

# US child health plummets amid austerity and inequality

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The health of children in the United States has deteriorated catastrophically over the past 16 years, a trend now documented in a new study published last week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA).

Authored by Dr. Matthew M. Davis and a team of researchers from Northwestern University, UCLA and other leading institutions, the report sheds light on the devastating social and medical conditions confronting an entire generation of American youth. Drawing on extensive data from nationally representative surveys, pediatric health system records (PEDSnet), and mortality statistics from the US and comparable OECD countries, the study exposes a systematic and across-the-board decline in pediatric health outcomes.

Between 2007 and 2022, mortality rates for infants under one year old in the US were consistently 1.78 times higher than in comparable OECD countries. The main drivers of these excess deaths were prematurity, which was 2.22 times more likely, and sudden unexpected infant death, at 2.39 times the OECD average.

Additionally, among children and youth aged 1–19, the mortality rate was 1.80 times higher, with firearm-related deaths an alarming 15.34 times more likely, and motor vehicle crash deaths 2.45 times more likely in the US than in the OECD average.

Chronic health conditions among children aged 3 to 17 have also risen substantially. From 2011 to 2023, the prevalence of chronic conditions increased from 39.9 percent to 45.7 percent according to clinical records (PEDSnet), and from 25.8 percent to 31.0 percent based on parent-reported data. Conditions such as anxiety, depression, autism spectrum disorder, obesity and developmental disorders have seen significant increases, with major depression more than tripling in prevalence.

Additionally, childhood obesity rates climbed from 17 percent in 2007–2008 to 20.9 percent in 2021–2023. Early

onset of menstruation in girls rose sharply, from 9.1 percent to 14.8 percent. Trouble sleeping among adolescents nearly doubled from 7.0 percent to 12.6 percent. Limitations in daily activities due to chronic illness also increased, affecting 9.1 percent of children in 2018 compared to 7.7 percent in 2008–2009.

Furthermore, the prevalence of physical symptoms diagnosed by physicians, such as pain, dermatological issues and menstrual disorders, has significantly grown, with over 41 percent of children experiencing at least one of these symptoms by 2023.

Equally concerning is the stark rise in emotional and psychological distress. Depressive symptoms among high school students increased dramatically from 26.1 percent in 2009 to 39.7 percent in 2023, and loneliness rose from 20.2 percent to 30.8 percent among adolescents aged 12–18 between 2007 and 2021.

This comprehensive evidence from the JAMA study provides clear documentation of a pervasive decline in the overall health and well-being of American children. The breadth of worsening health outcomes demands a deeper examination of the socio-political conditions and policy decisions from 2007 to 2023 that have determined this ongoing public health crisis.

Across the Obama, Trump, Biden and second Trump administrations, both major political parties have overseen and intensified the subordination of healthcare policy to the demands of capital.

While the Affordable Care Act (ACA), passed under Obama, was touted as a historic reform, it ultimately reinforced the private insurance model and left tens of millions of working class families with inadequate coverage, high deductibles and limited access to pediatric care.

At the same time, the Budget Control Act of 2011, a bipartisan agreement, imposed strict caps on domestic spending—including public health and education—initiating

a decade of austerity that directly impacted the systems children rely on.

Trump's first term brought further dismantling of whatever could be salvaged of the ACA, undermining Medicaid and enabling states to impose work requirements and restrict eligibility. His administration cut over \$1 billion from the Prevention and Public Health Fund and sought to cap Medicaid on a per-capita basis—moves that would have dramatically reduced funding for child health.

Environmental deregulation under Trump also increased exposure to toxins, particularly in low-income communities, while cuts to SNAP (food stamps) and school lunch programs further strained families.

Biden's presidency continued this pattern. Despite the temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit in 2021 under the American Rescue Plan, its failure to be renewed resulted in a rapid spike in child poverty. Biden also allowed emergency Medicaid flexibilities from the COVID-19 pandemic to expire in 2023, leading to the disenrollment of millions of low-income children.

The worsening health of American children is not a blameless state of affairs but the direct result of a society governed by a financial oligarchy that subordinates every aspect of life to the pursuit of private profit. Over the past several decades, both capitalist parties have overseen the systematic dismantling of the social programs—housing assistance, public education, food security and healthcare—that form the foundation of childhood development. As corporate profits have soared, investment in these critical services has stagnated or declined, leading to rising rates of disease, disability and inequality among working class youth.

The most egregious expression of this process is Trump's recently passed "One Big Beautiful Bill," a bipartisan-backed measure that represents the most sweeping transfer of wealth from the bottom 99 percent to the top 1 percent in modern American history.

While the ruling class enjoys massive tax breaks and government handouts, the working class is left to bear the costs of social collapse: crumbling schools, vanishing nutrition programs, unaffordable healthcare and deteriorating public infrastructure. It would be wrong to characterize this as a policy failure: it is a deliberate strategy to deepen exploitation and preserve the wealth of the ruling elite at the expense of workers and their families.

The child health crisis is bound up with the broader disintegration of economic opportunity and class mobility

under decaying capitalism. Real wages have stagnated, union protections have been gutted and basic necessities have become unaffordable. For millions of families, despair is not psychological—it is material. Rising child suicide, obesity and mental illness reflect the deepening poverty and hopelessness that afflict working-class communities.

Education, which plays a crucial role in health literacy and child development, remains chronically underfunded. Public schools lack resources for basic nutrition and health education, while millions of families live in "food deserts" that make healthy eating all but impossible.

These conditions are compounded by ideological attacks from the far right. Figures like Robert F. Kennedy Jr., now secretary of Health and Human Services under Trump, peddle pseudoscientific nonsense that shifts blame onto individual workers while concealing the role of capitalism in producing mass illness. One immediate result can be seen by a measles outbreak that has reached a three-decade high.

Policies like abortion bans are part of this exploitative system as well, promoting increased maternal and infant mortality. While capital devalues and discards older, costlier workers, a desperate new generation are exploited anew. This ruthless logic governs capitalist public health policy, which is methodically designed to protect profit.

The solution lies not in reform but in social revolution. Only the independent political mobilization of the working class can secure a society where health is a right, not a commodity. The fight for children's health is inseparable from the fight for socialized medicine, fought for by a workers government as part of a socialist program.



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