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Life expectancy gap between US rich and poor widens

By Jerry White

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A study published Monday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) provides more evidence that life expectancy in the United States is chiefly determined by economic class. Higher income is the most critical factor in longevity, the study found, with the gap between the richest one percent and poorest one percent of individuals averaging 14.6 years for men and 10.1 years for women.

The study was based on income data derived from 1.4 billion tax records between 1999 and 2014 of individuals aged 40 to 76, and death records obtained from the Social Security Administration. It found that men in the top one percent had an expected age of death of 87.3, compared to 72.7 years for the poorest one percent. The richest women on average lived 88.9 years, while the poorest lived only 78.8 years.

“Men in the bottom 1 percent of the income distribution at the age of 40 years in the United States,” the study noted, “have life expectancies similar to the mean life expectancy of 40-year-old men in Sudan and Pakistan.” US men in the top one percent of income distribution have “higher life expectancies than the mean life expectancy for men in all countries at age 40 years,” the study found.

Writing on the findings, which were obtained by a research team led by Stanford University economics professor Raj Chetty, the *Stanford University News* commented, “Being richer was associated with living longer at every level of the income distribution. And the gap between the richest 1 percent and the bottom 1 percent in the nation was vast.”

The study is only the latest report highlighting the pervasive impact of social inequality on every aspect of life in America. A study released late last year by two Princeton University economists showed that the mortality rate for white, middle-aged working-class Americans has risen sharply over the past fifteen years, largely due to a dramatic rise in the rate of deaths from suicide, drug abuse and alcoholism.

Another recent study showed that *all* net full-time job growth in the US between 2005 and 2015 was accounted for by “alternative work arrangements,” i.e., people working as independent contractors, temps, through contract firms or on-call.

These reports provide a glimpse of the grim reality of social life for broad masses of American workers and youth, a reality that is concealed by the media behind complacent and self-satisfied portrayals of an economy rebounding from the financial disaster of 2008. The political establishment is indifferent to the economic and social deprivation facing tens of millions of Americans. President Barack Obama summed up the combination of contemptuousness and cluelessness of the ruling elite when he hailed the jobs report for February with the boast, “America is pretty darn great right now.”

This social crisis is the source of the immense anger and hatred for the political establishment revealed in the 2016 election campaign. The worsening plight of workers—occurring side-by-side with record corporate profits and stock prices—underlies the convulsive character of the presidential contest.

The Republican front-runner, billionaire real estate speculator Donald Trump, has sought to tap into popular anger in order to divert it along the reactionary path of anti-immigrant chauvinism and militarism. But the broader phenomenon, reflected in the widespread support for self-described “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders, is the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment. The political radicalization of the working class is taking the initial form of backing for a candidate who is seeking the Democratic presidential nomination by presenting himself as an opponent of social inequality and the “billionaire class.”

The Stanford study underscores that the essential division in the United States is not race, but class. In America, how long you live is determined above all by what social class you belong to.

Between 2001 and 2014, life expectancy in the United States increased by 2.34 years for men and 2.91 years for women in the top five percent of income distribution, but by only a negligible 0.32 years for men and 0.04 years for women in the bottom five percent. The increase in longevity for the richest Americans, the study noted, is equivalent to eliminating all cancer deaths in the US.

The advances in medical science and life-extending technology have largely bypassed large sections of the population. The disparity is worse in areas hit hardest by deindustrialization and rural poverty.

Of the states with the lowest life expectancy in the bottom income quartile (25 percent), eight form a geographic belt from Michigan to Kansas (Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas). Nevada, Indiana and Oklahoma had the lowest life expectancies (<77.9 years) when men and women in the bottom income quartile were averaged.

When broken down further into so-called commuting zones—urban areas and surrounding counties that share common economic characteristics—five of the zones with the lowest life expectancies were clustered in the industrial Midwest states. Among the cities where the poorest sections of the population live the shortest lives were: Louisville, Kentucky (77.9); Toledo and Cincinnati, Ohio (77.9); Detroit, Michigan (77.7); Indianapolis, Indiana (77.6), Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (77.6), and Las Vegas, Nevada (77.6).

The worst in the nation is the economically depressed steel town of Gary, Indiana, where the mean life expectancy for both sexes is 77.4 years, and for men, 74.2 years. The gap in life expectancies between the richest and the poorest quintiles is 7.2 years in Gary, where more than 40 percent of the population lives in poverty. The gap in life expectancies is far higher, however, in several other cities, including Madison, Wisconsin (8.1 years), Detroit (8.2 years), Salt Lake City, Utah (8.3 years), and Louisville, Kentucky and Cincinnati, Ohio (8.4 years).

Between 2001 and 2014, average life expectancy in the bottom income quintile fell in several commuting zones. In Florida, this included Cape Coral, Miami, Tampa and Pensacola. Other areas seeing a decline were Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tucson, Arizona; Des Moines, Iowa; Bakersfield, California; and Knoxville, Tennessee.

While the Stanford study does not point to the contributing factors in the growing disparity in life expectancy, there is little question that they include access to good nutrition, decent housing, a healthy environment and lower levels of stress. A study last year by researchers from Harvard Business School and Stanford University found that stressful workplaces, caused by the probability of being laid off, long working hours, work-family conflicts and the lack of employer-paid health care, contributed to lower life expectancy. Researchers concluded that 10–38 percent of the difference in life expectancy across demographic groups can be attributed to disparate job conditions.

The American Psychological Association's annual stress report issued last month found that more than one-quarter of adults reported feeling stressed about money most or all of the time. Nearly one-third (32 percent) said their finances or lack of money prevented them from having a healthy lifestyle, and one in five said they had either considered skipping or had skipped going to the doctor in the past year when they needed care because of financial concerns.