

This evidence is hardly a shock to those of us studying inequality in America. The median income of a full-time male employee is lower than it was 40 years ago. Wages of male high school graduates have plummeted by some 19% in the period studied by Case and Deaton.

To stay above water, many Americans borrowed from banks at usurious interest rates. In 2005, President George W. Bush's administration made it far more difficult for households to declare bankruptcy and write off debt. Then came the financial crisis, which cost millions of Americans their jobs and homes. When unemployment insurance, designed for short-term bouts of joblessness in a full-employment world, ran out, they were left to fend for themselves, with no safety net (beyond food stamps), while the government bailed out the banks that had caused the crisis.

The basic perquisites of a middle-class life were increasingly beyond the reach of a growing share of Americans. The Great Recession had shown their vulnerability. Those who had invested in the stock market saw much of their wealth wiped out; those who had put their money in safe government bonds saw retirement income diminish to near zero, as the Fed relentlessly drove down both short- and long-term interest rates. With college tuition soaring, the only way their children could get the education that would provide a modicum of hope was to borrow; but, with education loans virtually *never* dischargeable, student debt seemed even worse than other forms of debt.

There was no way that this mounting financial pressure could not have placed middle-class Americans and their families under greater stress. And it is not surprising that this has been reflected in higher rates of drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide.

I was chief economist of the World Bank in the late 1990s, when we began to receive similarly depressing news from Russia. Our data showed that GDP had fallen some 30% since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But we weren't confident in our measurements. Data showing that male life expectancy was declining, even as it was increasing in the rest of the world, confirmed the impression that things were not going very well in Russia, especially outside of the major cities.

The international Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, which I co-chaired and on which Deaton served, had earlier [emphasized](#) that GDP often is not a good measure of a society's wellbeing. These new data on white Americans' declining health status confirms this conclusion. The world's quintessential middle-class society is on the way to becoming its first former middle-class society.