

What's the matter with white working-class men?

Middle-aged white American males are dying in droves. The culprits? Suicide and drug- and alcohol-related ailments. That's according to a new study by Princeton University economists Angus Deaton and Anne Case.

Deaton and Case found that the mortality rate among whites ages 45 to 54 with no more than a high school education increased by 134 deaths per 100,000 people from 1999 to 2014. "Only H.I.V./AIDS in contemporary times has done anything like this," Deaton told the New York Times.

Has America become too inhospitable to working-class whites? Are there policy solutions? Or is this cultural rot? Ben Boychuk and Joel Mathis, the RedBlueAmerica columnists, weigh in.

BEN BOYCHUK

Let's get one point out of the way, because somebody will suggest it: No, Barack Obama isn't solely to blame for the rising suicide rate among middle-aged whites.

It's true that the decline in labor force participation has reached new record highs during Obama's tenure. Right now, about 20 million working-age Americans are unemployed and don't want a job. But this is a problem that extends

beyond a single presidential administration or mere red-blue political divisions.

If you delve into Deaton and Case's study, you'll find a host of factors involved in the rising mortality rate. Personal and financial stress is a big one, obviously. But they also point to a three-decade rise in disability claims. More and more people say they are too sick to work.

And if you look at the past 15 years, the picture becomes clearer. In 1999, 8 percent of those in their early 50s cited disability as their primary reason for not working. By 2014, it was 11 percent. And the trend line shows no sign of turning downward.

What happens to a society in which subsisting on government disability payments becomes normal? Well, we're getting a taste of it now.

So why not reform the disability insurance system, maybe tighten up some of the criteria, and weed out the usual "waste, fraud and abuse" that we're so fond of blaming?

Because the problem isn't just a government program or even the welfare state; it's a profound shift in the culture and the whole global economy.



A high school diploma is worthless, and many college degrees are headed that direction. Family disintegration remains widespread. Religion, once a source of community support, continues to wane as more Americans identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." And pop culture is a wasteland. Nihilism is in the very air we breathe.

When you have nothing to believe in but yourself, and you're life is a misery, then it's hardly surprising that many men — unemployed, childless, aimless — turn to booze, drugs, video games, porn or whatever else dulls the pain.

Our problem isn't just a lack of meaningful work. It's the lack of meaning, period. Does anyone really think overhauling the tax code or expanding the welfare state can fix that?

JOEL MATHIS

No, Barack Obama isn't responsible for the rising death rate among

middle-aged whites. But Ronald Reagan might be.

It was under Reagan, after all, that a staggering rise in income inequality among Americans became more pronounced and stayed that way. Simply put: For more than 30 years, the rich among us have been getting richer while the rest of us have been treading water, financially. That widening gap can be attributed, in large part, to a series of Republican-led policy innovations since the Gipper, including massive tax cuts for the rich and laws that make it more difficult for unions to organize and represent the interests of workers.

Now, the standard Republican response when Democrats mention this is to accuse Democrats of "envy" or of perpetrating "class warfare." What they ignore, though, is that inequality isn't just a source of jealousy — it has tangible effects on public health.

In March, for example, the New York Times reported on a University of Wisconsin study which showed that people were more likely to die before the age of 75 in counties where income inequality is more pronounced.

"The researchers think that places where wealthy residents can essentially buy their way out of

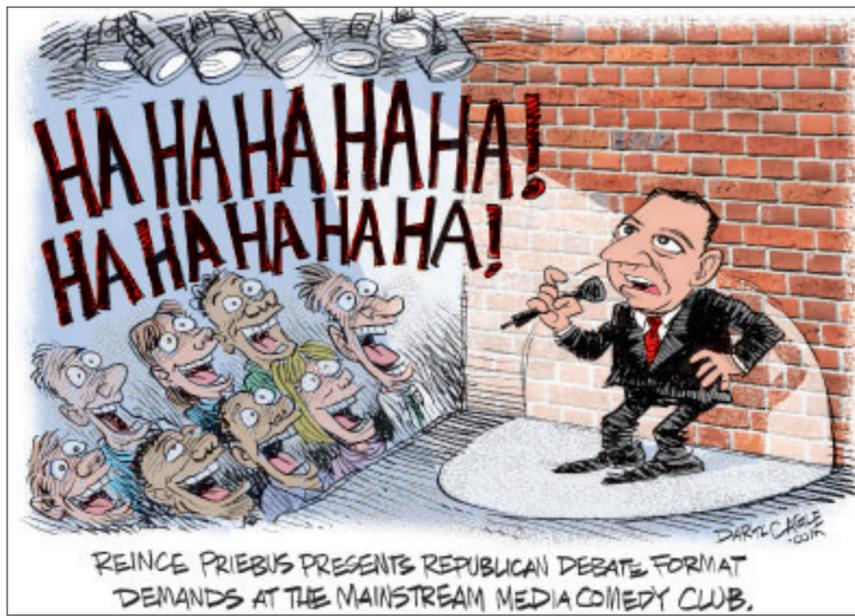
social services may have less cohesion and investment in things like education and public health that we know affect life span," the Times reported. "There is also literature suggesting that it's stressful to live among people who are wealthier than you. That stress may translate into mental health problems or cardiac disease for lower-income residents of unequal places."

So policy affects income inequality. Income inequality then turns around and affects policy. (If rich people don't need that public hospital, it's less likely to get built.) And policy affects lifespans. In the meantime, the rich blame the poor for being poor — or for living lives that lack "meaning" — and get off the hook for creating a world that's more difficult for the rest of us to live in.

It's tougher than ever to get ahead in America. If the strain affects our health, is that really any big surprise?

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Hurray for CNBC for making the candidates look good

Jeb Bush's campaign may be mortally wounded. Limping in the polls despite his massive war chest, he stooped (almost literally if you check the body language) to attacking Marco Rubio in an attempt to revive his fortunes.

Rubio's response, suggesting that Bush had been "told" to attack him, seemed like a bull's-eye. Jeb Bush is an honorable man, a man raised to behave like a gentleman; but he was feeling desperate at the recent debate, and tried to play against type. It failed utterly. Rubio was ready, and parried Bush's thrust by highlighting — for Bush and the audience — how very unbecoming the attack was. He made Bush look small, and you could almost tell that Bush himself felt diminished for doing it. This was not the "joyful" race he had envisioned.

Is it really so shocking that Republican primary voters have turned their faces away from Jeb Bush? Though he was an outstanding governor of Florida, his election would represent something unprecedented in American politics — a third president from one family. It bespeaks a wholesome anti-dynastic spirit in the electorate to say, "No. Two is the limit." Those were certainly my sentiments. Nor did his donor base guarantee anything. Who was the best-financed Republican candidate in 1980? Not Reagan. Not even George H.W. Bush. It was John Connolly. He got exactly one delegate.

On the other hand, since we're predicting his political demise, it's worth saying for the record that the anti-Bush vitriol among some on the right has been needlessly hysterical. There is nothing hateful about Jeb Bush or the Bush family. If they have a sense of entitlement, well, there are far worse things — like, oh, the flagrant corruption we find in the likely Democratic nominee.

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Many on the right are completely convinced that, cycle after cycle, the "Republican establishment" foists "moderate" nominees on an unwilling conservative electorate. This is myth. Henry Olsen, my colleague at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, tracks election results with meticulous attention and observes that the reason moderates get nominated is this: They get more votes. Though I wish the party were more conservative, and God knows I wish the country were more conservative, the voters are in charge.

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In addition to Marco Rubio, Chris Christie and Ted Cruz also had very good nights at the third debate. Carly Fiorina was strong and sensible, too.

I think all of the Republican debates should be hosted by CNBC from now on. The network demonstrated a number of traits people loathe about the press — and the candidates, most of them anyway, came out smelling like roses.

In the first place, by declining to use a stopwatch and a buzzer, CNBC (like CNN before it) guaranteed that the moderators would have to stomp on the candidates' sentences in a bullying fashion. This provided an opening for Chris Christie to quip: "That's rude even by New Jersey standards." By providing so few rules and leaving so much to "moderator discretion," CNBC invited the disorganized melee that sometimes broke out. This is an object lesson in letting liberals run things.

Second, by proffering "gotcha" questions, failing to provide sources ("Where did I read that?" asked Becky Quick at one point) and arguing with the candidates, the immoderate moderators revealed their bias.

Third, by posing questions about such trivia as missed votes, who said what about whom (and please repeat it

here so we can have a food fight and higher ratings) and fantasy football betting, the questioners demonstrated that they are not up to the task of discussing the great challenges that face our nation.

The candidates, however, are. They sailed over the heads of the petty and niggling questions and managed to debate several serious points. 1) How to reform entitlements? 2) Is a flat tax feasible? 3) How can we generate economic growth? 4) What is the proper role of the federal government?

Well, not all of the candidates. The one candidate on the stage Wednesday night who had almost nothing of substance to say was the frontrunner. History suggests that the voters will not choose him when the time comes. But here's a question for the conspiracy theorists: If the Republican "establishment" always picks moderates, wouldn't that be Trump?

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(Mona Charen is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.)

Your Opinion

Authors grateful for book signing

Editor:

We wish to thank the local businesses who contributed great door prizes to help make our September book signing at the Lake Mohawk Country Club a huge success. Local Sparta merchants, St. Moritz, The Shelter and Il Porto, donated generous gifts to raffle off to make this high energy event even more fun.

We also thank the nearly 100 people who showed up for the signing of our new book, "Balanced and Whole 21 Day Jumpstart to Weight Loss and Wellness," and to the country club for hosting a great event.

For more information about "The 21 Day Jumpstart Program" visit www.balanceandwhole.com or email Billy McHugh at b.mchugh@fitnesscoachinginc.com

Billy McHugh and Jules Shrunk Sparta

Fair value for valuable faculty

Editor:

I recently graduated from Siena College with a degree in environmental studies and am currently working to restore natural ecosystems. I would not be where I am today had it not have been for

the selfless, dedicated and passionate teachers and other faculty at Newton High School.

The faculty at Newton, that helped me discover my passion and helped to guide me to the happiest I have ever been in my young life, is in need of our support as a community. My teachers are working sans-contract and are getting paid significantly less than any of the administrators. This confuses me because while at NHS I saw my favorite teachers every day, exchanging knowledge, smiles and advice. I am not sure if I had ever seen an administrator. Why is it that the most valuable teachers at NHS are not getting paid for what they should rightfully deserve?

Teachers in New Jersey are considered an essential service. I think that it is time to respect and treat them as the essential service they are. My teachers at NHS are paid some of the lowest salaries in all of the Sussex County school districts, yet they are still teaching at NHS.

My teachers enjoy working with students to help them discover who we are, to help us grow, to lend us a hand, and most importantly to help us remember where we came from.

I would not be where I am today, and where I go tomorrow, without the knowledge-

able teachers I encountered at NHS. They need our support.

Casey Gallagher Newton

Change of party is questioned

Editor:

Re: Chris Kaufman's letter on his affiliation with the GOP. So, after "joining" the Republican Party you had an epiphany that made you realize how horrible a mistake you made.

What makes me look upon your announcement with a jaundiced eye? Perhaps the litty of complaints you wrote (minimum wage, global warming — excuse me, climate change, gay issues, gun control, etc.) could have been pulled out of any Obama/Clinton speech, or the way you vilified the party you just "joined"?

I seem to recall that during George Bush's first campaign the Democrat Party had its operatives in Illinois flood the Republican Primary (no party affiliation needed there) and cast votes for John McCain to make it seem he had more support and so split the vote.

Could this be yet another attempt by an operative to muddy the waters? That sounds more like the truth.

Bob Klymasz Jefferson

How to submit a Letter to the Editor

The New Jersey Herald welcomes letters about issues or events of general interest.

Letters:

- Should be 300 words or less
- May be edited for length and clarity
- Must be signed and include the writer's address and telephone number for purposes of verification. Only the writer's town will be included when published.

Letters that are unreasoned, libelous or that deal in personalities or personal disputes will not be published.

Letters can be submitted:

- By email at letters@njherald.com
- By postal mail at 2 Spring Street, Newton, N.J. 07860
- By FAX to 973-383-8477