

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF SAFETY ENGINEERS NORTH FLORIDA CHAPTER

MAY 2016 NEWSLETTER

Income versus Health

I recently received the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health quarterly magazine in the mail. I was lucky enough to get on the mailing list for this publication after an Ebola webinar that I had attended. On the very first page of this magazine is an article entitled *No Health Without Wealth*. And as I began reading this article, the subject hit close to home. Much of what is discussed in the article is greatly-related to what I deal with at work on a daily basis.

The Johns Hopkins article, written by Dean Michael J. Klag, MD, MPH, begins by pointing out that real income in our country has remained stagnant since the 1970s. Actually, there is an exception to that. Those Americans who reside within the top one percent of earners have seen income growth of 138 percent. Wages for the bottom 90 percent, however, grew by a mere 15 percent. Dr. Klag explains that this situation

brings about more than just fewer nights of eating out at nice restaurants and less shopping for luxury automobiles. As it turns out, economic wellbeing is a major determinant of public health. An article in the April 26, 2016 online edition of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) examined the association of income and life expectancy at 40 years of age, measure from 1999 to 2014. What was found is that men in the upper one percentile of the income distribution had a life expectancy at age 40 that was close to 15 years greater than those individuals in the lowest one percentile. For women, the differential was approximately ten years. As unsettling as this information is, it gets worse. The disparity between income groups actually increased over the 15 years of the study.

America's ever-widening disparities in survival rates contribute to its gloomy comparison with other high-income countries. To that

point, life expectancy in many other countries has risen faster than here in ours. In 1980, for example, the U.S. was in the middle of the pack of 25 nations in probability of surviving to the age of 50 years. The most recent data, according to Dr. Klag, indicate that we now have the lowest expectation of reaching the age of 50 of our peer group. Moreover, according to U.N. data, the U.S. ranks 43rd among all countries in the mortality rate for children under-five years of age. Disappointingly, the countries of Cuba, Slovenia, and Cyprus rank higher than the United States.

Back to the topic of income, experts have long known that financially-endowed people generally live longer than those who are at the opposite end of the spectrum. But a growing body of data shows a more disturbing pattern is forming. And despite big advances in medicine, technology and education, the longevity gap between high-income and low-income Americans has been

widening sharply. In a February 12, 2016 *New York Times* online article, the topic of income disparity and life expectancy was discussed. In this article, a study conducted by the Brookings Institution was mentioned. This study examined data related to life expectancy at age 50. Overall, according to the Brookings study, life expectancy for the bottom 10 percent of wage earners in the U. S. improved by just 3 percent for men born in 1950 compared with those born in 1920. For the top 10 percent, however, it jumped by approximately 28 percent.

Although it is difficult to point to one dominant cause of this disparity, some public health researchers have a few theories. One is that in recent decades, the wealthy and educated began to drop unhealthy habits, while those without wealth and education have continued to partake in them. Jessica Ho, of Duke University, and Mr. Fenelon calculated that one particular unhealthy habit accounted for a third to a fifth of the gap in life expectancy between men with college degrees and men with high school diplomas only; for women it accounted for as much as a quarter of the gap.

Moreover, obesity, which has been sharply rising since the 1980s, is more ambiguous as a cause. According to an analysis by the National Academy of Sciences, the gap between obesity rates for high earners and low earners actually narrowed from 1990 to 2010. By 2010, about 37 percent of adults at the lower end of the income ladder were obese, compared with 31 percent at the higher end. Sadly, the prescription drug epidemic has ravaged poor white communities in recent years, a problem that experts said would most likely exacerbate the trend of widening disparities.

The *New York Times* article goes on to point out that researchers postulate that limited access to health care accounts for surprisingly few premature deaths in America. So it is an open question whether President Obama's health care law, which has sharply reduced the number of Americans without health insurance since 2014, will help ease the disparity.

At the heart of the disparity, said Elizabeth H. Bradley, a professor of public health at Yale, are economic and social inequities, "and those are things that high-tech medicine

cannot fix." So the struggle to educate, assist, encourage, and motivate our fellow Americans remains. And that is why as safety professionals we do what we do.

Bob Dooley

Article Sources and Hyperlinks of Interest

- <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=2513561>
- http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/health/disparity-in-life-spans-of-the-rich-and-the-poor-is-growing.html?_r=1
- <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2016/02/life-expectancy-gaps-promise-social-security>

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ASSE Local Chapter Meeting Schedule

We are currently participating in summer break and hope that you and yours have a safe and fun-filled summertime.

Photographs of Worker's Memorial Day

Honoring Those Who Have Lost Their Lives in the Work Environment in 2015

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor Jordan Barab highlighted a list of VIP speakers at the annual Workers' Memorial Day event to honor those workers who lost their lives in the work environment in 2015. The event was held on April 27 at the Florida State College at Jacksonville (FSCJ) Downtown Campus Auditorium.

The ceremony featured a reading of the names of those lives lost, including the Sea Star Lines Crew of El Faro, followed by a moment of silence. A military honor guard also presented itself during the service.

Florida State Representative and president of the First Coast Manufacturers Association (FCMA) Lake Ray introduced speakers, who included, in addition to Barab,

- Brian Sturtecky, OSHA's Jacksonville Area Office Director
- Dr. Charles Moreland, Mayor's Office
- Gary Hollis, Governor's Jacksonville Office.

The event was a joint project by safety partners in Jacksonville that included the Northeast Florida Safety Council, FCMA, the American Society of Safety Engineers, Florida State College at Jacksonville and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).





