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AMERICAN INSTITUTE
FOR BOYS AND MEN

THE
STATE OF
WORKING
CLASS MEN

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WHY WORKING CLASS MEN? WHY NOW?

Working class men in America need help. While the shift to a knowledge-based economy has blessed the more highly educated with strong and rising wages, working class men face dwindling job prospects, stagnant wages, and declining health. These challenges have been intensifying for decades but have now reached a point of crisis.

This report outlines the current state of America's working class men and describes recent trends in the key areas of employment, earnings, health, and family. Class, race and gender are all important here. This report shows that working class women are struggling too, and that there are also significant differences in the trends among men of different races and ethnicities. But many of the issues impacting men—such as declining labor force participation and increasing social isolation—require tailored solutions that acknowledge gender-specific dynamics. Building an opportunity economy that improves the outlook for working class men will also strengthen our communities and benefit society as a whole.

The terms “working class” and “middle class” are used in various ways, with many empirical definitions. Here, we make a simple distinction between those with and without at least a four-year college degree, a commonly used dividing line in the social sciences. Those with less than a BA are, by our definition, working class.

We primarily focus in this report on prime-age men, aged between 25 and 54 in order to highlight the experiences of men most affected by changes in the labor market. By these definitions, almost two in three men (64%) are working class, a higher share than the 57% among women.

Majority Are Working Class, Especially Men

Share of prime-age men and women without a Bachelor's degree (2022)

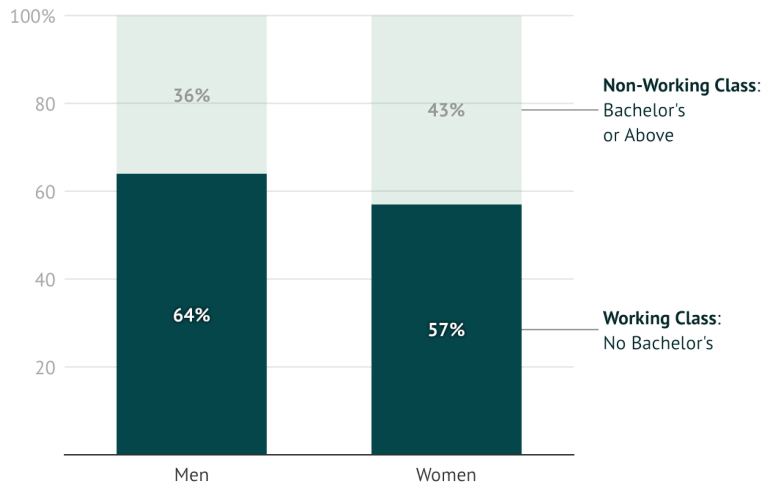


Figure shows the share of prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women who hold at least a bachelor's degree.
Source: ACS via IPUMS

The share of men who are working class varies by race, with the highest shares among Black and Hispanic men, at 77% and 81%. Slightly over half of white men (59%) are working class. The working class is more racially diverse than the non-working class: only half (51%) of working class men are white, compared to 64% of non-working class men. The fact of this diversity is important to debates about working class men, which are by definition just as much about men of color as they are about white men.

Large Majority Of Hispanic And Black Men Are Working Class

Share of prime-age men with and without a bachelor's degree by race (2022)

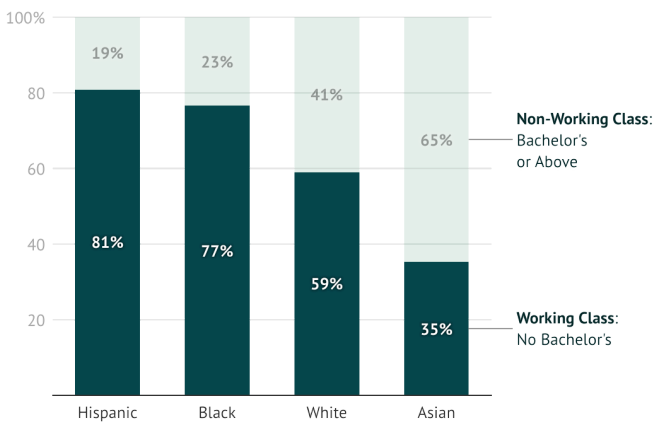


Figure shows the share of prime-age (25-54 years old) men who hold at least a bachelor's degree by racial group.
Source: ACS via IPUMS

Working Class Men More Diverse Than General Population

Share of prime-age men by race and class group (2022)

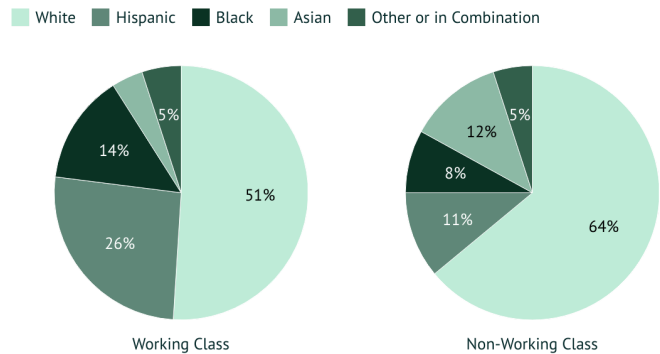
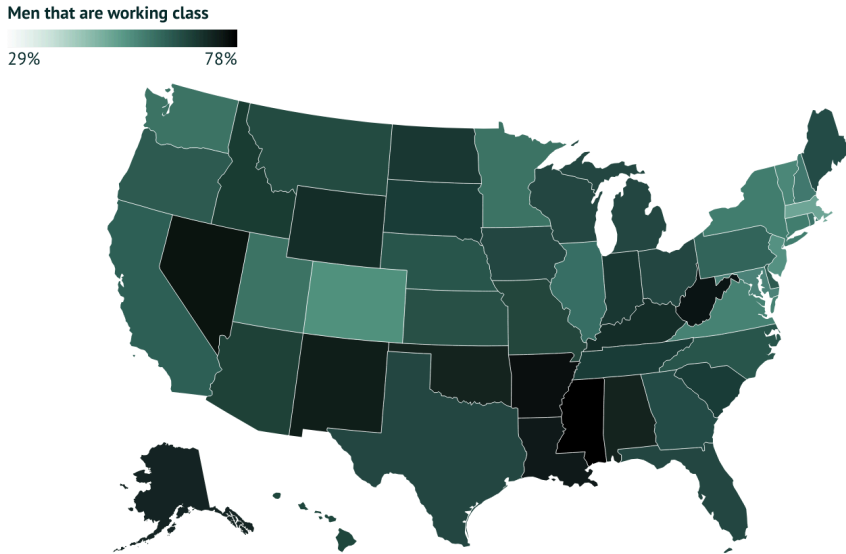


Figure shows the share of prime-age (25-54 years old) men within a class group by race. "Working Class" is defined as those who do not at least hold a bachelor's degree.
Source: ACS via IPUMS

The share of men who are working class is much higher in some parts of the country than others. But most men are working class in every state; the only jurisdiction where working class men are in the minority is Washington DC, where the share is just 29%. The challenges facing working class men may be more acute in some parts of the country, but this is a national issue.

More Working Class Men In Some States

Share of prime-age men who are working class, by state (2022)



Map displays the share of prime-age (25-54 years old) men within a state that are working class. "Working Class" is defined as not holding at least a bachelor's degree.

Source: ACS via IPUMS

The five states with the highest prime-age share of working class men are:

- Mississippi (78%)
- Arkansas (76%)
- Nevada (76%)
- West Virginia (76%)
- Louisiana (75%)

Those with the lowest share are:

- Washington DC (29%)
- Massachusetts (51%)
- New Jersey (55%)
- Colorado (55%)
- Vermont (57%)

As shown on the previous page, men are more likely to be without a college degree than women. This is a recent development. Over the past four decades, the share of women who are working class has dropped by 27 percentage points, while the share of working class men has decreased more slowly, by only 12 points.

In 1980, a higher percentage of women were classified as working class compared to men. However, by 2022, these patterns reversed, with men more likely to fall into this category.

While the significant educational gains among women are a major success, and men have also made moderate progress, the growing gap in educational outcomes between men and women raises important questions about the future of work, economic mobility, and social equity.

The overall picture is of a racially diverse, mostly male working class in the U.S. Most men are working class, by our definition. The question is: how are they doing?

Unlike The Past, Men Are Now More Likely To Be Working Class

Share of prime-age men and women who are working class (1980-2022)

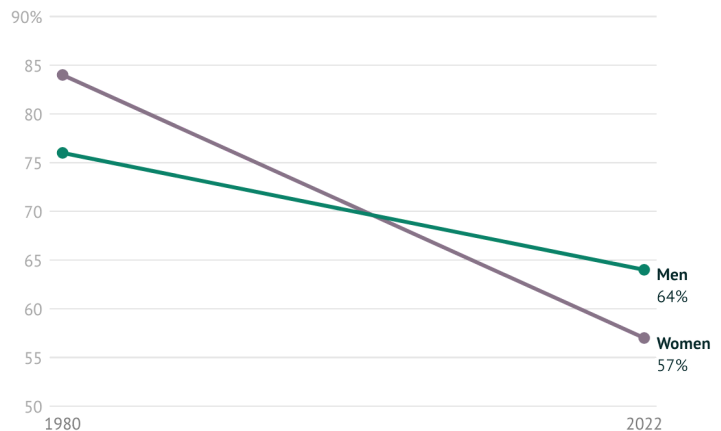


Figure shows the share of prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women who are working class. Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class.

Source: Census & ACS via IPUMS

The employment landscape has shifted dramatically over the past four decades, with significant changes for both men and women. The good news is that women across the economic spectrum have made considerable gains. The bad news is that many working class men have experienced declining job opportunities and stagnant wages.

Working Class Male Employment Has Declined Dramatically

Prime-age employment rate by sex and working class status (1979-2023)

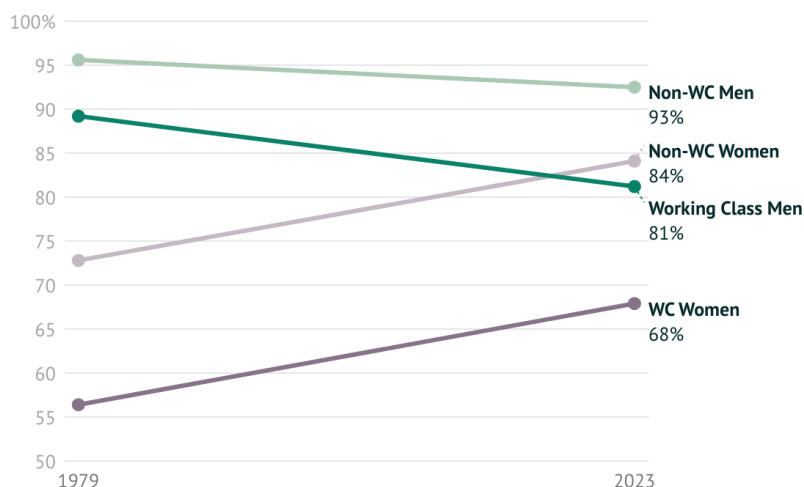


Figure shows the prime-age (25-54 years old) employment rate for men and women by working class status, where men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are considered working class. Source: CPS via IPUMS

The employment rate for working class men has declined significantly over the past four decades. In 1979, 90% of working class men were employed. By 2023, that figure had dropped to 81%.

In contrast, the employment rate for working class women has increased significantly, rising from 55% to 68% over the same period.

Non-working class men have maintained high employment rates at 93%, down only slightly from 96% in 1979, while non-working class women have seen dramatic gains in their employment rate from 71% in 1979 to 84% in 2023.

We focus on the employment rate here: but the same patterns show up with other metrics like labor force participation.

Working Class Men's Earnings Stagnant

Median real weekly full-time earnings for men and women (1979-2023)

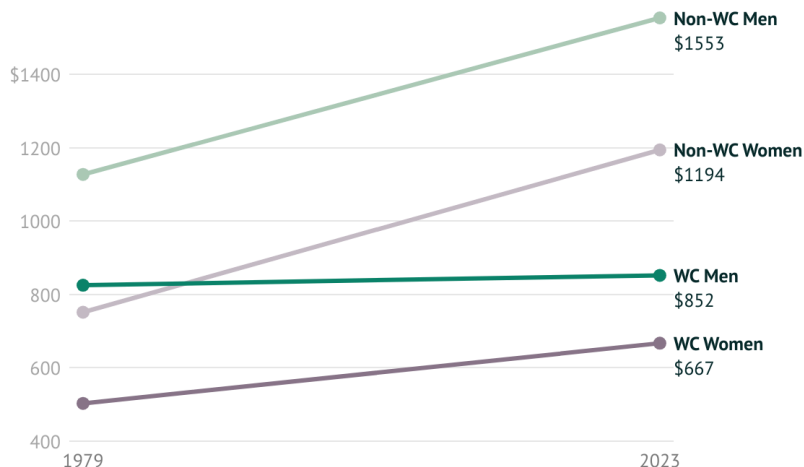


Figure shows median real weekly earnings for men and women, at least 25 years old, in 1979 and 2023. Nominal earnings by education status were collected from the U.S. BLS via FRED. Earnings were then deflated using the PCE chain-type price index (in 2017 dollars). Population counts for working class sub-groups (e.g., less than high school, high school degree, some college) were collected from the CPS via IPUMS in order to produce weighted averages for the median earnings for working class men and women. Source: BLS via FRED & CPS via IPUMS

Wages have stagnated for working class men. In 2023, median weekly earnings for working class men stood at \$852, only a fraction higher than in 1979 when adjusted for inflation. Weekly wages for working class women have risen from \$503 to \$667.

Meanwhile, both men and women with college degrees (i.e. the non-working class) have seen rapid earnings increases, with median weekly earnings reaching \$1,553 and \$1,194, respectively.

The long-term story here is of growing wage gaps by social class for both men and women, but with working class men faring worst of all in terms of trend.

While all working class men face growing challenges in the labor market, there is notable variation across racial groups. Black working class men have consistently faced the greatest hurdles, with their employment rates persistently trailing behind those of their white and Hispanic peers.

Continued Challenges For Black Men, Dramatic Decline For White Men

Prime-age male employment rate by race and working class status (1979-2023)

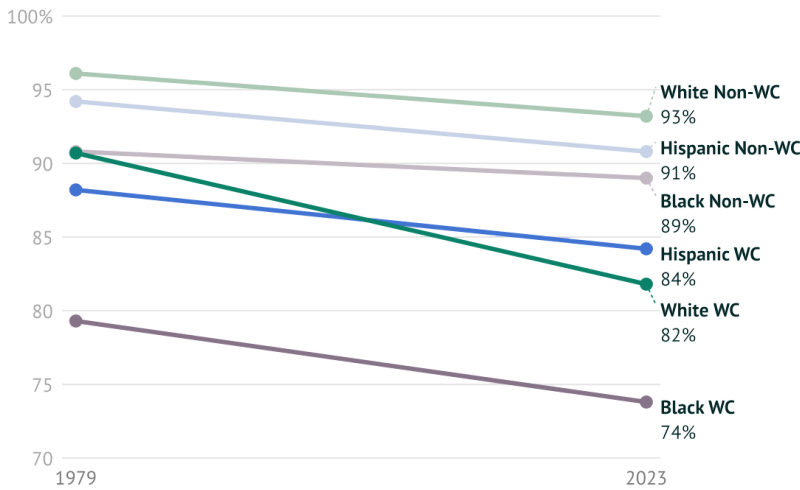


Figure shows the prime-age (25-54 years old) male employment rate by race and working class status, where men without at least a bachelor's degree are defined as working class. Asian men did not have recorded estimates in 1979; in 2023, the employment rate for working class Asian men was 83%, and the employment rate for non-working class Asian men was 92%.

Source: CPS via IPUMS

The employment rate for Black working class men has seen a steady decline from 79% in 1979 to 74% in 2023, highlighting persistent structural barriers and inequalities in the labor market.

But it is white working class men who have experienced the most dramatic decline in employment: from 1979 to 2023, their employment rate dropped from 91% to 82%, signaling a significant shift in the economic stability of this group.

White working class men are now slightly less likely to be employed than Hispanic working class men.

There are also considerable wage disparities by race. In 2023, Black, Hispanic and Asian working class men earned almost the same, with median weekly earnings at 48%, 47% and 51% of the earnings of non-working class white men, respectively. White working class men earned 60% of their non-working class peers.

Non-White Working Class Wages Lag Behind

Real weekly median earnings for 25+ men by race and class, relative to non-working class White men (2023)

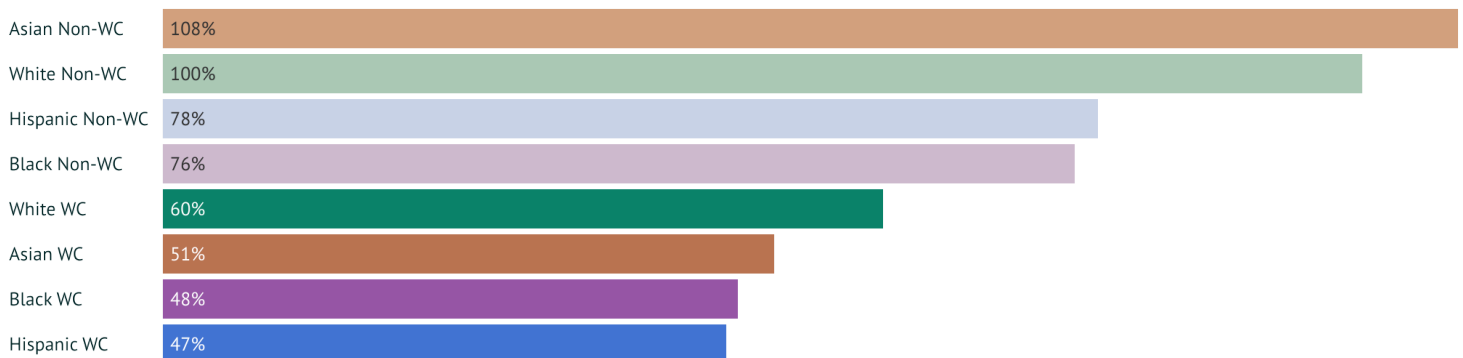


Figure shows median real weekly earnings for men at least 25 years old by race and class, relative to non-working class white men. Nominal earnings by race and class were collected from the basic monthly CPS's for 2023. Earnings were then deflated using the PCE chain-type price index (in 2017 dollars), and divided by the real median weekly earnings of non-working class white men.

Source: CPS

Working class men face significant challenges that prevent them from fully participating in the workforce. Two major ones are the loss of traditionally male jobs, and poor health.

Working Class Sectors Make Up Smaller Share Of Workforce

Yearly share of total employment by NAICS sector (1994-2023)

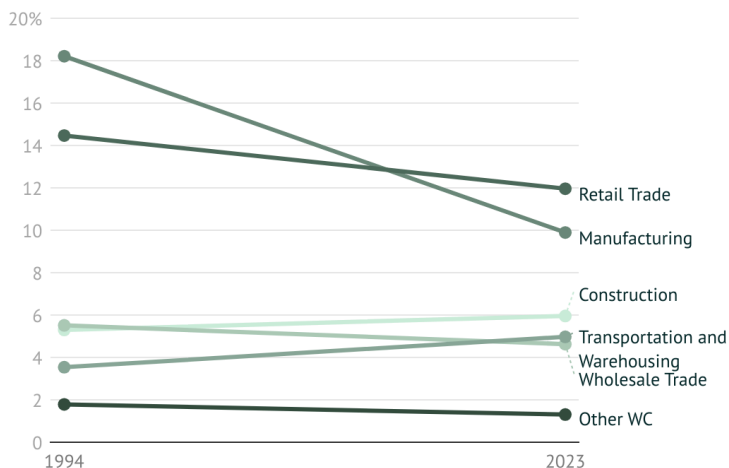


Figure shows the yearly averages of employment by NAICS sector as shares of total employment. 7 out of the 20 NAICS sectors are shown in the figure, with "Other WC" encompassing both "Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting" and "Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction."

Source: Census QWI

Over the past few decades, key industries that traditionally provided employment for working class men—such as manufacturing, retail trade, and construction—have seen a decline in their share of total employment, reflecting broader economic shifts toward a service-oriented and technology-driven economy.

There are one or two brighter spots on this front, with a rising share of jobs in construction and transport: sectors that disproportionately employ working class men. But the overall story is one of decline.

It is important to know not only whether men are employed, but if not, why not.

There are many good reasons people are not in paid work, including to raise children, care for family members or get educated. Here there is a very stark class difference. Half of the working class men not in work (52%) say that this is because of illness or disability, compared to just 18% of non-working class men. Men with a college degree are most likely to be out of work because they are pursuing yet more education (24%). This disparity underscores how economic and health inequalities amplify each other.

Poor Health Main Reason Working Class Men Not Employed

Reason why prime-age men did not work (2022)

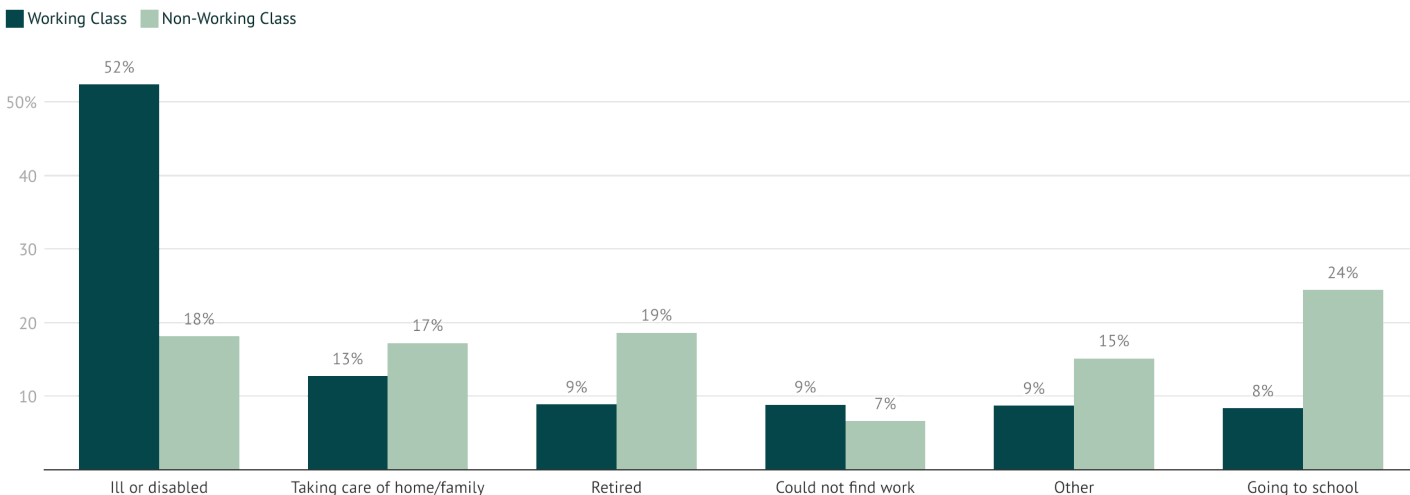


Figure shows the distribution of answers for why prime-age (25-54 years old) men did not work in the previous calendar year. Note that the data is collected from 2023, so that the estimates represent reasons for not working in 2022.

Source: CPS via IPUMS

In 2017, economists [Anne Case and Angus Deaton](#) documented an alarming rise in “deaths of despair”, especially among middle-aged white Americans. Since then attention has increasingly focused on the growing number of men succumbing to suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related deaths.

Deaths Of Despair Have Risen Most For Working Class Men

Deaths-of-Despair rates (per 100k) for prime-age men and women (1991-2022)

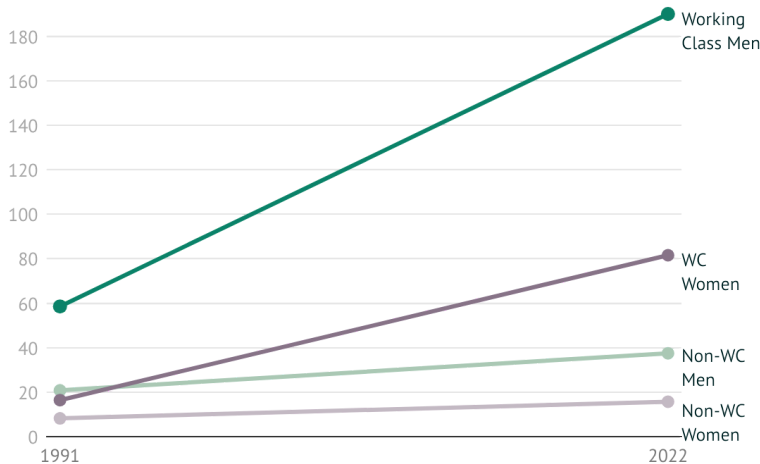


Figure shows the deaths-of-despair rate (per 100,000 population) for prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women in 1991 and 2022. Deaths were collected from CDC mortality data, with the ICD-10 codes for death-of-despair taken from Case and Deaton (2023). Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class. Population counts for each subgroup were collected from the CPS via IPUMS. Source: CDC & CPS via IPUMS

These deaths have disproportionately affected working class men, whose death rates from these causes have surged from 60 per 100,000 in 1991 to 190 per 100,000 by 2022. While the term “deaths of despair” suggests that these deaths stem from hopelessness, the reality is likely more nuanced. For instance, this increase in drug-related deaths is at least in part driven by the [growing supply of fentanyl](#) rather than simply increased demand as a result of despair.

It is important, then, to disaggregate the data by the three main causes. This shows the crucial role of drug poisoning in driving the spike in deaths of despair, particularly among working class men. In 2022, the death rate from drug overdoses for working class men was nine times as high as men with a Bachelor’s degree.

Deaths from alcohol-related causes and suicide are about three times as high among working class men as their non-working class counterparts. Notably, working class women are generally more vulnerable to deaths of despair than both men and women who are not working class. Suicide is the only cause of death where non-working class men are at more risk than working class women.

Drug Deaths Especially High For Working Class Men

Deaths-of-Despair rates (per 100k) for prime-age men and women (2022)

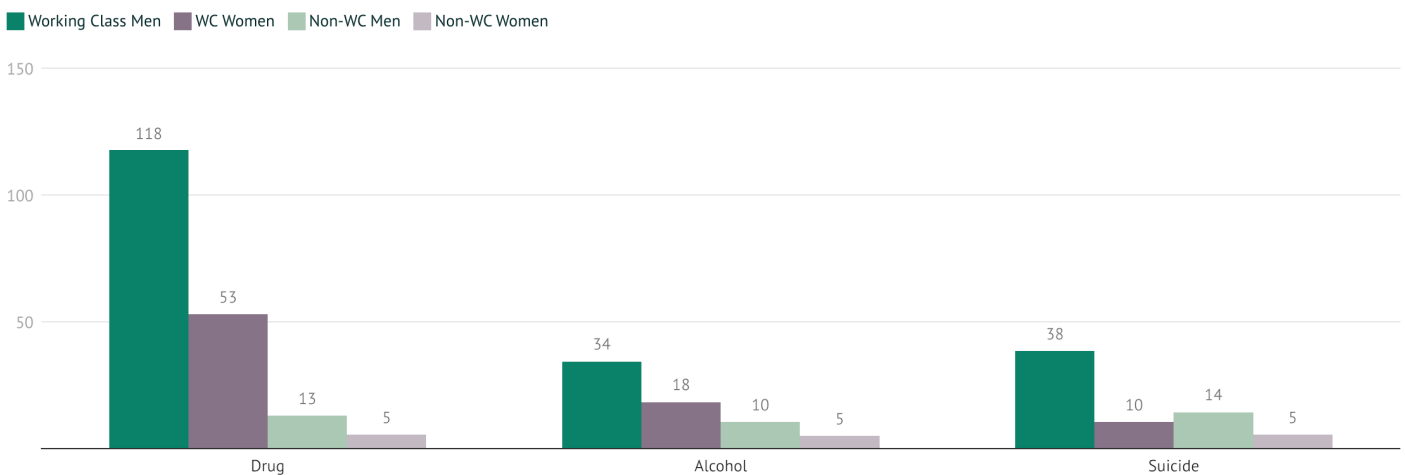


Figure shows the deaths-of-despair rate (per 100,000 population) for prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women in 2022, broken down by cause of death. Deaths were collected from CDC mortality data, with the ICD-10 codes for death-of-despair taken from Case and Deaton (2023). Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class. Population counts for each subgroup were collected from the CPS via IPUMS. Source: CDC & CPS via IPUMS

Working class men are not only at higher risk of deaths of despair but also from causes like workplace injuries and COVID-19. Working class men are more than twice as likely to die at work as all the other groups combined. They are also at higher risk from several other conditions including cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Working Class Men Most Likely To Die Of COVID-19

COVID death rate (per 100k) for prime-age men and women (2021)

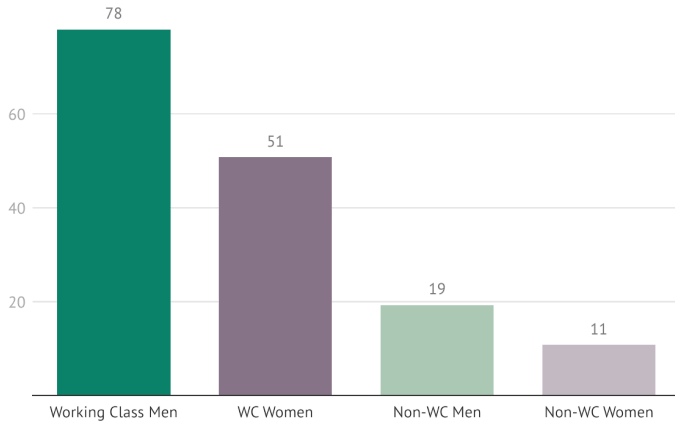


Figure shows the COVID-19 death rate (per 100,000 population) for prime age (25-54) men and women in 2021. COVID deaths were collected from CDC mortality data using underlying cause of death code "U071." Population counts for each sub-group were collected from the ACS via IPUMS.
Source: CDC & ACS via IPUMS

Working Class Men Suffer The Highest Occupational Death Rate

Occupational death rate (per 100k) for prime-age men and women (2022)

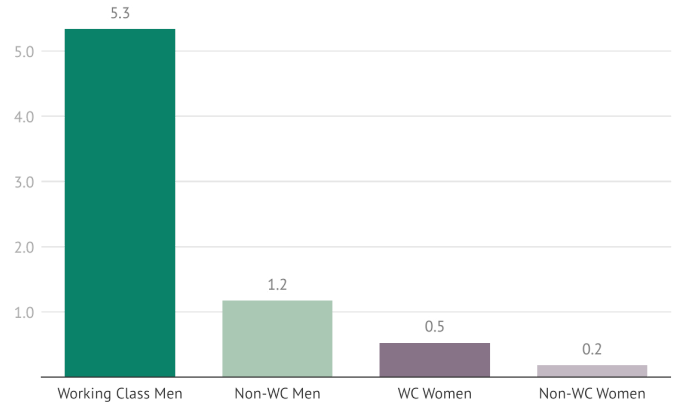


Figure shows the occupational injury death rate (per 100,000 population) for prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women in 2022. Occupational deaths are classified as deaths that occurred at work. Population counts per sub-group were collected from the 2022 ACS via IPUMS. Individuals with undeterminable education statuses were removed from the count.
Source: CDC & ACS via IPUMS

The combination of these factors, coupled with the lack of institutional support including health insurance, puts working class men at the highest odds of dying at an earlier age. Strikingly, young working class men (aged 25 to 34) are more likely to die than middle-aged non-working class men (aged 45 to 54).

Working Class Men Much More Likely To Die Across Age Groups

Death rate (per 100k) for prime-age men and women (2022)

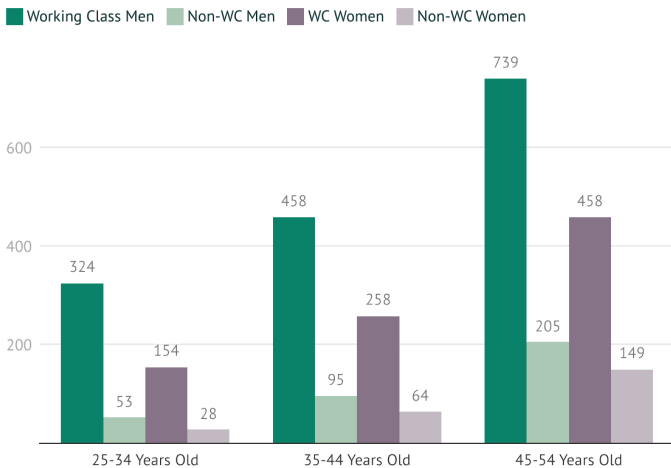


Figure shows the death rate (per 100,000 population) per 10-year age group for prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women. Deaths by age-group, sex, and working class status in 2022 were collected from CDC mortality data. Population counts for each subgroup in 2022 were collected from the 2022 ACS via IPUMS. Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class. Deaths without a determinable working class status were removed from the count.
Source: CDC & ACS via IPUMS

1 In 5 Working Class Men Don't Have Health Insurance

Share of prime-age men and women without health insurance coverage (2022)

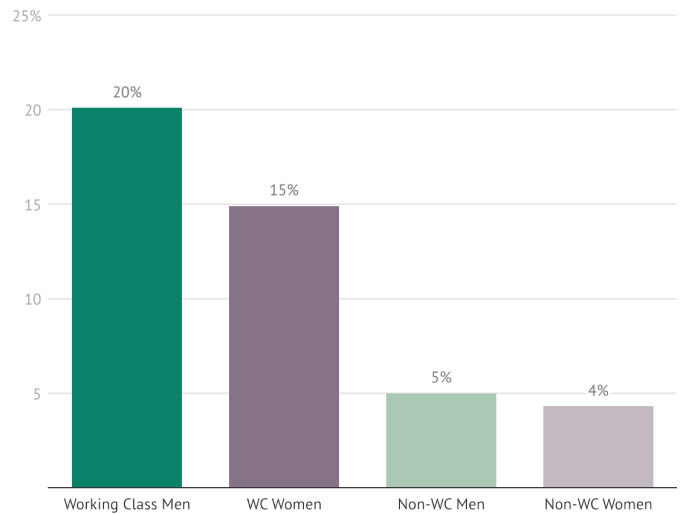


Figure shows the share of prime-age (25-54 years old) men and women who do not have any health insurance coverage, broken down by working class status. Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class.
Source: ACS via IPUMS

Family life, including marriage and parenting, plays a crucial role in personal well-being and stability. However, working class men are increasingly less likely to experience these milestones, with significant declines in marriage rates and the likelihood of having children at home. This is new: in the past there was hardly any class gap in marriage and family-formation. Today there is a huge one.

Marriage Rates Plummet For Working Class Men, Exposing Large Class Divide

Share of men and women ever-married by 40-years old (1980-2022)



Figure shows the share of men and women who have had at least one marriage by 40-years old, in 1980 and 2022. Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class. Source: Census & ACS via IPUMS

Sharp Decline Leaves Working Class Men Least Likely To Have Children At Home

Share of men and women 30-50 years old with any kids in household (1980-2022)

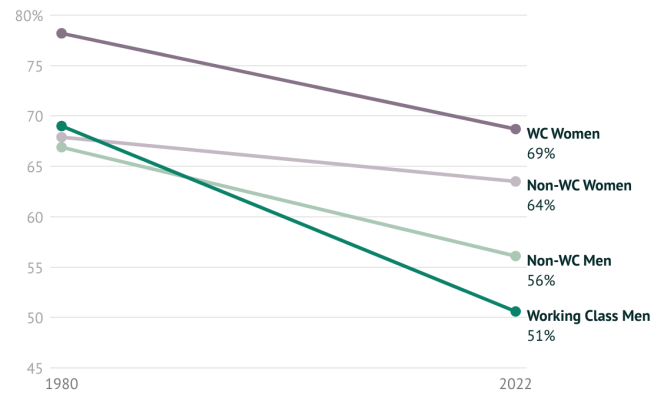


Figure shows the share of men and women (30-50 years old) who had any kids in their household in 1980 and 2022. Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class. Source: Census & ACS via IPUMS

In 2022, only 67% of working class men had ever been married by 40, compared to 84% of non-working class women and 80% of non-working class men. Working class men are also less likely to be fathers. The share of working class men with children at home has dropped from 67% in 1980 to 51% in 2022, a much lower share than for other groups, making them the least likely to live with children.

Working Class Men Most Likely To Have No Close Friends

Share of men and women not having any close friends (1990-2024)

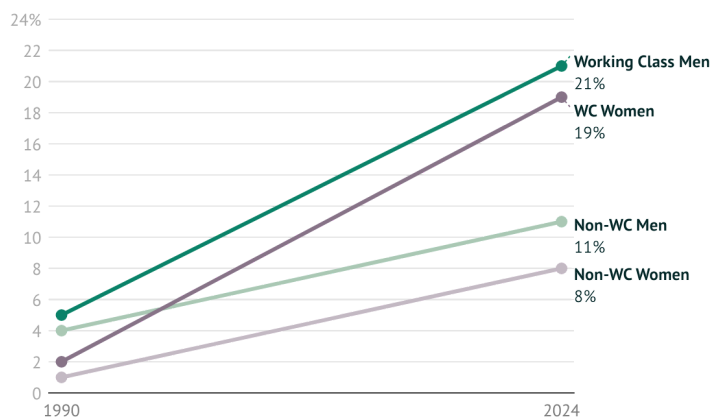


Figure shows the share of men and women who do not have at least one close friend. Men and women without at least a bachelor's degree are classified as working class. 1990 data are taken from Gallup, and 2024 data are from the Survey Center on American Life. Source: SCAL & Gallup

Family is family; but friends matter too. There are similar class and gender gaps here, with 21% of working class men saying they have no close friends, up from just 5% in 1990. Working class women have seen a similar trend: the “friendship recession” has a strong class dimension.

The weakening of social bonds means working class men are not only more isolated in their family lives but also in their social lives, deepening loneliness and disconnection.

Social isolation is becoming another divide along class lines, adding to the challenges faced by those with fewer resources.

CONCLUSION

The challenges facing working class men in the United States are profound and multifaceted. From declining marriage rates to wage stagnation and poor health, many of these men are struggling. This matters, above all, for the well-being of working class men themselves. But it also has broader implications for their families, communities, and society as a whole.

It is time to address these issues head on, with targeted interventions for working class boys and men of all races. This includes [improving college access and outcomes](#), as well as expanding access to quality jobs that do not require a college degree. It means strengthening social safety nets, and promoting policies that encourage family stability and economic security. At the American Institute for Boys and Men we are committed to shedding light on these issues, and working for solutions. As we continue our research and advocacy, we invite you to follow along, stay informed, and join us in the effort to create a brighter future for working class men and their families.

DATA SOURCES & METHODOLOGY

To produce *The State of Working Class Men*, we utilized data sources from a variety of governmental programs, along with a few survey organizations. These include the following:

- Census (Decennial)
- Census Current Population Survey (CPS)
- Census American Community Survey (ACS)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)
- Census Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI)
- Gallup
- Survey Center on American Life (data provided by request)

The notes section of each figure identifies the source used for the respective figure, along with the measure the figure is highlighting and any further methods used to produce the figure. Often, as we note in the figures, Census data are accessed through IPUMS.

The majority of figures in this piece represent prime working age (25-54 years old) men and women, where we define “working class” as having less than a 4-year college degree. Though we primarily focus on the prime-age population, we occasionally expand or limit our focus age-range in order to better capture a measure, notably marriage rates and share of men and women having a child in their home. When measures are broken down by race, racial groups are mutually exclusive.

Correction: Prior to December 6, 2024, the figure displaying real median weekly earnings by gender and working-class status incorrectly reported the 1979 median earnings for non-working-class women as \$904. The correct figure is \$751. This error has been corrected in the updated version of the report.

ABOUT AIBM

The American Institute for Boys and Men is a think tank conducting nonpartisan research on issues that affect the wellbeing of boys and men and designing programs and policies to help them thrive.

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