More and more people in the United States are feeling let down by American capitalism, and the population is being plunged into depression. This was the alarming conclusion reached by two researchers from Princeton University, Anne Case and winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics Angus Deaton. Over the past fifty years, many have been left feeling disillusioned with the American economic model, hyped up extensively within the United States, which even affects life expectancy in America: it has been declining for three consecutive years, a very unusual trend for a developed country. There has been a marked increase in the mortality rate among the white population in particular since the beginning of the new millennium. The number of suicides, as well as deaths from drug and alcohol abuse has increased dramatically.

These are the bleak findings of the research on the situation in the USA conducted by well-known American economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, who carried out a detailed analysis of the suicide and mortality epidemic that has engulfed America, noting that the United States has been experiencing a “deaths of despair” epidemic since the mid 1990s. The researchers point out that life expectancy for Americans declined for three consecutive years, from 2015 through 2017, something that had not happened since World War One, when the world was gripped by the Spanish influenza pandemic. Among the many different root causes leading to deaths of despair, the study highlights a significant fall in American wages in recent years and a dearth of good jobs, which is weakening core institutions of American life, such as marriage, faith and community. Social spending and housing-related expenses are an increasingly heavy burden for ordinary Americans.
This is despite the fact that the United States had once led the way as the number-one country in the world in terms of reducing mortality rates and increasing life expectancy in the 20th century, and many important discoveries and achievements in medicine have come from the United States.

However, the United States is now leading the way in the opposite direction.

Numerous US researchers believe that the Great Recession which began with the 2008 financial crisis is to blame for today’s greatest woes in America. However, the Great Recession was not what provoked the deaths of despair epidemic among ordinary Americans, although it did lead to the deterioration of living conditions for many people, which provoked anger and division in the United States. The deep-rooted causes of this epidemic can be traced back to a feeling of dissatisfaction with living conditions among Americans which has been there for a long time, and when inequality began to grow, young Americans began realizing that they would never be able to live the lives their parents could afford, while young people without highly professional skills have fallen even further behind.

America’s health care system which has been prescribing more and more opioids is also on the list of “culprits” responsible for the situation America has found itself in today. According to US research, one out of every two unemployed men in the US take painkillers on a daily basis, and these are usually addictive opioids. The national health-care crisis associated with substance abuse has plagued Americans for decades. The opioid epidemic in the United States is largely a failure of regulation and control. This is an area where pharmaceutical companies wield great political influence.

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of patients reporting pain, difficulties with communication, and depression. Pharmaceutical companies and distributors have taken advantage of people’s growing desperation, seeing an opportunity to promote and ramp up the sales of opioid pain medication such as OxyContin, a legal drug approved by the US Food and Drug Administration even though it is essentially no different to heroin. Between 1999 and 2018, more than 200,000 Americans died of opioid overdoses. Doctors are seeing the increasing amount of harm being caused by these drugs, and have begun prescribing them on a less frequent basis, but these opioids have opened the gateway to illegal drugs: heroin from Mexico, as well as fentanyl from China in more recent years, which is far deadlier. These drugs are causing a huge amount of damage and killing a lot of people. However, when ordinary Americans are faced with hardship and suffering, when there is social upheaval, and people begin to feel that their lives are meaningless, these drugs fill the void, and the number of deaths from drug overdoses goes up, adding to the number of suicides and alcohol-related deaths.

Alcohol-related deaths in American society today are simply ballooning out of control. According to a series of studies, “Alcohol-related deaths” have more than doubled in the last two decades. This is well ahead of the population growth rate over the same period. A study conducted over a twenty-year period found that alcohol had been the cause of more than one million deaths! Apart from people who simply drank themselves “to death”, half of the alcohol-related deaths were due to liver disease and drug overdoses from substances taken together with alcohol. Nine states — Maine, Indiana, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio and Virginia — have recorded a significant increase in the number of Americans binge drinking dangerous amounts of alcohol, which can lead to fatal car crashes and other fatal accidents, according to a report recently published by the CDC (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Americans almost all over the country who are trying to “drown their sorrows in alcohol” are already addicted to these hard drinks, and have began drinking more heavily and more often, with a 12% increase seen in the last five years alone.

Historically, there have always been more “deaths of despair” among men than women. However, a study published in the journal Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research, found that the largest annual increase in alcohol-related deaths in recent years was seen among non-Hispanic white women.

But these are not the only scourges of today’s American society. According to the January report published by the National Center for Homeless Education funded by the US Department of Education, over 1.5 million schoolchildren experienced homelessness in the 2017-2018 school year. 100,000 (7%) of these homeless schoolchildren spent the night in the open air and slept wherever they could, 7% slept in motels, 12% stayed in homeless shelters, and 74% stayed at a friend’s. And these are only the most modest estimates, but take figures from the American Institutes for Research, for example, which recorded that 2.5 million children had experienced homelessness in the year 2013. This could almost be considered some sort of historical “record”, with one in thirty American children experiencing homelessness! Criminal gangs, drug dealers, pimps and pedophiles are waiting for these children on the streets. In this context, does it really come as any surprise that crime is on the rise in the United States (especially juvenile crime)?
This grim situation in the US is hardly surprising if you look at the draft $4.8 trillion federal budget that US President Donald Trump is going to propose and use to pave the way for his re-election. After all, this budget is a continuation of a trend that has already been observed in federal budgets drafted in the United States, as we’ll see more big safety-net cuts and increased spending on defense, which even the Wall Street Journal has called out.

All of the Trump administration’s wall-to-wall “America First!” slogans cannot hide the glaringly ugly face of American reality we can see today.

Vladimir Odintsov, expert politologist, exclusively for the online magazine 'New Eastern Outlook'.