

Dale Keiger: The American working class has been getting a lot of ink and air time in the last two years. As you may have heard by the millions, they voted to elect Donald Trump president. They're the people in the middle of the country who supposedly hate the coastal elites. Stories in mainstream press about the opioid crisis, the victims always seem to be working class. Those jobs shipped out to China and Mexico, working class. The people who someday soon may be replaced by robots and self driving cars and trucks, working class. But who are the people of the working class? Do we even know what's happened to them? Why are they struggling? Why are they mad? That will be the conversation today on the first episode of the Known World, a new podcast from Johns Hopkins Magazine. I'm Dale Keiger, editor of the magazine and our idea is a series of conversations with some of the most fascinating minds at Johns Hopkins University. We hope you find these conversations engaging and enlightening, and by the end you know something you didn't know before.

Dale Keiger: Our first guest is sociologist Andrew Cherlin. I've known Andy for more than 20 years, written about him on several occasions. He's the grandly titled Benjamin H. Griswold the Third professor of policy in the Johns Hopkins sociology department. His expertise has been the American family. He has studied marriage and divorce and parenting, class differences, economic hardship, family instability. His most recent book is 'Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America', and he's here today to talk about the U.S. working class. Andy, welcome to the podcast and in thinking about our conversation, I was reminded that so many people including me casually toss around the terms middle class, working class, lower middle class with only the vaguest idea of what we actually mean. I assume a social scientist needs more precision and rigor than that. So in your line of work, what do you mean by working class?

Andrew Cherlin: I draw the line at a four year college degree. The people who have more than that, they have a college degree or more are the ones who have access to the professional jobs and the technical jobs that give you a good, stable, steady income. The people without a college degree can't get those jobs. So I would call the working class the people without four year college degrees. Now sometimes I call them the would be working class, 'cause these are the people who would take the factory jobs that used to be there if we had them now, but they don't. You could argue that we don't really have a working class anymore the way we did in the mid 20th centuries. You could argue that you have really a shadow working class, people who would like to take the kind of stable industrial jobs that used to support families, of which they can't really find anymore and that's the problem. That's the group I'm concerned about, this kinda would be shadow, whatever working class group of Americans.

Dale Keiger: And as a social significant group of people, when did the working class arise in this country?

Andrew Cherlin: It started in the early 19th century when we had the first textile factories in the U.S., then after the civil war, factories making lots of stuff, started to develop.

And so we had the growth of a working class as our factory system grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, so that by the mid 20th century, we had a very large class of people who were making a living working in factories.

Dale Keiger: And did the rise of the working class coincide with the shift in the country from an agrarian economy to more of an industrial economy?

Andrew Cherlin: Absolutely. People emptied out the countryside and came to the cities where there was more opportunity. That started happening in the latter half of the 19th century when at that point, three quarters of all Americans lived on farms. Now it's what, less than 10%, as people have gone to the cities at that time to get the factory jobs that were becoming available.

Dale Keiger: Now you write about the 1950s when the U.S. working class enjoyed high wages and job security and social stability. When you look at the broad expanse of U.S. history, does that period of time begin to look like an anomaly?

Andrew Cherlin: The 1950s was really the most unusual time in at least the past hundred years, if more. It's a fascinating time, think about it. The people who were coming of age in the 1950s had been born during the Great Depression in the 1930s. They grew up in tough times. The men went to fight in World War Two in the 40s. They came back in the 1950s and the U.S. was the unchallenged economic power of the world. Europe was in tatters, Japan was damaged. The U.S. was the great power not just politically, but in terms of what we produced and where we sent it, and so jobs were more [plentiful 00:04:49]. You could walk into a factory and get a job at wages which were much higher than you thought you would ever get in the past. That period, that very unusual time and that generation, the unusual generation that was born in the depression, came into adulthood in the 1950s, were really distinctive of how they lived, the families they had, the jobs that they had. They thought at the time it was gonna last forever, but it only lasted about 30 years.

Dale Keiger: Yeah. So I was gonna say now we come forward 70 years or so. The U.S. is no longer the unchallenged economic power globally. If you were to deliver ... and you've already done this to an extent, but a brief state of the union for the U.S. working class now. What would it be?

Andrew Cherlin: I would say the working class is in dissolution, their lives are unstable, they have difficulty getting good jobs and keeping them, they're not marrying as much as the middle class, they're not going to church as much. They are kind of disengaged, floating away from the middle class, by which I mean we have a large group of people now who don't have the stable anchors they had say 50 or 60 years ago. They don't have the kinds of stable jobs that last a long time and pay decent wages, that full time work that people used to have. They're not going to church as much as they used to have, they're not marrying. Instead, they are taking up short term cohabiting relationships with people and having kids in them. They're kind of drifting away from the middle class. It's very alarming and the most alarming recent indicator is the rise in deaths due to

opioids, the increase we've seen in so called deaths of despair. The fact that among middle class whites, more than any other group, deaths due to alcohol poisoning and drug abuse are skyrocketing. That's a key indicator of how bad things are for many of the working class.

Dale Keiger: Where did their jobs go?

Andrew Cherlin: Their jobs went either overseas or into computer chips. First thing that happened was computerization allowed firms to keep in touch with a factory that's in Mexico or overseas. So jobs went overseas as people began ... as other countries began to produce our goods. Here in Baltimore, we had a plant called Bethlehem Steel, Sparrows Point steel works. In the 1960s, it employed 30,000 people, it closed in 2005. And it closed because Japan and other countries were making steel better and faster and shipping it even more cheaply than we could. So first of all the jobs went overseas, but secondly there has been automation. Think about what happens when you call to reserve a train ticket if you've done that anytime in the past. You don't get a real person anymore. You get a computer voice and that computer voice is taking over from people who used to take those jobs. You see that everyday. You see jobs that were done by people who had a decent amount of education, but not a college degree. You see many of those jobs becoming automated and disappearing as computers take them over. So jobs going overseas, jobs being automated, the result a loss of the kinda middle skilled jobs that used to sustain people who had a high school degree, but not necessarily a college degree.

Dale Keiger: Now employment numbers are high, so there are a lot of people working. Is the biggest difference now that yes, people might be working, but they don't have the sort of security and they don't have the sort of stability they counted on and they don't have the same kinda high wages backed by a powerful labor union?

Andrew Cherlin: That's a big difference. Now one reason jobs are growing is not just 'cause they're growing at the top end, but also the very low income jobs are still growing 'cause they can't yet be automated or outsourced. If you go to a restaurant, you need somebody at the cash register. At least so far, you need somebody at the cash register. If you need your grass cut, you can't outsource that to Mexico and you can't automate it yet. So at the low end, low paying jobs are still fairly [plentiful 00:08:59]. They still don't pay very well, they're still insecure, but they're around. What's happened is that in the middle of the job market, we've seen the biggest contraction. Some people call this the hourglass economy. In the middle, it's pinched as the kind of mid level, decent paying jobs that used to give people a decent standard of living as those have disappeared. So you've got a decent but really low paying labor market in the bottom, you've got a very good professional, technical market in the middle ... in the top. But in the middle, although there certainly are some jobs and they may even be growing, we see a pinched labor market and opportunities just not there the way they were.

Dale Keiger: So at this time when so many industrial jobs were fleeing the country or disappearing for or another. We had a burgeoning economy, but not an economy that was burgeoning in creating jobs of this sort for this group of people.

Andrew Cherlin: Sure. Think about say Apple. Apple ... The people who design Apple computer and phones are in California, they're in the U.S. The people who serve them dinner are in the U.S. The phones are made in China. So what you have is a technical professional class and the people who are serving them, all in the U.S., but the people who are making the stuff, the shoes, the computers are overseas. It's that mid level that's not been growing as much as the bottom or the top and that's the problem for the would be working class.

Dale Keiger: My phone was made in China, my shirt was made in Mauritius. I'm not sure where my car was made, but chances are not Detroit or Flint.

Andrew Cherlin: But the guys who advertised it are in the U.S. The people who designed it are in the U.S. The people who are selling it in the U.S., it's those workers who are making the things you have, they're the ones who are overseas or increasingly being replaced by robots.

Dale Keiger: Now when you listed the effects that all of this has had on the working class, the things that you have studied and documented, it's easy to understand what happened to ... why they're out of work. Straightforward, the jobs went away. What accounts for some of these other effects? What accounts for the accompanying changes in marriage and people not going to church? Is that some kind of knock on effect? What happened there?

Andrew Cherlin: Dale, I think the heart of it is that we have a generation that is not able to have the kind of life they thought they were entitled to, the kind of life they saw their parents having. These are people who grew up in working class families with at least one parent with a decent income, stable job, often stable family and they thought they would have that kind of life. And they can't because the jobs that sustained them aren't there. And so you have people with relatively high expectations, people who really thought they were gonna have the kind of decent life they saw commonly in the generation before them, and now they can't. The ones out in the rural areas using opioids can't as rural America has changed. The ones in the cities can't as the jobs that used to be at Bethlehem still aren't there.

Andrew Cherlin: So what I think we've had is a generation with high expectations, but not getting what they thought, and it's largely among the white working class that we see that. Those are the people whose dads were unionized and made the highest wages a generation or two ago. African Americans and Hispanics, they make less money still, but if you ask them how the present is compared to what their parents did, what was happening a generation ago, many will say, "Well things have gotten better." They're not great, discrimination is not over, but things are better than they used to be.

Dale Keiger: They can still feel at least like they're on the rise.

Andrew Cherlin: Yes, they can. And they can see an African American president being elect, they can see Hispanics in congress. But the white working class especially sees a decline from what they thought, and they thought they were entitled to what their parents have. And they're angry because they think that what they were entitled to has been taken from them and perhaps given to other ... in their eyes, less worthy groups.

Dale Keiger: So we talk about this a lot in terms of its economic effects and economic numbers. But there's an emotional economy here that it sounds like is as significant, and needs as much consideration as just tinkering with the economy to change the numbers.

Andrew Cherlin: Yeah. It says that how happy you are doesn't just depend on how much money you're making. It might depend on how much money you're making compared to how much you expected to make. And if you're making a lot less than you expected, you might be relatively unhappy, even someone else who had your income would say, "Wow, this is pretty good." So it's that discrepancy between what you thought you would get and what you have now that's causing the young adults to say, "Well, I can't get married to somebody because I can't find a steady job or I can't find somebody who will be a partner for me who would have a steady job. I don't think I can be the kind of responsible parent that I saw before. So I'll just live with somebody and if we get pregnant, that's too bad but we'll deal with it and we'll have kids. And I'm not gonna worry about long term relationships 'cause at bottom, I'm not sure I can be successful at it." And so that ... at heart, I'm not sure I can be successful at this, is I think what's driving much of the despair that we see.

Dale Keiger: And it brings to mind the aspect of ... the crucial aspect of employment in terms of shaping a person's identity, of forming someone's sense of self. In that yes, it puts food on the table, it covers your mortgage, it keeps the car running, your job does all of that. But there was a time when it really mattered that in Baltimore, you were a Sparrows Point guy, in Michigan you were a GM guy, you were a third generation GM guy, and you were a union man, you were a teamster. And those things go away and then I suspect maybe it's you don't know how much that mattered until it's gone.

Andrew Cherlin: Work gives people dignity as well an income and if they don't have that dignity, they may be in despair even if their income is objectively not all that bad. What we've seen is a group of people who can't get the dignity they would like from work. I've studied low and moderate income workers for a long time, and I decided a while ago that I was never gonna use the phrase dead end jobs again. 'Cause I've seen too many people who do jobs that a college education person might disdain, but who get a basic sense of dignity from doing those jobs, from coming to work everyday, getting paid, doing what they're supposed to do. That dignity is important to people and without it, they're often unhappy even if they're getting enough money that they're not really poor. They're still not

saying, "I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." They're still not carrying themselves with pride, they're still not feeling like a contributing member to society, and they're unhappy about it.

Dale Keiger: You used the phrase [inaudible 00:16:31] the casualization of labor. What does that mean?

Andrew Cherlin: I mean informal, unstructured. Think of what's happening now to two groups of people. One, cab drivers in New York City who've paid 15 or \$20,000.00 for a particular medallion that allows them to be a cab driver, who work for cab companies, who have regular hours, and on the other end Uber drivers. They're only 11,500 cabs in New York City roughly. They're kept at a low level by the city. They're now over 40,000 Uber drivers in the city. They are killing cab drivers and speaking of killings, a livery driver a few weeks ago in New York City committed suicide in front of City Hall to protest what was happening. But those Uber drivers, they don't have health insurance, they don't have vacations, they don't have any promise of regular hours, they don't know what they're gonna be making. They're working casually, not in the sense of laid back, but in the sense of a really unstructured job-

Dale Keiger: Right.

Andrew Cherlin: Without much sense of what's gonna happen. That's what happened to a lot of the workforce now. That's what I mean by the casualization of labor, the kind of informal, no benefits, you don't know what's gonna happen, you don't know how many hours you're gonna get type of job that we're seeing more and more of.

Dale Keiger: And is the gig economy primarily an urban economy?

Andrew Cherlin: So far it is. Who knows what will happen in the rural areas, but right it's based on services and services are gonna yield the biggest result if you to a place with a lot of people who need them. So right now we're seeing this gig economy in the cities. It's not just the gig economy, many big businesses don't hire their own custodians.

Dale Keiger: Yeah.

Andrew Cherlin: They hire a company that hires the custodians and may not treat them as well as the regular employees of the company, may not give them the health insurance and vacations they need. So that kind of casual labor is more and more occurring to people in the middle of the job market.

Dale Keiger: A summary phrase that you've used is you've talked of the working class as floating away from the rest of society.

Andrew Cherlin: Unanchored, unmoored. Unmoored by going to church every week. Unmoored by marriage. Unmoored by a stable tie to the workforce, a place to go five days a week for jobs. Those kinds of things matter for peoples' wellbeing. Surely, you don't have to go to church and you don't have to be married to feel good about yourself. But in fact, having ties makes a difference to a lot of people and those ties are kind of disappearing. They're certainly fraying.

Dale Keiger: Here's a hot button question. Do you think the U.S. government needs to be doing more than it's doing?

Andrew Cherlin: Yes. I do. Of course it does. Now exactly what should they do, that's a really difficult problem. Clearly education is a large part of this. Clearly we have to try to better educate people for the jobs that are still here. Now some people say what we ought to do is have as a goal four year college for all, because people with four year degrees are doing better. I think that's a mistake. I think we need to put more funds into the kinds of education we give people, for middle skill jobs where you don't need a college degree, like a medical technician. That's a growth field. In order to be a good medical technician, you need something beyond a high school degree. But you don't need four year college. You need to go to a community college and to finish your course of study at a community college. Same thing for other kinds of jobs that are still there, emergency medical technicians and so forth. But when you look at community colleges today, you see graduation rates that are abysmal. Sometimes 10 or 15 or 20% only of the students who begin community colleges graduate. Often because they have difficulties at home or their car breaks down. They need assistance.

Andrew Cherlin: What we need to do for community colleges is not just or necessarily make them free of charge, but support better the students who are there and give them opportunities to learn the kinds of skills that we still have. So education yes, but in a more complex way to do it. That may not be enough. We may need wage subsidies, it may still be the case the labor market isn't good enough for the people in the middle of that. And instead, they might need some kind of subsidy that will make them more attractive to an employer. And there might be some room for a cultural message too. A lot of these young adults are going ahead and having kids in short term relationships, which is not really good for the kids or even them. We might have a message that says, "Don't have your first kid until you're sure you're in a committed relationship that's gonna last. Don't start things too soon." So I'm willing to say there may be some cultural messages too, but certainly there's a large economic component of this that we need to deal with.

Dale Keiger: Well Andrew Cherlin, thank you for so much ... being here today. It's always a pleasure to speak to you.

Andrew Cherlin: You too, Dale.

Dale Keiger: This has been the Known World, produced by Johns Hopkins Magazine from the studios of Johns Hopkins University, department of communications. The

magazine is a quarterly of knowledge journalism as we call it and you can go online and read every we've put out since 1995 at the Hub. That's hub.jhu.edu/magazine. Our producer is Dave Schmelick, I'm Dale Keiger and we hope you'll join us next time.