

Resilience, Working-Class Poor, and Death: The Complexities of Being A “Strong Young Woman”

Carmen Blonde

Wayne State University, hl0283@wayne.edu

ABSTRACT

This autoethnography explores the relationships between the working class, resilience, health, and mortality in the United States. It combines personal experiences with empirical research to paint a picture of working-class American struggles within the individual and family context over time. By detailing the author’s personal experiences with growing up in a working-class family and coping with a close family death at a young age, the article highlights what numerical data in other research fails to capture. Statistics alone do not encompass the daily hassles, struggles, and traumas that working-class poor people encounter. Being a member of the working class plays a strong role in an individual’s health and their access to healthcare and shapes their experiences with death and grief. Through discussing the various ways American healthcare and government systems are failing the working-class poor, this autoethnography calls for more community advocacy and change to these systems so that quality healthcare is accessible for all.

Keywords: Resilience, health, working class, United States, autoethnography

I have always been reminded how strong I am. I hear from friends and family around me, "You are such a strong young woman," and "I wish I was as resilient as you." These may sound like compliments, but to me they're a bit of a double-edged sword. I do agree that I am strong, and I appreciate those who recognize it, but my strength grew simply because I had no other choice. I didn't want to be strong, and I shouldn't have had to be strong, especially as a child. Growing up as a young woman of working-class poor status, I have faced my fair share of adversity.

As a child, my family was on food stamps, but as I got older, we no longer qualified because my dad made too much money according to the government. We still lived paycheck to paycheck and struggled to keep food in the house. There were times when the fridge was mostly bare except for condiments, water, and sometimes juice. Meals often consisted of different variations of red meat and cheese. Fresh fruit and vegetables were out of the question, as we couldn't afford them, or they would spoil before we could eat them. There were some occasions when we had fresh produce, but it wasn't often. I remember the excitement of hearing that mom was making chicken, carrots and potatoes in a crockpot. It was usually a special occasion when she made it for dinner. I felt like a rich person eating like that. I got lunch at school for free, but I was a very picky eater, so I mostly ate packed lunches. They were usually peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, soup, or tuna sandwiches with a side of chips and a Hostess dessert. The government's income threshold for those who qualify for food assistance did not, and still does not, match reality. Our household income was above the poverty line, disqualifying us from many government assistance programs,

and we still struggled relentlessly. My mom stopped working when I was in early high school due to her disability and began collecting Social Security checks. These checks were around \$700 or so a month, which was never a livable amount for a family of four even with my dad's income added. I never knew how much he made, and I'm not sure my mom did either. He seemed to keep quiet about that stuff. He handled all the finances and would give my mom a budget every week for what she could spend. He rarely did any shopping because he was always working, and he would be furious if my mom spent too much money. As a child, I often got my clothes from the Salvation Army. I never wanted to admit to it out of fear of being teased. At the time, it was not considered cool or trendy, but a sign of being poor.

My friends, who lived in beautiful white picket fence houses with finished basements and white crusty-eyed dogs, had moms who didn't want me to come play with their kids. There were many times when I asked if I could go to their house and play, and was told by their mothers, "maybe another day." I would hear about all the fun playdates and parties they would have that I was not invited to. I went a couple of times and remember feeling like it was the best day ever. I never asked why I wasn't invited, assuming it was something I did or said that made them not want to hang out with me. There was a noticeable divide in our friend group. I had a couple of friends who lived a street over from me in the trailer park, and I was always much closer to them than my other friends who lived in the nice neighborhoods across the main road. I remember my parents never really getting along well with the rich kids' parents. Sometimes I was told I was not allowed to hang out with them because my parents were not talking to their parents. I was never sure why until my parents broke the truth to me one day. They told me that they didn't like us because we were poor. What? Why would that matter? It was incredibly confusing to try to wrap my mind around as a child. It was something I had to come to terms with, whether I understood it or not, because it was not an issue that was going away any time soon. But what was I to do except be strong?

They treated being poor like it was a plague. Like if I came into their house, they would be

infected by it. It created insecurity in me that I had not previously had. I started to become more aware of the financial divide between myself and others. Getting older, everything started making sense as I learned more about social inequality and what it meant to be considered a “working-class poor” household. I saw this pattern of disgust and fear from the middle and upper class repeated as I got older. I had several boyfriends over the course of high school and into my freshman year of college whose families had more money than mine. My first boyfriend lived in a beautiful big house. He and his family lived very comfortably and had well-paying jobs. I always felt out of place when I went to their house. They were never outright rude, but their actions spoke louder than words. One night, I had gotten into a bad argument with my dad and needed to leave the house for a little bit. Just an hour or two to cool down. It was maybe 7 p.m., and I asked if I could come over to his house. His parents said it was too late at night for that. It was summertime, so there was no worry about having to be up early for school. It felt like they always had a reason why they did not want me over. They never seemed very interested in what was going on with my life. Whenever I tried to vent my frustrations and struggles, they always just seemed disengaged and distant. Almost like they did not want to hear it. It was easier for them to live in their bubble. That boyfriend and I were not together for very long. In high school, I began to give disclaimers to the friends I brought into my home. I would say, “I am just warning you now, my house is gross. It’s old and in bad condition. It’s not clean. My dad is probably sleeping on the couch too. I’m honestly embarrassed of it; I’m sorry.” If it was not the toilet broken, it was the oven, or the dishwasher, or all of the above. It was always awkward explaining my situation, especially as I got older and life became more complicated at home. However, as I aged, many friends that I brought home were understanding of my situation, and I think that is because I began surrounding myself with people who were understanding and empathetic. Despite this, insecurity about my social class and home grew stronger as my understanding of class grew. The embarrassment still resides deep within me. I feel that no matter how much money I

have, what home I live in, or how much I scrub counters and vacuum carpets, it will never be enough. No amount of money will make me feel secure. No number of hours spent cleaning will feel clean enough. The scars of financial insecurity may fade with time, but they are a part of who I am now and who I will become.

Background

Income, Health, and Mortality

Low-income groups face more barriers and struggle more than their middle- or upper-income counterparts. These can include physical and mental challenges that stem from their economic status. They more often engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and poor diet as well. Longitudinal research has found that low-income people have an over 10-year decrease in life expectancy. Although healthy behaviors in low-income groups can help to reduce this difference, they cannot erase it (Liu et al. 2024). Research has also found that the relationship between health and income is not a linear one. When looking at health data across various income levels, increases in income in lower-income groups more drastically improve health than in higher-income groups (Lleras-Muney et al. 2025).

In this article, I reflect on my experiences with growing up in the working-class poor. By sharing my struggles, I want to shine a light on the experiences of the poor, who often go unseen. From poor health habits, to unhealthy work conditions, to unobtainable and unaffordable healthcare, resiliency is built at the expense of quality of life and lifespan.

American Healthcare Systems and Costs

Despite healthcare being a fundamental need, people who struggle with food and housing insecurity face competing needs and will prioritize their food and shelter over healthcare costs (Kushel et. al. 2005). Kushel and colleagues (2005) found that 23.6% of respondents struggled with housing instability, and 42.7% struggled with food insecurity. People who struggle with food and housing insecurity will likely have a harder time accessing healthcare and are more likely to

have emergency room visits and hospitalizations (Kushel et. al. 2005). Of homeowners, 30% have reported housing instability. It is an even higher rate with renters, with over 50% reporting housing precarity (Burgard, Seefeldt & Zelner 2012). Self-rated health outcomes were found to be worse among participants who have reported a history of homelessness, those who struggle to keep up with rent/mortgage, and those in foreclosure (Burgard, Seefeldt & Zelner 2012). Higher incidence and prevalence of cardiometabolic health issues like hypertension and self-reported cardiovascular diseases were also found among people struggling with housing instability (Gu, Faulkner, & Thorndike 2023). Another study found that people who had healthcare through government assistance had worse or no change in health status. This could mean that these programs are not giving enough to low-income groups, leading to worse health than those with private insurance (Zieff et. al. 2020).

Financial instability and poor health can be an embarrassing experience for many. There are some people, though, who can successfully persevere in these situations. These people are considered to be resilient. They pride themselves on being able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” It is comforting to know that not everyone who is poor or sick is doomed to misery, but it can also set dangerous expectations for how working-class people view their status.

Resilience

Secombe (2002) discusses the concept of resiliency in poor people, how it has previously been researched, and how it should change public policy. People who are considered resilient can live happy lives and bounce back from financial hardships and traumas they have experienced. Due to the overwhelmingly negative consequences associated with being poor, less is understood about these resilient individuals. Research has found that children who were able to overcome these negative outcomes in adulthood had close family relationships high in warmth and support as well as strong community ties. These individual factors that influence resilience are important

to understand, but there is a glaring issue: income inequality is a societal issue, not an individual issue. With income inequality increasing, there is only so much an individual can do to better their circumstances, especially when government programs are not providing enough support for people to escape financial hardship long-term.

There is a lack of literature discussing working-class people and the negative side effects that come with the expectation of building resilience. However, Anderson (2019) discusses how African American families are expected to build resilience against adversity while the systemic root of these adversities is left unaddressed. Anderson’s study of over 400 African American children who experienced significant childhood stressors as well as exhibited strong resiliency were found to have high allostatic load in later life. It was theorized that these young adults would be more prone to chronic illness despite their best efforts to remain resilient. Therefore, expecting people to be resilient against adversity while neglecting advocacy work to change the systems creating these adversities is setting people up for failure. Although further research is necessary to better understand this relationship in working-class populations, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the same argument could be applied.

This idea of resilience in poor people, paired with a broken healthcare system, creates a perfect storm to keep the poor, poor. The strong individualistic culture in America tells people that they should work hard and can achieve their goals by doing so. Working hard is important, but what happens when tragedy strikes and health declines, preventing one from working? What happens when medical debt piles up and one still cannot return to work to even attempt to pay off those bills? How can someone possibly be resilient when our culture prioritizes hard work over health?

Methodology

I signed up for a sociology class about social inequality in my sophomore year as a psychology major at Wayne State University, which brought me on a long journey of self-reflection. We had to do several writings about

different aspects of social inequality and relate them to personal experiences, as well as observations about the experiences happening around us. When the topic of socioeconomic inequality came up, a topic I feel deeply passionate about, I began typing furiously. When it came time to share, I wanted to be the first. I wanted everyone to know about the horrible inequality that existed and affected people around them, even to some who sat next to them. I wanted to expose the real-life ramifications that social policy is having on the working-class poor.

Midterms rolled around, and it was time to choose our favorite prompt to further develop and support with empirical literature. I worked on it for hours and produced a piece of writing that I was most proud of up to that date. You can imagine my surprise when the paper came back as a C-. I was furious. How could something so deeply personal, after hours of work, be worth a C-? I met with my professor, and she explained my grade and gave me tips on how to improve the paper for the final, then suggested I pursue publishing. I saw the opportunity and ran with it. But the class ended, and as time passed, struggle persisted and the responsibilities of being a young adult compounded quickly. I felt my spark was burning out. I never let it go out completely, though. No matter how long it took or how many tears were shed, I knew I would finish this paper. I was going to tell my story, and I know that it will resonate with many who have faced similar struggles.

An autoethnography is a body of work that focuses on the author's life experiences and, through reflection, ties these experiences to culture, politics, and society (Poulos 2021). Méndez (2013) discusses how autoethnography can be used as a self-reflexive method to better understand your own experiences and therefore be more empathetic and understanding of others, creating a more well-rounded researcher. This method examines personal experience in a vulnerable way while recognizing the broader context that influences those experiences. It allows for rich data. It could be argued that its conclusions are limited due to data analysis stemming from personal narrative. However, this limitation does not

consider that people are connected to the world by culture, which influences experience, and therefore allows for more nuanced and culturally specific conclusions to be made.

This paper was important to me for several reasons outside of talking about my adverse experiences and my father. Writing forced me to look inward at my experiences and how they have changed my perceptions, behaviors, and growth. It also made me examine more deeply the social policies America has in place, the beliefs and stigmas many of us hold, and it made me want to share those reflections with others. It was easy for me to explain all that had happened. The hardest part, however, was thinking deeply about why this was so important and why I felt compelled to write about it. Also, if it was so important to me, why did I keep procrastinating? Why did I put this project on hold so many times? Where was that resilience that has driven me for so long? I think my fear of failing held me back often. If I had put all this time and effort into writing and it went nowhere, it would be for nothing. I also did not like having to admit how stacked my odds were as a young woman born in a working-class poor family, the negative and long-lasting effects of being financially unstable, and how I began to notice some of the things I hated about my father in myself, something that will be discussed in depth later in this paper. The more I wrote, the more I noticed how my mind becomes loud in silence. I felt irritable and burnt out through a period of having school and work 7 days a week. Seeing the bags developing under my eyes when I looked in the mirror made me wonder if I was doomed to the same sad fate as my father.

Life With and Without My Father

The Night Shift

My father worked night shifts for most of my life. There were short periods here and there where he would try a new job during the day, but it either did not pay well enough, or he did not like it. Between 2017 and the summer of 2023, my dad worked around 80 hours a week, every week, strictly night shifts. There were even periods of time when he would work around 100 hours a week. It was rare that he

ever had a day off, and if he did, it was because he specifically requested it off for important events like my graduation. These were far and few between, though, with his boss denying many requests. Even before those years, his life revolved around working. I remember as a child even having a birthday party at his work. At the time, my mom worked for Tim Hortons and my dad worked at Wendy's, which were connected in one building. That fast-food birthday party seemed normal to me at the time, but looking back now, I realize that it was not. Through high school, I remember spending lots of evenings behind the counter of my dad's gas station job. I have many memories of the cold lights and smells of gasoline. I often dreaded visiting my dad. Half of the time that I would visit, we would argue about something. I remember sitting on a milk crate (because he wasn't allowed to have a chair) behind the register, arguing with him. We would have to stop whenever a customer came up to the counter. He would flip a switch like it was nothing, greeting customers with a smile and asking them about their week. My father did not have any friends, but he knew his "regulars" very well. Sometimes they would even give him gifts. He prided himself on how well he took care of the store and his customers. He prided himself on working hard and instilled that attitude in me as well. If he moved locations, his coworkers would tell him that his regulars were asking where he went, and sometimes, they would start going out of their way to go to his new location. The gas station was his life. It was the only socialization he got outside of our home and family. I think in some ways he saw them as friends, but I am not sure that the gas station customers saw it that way. I could be wrong. Regardless, these people meant something to him. They were his only source of community and companionship

Embarrassment

Truthfully, I was embarrassed of him. He worked right around the corner from my high school, and he knew many of my teachers and friends. It was not because he went to teacher conferences or saw me hanging out with them. He knew them from the gas station. He may not have even known their name, but he could tell

you what they always got. He would say, "Hey, I saw one of your friends come into the station last night. I don't know what her name was, but I asked about you, and she said you guys are friends. She got a slushy and a bag of chips."

I always felt guilty watching him work because I knew it was taking a toll on him physically and mentally, but he always said he did it because of how much he loved our family. Liu et al. (2024) quantified how a working-class poor lifestyle decays health, but my father was living it, and my family and I watched. My dad wanted nothing more than for us to be financially stable. It was strange because despite all his sacrifice in the name of love and financial stability, he was not often kind to my mother and me. Our house was filled with sorrow, tears, arguing, slamming doors, and rotting wood. I resented him, and I was embarrassed by him. I felt emotionally neglected by him, because the only way he knew how to apologize was with a wad of cash. It made me learn the value of the dollar not just within our home, but within our society, very quickly.

He had permanent bags under his eyes and about half of his teeth. He ate mostly fast food and Hostess baked goods. Later in his life, he had to cut up almost everything he ate because it hurt to chew. He had even pulled out his own tooth at work once. He couldn't brush his teeth because it was too painful, so he would only use Listerine. The smell still reminds me of him. I remember how he would call my mom or me at 11 p.m. asking us to bring him food, and he would raise hell if we argued. He always ordered a plain Whopper, a large fry with no salt, and a large vanilla shake from Burger King. He knew he would get fresh fries if he ordered them without salt, and he could always tell if the fries were old or if the cooks needed to change the oil. He chain-smoked cigarettes like nobody else. On a good night, he would get maybe six hours of sleep. When he was 18, he had open-heart surgery to have an artificial aortic valve put in. He was told that around 40 he would most likely need another heart surgery. He never went to the doctor again or even thought about getting another surgery. He could not afford it, and any medical procedure terrified him. Even if he overcame his fear,

paying for rent and groceries took priority over healthcare; a situation many households that struggle financially find themselves in (Kushel et. al. 2005). He had no work benefits, no healthcare, nothing. I found myself wondering from a young age what would kill him first: the cigarettes, his diet, lack of sleep, high stress, or his preexisting health condition. Maybe it would be a freak work accident like a gas leak. Maybe the gas fumes would kill him slowly. I came to the realization that he would die young when I was about 16 years old.

Mental Illness

I think his mind was very busy, as he talked to himself constantly. I think the strangest part, though, was that the words he was speaking were only mouthed. There was no sound, except for an occasional chuckle. He would even use his hands and make gestures as if he was having an in-depth conversation with someone in front of him. My mom and brother said he had been doing this for a long time, even before I was born, but it got much worse as time went on. They blamed it on a work injury he had back when he used to work in a mechanic shop where a car bumper had fallen on his head and knocked him out. Maybe it was mental illness, maybe it was loneliness, maybe it was just another physical toll work was taking on him. Maybe it was all of it. To others and even to me, he looked crazy, and he was aware of it. He would even joke about it sometimes. "Yep, your dad is crazy," he would say. He was hard to talk to because of this. You could tell him something many different times, and he would insist he was never told that, because he was never listening. He was wrapped up in his own thoughts. He was someone who you wouldn't want to encounter while you were alone at night based on looks and mannerisms. Many of my friends feared him, and the house always felt a little more peaceful when he was not home. He did not have a smartphone, so all he had was the same radio station with the same songs, day after day. He only watched the news, specifically Fox News. He would keep it on the television at work and watch it at home as well. That is, until his bosses decided it was too expensive to keep televisions in the store and took them all away. At least we got a free

TV out of it. It looked way too big for our little living room, but when you're poor, you don't complain about free stuff.

The Shame of Being Poor

He wanted to be better, but he did not know how. All he knew for so many years was work, eat, and sleep. I remember one incident when I was in middle school where his shame was revealed to me for the first time. My mom would look at houses in the area that were for sale online. At the time, we had considered moving into a house and having my grandma move in with us. One house that my mom found was not in great shape. The people who had lived there previously trashed the house before they moved. I think they were evicted. It was two stories with a basement and had a fenced-in backyard with a pool. The house needed lots of remodeling. New walls, flooring, plumbing, etc. To me, even with all its imperfections, it was the perfect house. It was big and beautiful, and more than I could have ever dreamed of. My mom, brother, and I went and saw the house without telling my dad. When we came home, my mom proposed the idea to my dad. He was angry and immediately shut the idea down. They got into an argument, and I could hear them yelling from my bedroom. My dream home was truly just a dream. He came into my room after the argument. It was the evening, and he was on his way to work. He sat me down and told me how we could never afford that house. He looked me in the eyes, with tears in his eyes, and apologized for being such a disappointing father, and said that he was sorry he could not give me more. I had never felt more guilty in my life. I was watching him work himself to death, and I dared to ask for more. How could I? He cared deeply for his family despite not always being able to show it. He was the kind of father where you know no matter how angry he was at you or what was said in an argument, no matter how long it had been since you talked, no matter how badly you had messed up, he would defend you in a heartbeat.

There has been a lot of discourse about the fairness of society. There are differing opinions about whether free health care, schooling, or more, would take away the incentive to work.

Who could possibly want to give away what they worked hard for, so others don't have to? That would be more unfair than the way society functions now, according to some. I feel very differently, but there are plenty of people who agree with this idea, and my father was one of them. Lower-class people have been convinced that with hard work and elbow grease, we can achieve anything. That it is selfish to expect government assistance, and that those who accept it simply are not working hard enough. My father often told angry stories of the people he had helped at the gas station who were using food stamps. He called them lazy and made it a point to note if they were Black or "Mexican" or not. I honestly think he was jealous and bitter. Yes, there are people who commit fraud and abuse the system. But I think what he failed to understand was that most of the people who he came across were not undeserving of government assistance; it is that our family was deserving and was not getting it. No one should have to work 80-100 hours a week for a dream that could not be realized. But dangling this fantasy like a carrot in front of the working class keeps them stuck in a cycle of work and exhaustion.

I grew up very familiar with the saying, "Well, life isn't fair," hearing it from my parents whenever I thought something was not right or that I was being treated unfairly. I always thought it was ridiculous and was just a way for my parents to deflect when they had no good counterargument. As I grew older, I concluded that the saying really is true. My parents had worked very hard throughout their lives and had little to show for it. No matter how hard they tried to work with the system (with the few resources they had), they found themselves in the same financial situation repeatedly. I could not understand this as a child. What separates my childhood perspective on fairness from my adult perspective is that I now recognize that even when life is unfair (which it often is and will continue to be), you must keep going, and you must take care of yourself at the same time.

June 15, 2023

I remember the day my father passed vividly. We were sharing a car at the time because my

car was totaled in a car accident earlier that year. He was working the day shift at the time. He decided that the night shift was not worth the toll anymore and threatened that he would quit if his boss did not let him switch. Therefore, I had to drive him to work around 11:00 in the morning. As we were walking to the car, he told me he had good news; he was going to try to quit smoking again. The last time he had tried to quit was back in 2020, so this was a big deal. In hindsight, this may have been a last-ditch effort to save his life. We had gotten into an argument the night before, so I was not really in a talkative mood with him, but I told him I was excited for him. He said he was disappointed because he hoped that if he quit smoking, I would quit vaping at the same time, and we could get through nicotine withdrawal together. I told him I would try quitting someday but that I was not ready to quit. We shared a laugh because I made a joke that we would kill each other if we quit nicotine at the same time. He never complained of feeling sick that day or the days prior. He was in a good mood and was even hopeful for the future, something that I did not often see from him. I dropped him off at work, and unfortunately, that was the last time I would ever speak to him again. Around 6:30 that night, I was on my way to his work. I was going to drop the car off to him and have my friends pick me up so I could hang out with them without having to worry about picking my dad up from work. About a half mile down the road from his work, I got a call from my uncle but declined it with the intent of calling him back when I parked. He immediately called again, so I answered. He explained that the hospital had contacted him and said that my father was rushed in and they had no information on what happened or his condition. As he was telling me this, I was pulling into his work, where there were two cop cars sitting outside. I rushed in and asked what happened, but they said they did not know and that I needed to get to the hospital. On the way, I made calls to friends and family members. I was the first to arrive, and I was terrified. I had to give one of the nurses my general information and then was asked to wait for someone to speak with my family, and I soon.

After my uncle arrived, we were brought into the back of the emergency room. I immediately

knew something was very wrong when they took us into a room with a couple of chairs and a table with tissues on it. I knew something bad had happened, but nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to hear. After my aunt arrived, two doctors came in and explained that my father had had a heart attack and that they tried performing CPR but unfortunately could not save him. I screamed in a way I never had before. It was guttural—a sound I didn't even know I was capable of. I'm certain it echoed through the hallways of the sterile emergency room. We had to wait a gut-wrenching hour before my brother could arrive to break the news to him. I called my mom, who was living in California at the time, to tell her the news. She screamed too.

They allowed us to see him but warned us that he was in bad condition. I did not care; it was my dad. He had bruises all over his body. There was a plastic tube jammed down his throat. His skin was pale, veins bulging, dried blood on his lips. That was not my father, only a shell of him. He lay there, lifeless, in the sterile white room. His skin was cold to the touch. I didn't shed a single tear looking at him. I remember thinking to myself over and over again, "So this is just it, huh? You were fine earlier, and now you're dead?" I had never seen a dead body like that before, but it did not affect me the way I thought it would. A serene numbness fell over me. I was angry, hurt, confused, distraught. My whole life was turned upside down. It was just him and I living at home. I was only 19 years old. My new adult life had barely scratched the surface before being torn apart. What the hell was I going to do? Where do I go from here? My brother and I went home after the hospital so I could gather my things to stay at my sister's house for the night. The house had changed. Never again would I walk into my dad sleeping on the couch with Fox News blasting. It was quiet and dark. The smell of his cigarettes still lingered. I made sure to grab the black and grey flannel jacket that he liked to wear. A jacket I never cared about previously, suddenly held so much weight. I had never felt more alone than that night staying at my sister's. Everything I knew was changing, and I was scared.

Although I do believe that there is some

merit behind working hard for what you have, no one should have to work themselves to death just to scrape by. How is that fair? Even if you get a job and work as hard as you can, you may end up like my father. He worked every single day for years and years, sacrificing his health, sanity, family time, everything, just to have nothing to show for it in the end. He wanted a different life so badly. His health was in decline, and he knew it, but he could not do anything about it because he did not have healthcare and could not afford a doctor's visit. Leading up to his death, he talked to several family members about what to do if he died. He asked my uncle to take care of me, which sounded absurd at the time, because what would possibly happen to him? While cleaning the house after his death, we found several hidden bottles of aspirin. I had lived with him through the months prior to his death and never knew he was taking so much aspirin. I can only assume that he knew he was sick but did not want to tell anyone because he knew there was nothing that could be done about it. The last thing he ever saw was the walls of the gas station that he spent so much time at, missing family dinners, band concerts, life milestones, everything. We did not get a goodbye; we did not get to tell him one last time that we loved him. Do not worry, his bosses sent us some money for the funeral but blamed us for working him to death after shorting his final paycheck. It was one last signal from them that my father was nothing more than a dollar sign in their eyes. We were grateful for the money from his bosses because it did help with some funeral expenses, but in the end, money could not replace my dad. We were also given the ambulance bill from my dad (who died before he even got to the hospital) of \$31,000. Luckily, we had family members who informed us that it was not our responsibility to cover that bill. How unempathetic have our healthcare systems become to send us a giant bill after a traumatizing family death without an explanation that it is not our financial responsibility?

Aftermath

I am left with my wonderful mom, who is a DoorDash driver to supplement monthly Social

Security checks, but she still struggles to keep up with bills. She moved back to Michigan after my dad's passing. It took weeks to clean the house. He was a filthy man who never picked up after himself and believed that it was the sole responsibility of women to clean. I simply could not keep up with cleaning on my own. The bills were behind, and my mother and I barely had enough money to get caught up, which took months. Everything had to be transferred out of his name and into my mother's, except for the car, which went to my name and was sold shortly after. Every task was an uphill battle. Every company needed to hear the story of his death along with a copy of his death certificate. No one made these tasks easy on my grieving mother and me. Although my mother and father had a complicated and rocky relationship, he was her husband of 19 years, and she was grieving too. Our mobile home was broken down and old. It was built in the 70s, and it was easy to tell its age. Over time, my brother helped pay for us to get things like the shower and flooring fixed, but eventually we ended up moving. The year following my father's death was a struggle to keep food in the house. We applied for food stamps and were told we would only be given \$18 a month. We applied for a no-cost government assistance program to fix the gaping hole in our roof and the floor that was caving in. However, after over six months of waiting for an estimate, we were told that our house would be too expensive to fix and that we were on our own. My mom bought a used 2008 Jeep from someone we knew, which ended up being a money pit, costing her thousands of dollars in repairs that she did not have. The consequences of long-term financial instability had claws in us. Life felt hopeless. I was losing faith in our survival as I watched my childhood home decay around us. Navigating bills and insurance in ways we never had before was scary. There were so many times when we just wanted my dad to come and help, but he was gone. This was all happening because he was gone. In the spring of 2024, my mental health was becoming worse. I would cry myself to sleep thinking about my dead dad, reliving the day he passed over and over again. I attempted to find a therapist, but since I had Medicaid insurance, it was nearly impossible. I thought I finally found

one until after two sessions, when she explained that she actually did not accept my insurance, so I stopped seeing her. After that, I gave up on looking. Calling office after office to be rejected, waitlisted, or sent to voicemail was exhausting and created even more anxiety. As of February 2026, I am losing my health insurance altogether. I cope the best I can, and time has helped heal the wound, but it will forever be a scar on my heart.

My Mental Health and Struggles

I think about him every day, and I struggle with his sudden death at work. I find myself wondering if maybe things could have been different. Maybe if he had healthcare, he could have gotten help. Maybe if he was making a livable wage, he would not have had to work so much. Maybe he could have seen me graduate from college, get married, have kids and grow into adulthood. Instead, I am left with his memories and his credit card debt. Every year that passes, I worry that as I grow old, his memories will slowly be forgotten. His grandchildren will forget him, and my children will never know him. He'll never get to see me live a happy life as an adult. How could anyone possibly hear this story and think that this is fair?

Even today, life can feel like an uphill battle. There's always a car breaking down, a bill that is behind, or a part of our home that needs repairs. Sometimes I feel like the only thing I can do to make it better is to bury myself in work and school. Keep myself as busy as possible so that I don't have time to stop and feel. I go to school full time while working on the weekends as a server. I often find myself feeling overworked and stressed, and I struggle with procrastination, which adds to these issues. My goal is to obtain my B.A. in psychology, which has been achieved as of May of 2026, take a year or two off from school, then go back to get my master's degree and become a mental health counselor. I never feel like my work is good enough or that I am ever working hard enough. That there is always something more I could be doing. My job often makes me feel stressed, and there are days when I wake up feeling nauseous from anxiety, thinking about going. I am not the type of person to call

off, though. I fear criticism and repercussions for doing so, so instead I ignore my mental health and go anyway. I cannot stand the idea of not having anything to do, and in my free time I feel paralyzed. It feels wrong to relax. It feels too taxing to commit to a hobby. I keep reminding myself that if I work hard, I will be able to move up in socioeconomic status and build a better life for myself and my family. The only issue with that is that my dad thought the same thing. That despite the struggle, it will all be worth it in the end, right? What if I am trapped? Even if I find success soon, I could still face negative outcomes like chronic illness later in life, similar to what Anderson (2019) found.

Conclusion

I know the statistics. I know my odds. I refuse to let them define me. I refuse to stay in this situation that has been passed down to me. I will continue to pursue my education, and every day that passes is one step closer to achieving my goals. Sharing my experiences in this autoethnography has reminded me of my strength, and I hope that it can inspire others. If you were given a bad hand or feel trapped, know that you are not alone. Resilience is power, but that does not mean that we must be content with our situation. Recognizing the systems that we are in is the first step to changing them. I have changed my lifestyle habits and prioritized my health more. I now go to the gym four times a week with the goal of becoming stronger and healthier. I have changed my diet to prioritize foods that are healthier for me, and in the meantime, I have learned I enjoy cooking a good bit. Teaching myself was challenging in the beginning, but I love trying new recipes. Building a gym routine was very hard in the beginning as well, and even now there are days when I really do not want to go. I am not perfect: I like to go out and drink on the weekends, stay up late, and eat those greasy foods that I know are not very good for me. I do not always sleep as much as I should. Going to the doctor scares me, as I do not handle medical issues very well. But all I can do is try. If there is one thing I have learned about myself, it is that I am a fighter. I am certain that I will never stop fighting to better

myself. I recognize that I am resilient. Despite all my life experiences and struggles (and the future struggles that are certain to come still) I am on track to have a happy and prosperous life. All my horrible experiences have made me stronger. The reality that the world will not stop moving for you, even when someone dies, hit me hard and fast. I picked myself back up, and I kept moving. Although I did not really have a choice, I still did it despite how hard it was. It is still hard. Even writing this has been incredibly hard. I do not think I would be this resilient if I were born into a rich family who never struggled. I look around at the other people my age who have not faced the kinds of struggles that I have, and I feel that we are fundamentally different. My experiences shaped me into who I am today. I think everyone should face a healthy level of challenges throughout life. However, people are not just facing challenges; people are scraping by, barely staying afloat. People should not have to suffer to learn strength and independence. Our government and social policies are watching us struggle and telling us to work harder to fix it.

Working-class poor Americans cannot simply be expected to work themselves to death to fix societal-level issues. It is up to our government to make our healthcare systems more affordable and accessible for all. A healthy life is something that every human should have the right to, regardless of socioeconomic status. This work begins by supporting government policies that make changes to the way our healthcare systems currently function and voting for government officials who support these policies. If meaningful changes to American healthcare systems and costs can be made, it could better the health of many working-class poor Americans by removing barriers to accessing healthcare and promoting positive health behaviors.

Many people know that the working-class poor exist and that they are struggling. Lots of people have had at least one bad experience with health insurance, a strained budget for the week, or a lost loved one. But if anyone reading this paper can take one thing away when finished, it is that this experience, these struggles, are happening to millions of people in this country. Not everyone comes out of

them stronger or more resilient. Many of them cannot pull themselves through. They cannot bring themselves to talk about it or ask for help. Their stories are left unseen. They are the kid you see walking to school every day, the person who sits next to you in class, or the man who works at the gas station you stop at every morning before work who knows your order by heart. By publishing my story, I prove to myself and the world that I am breaking the cycle.

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