

Government financial reports tend to fixate on three economic indicators as barometers for the strength of the economy: unemployment, GDP and the stock market. High GDP growth has the president crowing, unemployment is below 4% and the stock market is booming. The Standard & Poor's 500-stock index has soared more than 320 percent since emerging from the rubble of the financial crisis in March 2009, creating more than \$18 trillion in wealth.

But, what do those numbers mean for you? I'm guessing not much!

The day-to-day experience for working and middle class Americans has become completely divorced from these macro metrics. An overall growth rate doesn't tell you a thing about how the spoils of that growth are shared. While middle-class incomes are trading water, the rich have prospered and the poor have fallen behind.

This is the decade in which wealth inequality has increased the most in U.S. history. So, where should we look for the health of our economy?

Here are a few ideas.

First, real wage growth. Are workers getting ahead? Or falling behind? Real wage growth can give you a sense and help tease out who's benefitting from those top-level metrics. Newsflash, it's not workers. Worker wages have been essentially flat since the 1970's! This should be an emergency but somehow it's just a pesky side note in our economic conversation.

Second, rate of unionization. As go unions, so goes the middle class. It really is that simple. Unions lift wages, benefits, and worker dignity. Unions have steadily declined right along with the middle class.

And finally, deaths of despair.

Sometimes you have to look beyond pure economic stats to get a real taste of what life is like for average Americans. When you add together suicides, deaths by overdose, and alcoholism, you get a grim metric that's been dubbed deaths of despair.

How many people find their situation so mind numbing, and generally hopeless that they give up on their own life? Here too, we have a disaster unfolding that seems to be hitting middle age high school educated whites in particular.

The nation has been gripped by an epidemic of despair and yet no one has actually proposed anything to deal with it. Once upon a time overall economic numbers actually meant something. A rising tide seemed to lift all boats. Those days are long gone though, and as long as we aim our policies at the wrong metrics, they aren't coming back.

For too long, our government has been controlled by the wealthiest among us, who are all too eager to spend trillions on tax breaks for billionaires but refuse to provide resources -- like universal health care and tuition-free college -- for the rest of us. And unless we stop electing leaders who are controlled by the billionaire class, this economic injustice will just keep going unchecked.