

Disappearing Center

Middle-Class Citizens May Be in Denial, But They're Becoming a Vanishing Breed

By Michael Y. Park

New York's middle class is being squeezed out of existence, according to a Manhattan think tank and a New York University professor, who have separately been sounding the alarm about what they call America's newest endangered species.

"Economic mobility is, at best, partly mythical," says Andrea Batista-Schlesinger, executive director of the Drum Major Institute. "It's becoming harder to move up."

"You're more likely to experience bankruptcy in your family than divorce," says DMI President and former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer. "Considering the rate of divorce, that's pretty bad."

Batista-Schlesinger cites statistics from a September 2003 DMI poll that paint a picture of New Yorkers living paycheck to paycheck, suffering unnecessarily because they don't have health insurance and slowly losing the livable wage that they took for granted 10 or 15 years ago. The era of the 1950s and 1960s, when people believed being middle class meant you held one or maybe two jobs for a lifetime, sent your kids to college and retired comfortably, is over.

"Ninety percent of American bankruptcies last year were from the middle class," she says. "We polled New Yorkers who were high-school graduates or had college degrees — one in two didn't save. The whole idea of being middle class was being able to save and send your kids to college."

The DMI, founded by real-estate lobbyist William Wachtel as a progressive counterweight to conservative think tanks like the Manhattan Institute and the Heritage Foundation, has been

focusing on what it says are the dwindling prospects of those who have to work for a living but are above the government poverty line. It's these folks who are suffering the most, thanks to years of bad policy, growing anti-tax and anti-government sentiments and an ailing economy, yet it's their woes being glossed over by the media and politicians on both the left and the right, the DMI says.

"The so-called liberals and progressives write off middle-class concerns and conceded them to the conservatives," Ferrer says. "Yet the shrinking

of the middle class isn't only a problem for the middle class."

New Yorkers are especially vulnerable, according to Micki McGee, a sociologist and NYU professor. Her book, "Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life" (Oxford University Press), coming out in September 2005, discusses how middle-class families began a slide in the period from 1972 to 1993, with economic security replaced by a self-help culture that emphasizes self-involvement and self-promotion at the expense of social reform.

"For those of us in New York City, our housing costs have increased so dramatically," McGee says. "Our cost of education has vastly outpaced inflation; the cost of health care, that speaks for itself — look at all the people who don't have health insurance."

Harkening to the theme of her book, she points to the perpetual popularity of books like the "What Color Is Your Parachute?" series and television shows that reward marketing oneself as a product, like "The Apprentice," as evidence that middle-class people are hurting economically yet responding in a peculiarly American way.

"People think they can bootstrap their way out of social problems," she says, even though figures show the possibility of climbing to the top rung of the socioeconomic ladder is slimmer than ever — partly because of reluctance by



Great Divide: Wealthy and middle class grow apart

middle-class Americans to associate themselves with anything that smacks of "the working class."

"One of the great challenges is to understand that the middle class is really a working people," McGee says.

There's still hope for the middle class, she and the DMI say, but it will take a change in perceptions.

"Economic fairness is itself a moral value," Batista-Schlesinger says. "We have to make that connection." ■

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