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Estimating the Income of the January 6, 2021 Insurrectionists

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Estimating the Income of the January 6, 2021 Insurrectionists

Abstract

The income of those who attacked the U.S. Congress on January 6, 2021 and were subsequently arrested is estimated using the income in the neighborhood of their residence as a proxy measure. Contrary to common wisdom, we find that the income of the arrestees deviated markedly from that of the population at large. Two groups were conspicuously underrepresented from this subset of the insurrectionists: the poor (whose estimated annual per capita income was below \$20K), and those who earned more than \$50K per annum. Fully 83% of the arrestees resided in areas with an average annual per capita income between \$20K and \$50K. This finding dovetails with the argument that the right-wing populist movement is driven largely by the struggling lower-middle class who have been left behind by the transition from an industrial to a knowledge economy.

JEL-Codes: A100.

Keywords: populism, capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, Capitol attack.

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1. Introduction

The prevailing view of the January 6 Capitol insurrectionists is that they were a typical cross section of the US population. Allegedly, they were “...more ‘normal’ Trump supporters—middle-class and, in many cases, middle-aged people without obvious ties to the far right.... 40 percent are business owners or hold white collar jobs.... Many... have a lot to lose. They work as CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists and accountants... only 9 percent are unemployed... more than half came from counties that Biden won... In these and many other ways, the mix of counties from which the arrestees hailed was typical of all American counties.... This breakdown mirrors the American population as a whole....” (Pape and Ruby 2021). This view has been reinforced by being widely circulated: “a surprising number were business owners or white-collar workers” (Kalmoe and Mason 2022, pp. 2, 105; Friends 2021; Hayward 2022; Kaplan 2021; Pape 2022). “.,40% of them are business owners or in white collar occupations such as lawyers, doctors, attorneys, accountants...” (Seder 2021, @45min). Hence, the dominant impression is that the insurrectionists were “everyday people” (Face the Nation 2022); “these are not people that are at the desperate end of the job ladder (Amanpour and Company 2021, @2:34min) and their motivation was more about “cultural anxiety” (racism) than “status anxiety” (Waldman 2021).

The exceptions to the above narrative, do point out, however, that being a much-touted “business owner” is hardly a guarantee of financial security or solid middle-class status in today’s contingent-employment economy (Inc 2022; Friedman 2014; Hafeez, Gupta, and Sprajcer, 2022; Kalleberg 2011; Ravenelle 2019). In this minority view, financial insecurity, feeling of economic marginalization, a precarious life, and vulnerability to the loss of social

status is key to the understanding of extremism (Miller-Idriss 2020, pp. xvii, 50, 89). Frankel, for instance, highlights a real estate agent who nearly lost her home to foreclosure, filed for bankruptcy, and is still paying of a \$37,000 lien for unpaid taxes. “Nearly 60 percent of the people facing charges... showed signs of prior money troubles... (2021).

Consequently, further research on the insurrectionists’ income is warranted. Our findings contradict the dominant narrative and instead support minority view that status anxiety is associated with the mob that attacked the Capitol. The arrestees were hardly typical Americans. Instead, they were almost exclusively from the lower-middle class, i.e., from the segment of the society that was most severely exposed to the vagaries associated with the transition from an industrial to a knowledge economy. The poor were too disoriented to rebel while those who could afford a solid middle-class lifestyle had no reason to do so.

2. Method

The arrestees’ income of can be estimated based on the income in the neighborhood of their residence.¹ The available zip-code level data, collected by the U.S. Census, are five-year averages, converted to 2020 prices. Given the names of the 933 arrestees in two data bases,² we searched in the media for their other identifying characteristics, such as their gender, middle initial, or age in order to make their residence more easily identifiable.³ Thereafter, for those living in large towns, we looked up their addresses in public-record search engines in order to obtain the zip code of the arrestees’ residence.⁴ However, for those living in small towns this was deemed unnecessary since in a small community the average income of the town in which the arrestees resided can be considered to be a reasonably good proxy measure of their income.

Through this procedure we obtained a reasonable estimate of the per-capita as well as of the household income in the vicinity of the arrestees' residence.

We are obviously well aware of the problems associated with drawing inferences in light of the ecological fallacy; nonetheless we are convinced that the following estimates increase our understanding of the insurrectionists social status and are much more useful than the county-level descriptors used hitherto and yield a significantly more nuanced and granular picture of the insurrectionists' socio-economic status than is currently available.

The U.S. Census publishes the distribution of household income but not that of per-capita income.⁵ Hence, the letter was calculated using the data available in the Current Population Survey for 2018.⁶ The calculation was based on total household income (htotval) divided by the size of the household (h_numper) weighted by the weight of the household in the U.S. population (marsupwt).⁷ The income data so obtained was converted to 2020 prices by multiplying it by 1.036, the inflation between 2018 and 2020.⁸

3. Results

We first compare the per-capita income distribution of the arrestees with that of the U.S. population at large (Figure 1 and Table 1). A key finding is that the utterly poor (those earning below \$15K) are practically absent from the sample. In fact, there are only five persons among the arrestees with an estimated per capita income below \$15K, although in a random sample of Americans one would expect to find some 60 such persons in the sample. This substantial difference is unexpected at first but makes perfect sense on further thought since poor people would not have been able to finance their travel to Washington, DC in the first place.

Figure 1 and Table 1 about here

The second key finding is that those whose estimated annual per-capita income is above \$50K are also underrepresented. This group can be subdivided into three groups: the upper half of the middle class (\$50K-75K) which is underrepresented by 9.7%, the upper middle class (\$75K-100K) underrepresented by 9.6%, and the rich (>\$100K) underrepresented by 21.2%. There were only 23 arrestees in the sample with an estimated income above \$75K. However, in a random sample of 933 Americans one would expect to find 300 people with income above that threshold. That is also a blatant deviation from a random sample.

In stark contrast, the lower half of the middle class, those with an annual income between \$20K-\$50K are overrepresented among the arrestees by a substantial margin. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the insurrectionists, fully 83.3% have an estimated income between \$20K and \$50K; the mode is in the \$25K-\$30K bin with 20% of the arrestees. Obviously, this subset of the insurrectionists were very far from being typical Americans in terms of incomes.

Figure 2 about here

The result of the comparison between the arrestees' and the US household distribution is the same as above with the difference that household incomes are approximately twice as much as the per capita incomes since there are mostly two earners per household (Figure 2) (Shrider et al., 2021, Table A-2). Fully 82.5% arrestees' household income is within the \$35K-\$100K range nearly identical to the above per-capita distribution in which 83.3% of the arrestees had estimated earnings \$20K and \$50K.

4. Conclusion

The income estimates of the arrestees, and by implication that of the insurrectionists, based on the neighborhood of their residence indicates that they were very far from being a random draw from the U.S. population. Instead, 83% of the sample were members of the lower

half of the middle class (without the utterly poor). This was precisely the segment of the population that was most exposed to the frailties associated with the transition to a post-industrial knowledge economy.

This finding dovetails with the argument that the right-wing populist movement is driven essentially by the financial anxieties associated with the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (Davis and Wilson 2022; Bartels 2016; Buffett 2011). The social movement behind the insurrectionists is based on these frustrations: instead of reaching the American dream theirs was a precarious existence. After all, a representative survey of the U.S. population in 2021 found that 53% of Americans were “concerned” about losing their primary source of income during the next 12 months of which 9% were “extremely concerned” (NORC 2021).⁹ Moreover, 4.8%, strongly agreed that “The use of force is justified to restore Donald Trump to the presidency”; that makes about 13 million adults (NORC 2021). So, the dissatisfaction is much wider than the few thousand insurrectionists who participated in the attack on Congress.

The source of that deep anxiety includes the enormous inequality that began with the immense tax windfall for the superrich in 1981 (Komlos 2019a, 2019b; Piketty 2014; Prasad 2012; Stiglitz 2011), the frustrations caused by globalization for those without a college education (Rodrik 2011, 2018; Stiglitz 2017), and the resentments generated by the financial crisis that bailed out the upper echelons of society without consideration of the problems of Mainstreet America (Deaton 2011; Hundt 2019; Posner 2009; Scheiber 2011). The IT revolution supplanted these processes by downgrading the market value of the skills of the less educated and contributed to the “hollowing out of the middle class” (Mazzucato 2020; Stiglitz 2012; Temin 2017; Warren 2007).

Those who succeeded in the new knowledge economy and prospered during this historic transformation had absolutely no reason to rebel; therefore, it is hardly astonishing that they did not participate in the storming of the Capitol (Stiglitz 2019; Reich 2020). If the primary motivation of the mob had been cultural anxiety, then why is it that that anxiety hardly affected those who were financially secure? Financial security inoculates the individual against manipulation whereas racial resentment “involves a reaction to the loss of status and privilege” (Davis and Wilson 2022, vii). So, in this model racism is a surface phenomenon, used by manipulating elites to exploit the status anxiety of the lower-middle class. Thus, the fundamental cause of discontent is precarious financial circumstances.

How the above-mentioned powerful economic forces redistributed income in favor of the rich and superrich and how they generated resentment at the institutions of government is discussed elsewhere (Komlos 2017). Suffice it to say here, that this complex of issues spawned a humongous literature, almost all of it after the financial crisis. For instance, Michael Sandel of Harvard University suggested that “...the election of Trump was an angry verdict on decades of rising inequality and a version of globalization that benefits those at the top but leaves ordinary people feeling disempowered” (Sandel 2018a,b). Similarly, Princeton Nobelist Angus Deaton believes that: “The fundamental problem is unfairness, that the great wealth at the top is seen as ill-gotten in a system that gives no chance to many” (Case and Deaton 2020, p. 262). And ex-Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan, an ardent advocate of free markets, realized years ago that if we don’t reverse “a quarter century of increases in income inequality, the cultural ties that bind our society could become undone. Disaffection, breakdowns of authority, even large-scale violence could ensue, jeopardizing the civility on which growing economies depend” (Greenspan 2007a,

p. 468). He even predicted presciently that “[y]ou cannot have the benefits of capitalist market growth without the support of... virtually all of the people; and if you have an increasing sense that the rewards of capitalism are being distributed unjustly the system will not stand (Greenspan 2007b). Well, it was apparently not standing very firmly on January 6th, 2021.

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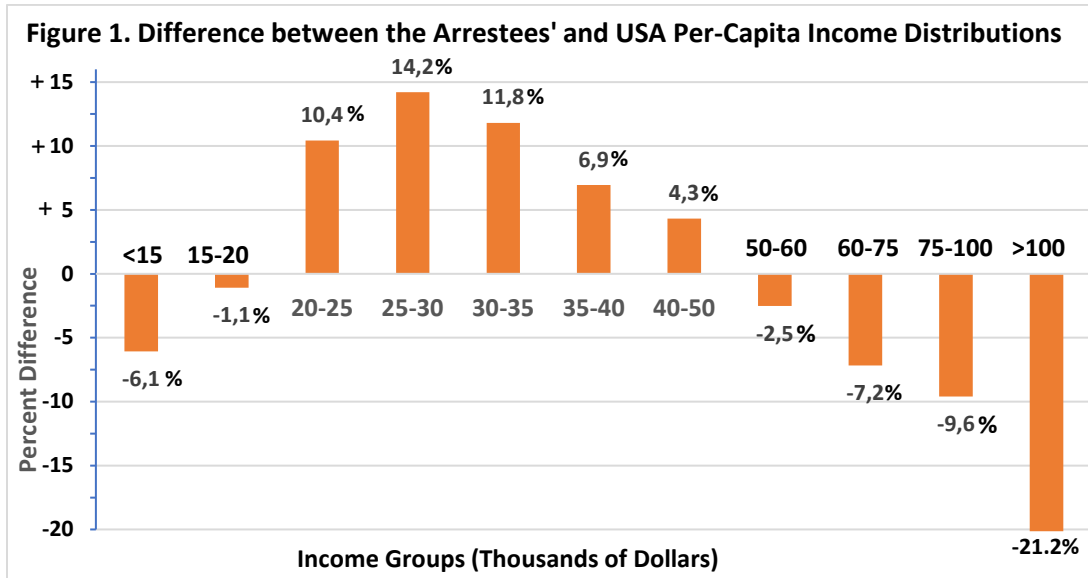
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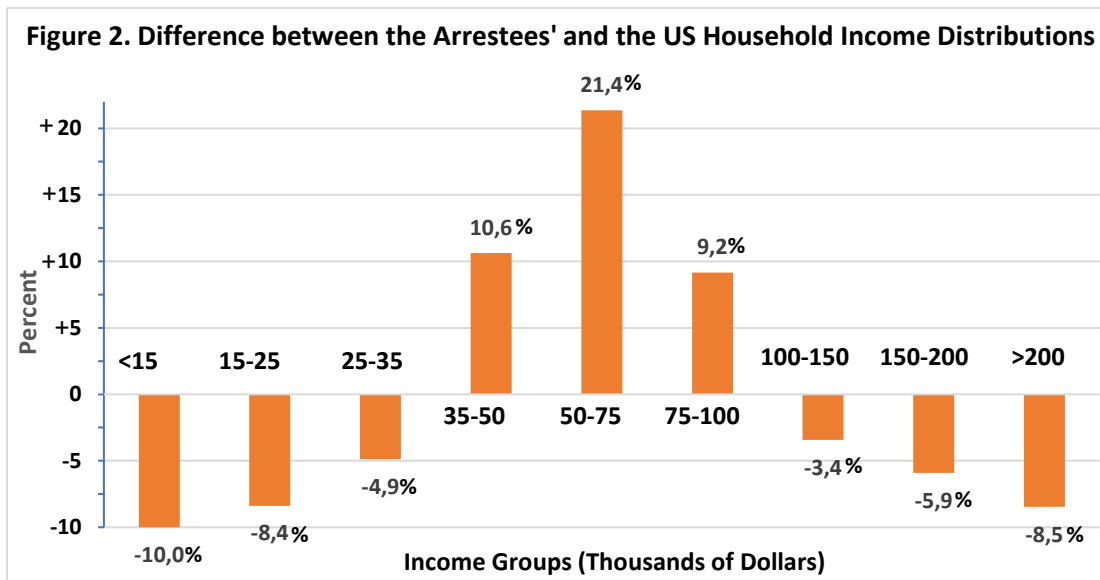
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6. Figures



Source: See text.



Source: Shrider et al 2021, Table A-2

7. Table

Income	U.S.	Arrestees	Difference
<15	6.6	0.5	-6.1
15-20	5.4	4.3	-1.1
20-25	6.0	16.4	10.4
25-30	6.3	20.5	14.2
30-35	6.2	18.0	11.8
35-40	6.2	13.1	6.9
40-50	10.9	15.2	4.3
50-60	8.9	6.3	-2.5
60-75	10.3	3.1	-7.2
75-100	11.2	1.6	-9.6
>100	22.1	0.9	-21.2

Note: Income is in thousands of 2020 dollars

8. Endnotes

¹ Incomes are available <https://www.incomebyzipcode.com/>. These are based on the American Community Surveys conducted by the U.S. Census.

<https://data.census.gov/table?tid=ACSST1Y2021.S1901>. The data available at the zip code level are averages for the five years 2016-2020, but the averages are in 2020 dollars. Hence, the incomes of the arrestees were compared to the U.S. incomes for 2018 in 2020 prices.

² The names of those arrested are available on two websites: Georgetown University's Program on Extremism:

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fextremism.gwu.edu%2Fsites%2Ffiles%2Fzaxdzs2191%2F%2FCapitolHillSubset10112022.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK> and The University of Chicago's project on Security & Threats https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/apv/jan_6_database/; [The Face of American Insurrection \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com)

³ U.S. Department of Justice, The U.S. Attorney's office, District of Columbia, "Capitol Breach Cases," <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/capitol-breach-cases>; USA Today, "Capitol riot arrests," <https://www.usatoday.com/storytelling/capitol-riot-mob-arrests/>. In addition, googling the arrestees name always brought up some useful information.

⁴ <http://Peoplefinders.com> and <https://whitepages.com>.

⁵ The Census does publish per-capita income data annually for the whole country by ethnicity [Historical Income Tables: People \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/historical-income/people). It also publishes the distribution of personal income. However, personal income is not useful for our purposes because it is not comparable to the per-capita income data available at the zip-code level. Personal income excludes children below the age of 15 from the divisor of household income whereas per-capita income includes all children [Personal Income: PINC-05 \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/pinc-05); [Subject Definitions \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/subject-definitions)

⁶ [Annual Social and Economic Supplements \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/annual-social-economic-supplements)

https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/datasets/2018/march/08ASEC2018_Data_Dict_Full.txt

⁷ The total weights add up to the total population of the U.S. Note that the survey provides a weight for each individual member of the household. The per capita income of the household received a weight that was the sum of the weights of its individual members. [cpsmar18.pdf \(census.gov\)](#)

⁸ St. Louis Fed series CPALTT01USM657N.

⁹ A quarter “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and consequently, Joe Biden is an illegitimate president