

'Middle-class' lifestyle becomes increasingly difficult to finance

I'm not a big fan of the degree of wealth disparity that exists in the world. The idea of people making a thousand times more than me brings into question why they deserve that much more. They don't work any harder, and aren't *that* much smarter. It's easy to detest someone who wallows in incomprehensible wealth.

But that certainly isn't a new phenomenon. As far back as human history shows, much of the world's wealth has been controlled by a very few. The summer home of Louis XIV at Versailles represented an incomprehensible difference from the digs of the average French peasant. The Caesar boys of Roman notoriety lived a far different lifestyle from the average Roman citizen — not to mention the millions who supported the empire through their bondage in slavery.

Efforts through the ages to equalize things haven't fared too well. Despite their idealistic notions, socialist leaders usually ended up corrupted with power and privilege not afforded to the average comrade. Ultimately, many of those societies crumbled under their own hypocrisy.

Some try to portray this wealth divide as Wall Street fat cats versus the exploited populace. I guess that helps advance their political ideology. But when Charlie Sheen made more than \$2 million per television episode, or LeBron James signs a

**DAN
LINSSEN**
Commentary



\$128 million contract to play basketball, it surely seems like someone is being exploited in those scenarios as well.

Lately, I've heard a lot of people crying about this disparity leading to the "death of the middle class." Maybe we've just forgotten what "middle class" is. The hand-wringing seems pretty hard to substantiate if you look where lifestyles have gone the past 40 or 50 years. Perhaps we've all just increased our expectations of "middle class" to a level that can't be sustained by everyone.

In 1965, the average annual wage was \$4,659. Adjusted for inflation, that would compare with \$31,731 in 2009. Yet, the average annual wage in 2009 was \$40,711. Seems the average person should be doing comparatively well.

What is a "middle class" home? In 1965, the average home size was about 1,300 square feet and cost about \$14,000. Adjusted for inflation, that would compare with a \$95,350 home in 2009. Yet, today's average home size is 2,330 square feet, costs about \$292,000 and would have been considered a luxurious mansion in 1965.

The average new car in 1965 cost \$2,650, which would compare with \$18,048 today. Yet, today's

average new car-buyer shells out \$28,400, and enjoys comforts, features and reliability that only would have been fantasy in 1965.

How many "middle class" folks in 1965 routinely flew on airplanes to destinations around the country, or enjoyed international vacations? How many paid the inflation-adjusted equivalent of today's concert or sporting event admissions? How many ate out at pricey restaurants several times a week?

Seems to me our notion of "middle class" simply has crept up to unrealistic levels. And along with that creep has come a sense of entitlement not unlike that of history's varied aristocracies. To satisfy that entitlement, we've buried ourselves, our states and our nation under piles of debt.

I suspect that if we want to avoid complete economic collapse (personal or societal), we will need to re-think our concept of "middle class."

There is little we ever will be able to do about gross wealth disparity. Incomprehensibly rich folks always will be here. So why get bummed out about it? If, instead, you find a lifestyle that fits your financial resources, and forget about comparing yourself with the economic elite, you may actually find "Leave it to Beaver" happiness.

Dan LinsSEN of Green Bay advocates for personal responsibility and thinking outside the box. His book "Who's to Blame?" is available at www.whostoblame.net and other online sources.