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This Economy is a Real Killer

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Economics is sometimes called the "dismal science," but sociologists are better at examining the human side of economic hard times. What they've learned is that when the economy is hurting, people are more likely to hurt -- and kill -- themselves and others.

Every day, week, and month that the current recession continues, and even deepens, more people die, get seriously injured physically, and suffer emotional hardships that can scar them for life.

When policymakers in Washington debate how to fix the economy, they typically look at changes in figures like the unemployment rate, the stock market index, and the gross domestic product. But there are other statistics that show the economy's ugly underside -- the toll that lay-offs, foreclosures and evictions, and dramatic drops in stock prices take on our daily lives. For example, there's a direct correlation between economic downturns and an increase in suicide and suicide attempts, heart attacks, domestic violence, child abuse, and murder.

Last week, economists at the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics unveiled the dismal unemployment figures. In February alone, the BLS announced, the economy shed 651,000 jobs, increasing the nation's unemployment rate to 8.1%, the highest in a quarter century.

Most economists think that even if President Obama's stimulus plan works wonders, the jobless rate will get worse -- to as high as 10% by the end of the year -- before it gets better.

Officially, 12.5 million Americans are now out of work, compared with 7.4 million a year ago. The number of long-term unemployed, those out of work for at least 27 weeks, has swollen to 2.9 million, up from 1.3 million last year. But if you add "discouraged" workers (those who are so frustrated that they have given up looking for work) and those who work part-time but would prefer to work full-time, the jobless rate jumps to 14.8% -- almost 23 million Americans.

No matter how you measure it, though, the economy has been sinking rapidly, leaving many people without jobs, without hope, and, for a growing number of Americans, without homes and health care. The severe recession not only hurts the poor and the middle class, it also emotionally devastates some wealthy Americans who have seen their net worth sink dramatically, making it impossible to maintain their lifestyles.

For over 30 years, Dr. Harvey Brenner, a sociologist and public health expert at Johns Hopkins University and the University of North Texas Health Science Center, has been carefully studying the link between economic fluctuations and the nation's physical and mental health. Based on the experience of the last half century, he has even estimated how many more deaths, suicides, heart attacks, homicides, and admissions to mental hospitals we can expect when unemployment rises.

After crunching the numbers, Brenner calculated that for every one percent increase in the unemployment rate (an additional 1.5 million people out of work), we can expect an additional 47,000 deaths, including 26,000 deaths from heart attacks, about 1,200 from suicide, 831 murders, and 635 deaths related to alcohol consumption. If, for example, the unemployment rate jumps from 8.1% to 9.1%, we can expect roughly an extra 1,200 people to commit suicide and another 831 people to commit murder.

For most people, losing their job, their life savings or pensions, or their home is traumatic, even when its through no fault of their own. Our individualistic culture leads people to blame themselves and to think of themselves as failures.

When the economy goes south, the hardships in people's lives get translated into increased stress, anxiety, and frustration. A recent national (ABC/Washington Post) poll found that 57 percent of Americans say they're under personal stress as a result of the country's economic crisis. One in four say they feel "serious" stress. Among Americans who are not confident that they will have enough income and assets to last through retirement, one-half say they suffer from "serious" stress. Nearly half of Americans are worried about keeping up with their rent or mortgage payments. Among this group, 79% report feeling stressed and 45% indicate that it's a "serious" stress.

According to Brenner's studies, recessions are accompanied by a significant increase in admissions to mental hospitals. But many people don't seek counseling, therapy or other forms of medical help when they are under stress. In fact, Brenner says, lay-offs typically result in people losing their health insurance, making it even harder to get the help they need.

Other social scientists and mental health experts have documented a spike in child abuse and domestic violence during economic downturns. A 2004 study by the National Institute of Justice found that the rate of violence against women increases as male unemployment increases. When a woman's male partner is employed, the rate of violence is 4.7%. It is 7.5% when the male partner experiences one period of unemployment. It increases to 12.3% when the male experiences two or more periods of unemployment.

Robberies and other crimes increase, too. "Every recession since the late '50s has been associated with an increase in crime and, in particular, property crime and robbery," Richard Rosenfeld, a sociologist at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, told the *New York Times* last year. Typically, he said, "there is a year lag between the economic change and crime rates."

By now we're all too familiar with news stories about people who"lose it," "go off the deep end," "go crazy," or "snap" in response to getting laid off, being unable to find work and support their families, or experiencing a significant loss of income. The media report the most dramatic examples -- for example, the recent suicide of French aristocrat Rene-Thierry Magon de la Villehuchet (who lost his wealth as a victim of the Madoff scandal) and the murder-suicide committed by a Southern California man who had lost his job.

The studies by Brenner and others can't predict *which* people will exhibit these behaviors in response to economic hardship. But Brenner says that these people aren't some subset of dysfunctional people. They are mostly just normal people reacting to difficult times.

Last year, for example, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline received 545,000 calls -- a 36% rise from the 2007 levels.

"The increase in suicide attempts and suicides during recessions is one of the most predictable correlations we have," Brenner said. "Its not only in response to unemployment. Its also about the loss of income and wealth. Upper class people may even be more likely than others to commit suicide when their circumstances change because they have much more to lose."

Moreover, much like post-traumatic stress disorder in wartime, for some people the symptoms become chronic and long-lasting, even after they find work again. Psychological depression, troubled marriages, and loss of self-confidence don't just go away when the economic recession ends. Economic hardship leaves behind a trail of wounded people who never fully recover.

This is particularly true now that our economy is undergoing a wrenching transformation. There's no guarantee that even when economic indicators improve, people who were laid off will return to work at the same jobs -- or with the same pay and benefits -- that they had before.

Any way you slice it, a prolonged and deep recession is costly in both economic and human terms. Economic hard times put demands on society to increase its police, courts, prisons, health services, social welfare programs (such as food stamps and child abuse services), and other efforts, just at a time when its tougher to raise the revenues to do so.

Brenner has been examining the social costs of economic fluctuations since the 1970s, including two reports for the U.S. Congress. He's updated his findings to account for changes in the economy as well as changes in police practices, social policies, and access to health services and medicine that may have their own impact on crime rates, heart attacks, suicide, and other problems.

One thing that Brenner has *not* examined is whether these symptoms are less likely to occur if people feel that things are getting better and that they won't be out of work and out of luck indefinitely. For a few years after the Great Depression began in 1929, for example, Americans initially blamed themselves for their economic problems. But as unions and community groups organized people to demand changes in public policy, and after President Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933 and began the New Deal programs, they gave people a sense of hope,

In his speech to Congress and the public two weeks ago, President Obama sought to explain that our current economic problems are the result of the misguided policies of the past, and that a different set of policies can reverse our nation's economic direction. He didn't promise a quick fix, but he argued that his stimulus plan, banking reforms, foreclosure help, universal health insurance, and other policies can put the economy -- and the American people -- back on track.

Political leaders like FDR and Obama can boost the nation's self-confidence, but ultimately the hard economic realities take their toll if joblessness and purchasing power don't improve.

Brenner's and others' research suggest that the Bureau of Labor Statistics or another federal government agency should start to systematically issue a "social health impact report" as part of their routine updates on the nation's economic health. It would chart how Americans are coping -- or not coping -- by tracking the link between economic dislocations and the symptoms of stress -- suicides, homicides, domestic violence, child abuse, heart attacks, and others.

This would give the public, the media, and policymakers a more realistic picture of the human costs of economic downturns -- and perhaps a greater sense of urgency to fix the economic hardships so that Americans can start putting their lives, families, and communities back together.