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The Economy is a Real Killer

by Peter Dreier

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

