

Time to Get Paid

American workers today face declining job security and dwindling earnings as companies downsize, move overseas, and shift more jobs to part-time workers. A 2009 survey by the Economic Policy Institute found that one or more members of 44 percent of American families had experienced job loss, a reduction in hours, or a cut in pay over the previous year. For the vast majority of workers, the costs of basic necessities are rising faster than income.

The government has ample powers to change these trends for the better. Back in the days of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, Republican critics liked to say that the best antipoverty program is a job. The federal government has the capacity—and the responsibility—to promote full employment, a situation in which everyone who wants to work has a job. But the kind of job is as important as the job itself.

A good job means one that pays enough to allow a family to buy or rent a decent home, put food on the table and clothes on their backs, afford health insurance and child care, send the kids to college, take a yearly vacation, and retire with dignity. A good job means that two parents don't have to juggle three jobs to stay afloat, and that they still have time to spend with their kids.

For most people, losing their job, their life savings, their pension, a portion of their earnings, or their home is traumatic, even when it's through no fault of their own. Our individualistic culture leads people to blame themselves and to think of themselves as failures.

Harvey Brenner is a longtime student of the correlations between economic fluctuations and mental and physical health. According to Brenner, who is a sociologist and a public health expert at Johns Hopkins University and the University of North Texas Health Science Center, for every 1 percent rise in the unemployment rate (about 1.5 million more people out of work), society can anticipate 47,000 more deaths, including 26,000 fatal heart attacks, 1,200 suicides, 831 murders, and 635 related to alcohol consumption.

Moreover, the symptoms, much like posttraumatic stress disorder in wartime, may become chronic, lasting even after people 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.

Decent wages are necessary for social stability and for the purchasing power that the economy needs to trigger and sustain a strong recovery. The explosion of low-wage jobs is not the result of workers having inadequate education or skills. Over the past two decades, both education levels and skills have improved, while incomes have stagnated. This troubling trend is due, for the most part, to the declining bargaining power of America's employees.