

Social Workers Speak on the Economy

April 2009

Every day in their work with individuals, families and communities, social workers see first-hand the devastating costs and consequences of poverty and unemployment.

Joblessness and economic insecurity can lead to more incidences of mental illness, family violence, suicide, substance abuse and crime.

Social workers are seeing increasing effects of the current economic crisis in their work. Economic insecurity presents a double-edged sword for social workers. While they work to provide essential community services such as counseling, crisis intervention and resource referrals to families in need, social workers are also directly affected by growing job losses, reduced budgets and low salaries.

This factsheet highlights some of the key concerns that social workers have about the current state of the economy, as well as how social workers are getting involved to help.

The Issues ¹

- There is disproportionate disparity between the rich and poor in the United States, with the top 1% of wealthy families receiving almost 42% of net assets.
- Poverty is highly concentrated among ethnic minority groups. The percentage of minorities living in poverty is greater than their representation in the US
- Welfare reform in the late 1990s sent poor parents back to work with minimal professional skills. As a consequence, many families are working for poverty-level wages and continue to need some level of income and social support.
- American workers are currently earning lower weekly wages than they were in the 1970s and are dividing a shrinking slice of the economic pie.
- According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, middle class wages have continued to grow at a slower pace than inflation, and the cost of living far exceeds the wages earned by middle class families.
- The unemployment rate in the United States reached a historic rate of 8.5% based on a report issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in April 2009.

¹ National Association of Social Workers. Social Work Speaks 8th Edition. *Economic Policy, 2009-2012*.

What Social Workers Believe ²

- NASW supports an economic policy that will eliminate poverty and race-based barriers to opportunity in the United States.
- Federal programs that invest in education and retraining, especially for low-income and displaced workers, are necessary to create opportunities for a fair share of economic prosperity for all.
- The US government has a responsibility to ensure that basic necessities are available to all people, regardless of the profitability of providing these services.
- Opportunities for quality higher education should be available to all, regardless of income, and pursuing a higher education should not leave individuals with an unreasonable amount of debt.
- Economic policy should include fair and equitable employment and social support policies based on need.
- People who are unable to work should receive government financial support at a level that allows them to live with dignity.
- NASW supports the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#), which was signed into law in February 2009 to provide aid to low-income individuals and families, as well as give money to states to prevent cuts in Medicaid assistance, education and other services. ³

How Social Workers Help ⁴

- Social workers advocate on behalf of individuals, families and communities by seeking legislative, regulatory and institutional changes to alleviate the underlying causes of poverty and economic displacement.
- Social work clients are often directly affected by an imperfect economic system. Social workers give a voice to these often disadvantaged and disenfranchised people through advocacy and clinical work.
- Social workers not only work in schools, hospitals and mental health clinics, but also in government. In fact, Vice President Biden recently appointed [Jared Bernstein](#), a social worker, as Chief Economist and Economic Policy Advisor in the Office of the Vice President.
- Other social work experts on the economy and public policy are: [Sandra Danziger](#), [Mimi Abromovitz](#) and [Mark Rank](#).
- Historically, social workers have been essential to economic recovery. Harry Hopkins and Frances Perkins, both social workers, were responsible for establishing safety net programs such as social security, unemployment insurance, workers compensation and other public works programs in the aftermath of the Great Depression.
- There are currently nine social workers serving in Congress. Among them are Sen. Barbara Mikulski (MD), Sen. Debbie Stabenow (MI), Rep. Edolphus Towns (NY) and Rep. Carol Shea-Porter (NH).

² National Association of Social Workers. [Social Work Speaks 8th Edition](#). *Economic Policy, 2009-2012*.

³ Pace, Paul. [NASW News](#). "Recovery Act to Impact Social Services." April 2009.

⁴ National Association of Social Workers. [Encyclopedia of Social Work](#). 2008.

What Social Workers are Saying

- **Economic stress causes increased domestic violence:** *"Economic stress is a very, very important factor in domestic violence," says **Shoshana Ringel**, an associate professor of social work at the University of Maryland School of Social Work and an expert on domestic abuse. Ringel says that for many couples, financial problems can "definitely push things over the line."* (Dec. 14, 2008. The Baltimore Sun. "Hard Times Means More Abuse").
- **Economic stress can lead to suicide:** *"Financial collapse, economic downturn, either on a global societal level, or even on a very personal level is often associated with the kinds of despair that [lead to suicide]," says **Jed Ericksen**, a licensed clinical social worker at Valley Mental Health.* (Jan 14, 2009. KSL-TV, Salt Lake City, UT. "Economic crisis affects men more than women")
- **How the economic crisis affects everyone:** *"If people's basic needs are not being met, that creates a problem for all of us. If people are losing their homes and facing a possibility of being homeless, people need to say, "We need to figure out ways to help these families and prevent it from happening again." That's a good thing for all of us. It's an opportunity for all of us to think about ways we can shore up the systems in play so we don't have to keep going through this again and again. Unless you attend to the needs of the least, it's going to pull everything down" says **Carrie J. Smith**, associate professor and director of the School of Social Work, at Syracuse University* (Feb. 11, 2009. The Post-Standard. "Hard times steer some toward social work").
- **Economic stress can cause depression:** *"The stress over financial things in the economy is making it difficult for people to function in their job. Not having a job is one thing. But, having one and still not being able to take care of the family the way you might want to? I think sometimes that makes the average person do something they wouldn't normally do," said **Christine Stacey**, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker at A Beautiful Mind in South Bend. .* (Mar 10, 2009. WSBT-TV, South Bend, IN. "Depression cases rise as economy falls").
- **More on the effects of economic instability:** *"I have seen an increase in alcohol abuse, marital conflict, depression and severe symptoms of anxiety among my clients. The emotional fallout of the economic crisis is not unlike post-traumatic stress disorder found in combat veterans," says **Ellen Brown**, a licensed clinical social worker who has a private psychotherapy practice.* (Mar 17, 2009. Albany Times Union. "Recession malaise runs deep")

Additional Resources

www.socialworkreinvestment.org

www.socialworkportal.org

www.socialworkers.org/pace

www.helpstartshere.org

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About the National Association of Social Workers

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in Washington, D.C., is the largest membership organization of professional social workers with 150,000 members. It promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its advocacy.

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