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Could the Recession Be Good for Your Health?

By Eben Harrell

From job security to home foreclosures, there are plenty of things for people to worry about during a recession. But a growing body of research suggests that there's one negative outcome that is actually less likely during an economic downturn: death.

Contrary to the common assumption that the stress of dealing with a recession is bad for your health, studies of population trends in developed economies have revealed that during economic downturns, mortality rates decline rather than increase. This trend is partly the result of a drop in traffic fatalities — perhaps because rising unemployment means fewer people commute to work or because people are trying to save on gas — but also of less easily explained drops in factors such as cardiovascular and liver disease, influenza and pneumonia. In one groundbreaking study in 2000 on the impact of joblessness, for example, Christopher Ruhm, an economist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, examined statewide mortality fluctuations in the U.S. between 1972 and 1991 and found that a 1% rise in a state's unemployment rate led to a 0.6% decrease in total mortality.

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In a review of such studies published on Monday, Aug. 31, in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, Stephen Bezruchka of The University of Washington School of Public Health suggests the results could be explained by declines in smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and overeating during recessions as people look for ways to save money. What's more, he writes, people have more time for friends and family during times of higher unemployment.

[\(See pictures of TIME's Wall Street covers.\)](#)

"The idea that hard work never killed anyone is one of those maxims that turns out not to be true," Bezruchka tells TIME. "One of the characteristics of a rapidly expanding economy is that people try to garner as much income as they can, working long hours and even multiple jobs. Spending time with friends and family is good for your health."

Reacting to Bezruchka's analysis, economists note several important caveats. First, mortality rates are a broad-brush health measurement and do not take into account nonfatal illnesses or fatal illnesses that take several years to develop, such as cancer. Furthermore, a study published in recent months contradicts the findings Bezruchka focuses on, suggesting that recessions are at best neutral in their impact on mortality. Writing in the *Lancet* in July, a team of American and British researchers said it found that the decrease in traffic deaths during recessions in Europe between 1970 and 2007 was offset by increases in suicides and homicides.

Adam Coutts of Oxford University, one of the authors of the *Lancet* study, tells TIME that recessions have other deleterious social effects not directly related to health and that measuring an economic downturn's overall health impact is a vexed undertaking. "It is true, for instance, that mortality rates reduced significantly during the Great Depression, but that era also saw the rise of fascism, followed by a world war," he says. "So there's no simple way to measure the impact of recessions on a population's welfare."

[\(See pictures of the dangers of printing money in Germany.\)](#)

Ruhm of the University of North Carolina says the data linking recessions to drops in mortality are not yet strong enough to influence macroeconomic policies. However, he believes there are elements of the research that could prove useful to lawmakers and individuals. "For instance, we might want to have traffic enforcement efforts increase when the economy is doing well, or we might want to raise taxes on alcohol and cigarettes," he says. "For individuals, when you get a great job opportunity and you know you're going to be working really hard, you could build in plans to protect your health. And when things aren't so good, use the time to focus on your health."

But some researchers feel the data are now convincing enough to spur large policy changes. The *Lancet* study, for example, found that investment in active labor-market programs like welfare-to-work reduces the effect of unemployment on suicide rates. This link is displayed in Scandinavian countries with strong welfare programs. Finland, for example, saw suicide rates drop steadily between 1990 and 1993 despite a 13% rise in unemployment. Sweden saw a drop in suicides during a recession in 1992. "What we found was that when spending on active labor-market programs exceeded \$190 per head per year, rises in unemployment had no adverse effect on suicide rates," Coutts explains. "When you think that governments

are spending hundreds of times that much to bail out banks, it would seem to a prudent investment."

[\(Read: "In Hard Times, Olympic Plans Go on a Budget."\)](#)

The University of Washington's Bezruchka, a medical doctor and scholar in public health, says the link between economic contraction and mortality rates is part of "a wide range of research studies of rich countries that have revealed that greater national wealth, by nearly any measure, does not lead to better human welfare." He believes that governments in wealthy countries should take steps to rein in excessive wealth among individuals and redistribute resources through social spending. While he acknowledges the political difficulties of wealth redistribution, he says, "As a doctor, I recognize that an unequal society is the biggest contributor to ill health. It's my obligation to make that known."

Whatever you think policymakers should take from these studies, it's reassuring to know that of all the things you're at greater risk of losing during the current recession, your life isn't one of them.

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