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Op-Ed Columnist

A World of Hurt

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

President Obama took a bit of a victory lap on Wall Street on Monday, declaring that the economy had been brought back from the abyss and “the storms of the past two years are beginning to break.”

The president and his economic team (and the Federal Reserve) deserve credit for moving quickly to prevent a full-blown collapse. A year ago, amid the panic that accompanied the implosion of Lehman Brothers, there were serious fears that the U.S. was headed toward another Great Depression.

Now, with the financial sector stabilized and economists predicting that the Great Recession is nearing an end, the sighs of relief coming out of Washington and Lower Manhattan are understandable. But this is no time to lose sight of the wreckage all around us. This recession, a full-blown economic horror, has left a gaping hole in the heart of working America that is unlikely to heal for years, if not decades.

Fifteen million Americans are locked in the nightmare of unemployment, nearly 10 percent of the work force. A third have been jobless for more than six months. Thirteen percent of Latinos and 15 percent of blacks are out of work. (Those are some of the official statistics. The reality is much worse.)

Consider this: Some 9.4 million new jobs would have to be created to get us back to the level of employment at the time that the recession began in December 2007. But last month, we lost 216,000 jobs. If the recession technically ends soon and we get to a point where some modest number of jobs are created — say, 100,000 or 150,000 a month — the politicians and the business commentators will celebrate like it's New Year's.

But think about how puny that level of job creation really is in an environment that needs nearly 10 million jobs just to get us back to the lean years of the George W. Bush administration.

We're hurtin' and there ain't much healin' on the horizon.

A national survey of jobless workers by a pair of professors at Rutgers University shows just how traumatized the work force has become in this downturn. Two-thirds of respondents said that they had become depressed. More than half said it was the first time they had ever lost a job, and 80 percent said there was little or no chance that they would be able to get their jobs back when the economy improves.

The 1,200 respondents were jobless at some point over the past year, and most — 894 — are still unemployed. More than half said that they had been forced to borrow money from friends or relatives, and a quarter have missed their mortgage or rent payments.

The survey found that affluent, well-educated workers, who had traditionally been able to withstand a downturn in reasonably good shape, were being hit hard this time around.

The professors, Carl Van Horn and Cliff Zukin, described that phenomenon as “a metric of the

recession's seismic impact." Of the workers who found themselves unemployed for the first time, more than one in four had been earning \$75,000 or more annually.

"This is not your ordinary dip in the business cycle," said Mr. Van Horn. "Americans believe that this is the Katrina of recessions. Folks are on their rooftops without a boat."

Stunned by the financial and psychological toll of the recession, and seeing little in the way of hopeful signs on the employment landscape, many of the surveyed workers showed signs of discouragement. Three-fifths said that they had experienced feelings of helplessness.

Said one respondent: "I've always worked, so this is very depressing. At age 60, I never believed I would be unemployed unless I chose to be."

Said another: "I fear for my family and my future. We are about to be evicted, and bills are piling. We have sold everything we possibly can to maintain, and are going under with little hope of anything."

At some point the unemployment crisis in America will have to be confronted head-on. Poverty rates are increasing. Tax revenues are plunging. State and local governments are in a terrible fiscal bind. Unemployment benefits for many are running out. Families are doubling up, and the number of homeless children is rising.

It's eerie to me how little attention this crisis is receiving. The poor seem to be completely out of the picture.

If we end up with yet another jobless recovery, there would seem to be little hope for impoverished families in America's big cities, rural areas and, increasingly, suburban neighborhoods as well.

The recession may be ending for some.

Tell that to the unemployed.

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