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Everybody hurts in a social recession

By Michael Kirby

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Financial stress can affect our mental health, the numbers show. Nurturing our human capital is a priority for recovery

U.S. public officials have been comparing the mental-health impact of the recession and unemployment crisis to a natural disaster, like Hurricane Katrina. The parallels are obvious: In both natural disasters and man-made economic ones, people lose businesses, jobs, homes, hopes, lives. Each type wreaks a devastating toll on the mental health of its victims - lost jobs and livelihoods cause great psychological distress and increased rates of anxiety, depression, child neglect, family violence, substance abuse, crime and suicide.

Even before the recession, our world was a complex and confusing place for many people. Now, the economic crisis is adding a whole new layer of pressures. The United Nations International Labour Organization estimates that 40 million people worldwide could lose their jobs this year, and each victim has colleagues, families and friends whose lives are also affected.

There is very solid data correlating unemployment and personal financial stress with increased mental-health problems, including higher rates of depression and suicide. In Windsor, Ont., where the auto industry was hit early and hard by the recession, demand for mental-health services has jumped 50 per cent in the past year. The Canadian Medical Association reported last week that 40 per cent of Canadians are feeling stressed or overwhelmed by financial concerns. And in a recent survey, 88 per cent of family physicians in Canada said that since the recession began, they have been seeing patients with stress problems that can be attributed to the economy.

So, in addition to the global economic recession, it appears we are now experiencing what the World Health Organization has called a "social recession," in which the daily lives of individuals, their families and whole communities are torn asunder by financial loss, unemployment, fear and declining physical and mental health.

At a unique international roundtable this past week in Ottawa organized by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, mental-health and public-policy experts from Canada, the United States, Europe, New Zealand and Australia discussed the toll the recession is taking on working men and women and their families and what action society should be taking to address the crisis.

We learned that even though we are starting to see hope for economic recovery, no government should be lulled into thinking that the social recession will end any time soon. After the last economic recession in Australia, it took more than 14 years for employment levels to recover. We learned that social agencies around the world are seeing a new group of people seeking help: members of the middle class who have never needed assistance before.

Where do we go from here? The answer is a challenge to both the public and private sector.

We should put an end to the sort of short-term thinking that caused the crisis, and focus on strengthening the resources that are of greatest strategic importance. A good place to start is with our human capital, because knowledge societies and knowledge economies need strong mental health capital.

As a priority, we need to improve the delivery of mental-health services to the groups in society that are most vulnerable. One of these is the 18- to 25-year-olds who are being hit hardest by unemployment. No society can afford to have an entire generation of disillusioned young people.

We should also urge employers to put workplace mental health at the top of the agenda. And when workers are laid off, we need to ensure that, in addition to employment insurance, they also gain access to psychological support.

And instead of cutting social-service budgets in times of crisis, we should nurture a culture of community support for the unemployed. This will help them cope with the initial impact of unemployment and assist the transition back to work.

By taking these and other actions, Canada will be in a much stronger position to address mental-health issues at every point in the economic cycle so we can avoid a social recession even if we can't avoid an economic hurricane.

Michael Kirby is chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

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