

The Great Recession took a toll on public health, study finds

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The Great Recession, spanning 2008 to 2010, was associated with heightened cardiovascular risk factors, including increased blood

pressure and glucose levels, according to a new UCLA-led study. The connections were especially pronounced among older homeowners and people still in the work force, two groups that may have been especially vulnerable to the stresses the Recession brought about.

Virtually all Americans were affected directly or indirectly by the Great Recession, the most significant economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s—some lost jobs, others their houses or life savings. Previous studies have arrived at mixed evidence for the [health](#) impact of the [recession](#), with some reporting [negative health effects](#) and others reporting benefits. But no study has looked at health measures at multiple time points leading up to the recession or used well-known biomarkers of overall health—[blood pressure](#) and glucose—to study the question objectively.

The team looked at data from the Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (MESA) for the period from 2000 to 2012. Blood pressure and glucose data for the 4,600 participants, ages 45 to 84, were analyzed at the outset, at multiple times leading up to the Great Recession and one time immediately after the recession ended. The researchers calculated changes in blood pressure and glucose that would have been expected to occur naturally with age had the recession not occurred, and compared that information to the changes that were actually observed at the end of the recession. The two outcomes, which are particularly valuable since they change rapidly in response to stress, provide a more accurate snapshot of how the crisis may have affected public health.

The results suggest that not only did both blood pressure and glucose rise during the recession, but the changes were particularly pronounced in people still in the labor force (under 65) and older homeowners (over 65). The researchers point out that both groups might be especially vulnerable to psychological fallout of economic downturns, since they could be at risk of losing jobs and houses, respectively.

The results provide strong evidence that economic crises can have measurable effects on public health. Understanding these connections in greater detail may help healthcare providers and policy makers prepare better for this reality in the future. The team next plans to look at additional time points after the Great Recession, and take into account other markers of health, including inflammation and insulin resistance. They'll also try to determine whether there were any regional differences for the recession's effects on [public health](#).

Teresa Seeman, professor of medicine and epidemiology at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, is the study's first author. Dr. Arun Karlamangla, a geriatrician in the Division of Geriatrics in the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, is the senior author. Other authors are: Sharon Stein Merkin and Karol Watson, both of UCLA, Duncan Thomas of Duke University and Kari Moore of Drexel University.

The study was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

More information: Teresa Seeman et al., "The Great Recession worsened blood pressure and blood glucose levels in American adults," *PNAS* (2018). www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1710502115

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