

One-third of Americans live with “extreme stress”

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One in three adults in the US regularly contend with extremely high levels of stress, resulting in problems with their health, relationships, and work, according to a new national survey. Economic troubles are the driving force of stress for ordinary Americans, who reported money, workload, and housing expenses among their most stressful concerns.

The survey, *Stress in America 2007*, released October 24 by the American Psychological Association, was conducted online last month by polling agency Harris Interactive. It was based on a sample of 1,848 adults. Responses indicated that nearly half of all Americans are living with more stress than in the past few years.

It is no surprise that the rising cost of living, stagnating wages, and poor job market figure heavily into the worries of working families. Three-quarters of respondents reported money and work as the leading causes of stress, a significant jump from 2006, when 59 percent cited those factors.

Because the survey was undertaken on the Internet, media outlets have cautioned that the findings do not carry the same scientific weight as other research. However, if anything, the survey results probably underestimate the stress borne by lower income workers, who are less likely to use the internet.

Nearly half of all respondents reported that stress negatively impacted both their personal and professional lives, leading to difficulties in managing work and family responsibilities. More than half said stress led to fighting, and many attributed stress to the ostracism of family members, family separation, and divorce.

Interpreting the findings, Dr. Bankole Johnson, chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia, told ABC News that the economy was alienating to individuals, leading

to mass uncertainty. “A lot of people are faced with a sense of an uncertain situation, and for most people that’s a big stressor,” he said.

The political climate has also contributed to stress. Johnson remarked, “There is the constant stress of the war on terrorism...I would say that in the last ten years, there is more stress in general in the world. There is more uncertainty and a feeling that the world is somehow less safe than it ever has been.”

This stress has been deliberately grafted onto American life over the past seven years, as the government and media have subjected the population to a constant barrage of color-coded terror alerts and fear-mongering. To the extent possible, the political establishment has promoted fear in order to justify militarism abroad and the attack on democratic rights at home.

Immense social inequality assumes a definite place among the burdens shouldered by ordinary Americans. For example, the APA report notes in passing that 40 percent of respondents said they do not use all their allotted vacation time annually. Among employed respondents, the leading sources of stress reported were low pay (44 percent), heavy workload (40 percent), and long hours (39 percent).

A September report from the International Labor Organization found that Americans are the world’s most productive workers, largely because of the sheer number of hours worked. As one company after another in every economic sector carries out layoffs, workers are required to take on greater workloads and increase their output. Meanwhile, these wages have declined relative to inflation, and the cost of basic needs such as gasoline, food, and home energy contributes to the stress of working families.

Across industries, a third of workers reported

experiencing extreme levels of stress during the month prior to being surveyed. Workers in the education and health services industries reported higher stress levels, with four in ten reporting “extreme stress.” These workers were among those who most frequently cited work as a cause of stress. Half of education and health workers reported low salaries, high workloads, and unrealistic job expectations.

The APA reported that adults with less than \$50,000 in annual household income were more likely than those with higher incomes to report both physical (80 percent versus 74 percent) and psychological (77 percent versus 68 percent) symptoms of stress. Physical symptoms included fatigue, headaches, tightness in the chest, faintness and dizziness, upset stomach and other digestive problems. Common psychological symptoms included anger, anxiety, and “feeling as though you could cry.” On average, the survey found that Americans lost 21 hours of sleep per month due to stress, with half of respondents reporting insomnia at night during the last month.

Lower income adults managed their stress poorly, according to the APA, relying more heavily on smoking and drinking, skipping meals and missing sleep. Poor management of stress contributes to serious health problems such as obesity and heart disease. Chronic stress, which results in an elevated heart rate over long periods, is strongly associated with increased risk of heart attack.

The APA noted, “While 69 percent recognize that a mental health professional could aid in stress management, only 7 percent have sought professional support to help manage their stress during the past year.”

The ongoing collapse of the housing market presents a particular strain for individuals. More than half of the APA’s respondents cited rent or mortgage costs as sources of “extreme stress.” Dr. Beverly Thorn, president of the APA health psychology division, told ABC News that the respondents cited housing costs even when they were not necessarily prompted to specify the source of their stress.

On the West Coast, where median housing prices and foreclosure rates are among the highest in the country, 61 percent of respondents reported housing costs as a significant stressor.

According to statistics from housing sector tracker

DataQuick Information Systems, mortgage companies sent over 72,500 pre-foreclosure default notices to California borrowers in the third quarter, substantially surpassing the previous record of 61,500 set in 1996. DataQuick also reported last week that California home sales for September were the slowest since the company began keeping records in 1988.

The decline of the housing market has very real consequences for the economy at large and the living conditions of working class households. As interest rates reset on millions of adjustable rate mortgages, borrowers in default are confronted with a market saturated with devalued houses. Unable to sell for what is due on the mortgage, homebuyers are pressed into foreclosure.

A number of new reports project more than a million foreclosures in the next year, wiping out an estimated \$71 billion in housing wealth. Another \$32 billion is expected to be lost indirectly as a result of neighborhood home devaluation in areas where foreclosures occur.



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