

In an already stressful workplace, Great Recession's health effects hard to find

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The Great Recession of 2007-2009 had little direct effect on the health of workers who survived the waves of job cuts that took place during that period, according to a new University of Akron study.

That's the good news.

The bad news may be the reason: Increased workloads and less satisfying job duties, the highly stressful byproducts of corporate restructurings during previous economic downturns, had by 2007 become the new normal in the workplace. Because of this long-term trend, workers who remained on the job during the Great Recession were already accustomed to coping with stressful environments that posed a threat to their [health](#).

The study authors, Mark Tausig, a professor of sociology, and Rudy Fenwick, an associate professor of sociology, both at the University of Akron, will present their findings at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Tausig and Fenwick based their conclusions on data collected in the biennial General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. Their new findings contrast with their earlier research into how the 1974-1975 recession affected workplace survivors.

Forty years ago, recession-ravaged companies sought efficiency not only by laying off workers, but also by reconfiguring the jobs of those left

standing. Back then, the new experience of more work and less say in decision-making stressed those still on the payroll, Fenwick and Tausig reported in a 1994 study.

Now, they say, the demands imposed by global competition have altered work routines to the point that they mimic the effects of a recession in an earlier era. Therefore, the already rising workplace stress levels could have affected employee health independently of the fallout from the Great Recession.

The researchers also point out that the Great Recession did not affect all workers equally—younger, less-educated, and non-white workers bore the brunt of layoffs. The recession's primary effect on health was that those groups of workers were the ones most likely to suffer the health consequences of unemployment.

"We argue that that's probably an indicator of the growing inequality in society," Tausig said.

And as companies sought more cost savings to survive the Great Recession, the makeup of the remaining workforce shifted to include more involuntarily part-time and as-needed [workers](#).

Part-time and contingent work give employees less say over their work schedules and create more job insecurity, the researchers say—factors also related to poor health.

More information: The paper, "The Great Recession and Health Among Employed Workers," will be presented on Tuesday, Aug. 19, at 8:30 a.m. PDT in San Francisco at the American Sociological Association's 109th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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