

Preventing Injury in Economic Hard Times: Challenges Ahead

Scott A. Bates, MSW
Ruth M. Glenn, MPA
Indira Gujral, MS, PhD
Jarrod Hindman, MS

Record job losses, home foreclosures and the recent decline in the financial markets are taking their toll in the United States and in Colorado. While unemployment and financial stress are contributing factors for violence, they do not cause them directly. Research indicates that different types of violence share risk factors, which suggests that financial stress is a risk factor contributing to increases in many types of violence. Financial stress exacerbates situations in which violence is already an underlying condition.

Historically, rising unemployment and financial stress have been associated with increased rates of child abuse, domestic violence, and suicide (Benson et al. 2004, Steinberg et al. 1981, Kposowa 2001). Although real time surveillance data to support this association during the current downturn is not available at this time, anecdotally, stories of suicide and familial violence are appearing more frequently in the media.

As more individuals lose their jobs and benefits, many will turn to community-based programs for assistance and counseling services. However, most of these programs operate on small budgets pooled from federal, state, and private donor sources. During economic downturns, community-based programs report a significant decrease in financial resources and, at the same time, an increasing need for services. As a result, Colorado community-based violence prevention programs are reporting a large

surge in the number of Coloradans seeking assistance at the same time they are experiencing a decrease in funding from the public and private sectors. The purpose of this discussion is to raise awareness about the connection between difficult economic times and injury and to provide a state interagency perspective of community-based prevention efforts aimed at reducing suicide, child abuse, and domestic violence in Colorado. Moreover, resources dedicated to the prevention of these types of injury are critical to maintaining services during economic downturns.

Suicide

The loss of a job raises stress levels and can jeopardize family financial security. However, employment provides more than just financial stability; employment also offers a social network, a place for individuals to connect with others. When social connections are cut from job settings and/or with family as a result of job loss, this can aggravate or lead to depression, anxiety, and/or to a perceived personal loss of control, both of which are risk factors for suicide.

According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, "a strong relationship exists between unemployment, the economy, and suicide." This association was observed during the Great Depression when, according to Alan Berman, Ph.D., suicide rose by more 50%. Dennis Ahlburg, Dean of the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado reported in the Denver Post (6/15/09 *Rise in Colorado suicides mirrors economic woes, experts say*) that for every one percent the unemployment rate goes up, the suicide rate increases by 100 nationwide. Today, as unemployment rises, so do the numbers of suicides and mental health needs in Colorado. As detailed in the Denver Post article (6/15/09), Arapahoe County

averaged one suicide a day for a two-week period in 2009. In Jefferson County, Coroner Katherine Loughrey-Stemp reported 30 suicides in the first three months of this year compared with 23 over the same time period in 2008. The article also points to an increase in mental health counseling needs. The Jefferson Center for Mental Health, a non-profit agency providing low-cost mental health counseling to residents of Jefferson, Gilpin and Clear Creek counties, reported a 40% increase in calls and admissions compared to a year ago, according to spokeswoman Jeanne Oliver.

Suicide prevention is one of the mental health priorities laid out in Governor Ritter's Colorado Promise. As of 2006, Colorado had the 9th highest suicide rate in the country (CDC WISQARS). Among Coloradans, suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for individuals 10 – 44 years of age and the 7th leading cause of death for all age groups. Suicide continues to be a socially taboo topic, often forcing surviving family members to deal with the lifelong stigma of their loved one's death. Further, family members of those who die by suicide are themselves at an elevated risk for suicide.

The Office of Suicide Prevention (OSP) was created by legislative action in 2000 to help reduce suicide in Colorado and to serve as the lead entity for statewide suicide prevention and intervention efforts. The OSP receives state funding to support 15 suicide prevention and intervention programs throughout the state. In 2006, the office obtained a federal

grant to address youth suicide statewide. The combination of the sharp economic downturn, higher unemployment, and the high rate of suicide in Colorado and the Rocky Mountain West supports the need to increase awareness of suicide and its prevention throughout the state.

Domestic Violence

Most prevention efforts for domestic violence and child abuse are aimed at reducing reoccurrence. The National Domestic Abuse Hotline, headquartered in Austin, Texas,

reported a 21 percent increase in the number of calls nationwide in September 2008. Of the 7,868 calls received, 54% (3,272) of callers reported that there had been a change in household finances over the past year. In Colorado, Jennifer Walker, Executive Director of the Women's Crises and Family Outreach Center in Douglas County, reported 2,100 calls in September 2008; a significant

increase from the monthly average of 700. According to Chitra Raghaven, researcher at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, "every time there's a recession, you see a clear increase (in domestic violence) (Kohn, Baltimore Sun, February 18, 2009)." Under normal circumstances, individuals would seek private counseling under their employment-based health insurance; however, as more people lose jobs and benefits, they are forced to turn to community-based centers for services.

The Colorado Domestic Violence Program in the Department of Human Services is funded

As of 2006, Colorado had the 9th highest suicide rate in the country ... suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for individuals 10 – 44 years of age and the 7th leading cause of death for all age groups.

by the federal Family Violence Prevention Services Act and Temporary Aid for Needy Families. Additional Colorado funds are generated through the Domestic Abuse Fund on annual state tax forms; however, Colorado's current financial constraints often impact such funds because people are less likely to donate a portion of their tax return. Over the past five years, funding has remained steady, while the need for services has increased. The Domestic Violence Program funds 44 programs across the state of Colorado. In 2007, over 6,000 Coloradans were turned away from shelters due to a lack of capacity, many of them women and children.

In a recently published study of 3,000 women assessing long-term health care costs associated with intimate partner violence, researchers found that women experiencing physical abuse had health care costs 42% higher than non-abused women (Health Services Research 2009). During these times of economic stress, victims are negatively impacted as access and availability to services diminishes.

Child Abuse

Following a nationwide trend, the rates of child maltreatment in Colorado increased by 36 percent between 2002 and 2007. In 2007, the abuse or neglect of 10,588 Colorado children was substantiated by investigation and 13 children died. Economic and psychological stress related to both poverty and an unstable economic system at home is related to child abuse (Straus et al., 1988). Child abuse often leads to the dissolution of marriages and may result in developmental

delays for the victim. Long-term effects on the child include increased risks of tobacco, drug and alcohol use and abuse (Corso et al., 2008) and increased chances for incarceration (Steinberg et al., 1981).

The majority of community-based child abuse and neglect prevention programs focus on improving the skills and knowledge of parents. To carry out this mission, the Colorado Children's Trust Fund and Family Resource

Centers are funded federally by the Community-Based Grants for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, and by state divorce docket fees. There are currently 19 Colorado Children's Trust Fund grantees and 24 family

resource centers that receive funding through the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. During the current economic downturn, community-based child abuse prevention programs are receiving fewer private donations and foundation funding. According to Rita Wiley, Co-Director of the Family Nurturing Center of Colorado in El Paso County, "In tough economic times, children, especially young children, suffer the most and sustain the most long-lasting consequences from the community and state's neglect of their most basic needs: social, emotional, educational and physical. Funding for prevention and early intervention services needs to be increased during these times to provide much needed safety nets."

Now that family support and parent education services will be needed more than ever, funding for these community-based programs should be maintained to help prevent abuse among Colorado children and to give parents the training to handle such stressful situations.

"In tough economic times children, especially young children, suffer the most and sustain the most long-lasting consequences..."

Conclusion

The current unemployment rate in Colorado is 7.3%. Although some economic forecasts indicate that the recession in Colorado will end in late 2009, unemployment is expected to continue to rise with the increase in migration to the state since the Colorado unemployment

rate is less than the rate elsewhere in the country (Denver Business Journal, 2009). Resources aimed at violence prevention continue to be needed to address the increasing demand for services. Stories like Angela's below are unfortunately all too common.

Angela's Story

"Angela" and her five-year-old daughter entered a Safehouse in February of 2009. Her boyfriend had made numerous threats to kill her and her daughter during the relationship, and the physical violence was escalating. When he was arrested in February, he called her from jail, and told her he would find and kill her when released.

Angela was left with few options; she and her daughter entered the Safehouse. Angela had a long-standing job in Loveland, a home, and, a school that her daughter had been attending. Soon after she came to the Safehouse, the company Angela worked for lost a large amount of business and Angela, along with three other workers, lost her job. Angela has been diligently applying for jobs but has not been able to find full-time work yet. The current economic crisis is proving to be a bigger hurdle than expected.

Angela and her daughter's six-week-stay in the Safehouse are coming to an end. Without income or child support from her ex-husband, Angela is having a difficult time finding housing. She has applied to local housing authorities who have long waiting lists due to an increase in applicants. Her only immediate option is to move in with her mother; unfortunately, Angela's abuser knows where her mother lives and she is fearful to live there. In the past year Angela has faced and overcome many obstacles. She has found the strength and courage to leave an abusive partner but now is facing other life-threatening problems: homelessness and indigence.

Prevention Services

Suicide Hotline – 1-800-273-TALK

Domestic Violence – 1-888-778-7091

Child Help Hotline – 1- 800-4-ACHILD

Contacts

For more information on prevention services to prevent suicide, child abuses, and domestic violence in Colorado, please contact the following state program managers:

Child Abuse Prevention

Scott Bates, MSW
Colorado Children's Trust Fund
Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment
4300 South Cherry Creek Drive
PSD-PPCY-A4
Denver, CO 80246-1530
Phone: (303) 692-2941
Fax: (303) 691-7852
Email: scott.bates@state.co.us

Suicide Prevention

Jarrold Hindman, M.S.
Suicide Prevention Program Manager
Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment
4300 Cherry Creek Drive South
PSD-ISVP-A4
Denver, CO 80246-1530
Tel: 303-692-2539
Fax: 303-691-7901
Email: jarrod.hindman@state.co.us

Domestic Violence

Ruth M. Glenn, MPA
Domestic Violence Program
CDHS, OBHH
1575 Sherman Street
3rd Floor
Denver, CO 80203
Cell: 303-968-6986
Tel: 303-866-2855
Fax: 303-866-5488
Email: Ruth.Glenn@state.co.us

References

1. Benson, M. L. & Fox, G. L. (2004). When Violence Hits Home: How Economics and Neighborhood Play a Role, Research in Brief. National Criminal Justice Number 205004.
2. Corso, PS, Edwards, VJ, Fang, X, Mercy, JA. (2008). Health-related quality of life among adults who experienced maltreatment during childhood. *American Journal of Public Health*, 98:1094-1100.
3. Kohn, D. Hard times mean more abuse. Baltimore Sun. February 18, 2009.
4. Kposowa, A.J. (2001). Unemployment and suicide: a cohort analysis of social factors predicting suicide in the US National Longitudinal Mortality Study. *Psychological Medicine*, 31:127-138.
5. Steinberg, L.D., Catalano, R. & Dooley, D. (1981). Economic Antecedents of Child Abuse and Neglect. *Child Development*, 52(3):975-985.
6. Straus, M.A. & Smith, C. (1988). Family Patterns and Child Abuse, Research in Brief. National Criminal Justice Number 117804.
7. Illescas, C. Rise in Colorado suicides mirrors economic woes, experts say. (2009, June 16). *The Denver Post*.