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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Too Poor to Make the News

By BARBARA EHRENREICH

THE human side of the recession, in the new media genre that's been called "recession porn," is the story of an incremental descent from excess to frugality, from ease to austerity. The super-rich give up their personal jets; the upper middle class cut back on private Pilates classes; the merely middle class forgo vacations and evenings at Applebee's. In some accounts, the recession is even described as the "great leveler," smudging the dizzying levels of inequality that characterized the last couple of decades and squeezing everyone into a single great class, the Nouveau Poor, in which we will all drive tiny fuel-efficient cars and grow tomatoes on our porches.

But the outlook is not so cozy when we look at the effects of the recession on a group generally omitted from all the vivid narratives of downward mobility — the already poor, the estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of the population who struggle to get by in the best of times. This demographic, the working poor, have already been living in an economic depression of their own. From their point of view "the economy," as a shared condition, is a fiction.

This spring, I tracked down a couple of the people I had met while working on my 2001 book, "Nickel and Dimed," in which I worked in low-wage jobs like waitressing and housecleaning, and I found them no more gripped by the recession than by "American Idol"; things were pretty much "same old." The woman I called Melissa in the book was still working at Wal-Mart, though in nine years, her wages had risen to \$10 an hour from \$7. "Caroline," who is increasingly disabled by diabetes and heart disease, now lives with a grown son and subsists on occasional cleaning and catering jobs. We chatted about grandchildren and church, without any mention of exceptional hardship.

As with Denise Smith, whom I recently met through the Virginia Organizing Project and whose bachelor's degree in history qualifies her for seasonal \$10-an-hour work at a tourist site, the recession is largely an abstraction. "We were poor," Ms. Smith told me cheerfully, "and we're still poor."

But then, at least if you inhabit a large, multiclass extended family like my own, there comes that e-mail message with the subject line "Need your help," and you realize that bad is often just the stage before worse. The note was from one of my nephews, and it reported that his mother-in-law, Peg, was, like several million other Americans, about to lose her home to foreclosure.

It was the back story that got to me: Peg, who is 55 and lives in rural Missouri, had been working three part-time jobs to support her disabled daughter and two grandchildren, who had moved in with her. Then, last winter, she had a heart attack, missed work and fell behind in her mortgage payments. If I couldn't help, all four would have to move into the cramped apartment in Minneapolis already occupied by my

nephew and his wife.

Only after I'd sent the money did I learn that the mortgage was not a subprime one and the home was not a house but a dilapidated single-wide trailer that, as a "used vehicle," commands a 12-percent mortgage interest rate. You could argue, without any shortage of compassion, that "Low-Wage Worker Loses Job, Home" is nobody's idea of news.

In late May I traveled to Los Angeles — where the real unemployment rate, including underemployed people and those who have given up on looking for a job, is estimated at 20 percent — to meet with a half-dozen community organizers. They are members of a profession, derided last summer by Sarah Palin, that helps low-income people renegotiate mortgages, deal with eviction when their landlords are foreclosed and, when necessary, organize to confront landlords and bosses.

The question I put to this rainbow group was: "Has the recession made a significant difference in the low-income communities where you work, or are things pretty much the same?" My informants — from Koreatown, South Central, Maywood, Artesia and the area around Skid Row — took pains to explain that things were already bad before the recession, and in ways that are disconnected from the larger economy. One of them told me, for example, that the boom of the '90s and early 2000s had been "basically devastating" for the urban poor. Rents skyrocketed; public housing disappeared to make way for gentrification.

But yes, the recession has made things palpably worse, largely because of job losses. With no paychecks coming in, people fall behind on their rent and, since there can be as long as a six-year wait for federal housing subsidies, they often have no alternative but to move in with relatives. "People are calling me all the time," said Preeti Sharma of the South Asian Network, "They think I have some sort of magic."

The organizers even expressed a certain impatience with the Nouveau Poor, once I introduced the phrase. If there's a symbol for the recession in Los Angeles, Davin Corona of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy said, it's "the policeman facing foreclosure in the suburbs." The already poor, he said — the undocumented immigrants, the sweatshop workers, the janitors, maids and security guards — had all but "disappeared" from both the news media and public policy discussions.

Disappearing with them is what may be the most distinctive and compelling story of this recession. When I got back home, I started calling up experts, like Sharon Parrott, a policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, who told me, "There's rising unemployment among all demographic groups, but vastly more among the so-called unskilled."

How much more? Larry Mishel, the president of the Economic Policy Institute, offers data showing that blue-collar unemployment is increasing three times as fast as white-collar unemployment. The last two recessions — in the early '90s and in 2001 — produced mass white-collar layoffs, and while the current one has seen plenty of downsized real-estate agents and financial analysts, the brunt is being borne by the blue-collar working class, which has been sliding downward since deindustrialization began in the '80s.

When I called food banks and homeless shelters around the country, most staff members and directors seemed poised to offer press-pleasing tales of formerly middle-class families brought low. But some, like

Toni Muhammad at Gateway Homeless Services in St. Louis, admitted that mostly they see “the long-term poor,” who become even poorer when they lose the kind of low-wage jobs that had been so easy for me to find from 1998 to 2000. As Candy Hill, a vice president of Catholic Charities U.S.A., put it, “All the focus is on the middle class — on Wall Street and Main Street — but it’s the people on the back streets who are really suffering.”

What are the stations between poverty and destitution? Like the Nouveau Poor, the already poor descend through a series of deprivations, though these are less likely to involve forgone vacations than missed meals and medications. The Times reported earlier this month that one-third of Americans can no longer afford to comply with their prescriptions.

There are other, less life-threatening, ways to try to make ends meet. The Associated Press has reported that more women from all social classes are resorting to stripping, although “gentlemen’s clubs,” too, have been hard-hit by the recession. The rural poor are turning increasingly to “food auctions,” which offer items that may be past their sell-by dates.

And for those who like their meat fresh, there’s the option of urban hunting. In Racine, Wis., a 51-year-old laid-off mechanic told me he’s supplementing his diet by “shooting squirrels and rabbits and eating them stewed, baked and grilled.” In Detroit, where the wildlife population has mounted as the human population ebbs, a retired truck driver is doing a brisk business in raccoon carcasses, which he recommends marinating with vinegar and spices.

The most common coping strategy, though, is simply to increase the number of paying people per square foot of dwelling space — by doubling up or renting to couch-surfers. It’s hard to get firm numbers on overcrowding, because no one likes to acknowledge it to census-takers, journalists or anyone else who might be remotely connected to the authorities. At the legal level, this includes Peg taking in her daughter and two grandchildren in a trailer with barely room for two, or my nephew and his wife preparing to squeeze all four of them into what is essentially a one-bedroom apartment. But stories of Dickensian living arrangements abound.

In Los Angeles, Prof. Peter Dreier, a housing policy expert at Occidental College, says that “people who’ve lost their jobs, or at least their second jobs, cope by doubling or tripling up in overcrowded apartments, or by paying 50 or 60 or even 70 percent of their incomes in rent.” Thelmy Perez, an organizer with Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, is trying to help an elderly couple who could no longer afford the \$600 a month rent on their two-bedroom apartment, so they took in six unrelated subtenants and are now facing eviction. According to a community organizer in my own city, Alexandria, Va., the standard apartment in a complex occupied largely by day laborers contains two bedrooms, each housing a family of up to five people, plus an additional person laying claim to the couch.

Overcrowding — rural, suburban and urban — renders the mounting numbers of the poor invisible, especially when the perpetrators have no telltale cars to park on the street. But if this is sometimes a crime against zoning laws, it’s not exactly a victimless one. At best, it leads to interrupted sleep and long waits for the bathroom; at worst, to explosions of violence. Catholic Charities is reporting a spike in domestic violence in many parts of the country, which Candy Hill attributes to the combination of unemployment and

overcrowding.

And doubling up is seldom a stable solution. According to Toni Muhammad, about 70 percent of the people seeking emergency shelter in St. Louis report they had been living with relatives “but the place was too small.” When I asked Peg what it was like to share her trailer with her daughter’s family, she said bleakly, “I just stay in my bedroom.”

The deprivations of the formerly affluent Nouveau Poor are real enough, but the situation of the already poor suggests that they do not necessarily presage a greener, more harmonious future with a flatter distribution of wealth. There are no data yet on the effects of the recession on measures of inequality, but historically the effect of downturns is to increase, not decrease, class polarization.

The recession of the '80s transformed the working class into the working poor, as manufacturing jobs fled to the third world, forcing American workers into the low-paying service and retail sector. The current recession is knocking the working poor down another notch — from low-wage employment and inadequate housing toward erratic employment and no housing at all. Comfortable people have long imagined that American poverty is far more luxurious than the third world variety, but the difference is rapidly narrowing.

Maybe “the economy,” as depicted on CNBC, will revive again, restoring the kinds of jobs that sustained the working poor, however inadequately, before the recession. Chances are, though, that they still won’t pay enough to live on, at least not at any level of safety and dignity. In fact, hourly wage growth, which had been running at about 4 percent a year, has undergone what the Economic Policy Institute calls a “dramatic collapse” in the last six months alone. In good times and grim ones, the misery at the bottom just keeps piling up, like a bad debt that will eventually come due.

Barbara Ehrenreich is the author, most recently, of “This Land Is Their Land: Reports From a Divided Nation.”

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