

What do You Want Your World to Look Like Tomorrow?



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Photography courtesy of **Michelle A. Williams**

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As the novel coronavirus blankets the country, infecting hundreds of thousands and disrupting life in unprecedented ways, one thing is increasingly clear: Our world will never be quite the same. And for those coming of age amid this crisis, the long-term impact on their health—both physical and mental—could be even more profound than the virus itself.

The generation born in the years just before and after the national trauma of 9/11 has weathered its fair share of unrest: the Great Recession, mass shootings in their schools, the devastating consequences of climate change. But the COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt be one of the most formative experiences of their young lives.

More than 14 million students have had their college experiences abruptly cut short and dramatically altered. Millions more are entering the workforce just as the workplace as we know it ceases to exist. Many are living on their own for the first time, facing the added isolation of sheltering-in-place alone. Others are watching

loved ones fall ill—and maybe even confronting their own mortality for the very first time. All of this, compounded by the anxiety of not knowing when or how this crisis will end, will take its toll, especially for those with existing mental health struggles.

Yet perhaps the most potent stressor will be the economic devastation that is only beginning to unfold. In the last two weeks of March alone, a record 10 million Americans sought unemployment benefits as the U.S. shut down large swaths of the economy in an effort to contain the virus.

The breathtaking spike in unemployment, accompanied by the stock market's worst quarter since 1987, is likely just the start of the economic consequences. There is every indication that we could be entering the deepest recession the U.S. has ever experienced—or worse, a full-blown depression. That will no doubt take a profound toll on Americans' financial health, particularly for those just starting to build careers and families. In turn, that could hurt their mental and physical health, too.

We have substantial evidence that economic turmoil is tough on our bodies and minds. This is especially true in the United States, where being laid off means much more than just the loss of a paycheck. The U.S. is unique among wealthy countries because of our reliance on employer-sponsored health insurance and lack of universal paid medical leave. Today, about half of Americans under the age of 65 get health insurance through their work, and mass layoffs could put the coverage of millions at risk—for both those who've lost jobs and those who are on their parents' health insurance.

Young people tend to have better overall physical health, but being uninsured—even temporarily—can lead to worse health outcomes. Gaps in health coverage keep people from getting medical attention or filling prescriptions. They lower the likelihood of receiving recommended primary care and cancer screenings. In fact, many uninsured people avoid seeking health care altogether, unless it's an emergency or their symptoms become unbearable. As a result, they're less likely to receive diagnoses in the early stages of disease and more likely to suffer complications from aggravated medical conditions.

A recent study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Imperial College London, and Oxford University found that increases in unemployment during the 2008 recession were associated with an uptick in cancer deaths. The association was strongest for treatable cancers and in countries without universal health coverage, suggesting that a lack of care may have been a factor in the additional deaths.

Research also shows that chronic, unrelenting strain—the kind that comes from financial devastation, loss of opportunity, and the fraying of social bonds—can lead to “wear and tear” on our minds and our bodies, contributing to a cascade of adverse health outcomes, like heart disease, obesity, and stroke. Even before this crisis, we saw a rise in overdose deaths and suicides, known as “deaths of despair,” among young Americans. These developments illuminate the need for a more coordinated and long-lived response than in any other time.

So, as we in the public, private, social, and philanthropic sectors mobilize in response to this pandemic, it's imperative that we find ways to address not just the contagion at hand, but also the financial, emotional, and physiological fallout that

will unfold over the coming years. Because that burden, particularly on today's young adults, will be tremendous.

The good news is, the future's not set in stone. We all have a role to play in shaping our communities now—and after the immediate crisis has passed. This is the moment for philanthropists, educators, and community leaders to be asking ourselves: What do we want our world to look like tomorrow?

For one, the public health ecosystem should no longer accept the status quo of being the underfunded sector. Secondly, we in public health must work to more effectively communicate the important message that public health does not work in isolation. In fact, public health is at its best when it engages across all sectors.

While this will require new tools and new thinking, human beings have demonstrated an incredible capacity for innovation and resilience, even under the most difficult of circumstances. We've seen it time and again, in the aftermath of natural disasters, the trauma of war and terror attacks, and yes, the scourge of infectious disease. People have successfully recovered from—and adapted to—an unimaginable range of “new normals.” And young people, perhaps more than anyone else, are well positioned to do just that.

There are many factors that determine our ability to cope in trying times. But perhaps the most important is our connection to those around us. So, when we think about what we want our future to look like in the months and years ahead, it will be up to all of us to invest in strengthening our social fabric: from improving access to mental health care for people in need to finding innovative ways of building and sustaining a healthier and more just world. **LM**