

# What if sociologists had as much influence as economists?

By Neil Irwin

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Walk half a city block in downtown Washington, and there is a good chance that you will pass an economist. People with advanced training in the field shape policy on subjects as varied as how health care is provided, broadcast licenses auctioned or air pollution regulated.

Turn on cable news, and the guests who opine on the weighty public policy questions of the day quite often have some title like “chief economist” underneath their name. And there are economists sprinkled throughout the government — there is an entire council of them advising the president in most administrations, if not yet in this one.

But as much as we love economics here — this column is named Economic View, after all — there just may be a downside to this one academic discipline having such primacy in shaping public policy.

They say when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. And the risk is that when every policy adviser is an economist, every problem looks like inadequate per-capita gross domestic product.

Another academic discipline may not have the ear of presidents but may actually do a better job of explaining what has gone wrong in large swaths of the United States and other advanced nations in recent years.

Sociologists spend their careers trying to understand how societies work. And some of the most pressing problems in big chunks of the United States may show up in economic data as low employment levels and stagnant wages but are also evident in elevated rates of depression, drug addiction and premature death. In other words, economics is only a piece of a broader, societal problem. So maybe the people who study just that could be worth listening to.

“Once economists have the ears of people in Washington, they convince them that the only questions worth asking are the questions that economists are equipped to answer,” said Michèle Lamont, a Harvard sociologist and president of the American Sociological Association. “That’s not to take anything away from what they do. It’s just that many of the answers they give are very partial.”

As a small corrective, I took a dive into some sociological research with particular relevance to the biggest problems facing communities in advanced countries today to understand what kinds of lessons the field can offer. In 1967, Senator Walter Mondale actually proposed a White House Council of Social Advisers; he envisioned it as a counterpart to the well-entrenched Council of Economic Advisers. It was never created, but if it had been, this is the sort of advice it might have been giving recent presidents.

For starters, while economists tend to view a job as a straightforward exchange of labor for money, a wide body of sociological research shows how tied up work is with a sense of purpose and identity.

“Wages are very important because of course they help people live and provide for their families,” said Herbert Gans, an emeritus professor of sociology at Columbia. “But what social values can do is say that unemployment isn’t just losing wages, it’s losing dignity and self-respect and a feeling of usefulness and all the things that make human beings happy and able to function.”

That seems to be doubly true in the United States. For example, Ofer Sharone, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, studied unemployed white-collar workers and found that in the United States, his

subjects viewed their ability to land a job as a personal reflection of their self-worth rather than as an arbitrary matter. They therefore took rejection hard, blaming themselves and in many cases giving up looking for work. In contrast, in Israel similar unemployed workers viewed getting a job as more like winning a lottery, and were less discouraged by rejection.

It seems plausible that this helps explain why so many Americans who lost jobs in the 2008 recession have never returned to the labor force despite an improved job market. Mr. Sharone is working with career counselors to explore how to put this finding to work to help the long-term unemployed.

Jennifer M. Silva of Bucknell University has in recent years studied young working-class adults and found a profound sense of economic insecurity in which the traditional markers of reaching adulthood — buying a house, marrying, landing a steady job — feel out of reach.

Put those lessons together, and you may think that the economic nostalgia that fueled Donald J. Trump's presidential campaign was not so much about the loss of income from vanishing manufacturing jobs. Rather, it may be that the industrial economy offered blue-collar men a sense of identity and purpose that the modern service economy doesn't.

Sociology also offers important lessons about poverty that economics alone does not. "Evicted," a much-heralded book by the Harvard sociologist Matthew Desmond, shows how the ever-present risk of losing a home breeds an insecurity and despondency among poor Americans.

It works against the tendency to think about housing policy as solely a matter of which subsidy goes to whom and what incentives ought to be in place to encourage banks to lend in poor neighborhoods. All that stuff is

important, of course, but doesn't really address the overwhelming challenge of insecurity that affects millions of people.

And a large body of sociological research touches on the idea of stigmatization, including of the poor and of racial minorities. It makes clear that there are harder problems to solve around these issues than simply eliminating overt discrimination.

It's one thing, for example, to outlaw housing discrimination based on race. But if real estate agents and would-be home sellers subtly shun minority buyers, the effect can be the same. Professor Gans of Columbia has argued for decades that the stigmatization of poor Americans fuels entrenched, persistent poverty.

If the White House Council of Social Advisers did exist, one of its great challenges would be to convert some of these findings into actual policy proposals that might help. Part of the ascendance of economics in the policy-making sphere comes from the fact that economists tend to spend more time looking at specific legislative or regulatory steps that could try to improve conditions.

And trying to solve social problems is a more complex undertaking than working to improve economic outcomes. It's relatively clear how a change in tax policy or an adjustment to interest rates can make the economy grow faster or slower. It's less obvious what, if anything, government can do to change forces that are driven by the human psyche.

But there is a risk that there is something of a vicious cycle at work. "When no one asks us for advice, there's no incentive to become a policy field," Professor Gans said.

It may be true that these lessons on identity and community don't lend themselves immediately to policy white papers and five-point plans. But a deeper understanding of them sure could help policy makers.