

44 million reasons

On Monday, Sept. 20, the headline garnering attention was an outlandish claim, which defied the comprehension of almost every American across this country. The National Bureau of Economic Research announced that the largest recession to ever plague our nation had ended as of June 2009.

Reaction was almost immediate on social networking sites, television news programs and everyday conversations at work or at home.

"Hallucinatory news," some said. "I'll start believing the recession is over when I stop seeing endless numbers of people sleeping on the streets."

And that's just naming a few.

The nonprofit research bureau, which is considered the official authority when it comes to "economic contradictions and expansions," couldn't possibly have gotten this wrong, could they?

It's hard to argue with what's factual. Unemployment is still incredibly high, while job creation seems at a standstill. The housing market is barely staying afloat and daily economic realities continue to weigh heavy on the hearts and minds of everyday people from coast to coast. It makes you wonder if the bureau was more concerned with analyzing pie charts and data than looking outside their office windows and seeing just how hard ordinary Americans have been hit.

American investor, industrialist and philanthropist Warren Buffet said, "I think we're in a recession until real per capita (gross domestic product) gets back to where it was. That is not the way the National Bureau of Economic Research measures it."

He went on to say that claiming the end of a recession has to do with

how it's defined — by a shrinking GDP and not necessarily how it affects Americans.

While per capita and gross domestic product sounds like a foreign language to me, it doesn't take a financial wizard to realize that this country is still very much in trouble and I can give you 44 million reasons why that is.

The Census Bureau recently released its findings for the United States population at large. While much of the resulting data was far from



THE VIEW FROM HERE

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extraordinary, one item in particular was astonishing — yet later not so surprising given the uncertainty in the world today.

Just about 44 million Americans — one in seven — are now living below the poverty level, which has been defined as a family of four earning a total of \$22,000 annually. In the 51 years since the census was first introduced, that statistic has never been so high. What's most disturbing is the sheer number of our population that now refers to themselves as being "poor." It's utterly sobering and com-

pletely disheartening.

It seems almost inevitable, with one in seven Americans now living below the poverty level, that at some point we'll all encounter these individuals in our daily lives — though we may never know it. Poverty is a fate which can often crush the confidence and self-esteem a person once possessed; sometimes causing them to pretend that their lives are not the realities they return to at the end of a long day.

It's not something we often think about while we're standing in mixed company bragging about our new luxury car, the size of our flat screen television or the exotic vacation we just returned from. If I've learned one thing about modern day Americans it's that many of us are simply insensitive to the hardships others endure. We believe if the pendulum of despair swings away from us, the harsh realities of others don't deserve justification or even our sympathy.

While there are some who have managed to pass through this recession unscathed, the majority have not. Perhaps on paper it might appear logical that the recession did in fact expire over a year ago, but as they say, appearances can often be deceiving. If you're auspicious enough to still maintain financial security, count your blessings for it only takes one unforeseen incident to change the lifestyle you've become accustomed to living.

And for those 44 million Americans who find themselves asking "why me?" as they lay down to sleep each and every night, I hope the next time the headline reads "recession over" it might actually be true.

"The View from Here" runs every other week, alternating with guest columns.