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A new record

Economic recovery is weakest since World War II

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WASHINGTON — The recession that ended three years ago this summer has been followed by the feeblest economic recovery since the Great Depression.

Since World War II, 10 U.S. recessions have been followed by a recovery that lasted at least three years. An Associated Press analysis shows that by just about any measure, the one that began in June 2009 is the weakest.

The ugliness goes well beyond unemployment, which at 8.3 percent is the highest this long after a recession ended.

Economic growth has never been weaker in a postwar recovery. Consumer spending has never been so slack. Only once has job growth been slower.

More than in any other post-World War II recovery, people who have jobs are hurting: Their paychecks have fallen behind inflation.

Many economists say the agonizing recovery from the Great Recession, which began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, is the predictable consequence of a housing bust and a grave financial crisis.

Credit, the fuel that powers economies, evaporated after Lehman Brothers collapsed in September 2008. And a 30 percent drop in housing prices erased trillions in home equity and brought construction to a near-standstill.

So any recovery was destined to be a slog.

"A housing collapse is very different from a stock market bubble and crash," says Nobel Prize-winning economist Peter Diamond of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It affects so many people. It only corrects very slowly."

The U.S. economy has other problems, too. Europe's troubles have undermined consumer and business confidence on both sides of the Atlantic. And the deeply divided U.S. political system has delivered growth-chilling uncertainty.

The AP compared nine economic recoveries since the end of World War II that lasted at least three years. A 10th recovery that ran from 1945 to 1948 was not included because the statistics from that period aren't comprehensive, although the available data show that hiring was robust. There were two short-lived recoveries — 24 months and 12 months — after the recessions of 1957-58 and 1980.