

The Many Faces of Inflation

Since the current recession started in December 2007, it seems all we've seen and heard about the economy was bad news: the housing market collapsing, 401(k)s suddenly being worth much less than before, a lifetime of savings almost disappearing in a few months, rising unemployment, and fluctuating prices. In this uncertain economic climate, it may be helpful to learn about the different types of inflation and their immediate effects.

Inflation

Inflation is defined as a continuing rise in the general prices of goods and services. Simply put, if prices, on average, are going up in an economy, then you've got inflation. With a set amount of money in an inflationary environment, consumers are able to buy less and less over time. High rates of inflation can generate uncertainty, lower productivity and discourage investment. The leading measure of inflation in the United States is the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The government can change its monetary policy to control the money supply and keep inflation in check, although this is not the only variable affecting inflation.

Hyperinflation

Hyperinflation is extremely high, out of control inflation, caused by a steep increase in the money supply without a corresponding increase in the output of goods and services. Well-known examples include the German hyperinflation after World War I and the hyperinflation in Hungary after World War II. It appears that such an extreme phenomenon occurs mainly as a result of radical changes and prolonged economic instability.

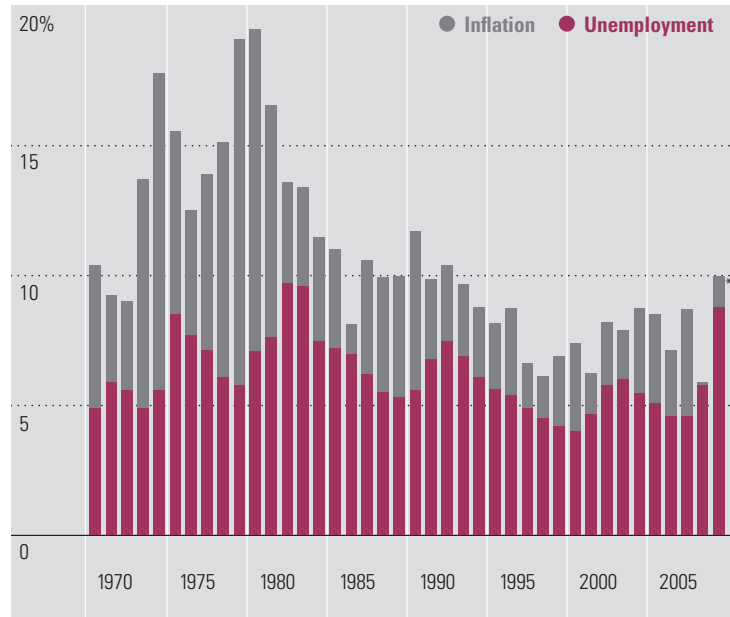
Deflation

Deflation is the opposite case: a general decline in the prices of goods and services. In the U.S., deflation occurred as recently as 2008: The monthly change in CPI was negative from August to December, a clear indicator of deflation. The obvious positive effect here is lower prices—many argue that deflationary periods are good times to buy. The problem with deflation, though, is that consumers reduce spending and businesses stop growing, which is not good for the economy.

Stagflation

This is the worst-case scenario: high inflation and slow growth simultaneously. Normally, there is an inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment; if the economy is able to tolerate a higher rate of inflation, lower unemployment can be achieved, and vice versa. But during a stagflation period, both inflation and unemployment go up. An interesting measure for stagflation is the misery index, which, as illustrated in the image, combines the unemployment and inflation rates. The U.S. experienced severe stagflation in the 1970s, when unemployment and inflation reached a combined high of almost 20%. There has been talk of stagflation during the current crisis as well, but the potentially encouraging news is that the misery index is not nearly as high now as it has been in the past.

The Misery Index



*Data is for 1st quarter of 2009

Source: Inflation is represented by the Consumer Price Index, and unemployment by the national unemployment rate, not seasonally adjusted, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.