

Community Perspectives on Poverty Among Adults in Minnesota

- Results from a National Survey with an Oversample of Minnesotans -

The Northwest Area Foundation (NWAFF) commissioned Lake Research Partners (LRP) to conduct a national tracking survey to explore the public's perception of poverty in one's own community, attitudes toward the roles of local elected officials, and ways in which to address the issue. The survey was conducted among 4,011 Americans age 18 and older, from February 8-29, 2008. A total of 800 interviews were conducted nationally, and oversamples of 400 interviews were conducted in eight states, including 412 interviews in Minnesota. The margin of sampling error for the Minnesota results is ± 5 percentage points. This is the third survey of its kind, replicating a survey first conducted in December 2005 and released to the public in March 2006, and repeated in March 2007.¹ These findings focus on the 2008 data; overall, we find many consistencies with the 2007 report, along with a few areas of greater intensity.

Key Findings

Main findings among Minnesotans include:

- Fifty-three percent of Minnesotans say the economic conditions in their own community are only fair (40%) or poor (13%). Those in rural Minnesota (71%) are much more likely to say their local economies are fair or poor, compared to those in urban (49%) or suburban (44%) areas.
- Additionally, 69 percent of residents are worried that these conditions might get worse in the coming year – and this concern cuts across urban, suburban and rural areas in the state.
- Nearly three in 10 Minnesotans (29%) worry all or most of the time that their total family income will not be enough to meet their family's expenses and bills, including 53% of those earning \$35,000 or less per year. Another four in 10 Minnesotans (40%) say they worry some of the time about making ends meet.

Snapshot of Results

About half of Minnesotans rate their local economy as only fair or poor – with rural Minnesotans much more likely to give these ratings than those in urban or suburban areas. A majority in the state is also worried about local economic conditions getting worse over the next year. Several Minnesotans are feeling squeezed financially – about three in 10 saying they worry all or most of the time about earning enough income to pay their bills and expenses. Compared to last year, a higher percentage of Minnesotans say it takes *more than \$40,000* for a family of four to get by in their community. Despite these worries, however, Minnesotans remain hopeful and optimistic about their communities: they are willing to help those who are struggling and believe their own community can come together to reduce the number of people struggling to make ends meet. They also look to local elected officials to take action on these issues, and say they take these concerns into the voting booth.

¹ The 2005-2006 survey included a national sample of 800 interviews, with oversamples of 200 interviews in each state. The 2007 survey was conducted among a national sample of 800 adults, with oversamples of 400 interviews in each state.

- Seventy-one percent of Minnesotans say a family of four living in their own community would need \$40,000 or more to make ends meet – far beyond the federal government’s poverty income threshold of \$21,027. Forty-four percent say a family of four needs *more than* \$40,000 to get by – an increase of eight percentage points since last year (36%).
- More than four in 10 Minnesotans (44%) perceive a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet in their community, and 35 percent say a lot of people are working full-time jobs, yet still struggling to get by. One in two Minnesotans (51%) know someone personally in their community who works two or more jobs and is struggling. Rural Minnesotans are most likely to perceive a lot of people struggling (64%) – nearly twice as many as those living in suburban areas (33%). Additionally, lower-income Minnesotans (earning less than \$35,000) are twice as likely to say they see a lot of people struggling than those earning \$75,000 or more (60% vs. 31%).
- Helping people struggling to make ends meet is a top concern for 41 percent of Minnesotans, and a middle concern for another 46 percent of residents. This concern seems to carry through to the voting booth. Nearly eight in 10 (79%) say that when they vote, they think about how well a candidate would help those struggling to make ends meet – up six percentage points from 2007 (73%).
- Trust in local government has dropped since last year. Three in 10 Minnesotans (30%) say they can trust local government to do what is right always or most of the time, compared to 41 percent who said the same last year.
- Despite economic worries and a decline in trust, the survey reveals hope and optimism for reducing poverty locally; a majority (90%) feels the number of people struggling could be reduced. This optimism may stem in part from the perceived efficacy of their communities – 46% of Minnesotans say their own community is effective at dealing with local problems either always or most of the time – or may be fueled by perceptions of their neighbors’ willingness to help.
- Minnesotans are also ready and willing to engage in this issue personally. Eighty-seven percent say they would like to do more to help people struggling. Nine in 10 (91%) say it would be a good idea to hold a community discussion on helping those struggling – with 53 percent saying it would be a *very* good idea. Two-thirds of Minnesotans (67%) say they would be likely to attend such a discussion. The same proportion (67%) say they would be willing to pay \$50 more a year in taxes if it would go to programs in their own community to help people struggling to make ends meet.
- Finally, Minnesotans look to their local elected officials to take action on poverty issues. Nine in 10 (90%) say it is important for local elected officials to work to help those struggling to make ends meet, and 77 percent say their local elected officials are knowledgeable about the struggles people face in their community. Facilitating community efforts as well as setting up ways for community members to become involved are among the responsibilities Minnesotans see for their local elected officials.