

Community Perspectives on Poverty Among Adults in Montana

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

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 403 interviews in Montana. The margin of sampling error for the Montana 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 Montanans include:

- Close to half of Montanans (48%) say the economic conditions in their own community are only fair (33%) or poor (15%). Those in rural Montana (53%) are more likely to say their local economies are fair or poor, compared to those in urban (39%) areas.
- Additionally, 56% of residents are worried that these conditions might get worse in the coming year – with rural residents more worried than urban residents (62% vs. 47%).
- Nearly three in 10 Montanans (28%) 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 42 percent of those earning \$35,000 or less per year. Another 37 percent of residents say they worry some of the time about making ends meet.

Snapshot of Results

About half of Montanans rate their local economy as only fair or poor – with rural Montanans more likely to give these ratings than those in urban areas. A slight majority in the state is also worried about local economic conditions getting worse over the next year. Several Montanans 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. Half of Montanans says it takes at least \$40,000 for a family of four to get by in their community. Despite these worries, however, Montanans 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.

- Half of Montanans (52%) 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.
- A slight majority of residents (55%) perceive a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet in their community, and 43 percent say a lot of people are working full-time jobs, yet still struggling to get by. Six in 10 Montanans (60%) know someone personally in their community who works two or more jobs and is struggling. Women are more likely than men to say a lot of people are struggling in their community (67% vs. 43%). Additionally, lower-income Montanans (earning less than \$35,000) are more likely to say they see a lot of people struggling than those earning \$75,000 or more (61% vs. 46%).
- Helping people struggling to make ends meet is a top concern for 41 percent of Montanans, and a middle concern for another 47 percent of residents. This concern seems to carry through to the voting booth. Nearly three in four residents (74%) say that when they vote, they think about how well a candidate would help those struggling to make ends meet.
- Despite economic worries, the survey reveals hope and optimism for reducing poverty locally; a majority (80%) feels the number of people struggling could be reduced. This optimism may stem in part from the perceived efficacy of their communities – 49 percent of Montanans 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.
- Montanans are also ready and willing to engage in this issue personally. Eighty-eight percent say they would like to do more to help people struggling. The same proportion (88%) say it would be a good idea to hold a community discussion on helping those struggling – with 51 percent saying it would be a *very* good idea. Seventy-two percent say they would be likely to attend such a discussion. Six in 10 Montanans (61%) 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, Montanans look to their local elected officials to take action on poverty issues. Eight-seven percent say it is important for local elected officials to work to help those struggling to make ends meet, and 74 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 Montanans see for their local elected officials.