

# Community Perspectives on Poverty Among Adults in North Dakota

## - Results from a National Survey with an Oversample of North Dakotans -

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 404 interviews in North Dakota. The margin of sampling error for the North Dakota results is  $\pm 5$  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.<sup>1</sup> 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 North Dakotans include:

- Nearly six in 10 North Dakotans (59%) say the economic conditions in their own community are excellent (10%) or good (49%). Thirty-eight percent rate conditions as only fair (29%) or poor (10%). Those with household incomes less than \$35,000 per year are almost twice as likely to say conditions are fair or poor, compared to those earning \$75,000 or more (47% to 23%).
- Fifty-six percent of residents are worried that these conditions might get worse in the coming year – particularly women (64%) and residents earning less than \$35,000 (71%).
- Close to three in 10 North Dakotans (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 44 percent of those earning \$35,000 or less per year. Another 38 percent of North Dakotans say they worry some of the time about making ends meet.

### Snapshot of Results

A slight majority of North Dakotans rate their local economy as excellent or good, although about the same proportion are worried that local economic conditions will worsen in the next year. Several North Dakotans are feeling squeezed financially – close to 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 North Dakotans say it takes *more than \$40,000* for a family of four to get by in their community. Despite these worries, however, North Dakotans 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

- Fifty-nine percent of North Dakotans 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. Twenty-nine percent say a family of four needs *more than* \$40,000 to get by – an increase of six percentage points since last year (23%).
- Four in 10 North Dakotans (41%) 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. Nearly six in 10 North Dakotans (59%) know someone personally in their community who works two or more jobs and is struggling. Women are more likely than men to perceive a lot of people struggling (52% vs. 30%). Additionally, lower-income North Dakotans (earning less than \$35,000) are more than twice as likely to say they see a lot of people struggling than those earning \$75,000 or more (55% vs. 21%).
- Helping people struggling to make ends meet is a top concern for 42 percent of North Dakotans, and a middle concern for another 43 percent of residents. This concern seems to carry through to the voting booth. Nearly eight in 10 (78%) say that when they vote, they think about how well a candidate would help those struggling to make ends meet.
- Trust in local government has dropped since last year. Forty-three percent of North Dakotans say they can trust local government to do what is right always or most of the time, compared to 54 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 (89%) feels the number of people struggling could be reduced. This optimism may stem in part from the perceived efficacy of their communities – 56 percent of North Dakotans 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.
- North Dakotans are also ready and willing to engage in this issue personally. Eighty-nine 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 54 percent saying it would be a *very* good idea. Seventy-two percent of North Dakotans say they would be likely to attend such a discussion. Nearly two-thirds (64%) 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, North Dakotans look to their local elected officials to take action on poverty issues. Nine in 10 (92%) say it is important for local elected officials to work to help those struggling to make ends meet, and 82 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 North Dakotans see for their local elected officials.