

Perspectives on Poverty Among Adults in North Dakota

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

The Northwest Area Foundation commissioned Lake Research Partners to conduct a national survey to explore the effects of the recession on families, perceptions of poverty in one's own community, attitudes toward the roles of local elected officials, and ways in which to address poverty. The survey was conducted among 4,004 Americans age 18 and older, from June 18 – July 13, 2009. A total of 800 interviews were conducted nationally, and oversamples of 400 interviews were conducted in eight states, including 400 interviews in North Dakota. The margin of error for the North Dakota results is ± 5 percentage points. This is the fourth survey of its kind, replicating selected questions from surveys released to the public in March 2006, March 2007 and April 2008¹.

Key Findings

Main findings among North Dakotans include:

- The recession is having a major impact on many North Dakota families. Close to half of North Dakotans (48%) say they have cut back their spending as a result of the recession. Those in rural areas are more likely than urban residents to have cut back spending (52% versus 43%). Of North Dakotans who have cut back, 56 percent say these new habits are likely to be permanent.

Snapshot of Results

Data from the survey show how far-reaching the effects of the economic recession have become for some North Dakota families. One in five is facing a loss in work hours, and the same proportion has had trouble paying for basic needs such as housing and food. Four in 10 have seen an increase in the number of people struggling in their community. Despite these hardships, North Dakotans are less likely than Americans at large to experience these effects of the recession, and to be worried about local economies worsening. Looking to the future, North Dakotans are more likely to be optimistic than pessimistic about the national economy, and a majority feels the number of people struggling in their community can be reduced. Many North Dakotans are already helping out friends and family by giving or loaning money to those who are struggling. They are willing to do more, but also want elected officials to take more action to help people who are struggling.

¹ The survey released in 2006 included a national sample of 800 interviews, with oversamples of 200 interviews in each of eight states, including North Dakota. The 2007 and 2008 surveys were conducted among a national sample of 800 adults, with oversamples of 400 interviews in each of eight states, including North Dakota.

- One in five (22%) say they or a family member living in their household have had hours cut at work in the past 12 months, and about the same proportion (21%) have had problems paying for basic necessities such as mortgage or rent, heating and food. Four in 10 (40%) say they or a family member has cut back on saving for retirement. More than one in three North Dakota families (36%) have cut back on the amount they spend on food in the past year, including 42 percent of those with children under 18. Although many families in the state are experiencing these effects, North Dakotans are less likely than Americans nationwide to report these hardships. For example, 53 percent of Americans have cut back on what they spend for food, and 38 percent say they or a family member has had hours cut at work.
- Four in 10 North Dakotans (40%) do not know where they could go in their community if they needed help with basic necessities. Residents ages 55 and older (50%), those with a high school degree or less (45%) and rural North Dakotans (45%) are most likely to say they would not know where to turn. Additionally, 44 percent are unfamiliar with government services in their community such as temporary housing assistance and food stamps (only 19% are very familiar with these services).
- North Dakotans are also seeing others struggling in their community. Forty-three percent say more people are struggling in their community compared to a year ago. North Dakotans are split on whether people are struggling to make ends meet because of circumstances outside their control (45%) or people's own poor choices (45%). Nationally, 67 percent of Americans say the number of people struggling in their community has increased in the past year, and most (60%) say people are struggling to get by because of outside circumstances.
- Six in 10 North Dakotans (62%) say a family of four living in their community would need \$40,000 or more to make ends meet, far beyond the federal government's poverty income threshold of \$21,834.
- Despite personal experiences and the struggles they see around them, 55 percent of North Dakotans feel hopeful about the national economy (38% pessimistic). Women (60%), North Dakotans under age 55 (60%) and those with a college degree (63%) are most likely to be hopeful about the national economy.
- While about half of residents (53%) are worried that their local economy may get worse in the next year, fewer North Dakotans are worried than Americans at large (67% are worried about their local economy worsening). North Dakotans' hope and optimism also remain about reducing poverty in their community; 81 percent believe the number of people struggling in their community can be reduced. Additionally, 53 percent say they would benefit personally if the number of people struggling in their community was reduced.

- Many North Dakotans are already doing things to help out people they know. More than four in 10 (46%) say they or someone in their household have given or lent money in the past 12 months to someone who was struggling to get by, including 38 percent of those in the lowest income brackets (\$35,000 per year or less). One in six (16%) has taken a friend or family member into their home because of money. Additionally, 81 percent say they are willing to volunteer for an organization that helps people who are struggling (35% very willing). Two-thirds (67%) are at least somewhat willing to get more involved in their local government by attending meetings or contacting elected officials (24% very willing). A majority (58%) says they would be willing to pay \$50 more in taxes if it went to local programs to help people struggling in their community (27% very willing).
- North Dakotans also look to elected officials for action. Four in 10 (40%) say the government is doing too little to help those who are struggling (21% say it is doing too much). Residents in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to say the government is doing too little (41% versus 32%). Sixty-eight percent of North Dakotans say that when they vote, they think about how well a candidate for office would help those struggling. About two-thirds (68%) say their local elected officials are knowledgeable about the struggles people face in their community (although only 24% say very knowledgeable), compared to 50 percent who say the same about national elected officials.
- In terms of solutions, 73 percent of North Dakotans say affordable health care makes a big difference in a family's ability to make ends meet and they view this as a top or high priority (73%) for local elected officials. Seven in 10 (71%) also say making college and vocational education more affordable should be a top or high priority for local officials. A vast majority of North Dakotans (92%) say local elected officials have a great deal or some responsibility in keeping and attracting good-paying jobs. Eight in 10 (81%) say local officials have a responsibility to get churches, businesses, schools and other local groups to work together to help people struggling to make ends meet.