STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET

MINNESOTA 2009

Hard Hit by Recession, Minnesotans Take Action but Expect Officials to Do More

Minnesotans say that things are even tougher for their families than suggested by the official unemployment ratings. According to a statewide survey of 400 adults, they have seen more people struggling to make ends meet in the past 12 months than in the previous year. Many report job losses, reduced work hours, and smaller budgets for food, medical care and other basic needs. Respondents say they have taken steps such as lending money to family and friends in need, and some report sheltering loved ones, yet nearly half say they are unsure of where to turn for help if they need it.

While many said they are willing to do more to help those who are struggling, they also believe elected officials are not doing enough. A majority of respondents said local elected officials have responsibility to attract well-paying jobs, to improve access to affordable health care and education, and to ensure a housing safety net. And most of those surveyed said they think about this when they go to vote.

Families Hit Hard by Recession

When asked about the economic struggle within their homes and communities more than six in 10 Minnesotans (63%) say they have cut back their spending as a result of the recession. More than half of those who have reduced spending say they think their reduced spending will be permanent (55%). Half of Minnesotans (51%) say that in the past year, they or a family member have specifically cut back on the amount they spend on food.

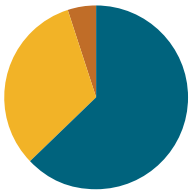
One-quarter (24%) say they or a family member living with them have lost a job in the past 12 months. More than a third (41%) say that they have had their hours cut at work.

More than one in four families (27%) have had problems paying for basic necessities like mortgage or rent, heating or food. Almost half (48%) have cut back on their retirement savings.

In all, two-thirds (67%) of Minnesotans say more people are struggling in their community now, compared to a year ago. A majority (52%) says they would benefit personally if the number of people struggling in their community was reduced.

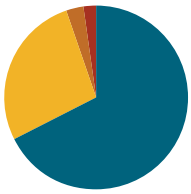
"The economic downturn has played a huge role in the housing market in mid-Minnesota. Affordable housing has become less affordable and renters are struggling to make payments. Rents are not being paid on time and the eviction rate has tripled in the past year."

– Laura McKnight,
property manager,
Partnership to Supply Affordable Housing



As a result of the recession, have you/are you:

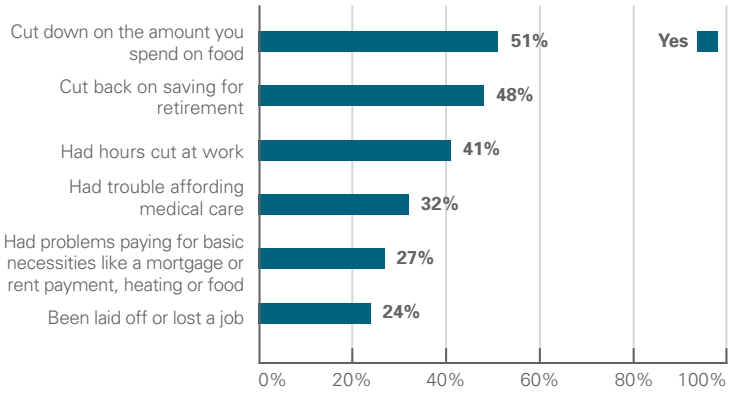
Cut back on spending	**63%**
Spending the usual amount	**32%**
Spending more than usual	**5%**
Refuse	0%
Don't know	0%



Compared to a year ago, do you see more people in your community who are struggling to make ends meet, less people who are struggling, or has it remained about the same in the past year?

More people	**67%**
Remained the same	**27%**
Less people	**3%**
Don't know	**2%**
Refuse	0

In the past 12 months, have you or a family member in your household:



Circumstances Beyond People's Control

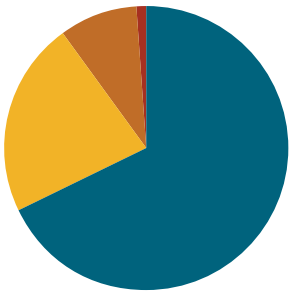
Two-thirds of survey respondents (68%) say people are struggling because of circumstances outside of their control. Just 22 percent say it's due to poor choices.

Minnesotans also say it takes almost twice as much to get by as the federal government says it does. For a family of four with two adults and two children, the federal "poverty threshold" is $21,834, according to the Census Bureau. That means that a family whose yearly income is less than that is, according to the government, "in poverty."

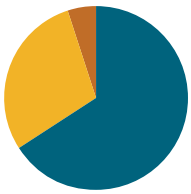
However, seven in 10 Minnesotans (69%) say that it takes at least $40,000 for a family of four to make ends meet in their community.

Two-thirds of Minnesotans (66%) say that for a family of four, if both adults each make $10 per hour, it is still not enough to get by.

Do you think people are struggling to make ends meet right now mostly because of their own poor choices, or mostly because of circumstances outside of their control?



Out of their control	**68%**
Poor choices	**22%**
Don't know	**9%**
Refuse	**1%**



For a family of four, do you think two working adults who each make 10 dollars an hour is enough to make ends meet in your community?

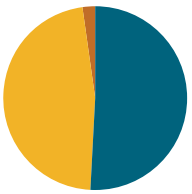
No	**66%**
Yes	**29%**
Don't know	**5%**
Refuse	0%

Not Sure Where to Turn

Two-thirds of Minnesotans say they see more people struggling in their communities than a year ago. Even so, people say they are not sure what they would do if they were hit with a financial crisis.

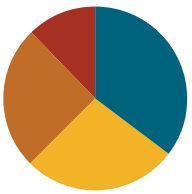
Almost half the public (47%) does not know where they could go in their community if they needed help with basic necessities like food or shelter. This includes more than half (55%) of men, while just 39 percent of women say they would not know where to go.

Fifty-two percent of Minnesotans say they are not familiar with government services in their community like temporary housing assistance and food stamps. Only 12 percent are "very" familiar with these kinds of services.



If you were suddenly unable to pay for basic necessities such as food or shelter, do you know where you could go to get assistance from the government or a charity in your community?

Yes	**51%**
No	**47%**
Don't know	**2%**
Refuse	0%



How familiar would you say you are with government services in your community such as temporary housing assistance, food stamps and WIC?

Somewhat familiar	**35%**
Not at all familiar	**27%**
Not too familiar	**25%**
Very familiar	**12%**
Don't know/refuse	0%

"Northwest Area Foundation's critically important survey further confirms the devastating current scenario that we are far too often seeing and experiencing in all of our Catholic Charities agencies around the country. Northwest Area Foundation and CCUSA share a strong bond in our focus on the poor and helping them achieve a greater level of prosperity. These times may test our human and financial resources, but they do not weaken our will – or our resolve – in the work to reduce poverty in America."

– Father Larry Snyder,
president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA

Worried, but Hopeful

Minnesotans remain worried about the economy, as they have said they were in previous surveys. Three-quarters of Minnesotans (74%) say they are worried that their local economy may get worse in the upcoming year. One in four are "very" worried about this.

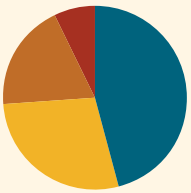
Closer to home, one in three Minnesotans (33%) say they worry all or most of the time that their total family income will not be enough to meet their family's expenses and bills.

Minnesotans also remain optimistic, however, on a number of levels.

Overall, more than half (59%) of Minnesotans feel optimistic about the national economy. Just more than one-third (36%) say they are "pessimistic."

While people worry about the economy's effect on their communities, people are very optimistic that the numbers of people struggling locally could be reduced. Eight in 10 (85%) say this is possible within their communities.

Since this survey began in 2005, Minnesotans have continued to express this American spirit, despite the decline in the economy.

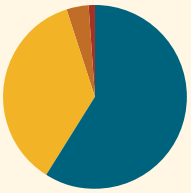


How worried are you that your local economy might get worse in the next year?

Somewhat worried	**46%**
Very worried	**28%**
Not too worried	**19%**
Not at all worried	**7%**
Don't know/refuse	0%

How often do you worry that your total family income will not be enough to meet your family's expenses and bills?

Some of the time	**36%**
Almost never	**31%**
All of the time	**17%**
Most of the time	**15%**
Don't know/refuse	0%



Thinking more broadly, do you generally feel hopeful or pessimistic about the national economy?

Hopeful	**59%**
Pessimistic	**36%**
Don't know	**4%**
Refuse	**1%**

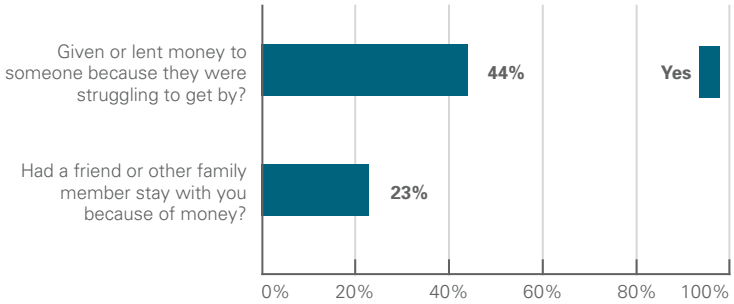
Minnesotans Take Steps to Help

In Minnesota's communities, people say they are already helping out friends and neighbors.

More than four in 10 (44%) say they or someone in their household have given or lent money in the past year to someone who was struggling to get by. A similar share (43%) of Minnesotans in lower income brackets ($35,000 per year or less) say so.

People are extending themselves in other ways, too. Almost half (46%) say that, in the past 12 months, they have joined with others to work to fix or improve something in their community. Almost one-quarter (23%) say they have taken a friend or family member into their home because of money.

Have you or a family member in your household in the last 12 months:

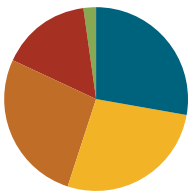


Willing to Do More

Strong majorities of people say they are willing to do even more to help their neighbors who are struggling.

Eight in 10 (80%) say they are willing to volunteer for an organization that helps people who are struggling. One-third (36%) are "very" willing. Not only that, but six in 10 (62%) are willing to get more involved in their local government by attending meetings or contacting elected officials.

Even though times are tough, more than half (55%) of Minnesotans say they would be willing to pay $50 more in taxes if it went to local programs to help people struggling in their community. Almost half that number (27%) would be "very" willing to pay such a tax.



How willing would you be personally to:

Pay 50 dollars more a year in taxes if it would go to programs in your own community that help people struggling to make ends meet?

Somewhat willing	**28%**
Not at all willing	**27%**
Very willing	**27%**
Not too willing	**16%**
Don't know/refuse	**2%**

What Would Make a Difference

Minnesotans have clear priorities when it comes to what they say would make a difference in the lives of people who are struggling to make ends meet.

A vast majority of the public (94%) says local elected officials have a great deal or some responsibility in keeping and attracting good-paying jobs. Eighty-two percent say this should be a top or high priority.

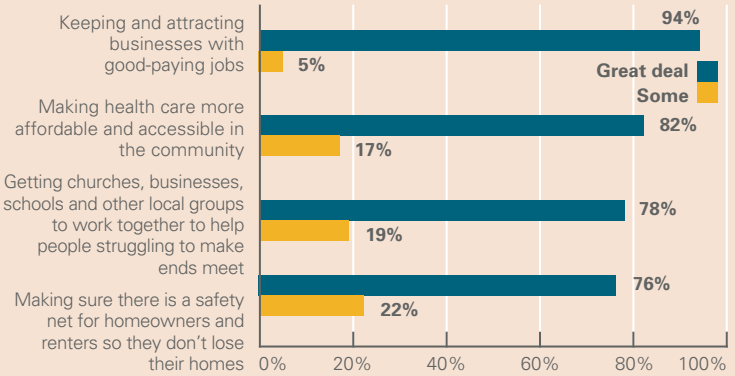
Seven in 10 (70%) say having affordable health care makes a big difference in a family's ability to make ends meet. Eight in 10 (82%) say that local elected officials should have responsibility for this. Seventy-six percent say that this should be a top or high priority for local officials.

Sixty-four percent of Minnesotans say that making college and vocational education more affordable should be a top or high priority for local officials.

Three of four (76%) say that local elected officials should have some or a great deal of responsibility in making sure that there is a safety net for homeowners and renters so they do not lose their homes. Fifty-eight percent say this should be a top or high priority for local officials.

Eight in 10 (78%) 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.

Responsibility of Local Elected Officials:

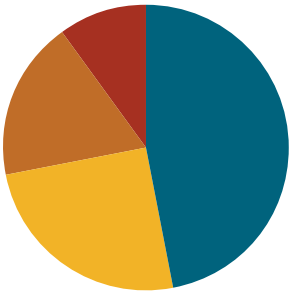


Looking for Leadership

Minnesotans are willing to roll up their sleeves, but they also are looking to elected officials and to government to do their parts to help people facing tough times. Half (47%) say the government does too little to help people who are struggling. Only 18 percent say the government is doing "too much."

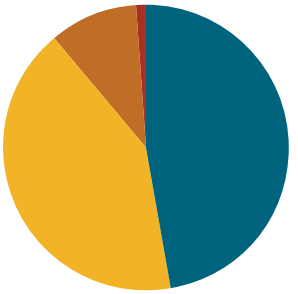
Almost half of Minnesotans (47%) say helping people to make ends meet is a top concern, and another 41 percent say it's a middle concern. Against this backdrop, three in four (75%) say that when they go into the voting booth, they think about how well a candidate for office would help those struggling.

Seven in 10 Minnesotans (70%) say their local elected officials are knowledgeable about the struggles people face in their community, though just 18 percent say local officials are "very" knowledgeable. Half (52%) believe national elected officials are knowledgeable about people's struggles.



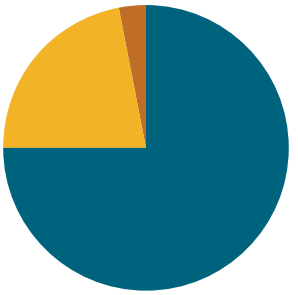
In general, do you think the government is doing too much, too little, or the right amount to help people struggling to make ends meet?

Too little	**47%**
Right amount	**25%**
Too much	**18%**
Don't know/refuse	**10%**



Thinking about all of the concerns you personally have about your community, is helping people struggling to make ends meet a top concern, a middle concern, or a low concern?

Top concern	**47%**
Middle concern	**41%**
Low concern	**10%**
Don't know/refuse	**1%**



When you vote in an election, do you think about how well a candidate would help those struggling to make ends meet?

Yes	**75%**
No	**22%**
Don't know/ refuse	**3%**

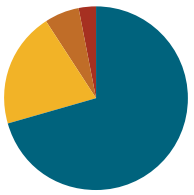
Health Care

Seventy-six percent of Minnesotans say that improving access to health care and dealing with health care costs should be a top or high priority for their local elected officials.

Three in 10 (32%) say they have had trouble affording medical care in the past 12 months.

Seven in 10 Minnesotans (70%) say that having affordable health care makes a "big difference" in a family's ability to make ends meet.

Eight in 10 (82%) say that local elected officials should have responsibility for making health care more affordable and accessible to everyone in the community.



Do you think having affordable health care makes a big difference, a small difference, or no difference in a family's ability to make ends meet?

Big difference	**70%**
Small difference	**20%**
No difference	**6%**
Don't know	**3%**
Refuse	0%

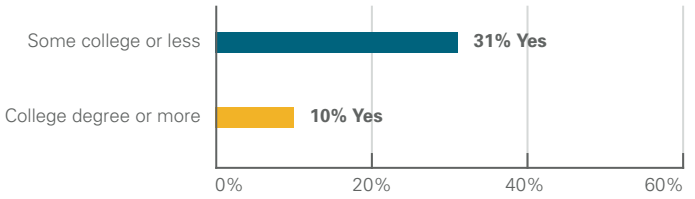
Education

Education – the challenges posed by having less of it as well as the benefits of creating policies to foster more of it – figures prominently throughout this survey.

Tough economic times are hitting people with less education harder than other Minnesotans. While just 10 percent of Minnesotans with a college degree say they or a family member have lost a job in the past 12 months, one-third (31%) of Minnesotans with some college or less say the same thing.

Sixty-four percent say making college and vocational education more affordable should be a top or high priority for officials.

In the past 12 months, have you or a family member in your household been laid off or lost a job?

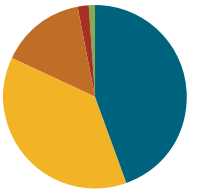


Jobs and the Economy

People are worried about the economy, say they have lost jobs, and see improving these two conditions as important tasks for local officials.

Three-quarters (74%) of Minnesotans say they are worried that their local economy might get worse in the next year. Twenty-four percent have seen someone in their household lose a job or get laid off in the past year. Eight percent say they themselves are unemployed.

More than eight in 10 (82%) say that it should be a top or high priority for local elected officials to keep and attract more businesses that have good-paying jobs. Ninety-four percent say that doing this is the responsibility of these officials.



In your own opinion, should this be a top priority, a high priority but not top, a middle priority, low priority, or not a priority at all for state and local elected officials?

Keeping and attracting more businesses that have good-paying jobs

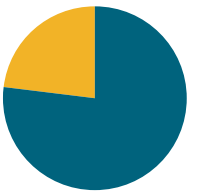
High priority, but not top	**45%**
Top priority	**38%**
Middle priority	**15%**
Low priority	**2%**
Don't know/refuse	**1%**
Not a priority at all	0%

Housing

Housing is a concern in many communities, as foreclosures continue to rise and home values do not. Minnesotans say they want a safety net to be in place so that people do not lose their homes.

In some cases, people say they are providing that safety net for friends and family. Almost one in four (23%) say they have had a friend or family member stay with them because of money in the past year. Only 12% say they are "very familiar" with government services in their community, including temporary housing assistance, to help people who are struggling.

Three-quarters of Minnesotans (76%) say that making sure there is a safety net so homeowners and renters do not lose their homes should be the responsibility of local elected officials. More than half (58%) say it should be a top or high priority.



Have you or a family member in your household had a friend or other family member stay with you because of money in the last 12 months?

No	**77%**
Yes	**23%**
Don't know/refuse	0%

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About

This survey is the fourth in a series of annual surveys commissioned by the Northwest Area Foundation, replicating selected questions from surveys released to the public in March 2006, March 2007 and April 2008.

The Northwest Area Foundation's mission is to support the people, organizations and communities of its eight-state region to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable prosperity. Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon were states served by the Great Northern Railway, founded by James J. Hill. In 1934, Hill's son Louis W. Hill established the Foundation.

For full details on the national poll, including access to the full data set, visit www.nwaf.org.

Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey conducted by telephone 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 Minnesota. The margin of error for the Minnesota results is +/- 5 percentage points.

This survey brief was written by Brad Rourke.