

Community Perspectives on Poverty

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY from a National Survey

The Northwest Area Foundation commissioned Lake Research Partners to conduct a national 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. Unlike many surveys that gauge opinions toward poverty in a *national* context, this survey focuses exclusively on perceptions of those struggling to make ends meet at the *community level*. The survey was conducted among 2,400 Americans age 18 and older from December 14 through December 22, 2005. A total of 800 interviews were conducted nationally, and oversamples of 200 interviews were conducted in each of eight states: Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. The oversamples were weighted down to reflect their true proportion in the country. The margin of error is ± 3.5 percentage points.

Main findings include:

- Half of all Americans perceive "a lot" of people struggling to make ends meet in their own community, and four in ten say a lot of people in their community are working full-time jobs, yet still struggling. This perception is not exclusive to urban areas. Half or more residents in small cities, towns, and rural areas also say a lot are struggling. Suburbanites are the only geographic group in which a minority of its residents perceives a lot of people struggling to make ends meet.
- A majority of Americans 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 \$19,806. The vast majority says a family of four would need incomes of \$30,000 or more to make ends meet.
- At the same time the public sees many people struggling in their communities, the survey reveals optimism for reducing poverty locally; a majority feels the number of people struggling could be reduced. This optimism may stem in part from the perceived effectiveness of their communities – half of the public says their own community is always or almost always effective at dealing with local problems – or perhaps fueled by perceptions of their neighbors' willingness to help.
- When it comes to the role of local elected officials, most say it is *very* important for local officials to work to help those struggling to make ends meet. Additionally, a majority of voters say they think about how well a candidate would help those struggling when casting their vote. Facilitating community efforts as well as setting up ways for community members to become involved in helping are among the responsibilities Americans see for their local officials.