

Community Perspectives on Poverty

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.

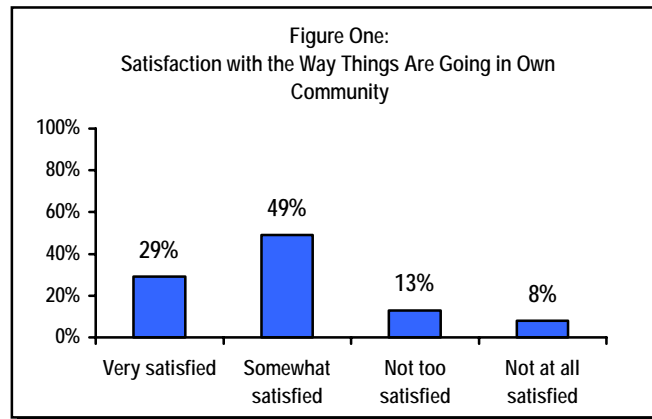
Main findings include:

- 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 \$19,350. 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.

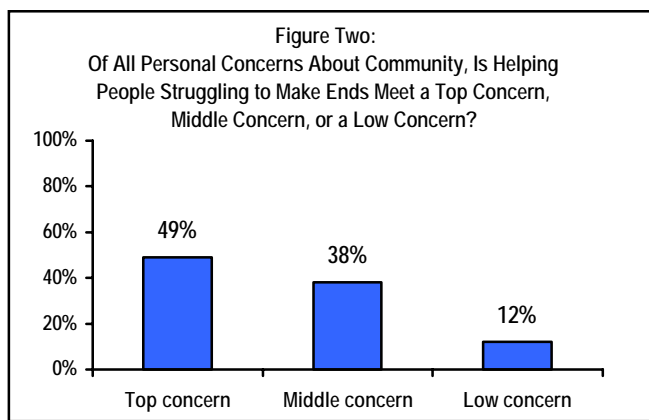
-FINDINGS IN DETAIL-

Health Care and Good-Paying Jobs Should Be Top Priorities For Local Elected Officials, say Americans. -Concern for Those Struggling to Make Ends Meet Is Apparent.

A majority (78%) of Americans say they are satisfied with the way things are going in their communities. Twenty-nine percent are very satisfied, and half (49%) are somewhat satisfied. (See Figure One) Whites and upper-income Americans are among the most likely to express satisfaction with their own community.



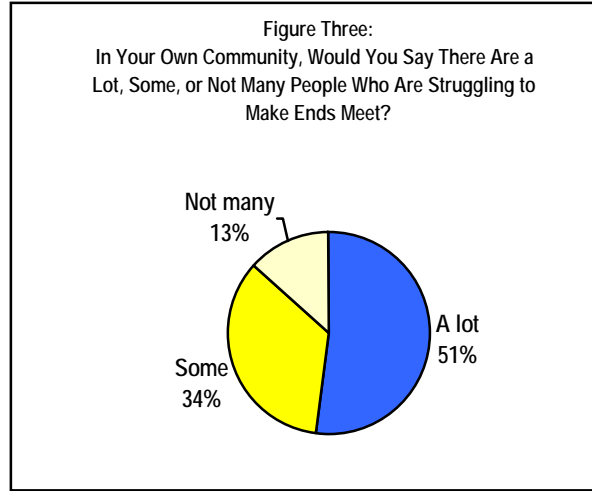
In a list of priorities for local elected officials to address, health care and good-paying jobs rise to the top. Seventy-seven percent say keeping and attracting more businesses that have good-paying jobs should be a top or high priority (39% top, 38% high, but not top). Nearly three-quarters (74%) say health care access and costs should be a top or high priority (43%, 31%) for local elected officials. Creating more affordable housing (27%, 28%) and improving public transportation (16%, 24%) fall lower on the list of priorities.



Thinking about local concerns, half of the public (49%) says helping people struggling to make ends meet is a top concern; and another 38% say it is a middle concern. (Figure Two) Americans who say they are not too or not at all satisfied with their community are among the most likely to say this a top concern.

Americans See A Lot of People Struggling To Make Ends Meet in Their Own Community.

One in every two (51%) Americans say there are “a lot” of people in their own communities who are struggling to make ends meet. Thirty-four percent say there are “some” people struggling, and 13% say “not many” are struggling to make ends meet. (See Figure Three) This perception spans the spectrum of geographic areas – from those living in urban cities¹ (55% say “a lot”) to rural communities (54%). Suburbanites are the only geographic subgroup in which less than half see a lot of people struggling (39%).

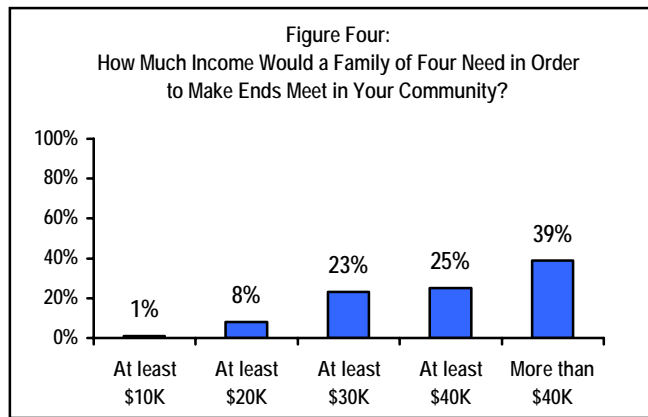


Racial/ethnic minorities² (65%), those making less than \$25,000 a year (70%), and Americans working two or more jobs and more than 40 hours a week (72%) are among the most likely to say there are “a lot” of people struggling to make ends meet.

At the local level, four in ten Americans (41%) say there are “a lot” of people working full-time and still struggling. Minorities, people with a high school degree or less, lower-income Americans, and those less satisfied with their communities are most likely to perceive people struggling while working full-time. Half (51%) of the public also says they personally know someone in their community who is working two or more jobs, but still struggling. Suburbanites are among the least likely to say they know such a person (39%).

What Does It Mean To Make Ends Meet? Majority of Americans Says a Family of Four Needs \$40,000 or More.

According to the federal government, the minimum annual income required to support a family of four is \$19,350. This is the income threshold the government uses to measure the nation’s poverty rate. According to survey results, nine percent of



¹ Urban cities include respondents who say they live in community of more than 100,000 residents. Suburbanites are those who say they live in a suburb outside of a large city. Small cities are respondents who say they live in communities of between 30,000 and 100,000 residents. Towns include those in communities of between 5,000 and 30,000. Rural areas reflect those living in communities of less than 5,000 residents.

² Respondents who are African American or Latino.

Americans say \$20,000 is enough for a family of four to make ends meet in their own community; and almost two-thirds (64%) of Americans say a family of four would need to make \$40,000 or more. (See Figure Four)

Those with lower incomes are more likely to say a family of four needs less to make ends meet than those in the highest income brackets. For example, one quarter (24%) of those who earn under \$25,000

Table One: How much income would you say a family of four needs to earn in a year in order to make ends meet in your community? Do you think they need an income of....

	At least \$10K	At least \$20	At least \$30	At least \$40	More than \$40K
Total	1%	8%	23%	25%	39%
<\$25K HH Inc.	2%	16%	32%	22%	24%
\$25-\$50K	1%	7%	30%	26%	36%
\$50-\$75K	*%	5%	16%	25%	52%
\$75K+	--%	2%	13%	28%	56%
Urban	2%	6%	18%	23%	50%
Suburban	2%	8%	15%	24%	50%
Small city	1%	2%	30%	32%	33%
Town	*%	11%	23%	25%	37%
Rural	*%	7%	37%	27%	26%

say a family of four would need more than \$40,000 to make ends meet, whereas 56% of those who currently earn \$75,000 or more say the same. Other demographic groups also stand out in perceptions of what is needed to make ends meet: Younger adults, particularly those in child-rearing years (ages 35-44), and those

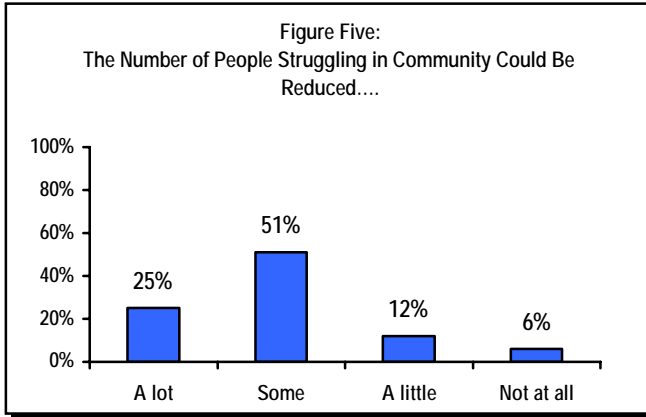
working more than full-time are among the most likely to say a family of four needs more than \$40,000. Urbanites and suburbanites are more likely than their counterparts to say a higher income is needed to make ends meet in their community. (See Table One)

Poor Would Be Hardest Hit From Katrina-Like Natural Disaster.

In an open-ended question, survey respondents were asked about the types of people in their community they think would be hardest hit by a natural disaster. The question read: “Think about Hurricane Katrina just for a moment and the people who were in the city of New Orleans during the hurricane. If there were a natural disaster in your own community like a hurricane, flood, tornado, or something else, who would be hardest hit? What types or groups of people do you think would be hardest hit?” Fifty-three percent say the poor, less fortunate, or low-income community members would be hardest hit. Aside from the poor, the most common categories of responses were “everyone” (15%) and the elderly (14%).

While the Public Sees Many Struggling, There is Optimism for Reducing Poverty in Their Communities.

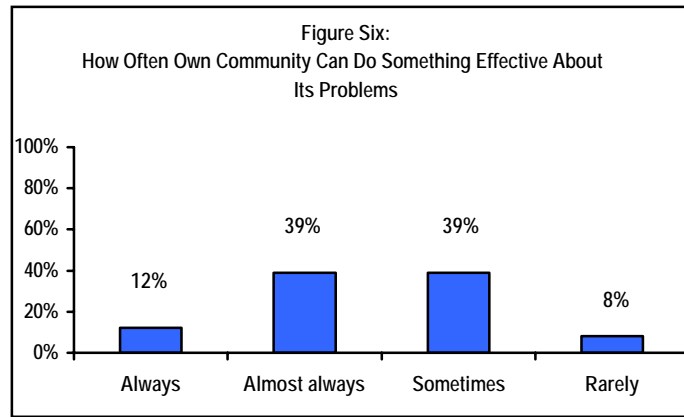
One quarter (25%) of Americans say they feel the number of people struggling to make ends meet in their community could be reduced “a lot.” Half (51%) of the public says this



number could be reduced “some”; and 12% say “a little.” (See Figure Five) Those most optimistic about reducing the number of people struggling include minorities, less educated, those making less than \$25,000 a year, and people less satisfied with the way things are going in their community.

Perceived community effectiveness may be one factor behind this optimism. Half (51%) of the public

says their own community can do something effective about its problems either “always” or “most of the time.” Another 39% says their community can effectively address problems “sometimes.” (See Figure Six) Women, minorities, and those who have volunteered recently in their community are among the most likely to say their communities can effectively deal with problems.

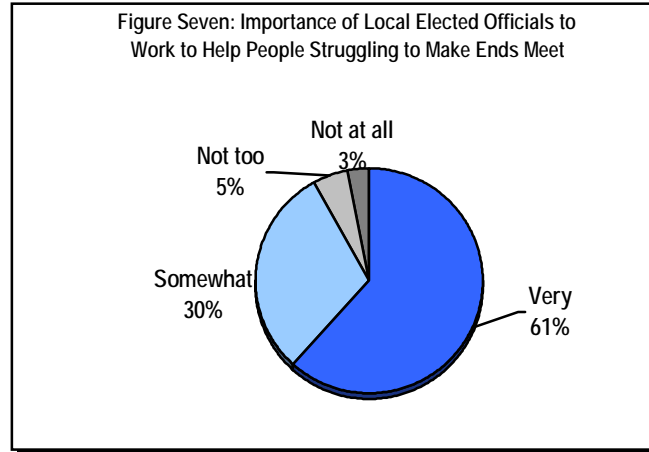


Another factor behind Americans’ optimism may be perceptions of their fellow community members. About half of the public strongly agrees that there are many skilled and capable people in their community (57% strongly, 30% somewhat agree), that most people are willing to help their neighbors (48%, 37%), and that they personally would like to do more to help those who are struggling to make ends meet (52%, 38%). Those most likely to strongly agree that they would like to do more to help include women under 45, minorities, those who work part-time, volunteers, and those less satisfied with their community.

Seven in ten (70%) Americans say they would be very likely to do at least one of the following in their community: take part in a church project to help people struggling to make ends meet, adopt a family in need to help from time to time, attend a community discussion to talk about ways to help those struggling, talk to a local official about people’s struggles, or pay \$50 more a year in taxes if it would go to programs in one’s own community.

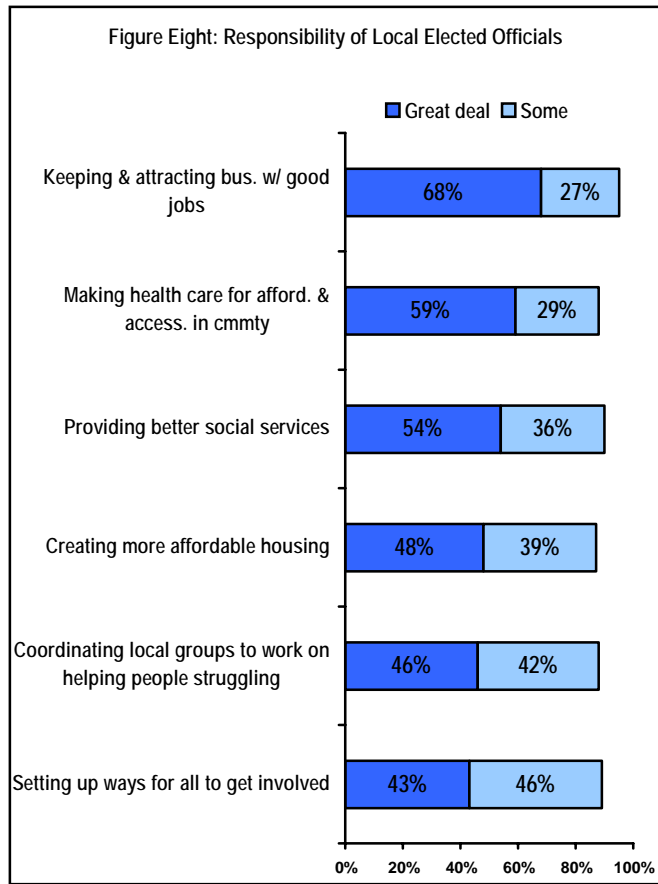
Aside from Personal Ways of Helping, the Public Feels It Is Very Important for Local Elected Officials to Work to Help Those Struggling.

Six in ten (61%) Americans say it is very important that elected officials work to help those struggling to make ends meet in their community; and another 30% say it is somewhat important. (See Figure Seven) Majorities of almost all demographic segments find this important, including those who say they always vote in local elections. Additionally, 73% of these voters say they think about how well a candidate would help those struggling to make ends meet when voting.



In terms of local officials already in office, a majority of the public feels their local elected officials are at least somewhat knowledgeable about the struggles people face. Close to half (47%) says their own officials are somewhat knowledgeable, and 22% say they are very knowledgeable. A slightly smaller proportion feels their local officials are working hard on the issue: nine percent say officials are working very hard, and 47% say somewhat hard. Those most likely to say officials are working hard to help people struggling to make ends meet include Americans 65 or older and those who are very satisfied with the way things are going in their communities. Segments most likely to say local officials are *not* working hard to help those struggling are people working two or more jobs more than 40 hours a week, minorities, and those making less than \$25,000.

Two-thirds (66%) of Americans say elected officials would be at least somewhat willing to talk to them if they had an idea or solution to help people struggling in their communities. Whites, those with a college education, upper-income Americans, voters, and volunteers in the community are most likely to say officials would be willing to talk to them. Conversely, 18 to 34 year olds, minorities, less educated, those working two or more jobs more than full-time, and those less satisfied with the way things are going in community are most likely to say elected officials would be *unwilling* to talk to them about ideas and solutions.



The public says elected officials should have responsibilities in a number of areas: keeping and attracting businesses that have good-paying jobs (68% “great deal” of responsibility), making health care more affordable and accessible in the community (59%), providing better social services (54%), and creating more affordable housing (48%).

Additionally, more than four in ten Americans say local officials should have a great deal of responsibility in getting churches, businesses, schools, and other local groups to work together to help people struggling to make ends meet (46%), as well as setting up ways so everyone in the community can get involved in helping those struggling (43%). (See Figure Eight)

Finally, six in ten (61%) Americans say it would be a very good idea if community residents got together to discuss ways to help those struggling to make ends meet. Three in ten (30%) say they would be very likely to attend such a discussion, and another 46% say they would be somewhat likely to take part. Women under 45, minorities, volunteers, and those less satisfied with their communities are particularly likely to say they would attend such a discussion.

Methodology:

Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey conducted by telephone among 2,400 Americans age 18 and older from December 14th through 22nd, 2005. A total of 800 interviews were conducted nationwide, and oversamples of 200 each were conducted in eight states: Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. For the national data, oversamples were weighted down to reflect their true proportion in the country. Telephone numbers for the survey were drawn using random-digit-dial (RDD) sampling methodology. The data were weighted slightly by gender, race/ethnicity, age and region. The margin of sampling error for the survey is +/- 3.5%.