

Community Voices on the Economy Survey

Summary of Key Findings

By Ms. Foundation for Women and Center for Community Change¹

Americans are deeply concerned about the state of the economy. Four out of five describe themselves as very or somewhat concerned about the economy. This concern is not abstract: 68 percent say the economic downturn has affected their families, and 83 percent say that the downturn has affected their communities.

- ▶ While most report that they have been concerned for the past two years, 55 percent of African American women say they have been worried about it for five years or more.
- ▶ Latinas have been particularly hard hit, with two-thirds saying their personal situation has been affected by the country's economic situation and more than half reporting that they or someone in their household has lost a job in the past year.
- ▶ For most groups, the top worries are rising health care costs, lack of jobs with a sustainable wage, everyday expenses and losing their jobs.

Many Americans, particularly women, are living paycheck to paycheck. Twenty-five percent of men and 35 percent of women say they have \$500 or less in savings. Latinas, in particular, report low levels of savings, with more than half saying they have \$500 or less.

Americans are hurt by the economic downturn not only when they lose their jobs but also when their hours or compensation are reduced. Three in 10 say they or someone in their household has lost a job in the past year. Those most likely to have been affected by jobs losses are young people, Latinos, adults whose income is less than or equal to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, and single moms. Americans are even more likely to have experienced a reduction in wages, hours or tips, with half saying they or someone in their household has experienced this job-related hardship in the past year.

Americans are worried that they will be hurt even further as the downturn continues.

- ▶ Just under half are worried that they or someone in their household will be out of a job in the next 12 months, and more than half are worried that they or someone in their household will not be working enough hours to make ends meet.
- ▶ Nearly all Americans are concerned about future health care costs they and their families may face. Women are more likely than men to say they are very concerned about future health care costs. More than 70 percent of those surveyed in every demographic subgroup says they are concerned about future health care costs.
- ▶ Most Americans say they are insecure about meeting their retirement needs.

Fifty-nine percent of Americans agree that it is no longer true that if you work hard you and your family will get ahead. This is a striking change from prior polls¹ when substantial majorities used to disagree with the statement “hard work offers little guarantee of success.” This may be a temporary shift in public opinion fueled by the economic downturn or it may signal a significant, long-term change.

Across party lines, Americans believe the economy can be influenced by government actions. Two-thirds of Republicans and 70 percent or more of independents and Democrats agree. A majority of Americans believe it is time for the government to take a larger, stronger role in making the economy work. This view is held even more strongly by women of color, low-income women and single moms. Most of those surveyed believe that both elected officials and business leaders can play a role in fixing the economy.

Americans believe a good economy should provide accountability, with economic security a close second. Perhaps because they no longer believe that hard work will be rewarded, they say by a two to one margin that it’s more important for the economy to provide security than opportunity.

The vast majority of Americans question the values that our economy rewards. The single description they believe best fits the current economy is “everyone for themselves,” an approach they reject. The public also believes that the current economy lets the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Almost nine out of ten Americans agree that government and corporations should join with individuals to place the common good above greed.

Three out of four Americans believe that the following policy proposals are important to them personally and even more believe they would be good for the economy:

- ▶▶ Health care available and affordable and not dependent on jobs.
- ▶▶ Equal pay and benefits for men and women.
- ▶▶ More jobs with decent wages and benefits for low income families.

Paradoxically, they want all this and lower taxes too.

The survey tested 11 separate messages for discussing the economy and found several that the public finds very persuasive: These messages include giving people what they need to support themselves and their families, strengthening families and empowering communities. The message on giving people what they need to support their families is the most effective for both men and women; women respond to all of these top progressive messages more than men.

The survey shows that more than half of all Americans find messages about the importance of women in the workforce very convincing. This is one of the top messages with all the oversampled subgroups. A populist message on increasing oversight of corporations and banks, and giving more power to communities, also works for women of color, with a special emphasis on CEOs to African-American women. Language about both stability and security is effective among Latinas. Stability is also an effective frame for single moms.

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² See <http://www.economythatworks.net/reports/AchievingTheAmericanDream.pdf>, from 2001; <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=753>, 2004; <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1522>, 2009.