

Media Relations

Update: Employed Wives Bring Home Almost Half Of The Bacon In 2009

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DURHAM, N.H. – In the second year of the recession, wives' contributions to family earnings leapt again, jumping two percentage points from 45 percent in 2008 to 47 percent in 2009. This rise, documented in a new fact sheet from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, marks the largest single-year increase in 15 years.

"As husbands lose their jobs, family earnings plummet, and the role of wives' earnings often becomes critical to keeping families afloat," says fact sheet author Kristin Smith, a family demographer at the Carsey Institute. "Make no mistake: this increase is not due to advancement or opportunities for women, but rather it is an indication of hard financial times for families." Smith notes that while the official end of the "Great Recession" was in June 2009, American families continue to experience the pain of massive job loss and slow job recovery.

An additional key finding is that almost half the total increase in wives' share of family earnings over the past 15 years occurred during the Great Recession. Over thirteen years, from 1995 to 2007, employed wives' share of total family earnings grew by four percentage points. In contrast, from 2007 to 2009 (the two years of the recession) employed wives' share grew by three percentage points.

The large increase in wives' roles as family breadwinners is not due to an increase in their earnings (in fact, the median earnings of employed wives decreased from \$31,041 in 2007 to \$30,000 in 2009), but rather to a decrease in husband's employment as the economy disproportionately shed male-dominated jobs during the recession. Job loss and unemployment has been particularly high among African American men and men with less education, and in both cases wives contribute an even higher percentage (55 percent and 58 percent, respectively) of total family earnings.

"The massive job loss over the 18 months of the recession, primarily in male-dominated industries, has left many families with lower earnings, and has placed an unprecedented importance on wives' earnings to keep families afloat," says Smith, who is also a research assistant professor of sociology at UNH. "With almost half of family earnings now coming from wives, equity in the workplace needs attention more than ever. Family economic stability depends on wives' economic contribution, and families suffer when women earn less."

The fact sheet, "Wives as Breadwinners: Wives' Share of Family Earnings Hits Historic High during Second Year of Great Recession," is available to download here:

<http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/IB-Smith-Breadwinners10.pdf>. It updates an earlier fact sheet that looked at the increase of employed wives' contributions during the first year of the recession, available here: <http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/IB-Smith-Breadwinners09.pdf>

The Carsey Institute conducts policy and applied research on vulnerable families and on sustainable community development, giving policy makers and practitioners the timely, independent resources they need to effect change in their communities. Learn more at <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/>.

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