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Families Retain Reliance on Wives' Earnings in the Aftermath of the Great Recession

DURHAM, N.H. – Despite the end of the Great Recession, American families continue to rely on the income of wives at record levels, with employed wives' contribution to family earnings holding steady at 47 percent, according to new research from the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

"In the wake of the Great Recession median family earnings remain depressed in many states leading to increased stress and continued unease for families, despite increased reliance on wives' earnings," said Kristin Smith, family demographer at the Carsey School and research associate professor of sociology at UNH. "Our results highlight the continued need to support working families on the federal and state levels."

Smith's new research is presented in the Carsey School brief "Families Continue to Rely on Wives as Breadwinners Post-Recession" authored with Andrew Schaefer, a doctoral student in sociology at UNH and research assistant at the Carsey School.

Employed wives' share of family earnings increased from 44 percent in 2007 to 47 percent in 2009 and remained unchanged at 47 percent through 2012, the most recent year that data is available, Smith and Schaefer reported. Although the recession officially ended in June 2009, the national unemployment rate remains 1.5 percentage points higher than the pre-recession rate even though the total number of jobs lost during the recession has recovered. In addition, long-term unemployment is prevalent and involuntary part-time work remains constant.

"These statistics translate into continued hardship for many Americans, exemplified in the decline in median household income since the onset of the Great Recession," Schaefer said. Thirty-three states experienced a decrease of $2,000 or more in median family earnings from the pre-recession to the post-recession. Many of those states also experienced an increase in wives' share of family earnings and decreases in husbands' employment rates.

The authors found that from the pre-recession to the post-recession period 37 states experienced increases in employed wives' share of family earnings, leaving just 13 states that experienced no change. No states experienced a decline. The brief documents the increased role employed wives played in family economic stability prior to, during, and after the Great Recession for the nation, and by state, region, metropolitan area, and nonmetro residence.

"With families relying more on wives as breadwinners, policies that increase wives' paychecks and provide support to working families are critical," Smith said. "As women are more likely to be in minimum wage jobs, policies that increase the minimum wage will help families in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Furthermore paid sick leave and paid family medical leave are important workplace policies as more families rely on two breadwinners.

This analysis is based on data from the 1989-2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplements of the Current Population Survey, a joint project between the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Carsey School of Public Policy (formerly the Carsey Institute) at the University of New Hampshire is a nationally acclaimed resource for research, leadership development, and engaged scholarship relevant to public policy. The school addresses the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, striving for innovative, responsive, and equitable solutions at all levels of government and in the private, nonprofit, and civic sectors.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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Editors, Producers: The complete report about this research is available at http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publication/1167

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