



1984 - Anniversary Year

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EXTENSION HOME ECONOMISTS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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RIISING MEDICAL COSTS CONCERN FAMILIES

New York City-- "No matter where they live, no matter what income level they have, no matter what other problems they report, rising medical costs are the #1 concern of families across America," according to a survey released today entitled, "Major Concerns of Families in the Mid-80's."

Pay equity, the idea that salaries should be equal for equal work, was the #2 issue. Care of preschool children and care of the elderly tied for #3.

Other major issues which emerged as family concerns were unemployment and lack of jobs, family relationships and parenting, and the high cost of housing.

The survey was conducted by the National Association of Extension Home Economists (NAEHE) as a 50th Anniversary project with funding provided by Chesebrough-Pond's Inc. Results were announced today, at a news conference that marked the opening of the NAEHE Annual Meeting. More than 1,800 are expected to attend.

Charlotte Young of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is president of NAEHE, and explained that the survey was conducted because, "For fifty years Extension home economists have worked with people in their

EXTENSION HOME ECONOMISTS — LINKING RESEARCH TO LIFE EXPERIENCES FOR 50 YEARS

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communities, in a relaxed, informal, but very helpful way. People rely on us for advice and information...we decided that a national survey of our membership could be used to assess the problems confronting families...and perhaps give direction to decision makers such as politicians, business leaders, and volunteer organizers. We sent questionnaires to a random sample of 25% of our members...and 64% responded. It really was heartening to see this response, knowing that the results give a clear picture of what issues are influencing families in suburban, urban, and rural areas."

She continued, "What stands out is the significance of economic issues...people are very worried about them, all across the country."

The survey focused on thirteen issues: fair insurance rates; pay equity; medical costs; court-order child support enforcement; care of preschool children; care of the elderly; care of the handicapped; flexitime and job sharing opportunities; employment training opportunities; equal pensions; survivor's benefits for spouses; equity of social security for women; and before/after school care for elementary school children. NAEHE members were asked to rate each issue based on their perceptions of the level of concern families in their communities exhibit.

An overwhelming 96% of the respondents said that people in their area were "extremely" or "very concerned" about rising medical costs. The Southern and Western regions of the country were reported to be

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particularly concerned about pay equity. More than 31% of the respondents said preschool child care and 30% said care of the elderly were critical issues for families they work with.

In addition to rating the thirteen issues, NAEHE members were asked to "write-in" other concerns of families. Unemployment and lack of jobs was mentioned by 19.4%. Difficulties in family relationships and parenting was cited by 15% and when comments related to divorce, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, were included, a total of 42% of the respondents mentioned family problems as the ones that were of most serious concern.

More than 4,000 NAEHE members work in rural, suburban, and urban counties conducting programs on money management, nutrition, child care, and other critical issues. Extension home economists also prepare newsletters, columns for local newspapers, television and radio shows, and exhibits.

Of the survey respondents, 58% work in rural counties, 17% in urban areas, 5% in suburbia and 19% work in counties that are a blend of rural, suburban, or urban.

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EXTENSION HOME ECONOMISTS

MAJOR CONCERNS OF FAMILIES IN THE MID-80'S

A Summary of Survey Findings September 1984

Purpose Of The Survey

This survey on public policy issues was sponsored by the National Association of Extension Home Economists (NAEHE) to identify those areas of greatest concern to women and families. Extension home economists stand in the unique position of being in close touch with women and families at county and community levels across America; they were asked, "How concerned do you think the people of your county are with these consumer and public issues?" The results of the survey will now be used to launch a public policy education program.

Survey Design

The responses of 547 Extension home economists out of a random sampling of 856 names were tallied. (856 is approximately 25% of the members whose names were drawn from the membership lists of NAEHE). The completed, returned questionnaires represent a 64% response rate, considered by survey specialists to be a very good rate. A profile of the respondents will follow.

The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts. First, Extension home economists were asked to rate, on a four-point scale and according to their observations, how concerned the majority of people in their counties were about each of 13 issues. The four-point rating scale, ranged from "extremely concerned" to "not at all concerned." Respondents were then asked to rank which three of the 13 issues should be considered of highest priority.

How Were The 13 Public Policy Issues Selected?

With the help of a steering committee and two U.S.D.A. specialists, one in family life education and the other in family economics, 13 issues were selected on the basis of their timeliness and relevance to priority areas of Extension home economics programs.

The 13 issues included in the first part of the survey questionnaire were:

- Fair insurance rates (such as age, sex, race);
- Pay equity for women;
- Medical costs;
- Court-ordered child support enforcement;
- Pre-school care for children;
- Before/after school care for school age children;
- Care of the elderly;
- Care of the handicapped;
- Flextime and job-sharing opportunities;
- Employment training opportunities;
- Equal pensions for men and women;
- Survivor's benefits for spouses;
- Equity of social security for women.

The second part of the survey questionnaire was open-ended. It asked the Extension home economists to list three family concerns or issues other than those already covered in Part 1.

Profile of Respondents:

Here is a brief profile of the home economists in the survey:

TYPE OF COUNTY

When asked to describe the type of county in which they worked, the following percentages were reported

- 58% rural
- 17% urban
- 5% suburban
- 19% mix of the above

AGE OF RESPONDENTS

Under 30	21.6%
31 to 40	36.0%
41 to 50	22.3%
51 to 60	14.8%

More than half of the respondents (57.6%) were in the under 30 to 40 age group; 79.9% in the under 51 to 60 age group. The survey reflects the viewpoints of relatively young professional women.

MARITAL STATUS OF RESPONDENTS

Married	63.3%
Single	23.6%
Divorced	8.0%
Widowed	2.6%

The majority of the responding Home Economists answering the survey are, or were, married.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATION

The National Association of Extension Home Economists (NAEHE) has four regional sub-groups.

The Southern region, which has the greatest number of members also had the largest number of survey respondents, by far; 253 out of 547 (46.4%). The Central region accounted for the next largest group of respondents, 155 (28.3%). The Eastern region was represented in the survey by 71 respondents (13%). The Western region contributed the fewest respondents, 54 (9.9%).

It is evident that the survey heavily represents the concerns of Extension home economists working in Southern counties.

Survey Results...Part 1

The leading public policy issue selected was medical costs. Meeting medical costs was ranked first by 36% of all respondents and identified as one of the three most important issues by a total of 61%. In fact, an overwhelming 96% said that people in their communities were "extremely" or "very concerned" about rising medical costs. Communities in the Central region were worried about medical costs the most with 40% of the respondents stating that this was the most important issue, compared to 28% of the Eastern region communities.

The second most important concern was pay equity for women, given top choice by 19% of the respondents and named among the three most important issues by 40%. Pay equity was of particular interest in the Southern and Western regions where 28% and 22% of the Extension professionals respectively stated that people in their communities were "extremely concerned" about this matter. (The comparable figure was 14% for the Eastern and Central regions.)

Two issues, closely related, virtually tied as the third ranked choice. The problem of preschool child care was cited by 31% of the respondents and care for the elderly was identified by 30%. Although Extension professionals in the Central region were somewhat less likely to feel that people in their counties were "extremely concerned" about preschool child care, the difference among the regions were minimal, both in child care and in care for the elderly.

Results of Open-Ended Question...Part 2

To determine the issues not already covered, an open response question asked respondents to list three concerns of families which were now or could become problems in the future. A wide range of problems emerged, however, it is interesting to note that high unemployment and lack of jobs were mentioned by almost a fifth (19.4%) of all the respondents, and 44% of the respondents from Southern counties.

Difficulties in family relationships and parenting emerged as the second most frequently mentioned concern (15%), although if the whole array of problems which indicate stress on the family -- divorce, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse -- are aggregated, we find that family stability was listed among the current concerns 42% of the time.

Housing problems and the cost of housing were mentioned by 11% of the respondents, as the third most pressing issue. The region that gave this problem its top priority was the East where almost one-quarter of the home economists (23.9%) who responded indicated they saw the high cost of housing and/or the need for low cost housing as a present and growing family concern in their counties.

Implications of the Survey

Of the 13 issues presented in the survey, the cost of medical care appears to be the top concern among American families, according to the observations of Extension home economists. Concerns about pay equity for women, and care for dependent children and the elderly follow in order. Related to these issues were the "write-in" concerns ...unemployment and the availability of jobs, parenting, family relationships, and housing...all interrelated issues pointing to the major changes taking place in the economic and family structures of our society.

As women enter the labor force they primarily do so because of economic need...either because they must supplement the family income or become primary breadwinners to support themselves and often some dependents. Since women are most likely to be concentrated in jobs with low pay and few fringe benefits...the so-called secondary job market...pressing economic needs arise.

Payments for medical care emerges as the #1 issue; most affected would be the unemployed and those working in the secondary labor market where employers are less likely to offer extensive medical coverage, if any. Individually purchased health insurance is very expensive. Teenage mothers, the unemployed, self-employed, often carry no medical or hospital insurance because they can't afford to buy it. Medicare patients without supplemental insurance can be devastated by medical costs.

Economic factors also effect child care and the care of the elderly. Working mothers of preschool children still find it hard to pay for adequate care of their dependents. The frail elderly, often the responsibility of middle-age daughters, can become an economic as well as emotional problem. Interpersonal tension does exist in families of great wealth, but research shows that economic deprivation exacerbates whatever family problems are there and can create a few that weren't there; it's no surprise that unemployment, low-paying jobs for women (the wage gap) and medical costs are top concerns of families.