

# Local voices Local PERSPECTIVES

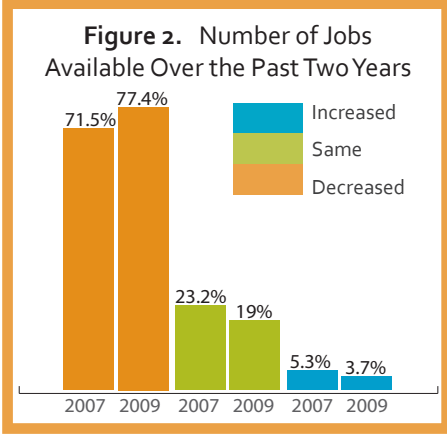
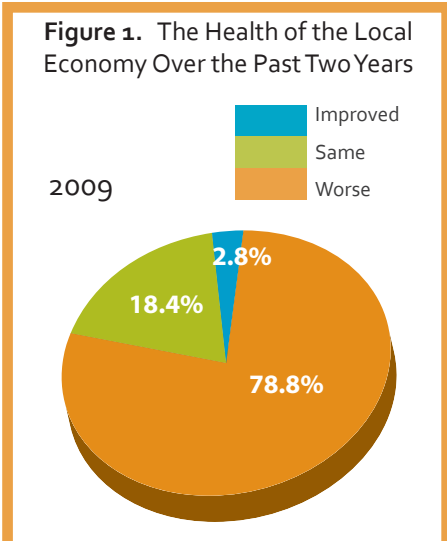
## Jobs and the Economy in Phillips County, Arkansas

*This information brief is intended to provide a snapshot of jobs and the local economy from the perspective of local residents. The Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University conducted countywide surveys in 2007 and 2009 in Phillips County, Arkansas. The Center has captured the views of local residents about the state of the county's economy. The information contained in this report offers insight with regards to the important economic opportunities and challenges that have affected Phillips County.*

### The State of the Local Economy

From the surveys, it is evident that the bleak economic situation that has impacted many parts of the U.S. has also taken its toll on Phillips County. In both the 2007 and 2009 surveys, local residents were asked to share their views about the state of the local economy and whether the number of jobs available in the county had improved over the previous two years.

- The percentage of people who felt the local economy had gotten worse increased from 69 percent to nearly 79 percent between the 2007 and 2009 surveys (see Figure 1). Groups most likely to claim that the economy worsened at the time of the 2009 survey included male residents, white residents, homeowners, and those with less than a high school education.
- The percentage of residents who believed the local economy remained relatively the same declined from 23.1 percent in 2007 to 18.4 percent in 2009.
- Nearly 8 percent of residents felt the local economy was improving at the time of the 2007 survey; in the 2009 survey, this figure dropped to 2.8 percent.
- About 77 percent of the 2009 survey respondents believed that the number of jobs available in the county had declined. This was slightly higher than the 71 percent recorded in the 2007 study (see Figure 2). Those with higher levels of education were the most likely to feel that the number of available jobs had decreased over the past two years. This was the case for persons 45-64 years of age as well, with 82 percent of this age group feeling that job availability had worsened over the two year period.
- Only 3.7 percent of participants in the 2009 survey stated that the availability of jobs in the county had improved over the previous two years.



## Quality of Jobs and Benefits for Better Education and Skills

Research conducted by the Economic Research Service/USDA and others suggests that low-wage work opportunities are declining and that small cities and rural counties should focus on providing well-paying jobs with decent benefits in their quest to strengthen their local economies. When better jobs are created, areas are more likely to attract and retain workers who have higher levels of education and essential skills. Thus, the next series of questions was intended to gauge perceptions regarding whether the number of quality jobs was increasing in Phillips County and whether better skilled and educated workers were being attracted to the county.

Five questions were included in the survey that touched on jobs-related matters. Individuals were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements. The results and key observations are reported in Table 4.3.



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**Table 4.3.** Responses of Phillips County Residents to Job-Related Issues

Statement	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neither	Strongly Agree/ Agree
Plenty of good paying jobs with benefits	79%	14.6%	6.4%
	87.4%	2.3%	10.4%
Additional education and training is rewarded	58.7%	23.7%	17.6%
	53.6%	11.3%	35.1%
Job training is available	52.4%	14.6%	33.0%
	54.8%	8.1%	37.1%
GED and adult classes are available	4.7%	5.3%	90%
	6.3%	0.3%	93.5%
New businesses hire locally	26%	24.3%	49.7%
	32.8%	16.5%	50.6%

2007 2009

**Table 4.3 Observations**

- The percent of residents that disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement that jobs paying decent wages, good benefits and opportunities for advancement are available in Phillips County increased eight percent between 2007 and 2009 (from 79 percent to 87 percent). On the other hand, a greater percent of 2009 respondents agreed/strongly agreed with this statement than in the 2007 survey (10.4 percent versus 6.4 percent).
- More people in the 2009 survey felt that having higher levels of education or more advanced training would be the ticket for getting rewarded by local employers. The percent that agreed/strongly agreed with this statement nearly doubled, increasing from 17.6 percent in 2007 to 35.1 percent in 2009.
- More residents disagreed/strongly disagreed that new businesses in the country were hiring locally in 2009 compared to the 2007 survey. For example, roughly a fourth of 2007 respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed that new firms were hiring locally. By 2009, that figure had increased to 32.8 percent.

## Local Residents' Financial Situation: Better or Worse?

Despite the economic uncertainties that many people have faced, the countywide survey revealed that nearly half of the residents stated their financial situation had remained stable in recent years. On the other hand, the number who claimed that their financial status had worsened increased from 28.8 percent in 2007 to 35.7 percent by 2009.

See Figure 3 for a brief overview of how the personal financial situation changed for various Phillips County residents in both 2007 and 2009 surveys.

Nearly 50 percent of Phillips County residents stated their financial situation remained the same over the past two years.



Nearly 40 percent of those with a high school degree noted their financial situation had worsened by 2009.



Figure 3.  
Personal Financial Situations 2007-2009



Table 4.4. The Personal Financial Situation of Residents: Changes by Key Characteristics

Background Information	Worse		Improved	
	2007	2009	2007	2009
<b>Education</b>				
Less than High School	28.1%	35.4%	13.2%	11%
High School	25.5%	39.7%	20%	15.5%
Some College	37%	35.9%	21.8%	16.4%
College	12.8%	23.8%	33.3%	14.8%
<b>Race</b>				
White	27.2%	38.2%	21.9%	9.1%
African American	48.6%	34.4%	19.1%	18%
<b>Age</b>				
18-44	31.2%	43.4%	22.3%	15%
45-64	29.2%	33.1%	21.5%	17.9%
65 and over	23.5%	25%	11.8%	9.1%

### Table 4.4 Observations

Table 4.4 indicates that the personal financial conditions worsened for nearly every demographic group, with the exception of African Americans and those with some college education. For example, nearly 40 percent of the 2009 respondents with a high school degree noted that their financial situation had worsened, a significant increase from the 25 percent that answered this way in 2007. Only 14 percent of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher indicated that their personal financial situation had improved by 2009. Interestingly, the percent of African Americans in the county that said their financial situation had worsened decreased from 48.6 percent in 2007 to 34.4 percent in 2009.

## Business Ownership on the Decline

All adult residents surveyed in 2007 and 2009 were asked if they owned their own business. Nearly 15 percent of residents responded “yes” in 2007. However, the percent of respondents responding in the affirmative decreased to 10 percent by 2009. In many communities, small businesses and nonfarm proprietorships are emerging as a key source of new jobs. The fact that fewer survey participants in the 2009 survey stated they owned their own business is a trend worth careful monitoring in the county.

Survey Participants  
Owning Their Own  
Business

2007: 15%  
2009: 10%



## Concluding Comments

Unquestionably, the economic climate in the United States today has impacted communities across the country, including Phillips County. The proportion of residents who stated that their financial situation had worsened increased by seven percent between 2007 and 2009. This is the case even among respondents with the highest levels of education. Residents believed that training opportunities were available in the county, though they also noted that the availability of decent jobs was diminishing.

In order to prevent skilled workers from exploring job opportunities outside of Phillips County, employers should reward those with more training and education by providing well-paying jobs with decent benefits. Also, local leaders should carefully examine ways to increase the number of personally-owned businesses since the Center's surveys revealed these numbers have declined since 2007. Entrepreneurial businesses play an important role in increasing the vitality of small communities, providing further motive to strengthen the retention and expansion of these types of enterprises.



For More Information:  
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Southern Rural Development Center  
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or visit [srdc.msstate.edu](http://srdc.msstate.edu).

### About these surveys:

The surveys used for this brief were conducted in the fall of 2007 and 2009. Telephone interviews with adult respondents from households in the target counties were conducted using a random digital dialing sampling procedure for telephone numbers.

A total of 400 adult residents took part in the 2007 study and another 400 adults responded to the 2009 survey. The surveys were weighted based on gender, educational attainment, and age groups to ensure they were representative of the adult members of the county (18+ years of age).

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