

# Wives as the new breadwinners

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During the recent recession in the United States, many industries suffered significant layoffs, leaving individuals and families to revise their spending and rethink income opportunities. Many wives are increasingly becoming primary breadwinners or entering the labor market. A new article in Family Relations tests "the added worker" theory, which suggests wives who are not working may seek work as a substitute for husband's labor if he becomes unemployed, and finds that during a time of economic downturn wives are more likely to enter the labor force when their husbands stop working.

Lead Carsey Institute researchers Marybeth Mattingly and Kristin Smith explain, "With many of the recent [layoffs](#) coming from male-dominated fields, families are relying on wives as breadwinners to a larger extent than during a recent period of relative prosperity."

The research suggests that the recent recession accelerated employment trends that have been emerging for several decades, and in turn highlights changing gender roles in the family, equity in the workplace, and work and family balance.

The study compares the likelihood that wives will look for or start work when their husbands stopped working during the relatively prosperous time period of May 2004–2005 to the financial downturn period of May 2007–2008. Wives of husbands who stopped working during the recession had nearly three times the odds of entering the [labor](#) force as compared to those whose husbands remained in the labor force.

The study also finds that in times of prosperity and recession married women who work part-time increase their hours when their husband stopped working. Jobs in the health and education industries (two female dominated occupations) remained level or increased throughout the recent [recession](#), creating a potentially more reliable source of income for families.

**More information:** "Changes in Wives' Employment When Husbands Stop Working: A Recession-Prosperity Comparison." Marybeth J. Mattingly & Kristin E. Smith. *Family Relations*; Published Online: September 11, 2010 ([DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3729.2010.00607.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2010.00607.x)).

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