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Economic Insecurity: Meaning and Measurement

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Although economic insecurity has long been a fact of life in underdeveloped countries, since the 1980s it has become more prevalent in wealthy democracies. Two things have contributed to this trend. First, many of these nations are reducing taxes and rolling back the welfare state. Second, globalization has increased their international economic interdependence, sending jobs to countries where wages are lower and government regulation less stringent.

While most experts agree that wealthy democracies are becoming more economically insecure, they vary in what they see as its important consequences. Does it weaken democracy by eroding support for established political parties and feeding support for right-wing populists? Does it fuel inter-group tensions by fostering resentment against immigrants?

Finally, research shows that while Australians support keeping a strong welfare state to offset the negative affects of globalization, Americans do not. Why is this so?

The first step in answering these questions is to understand what economic insecurity means to the people affected. Is it loss of a job? Is it the inability to find a job with good wages and benefits? Is it difficulty in paying for health care or lack of health insurance?

This project will hold a series of focus groups to find out what economic insecurity means to ordinary people and how it affects them politically. Three groups will be tested: suburban dwellers, blue-collar workers, and African-Americans. The information gleaned will be used to create a broader survey in the everyday language of potential respondents.



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