



The **Opportunity** Agenda

*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America*

A Window of Opportunity



**Media and Public Opinion
on Poverty in America**

Acknowledgments

The Opportunity Agenda wishes to thank and acknowledge the many people who contributed their time, energy and expertise to the research and writing of these reports on deep and persistent poverty. Our sincerest gratitude goes to the leaders and experts in the field with whom we consulted. The Media Analysis and the Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion were researched and written by Loren Siegel. The Social Media Analysis was researched and written by Jill Mizell and Jhanidya Bermeo. It was edited by Ellen Braune and Eleni Delimpaltadaki Janis of The Opportunity Agenda. We also want to express our great appreciation to Christopher Moore who designed, Jill Bailin who edited, and Margo Harris who proofread all three reports. Special thanks to Carol Schlitt who managed the project.

The Opportunity Agenda's research on deep and persistent poverty is funded by the JPB Foundation, with support for additional research from The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, The Libra Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations. The statements made and views expressed are those of The Opportunity Agenda.

About The Opportunity Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda's mission is to build the national will to expand opportunity in America. We use strategic communications, advocacy, and cultural engagement to grow a large and lasting movement for social justice vision and values, and we promote concrete solutions that fulfill those ideals. Our mission encompasses everyone in the nation, particularly communities facing steep barriers to opportunity, including low-income Americans, people of color, women, and immigrants. Our current issue areas include immigration, economic opportunity, criminal justice, and poverty.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Public Opinion Meta-Analysis	I-1
Executive Summary	I-1
Introduction	I-8
Methodology	I-12
Findings	I-13
Allies and Persuadables	I-32
Recommendations	I-33
Conclusion	I-36
Appendix	I-37
Media Analysis	II-1
Executive Summary	II-1
Introduction	II-5
Methodology	II-9
Findings	II-11
Dominant Media Narrative	II-25
Recommendations	II-26

Social Media Scan	III-1
Executive Summary	III-1
Introduction	III-5
Methodology	III-7
Findings	III-8
Conclusion & Recommendations	III-36

Executive Summary

Research Overview

This series of reports from The Opportunity Agenda describes the American public discourse on poverty, poor people, and the path to greater economic opportunity. It examines years of public opinion research, mainstream media coverage, and social media content. And it incorporates the input of leaders working to end poverty from different perspectives and approaches. Taken together, this body of work is intended to help anti-poverty leaders, organizations, and allies to build public support for effective solutions. It also provides useful insights for journalists, news outlets, and commentators who cover—or could cover—this important subject.

Poverty and Public Perception

The promise of economic opportunity is deeply rooted in our nation's history and consciousness. The basic tenets of the American Dream, that work and persistence should yield financial security, and that where a person starts out in life should not predetermine where he or she ends up, have long been integral to our national psyche and political rhetoric. The notion that our society has a responsibility to care for the most vulnerable among us has both spiritual and civic underpinnings. And, at least since the end of the twentieth century, the belief that what a person looks like and where a person was born should be no obstacle to success has also become a part of our national doctrine.

However, the public discourse regarding the causes of and solutions to poverty has fluctuated widely throughout our history. Attitudes toward people living in poverty continue to be both complex and contentious. Over many decades, public debate has centered on whether poverty is rooted primarily in unequal societal opportunities or in irresponsible choices made by individuals. Also prominent in the debate is the proper role of government in making economic security more widely available. Attitudes toward race, gender, nationality, and other aspects of identity have also played an important, though often implicit, role in the discourse.

Two presidential statements—one by Lyndon Johnson in 1965, and the other by Ronald Reagan in 1986—bookend the larger public debate:

[T]o exercise these privileges [of citizenship] takes much more than just legal right. It requires a trained mind and a healthy body. It requires a decent home, and the chance to find a job, and the opportunity to escape from the clutches of poverty. Of course, people cannot contribute to the Nation if they are never taught to read or write, if their bodies are stunted from hunger, if their sickness goes untended, if their life is spent in hopeless poverty just drawing a welfare check. So we want to open the gates to opportunity. But we are also going to give all our people, black and white, the help that they need to walk through those gates.
– Lyndon B. Johnson¹

For two centuries now, it's been families pulling together that has provided the courage, willpower, and sense of security that have enabled millions of Americans to escape poverty and grab hold of the rungs on the ladder of opportunity.... But for the children of child mothers and absentee fathers, there is often only a deepening cycle of futility, hopelessness,

1 Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise," March 15, 1965.

and despair. We're in danger of creating a permanent culture of poverty as inescapable as any chain or bond; a second and separate America, an America of lost dreams and stunted lives. The irony is that misguided welfare programs instituted in the name of compassion have actually helped turn a shrinking problem into a national tragedy. – Ronald W. Reagan²

The current moment finds the nation at a crossroads. A lingering Great Recession, substantial long-term unemployment, and a high profile, if short-lived, social movement—Occupy Wall Street—have made economic insecurity and inequality more visible and more relevant to far more Americans than in past decades. At the same time, an increasingly polarized electorate, a Tea Party movement rooted in a reduced role for government, and rancorous debates over health care, deficits, taxes, and safety net spending have provided strong counterweights to the public will to address poverty. Cognizant of this roiling landscape, we see a need to more closely examine poverty in the public discourse.

Why study the *public discourse* on poverty? Our conversations with anti-poverty leaders around the country—researchers, advocates, former government officials, and philanthropists—make clear that understanding and informing how Americans think, feel, and communicate about poverty is crucial to successfully addressing it. The greatest obstacle to the unfinished business of economic opportunity for all, these leaders say, is a failure of national will:

“[There’s a narrative that] poverty is a given, that it’s a choice, that it can’t be changed and therefore, must be accepted. It’s none of those things, but changing it requires a focused, committed, directed effort. So far, we’ve lacked the will.”

“[A major challenge is] misinformed beliefs, mostly driven by corrosive and ill-intended narratives, that poverty is solely caused by laziness, stupidity [and] lack of education. [The public] mostly believes that there will ‘always be the poor..’ and that there aren’t sweeping approaches to diminish poverty.”

“The ‘poverty is a choice’ narrative dominates on the right, while moderates and progressives increasingly understand and embrace structural explanations, such as segregation and poverty wages.”

Additionally, the anti-poverty leaders with whom we spoke agree that finding more effective ways to discuss poverty with a broader audience is a critical ingredient to moving forward with solutions:

“Finding understandable ways to make the connections, to draw the lines from cause to solutions is the challenge facing ... policymakers. For communicators, the challenge is how to talk about it in ways that capture funders, policymakers, and others.”

“The anti-poverty sector has increasing communications sophistication and important opportunities to elevate discussions of structural solutions to poverty (e.g., in the context of discussions of growing inequality), but must compete with the dominant narrative of individual self-determination that is promoted in marketing and much of popular culture.”

“We need better, consistent, coherent messages. We all have our organizational, nuanced points of view. It’s probably unrealistic to suggest we speak with one voice. But if we could figure out how to make that happen, it would be awesome.”

2 Ronald W. Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform,” February 15, 1986.

Research Elements

Our examination consists of three parts. The first study in the series analyzes, through existing public opinion research, trends in attitudes toward the causes of poverty, perceptions of people living in poverty, support for various solutions, and variations in the opinions held by different demographic groups. The second analyzes mainstream media coverage to determine the dominant and competing narratives, the most prominent voices, the types of commentary, and the information that news consumers typically do and do not receive. The third assesses discussions of poverty in social media—Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and online comments—as well as prominent voices and activism via those platforms. The methodologies used in each study are described in the individual reports, and online at www.opportunityagenda.org.

Major Findings

Taken together, the research findings paint a vivid, nuanced, and in many ways, hopeful picture of the public discourse on poverty. Yet more effective communications are clearly needed. In both public opinion and mainstream media reporting, we found a greater sense of identification with poor people, a higher level of interest in the root causes of poverty, and broader support for some high profile solutions than previously existed. But the implicit classification of “deserving” and “undeserving” poor people persists, as do negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. Particularly in social media, we also found hostility toward people living in poverty. Americans of different backgrounds and demographics, moreover, tend to have starkly different views on many poverty questions.

Despite increasing public acceptance of poverty’s structural causes, there is little in-depth knowledge or media coverage of those causes, or of effective solutions. Similarly, a sophisticated discussion of unequal opportunity based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other aspects of identity is mostly lacking.

Whereas anti-poverty leaders, advocates, and policymakers are among the most prominent voices in both traditional and social media, they tend to lack a coherent narrative or “big story” rooted in shared values or common, resonant themes. By contrast, their most frequent opponents have a clear and consistent narrative founded in individual responsibility, government dependence, and free markets.

Overall, the research reveals a significant opportunity for those who care about poverty to reframe the debate, build public support, and inspire mass action. But doing so will require sustained and strategic action, as well as a shift in communications. As the economy improves, moreover, the window of opportunity to expand support and activism may close without notice.

We share below a sampling of findings from the three studies. The reports themselves include detailed findings and analyses for each medium.

Public opinion

- ▶ Addressing U.S. poverty is relatively high on the public’s agenda at present; most Americans believe that reducing poverty should be a priority for the federal government.
- ▶ American attitudes toward poverty, poor people, and the role of government tend to be grounded in two competing—but not always mutually exclusive—sets of values: individualism and personal responsibility on the one hand, and equal opportunity and interconnection on the other. For example, significant majorities of Americans simultaneously oppose cutbacks in aid to poor people *and* believe that poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs.

- ▶ A majority of Americans are receptive to a structural explanation for the existence of poverty. Sixty-two percent, for example, agreed with the statement: “the primary cause of America’s problems is an economic system that results in continuing inequality and poverty.”³
- ▶ Negative racial stereotypes about poor people persist among many Americans. In 2010, for example, close to half of the American public (47 percent) agreed that “African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people because most African Americans just don’t have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty.”⁴
- ▶ The most supportive audiences for anti-poverty policy and activism are Democrats, African Americans and Latinos. Low-income Americans, while knowledgeable about the realities of living in poverty and interested in change, tend to lack information about structural causes and solutions, and are doubtful about their influence in society. Millennials, independent voters, women, and people of faith are disproportionately open and persuadable on poverty issues. White Evangelical Christians, for example, seem to be increasingly in play; 53 percent of them agree that “society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal,” while only 35 percent of Republicans do.⁵

Mainstream media coverage

- ▶ News reporting generally describes the plight of the “newly poor” sympathetically, but with the unstated subtext that these Americans are different from the “old poor.” The implicit storyline is that the newly poor are victims of structural problems with the economy, while those living in deep poverty are poor for other, largely unexplained, reasons. Stories rarely describe those in deep or persistent poverty in any detail, and few of those Americans are quoted in stories.
- ▶ While news reporters generally ascribe poverty to systemic causes, they do so through fleeting references to general trends such as plant closings, the scarcity of jobs, or the “weak economy.” Few stories explain root causes in any detail, and the disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender receives practically no attention.
- ▶ While there is some coverage of promising local-level solutions, media consumers received little information about the success or failure of state and federal policies.

Social media discourse

- ▶ Social media voices and content with the greatest reach and engagement overwhelmingly painted a sympathetic picture of Americans living in poverty, and drew attention to systemic causes such as the lack of good jobs and the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with the cost of living. They also presented research and statistics that demonstrated the pervasiveness and impact of poverty in the U.S.
- ▶ Among content generated by organizations (for example news outlets, associations, advocacy groups and foundations) and individuals with the broadest reach, progressive-leaning themes and narratives outweighed conservative ones, with more content focusing on preserving and expanding government programs and advocating for good jobs and fair wages. The “individual choices” narrative emerged very infrequently in the content that reached the most audiences, and was typically tied to conservative politicians.
- ▶ The discourse generated by the wider public (individual accounts irrespective of reach), by contrast, often included the narrative that government safety net programs have failed or have

3 PRRI, American Values Survey 2012, September 2012.

4 Gallup/USA Today poll, June 2010.

5 Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2011.

actually made things worse for poor people. There were few if any direct mentions of economic policy trends, such as deregulation, privatization, or the decline of unionization, as contributing to poverty. There were indirect references to these concepts, however, particularly in discussions of the decline of quality jobs and livable wages, and readiness among many to blame “greedy” corporations.

- ▶ Despite their smaller numbers, conservative voices are extremely unified in social media. They convey a shared vision of who poor people are, what causes poverty, and what, if anything, can be done to alleviate poverty in the U.S. By contrast, anti-poverty and progressive discourse generally fail to communicate a common idea of who poor people are, the challenges they face, why they are poor, or what can be done about it.

Recommendations

Narrative, messaging, and storytelling

Our research points to a need, as well as an opportunity, for anti-poverty leaders to communicate in new, more impactful ways. Lessons from our three studies include:

- ▶ **Craft a shared narrative.** While anti-poverty voices are relatively prominent in the public discourse, they are diffuse, lacking a coherent narrative that can persuade undecided audiences or counter the disciplined narrative of their most frequent opponents. We recommend that while anti-poverty leaders and groups maintain their individual perspectives and priorities, they also craft a shared narrative in which they:
 - ✓ Emphasize the values of equal opportunity and community
 - ✓ Highlight systemic causes
 - ✓ Describe a path from poverty to economic participation
 - ✓ Promote effective solutions and successes
 - ✓ Invoke a positive role for government

Messaging should build on public concerns about growing inequality, low wages, and long-term unemployment, while educating audiences about less visible forces like racial and gender bias, globalization, and tax and labor policies.

- ▶ **Avoid the simplistic “new poor”/“old poor” dichotomy.** While recent media focus on the “new poor” has raised the visibility of certain poverty issues, the framing of those stories also tends to reinforce inaccurate stereotypes about poor people, as well as race, and obscures systemic factors that affect both recently and persistently poor people. Communications should move beyond this illusory distinction. Consistent with that approach, stories about the challenges and progress of communities facing deep poverty are needed to ensure a full and accurate picture. Furthermore, the voices of people in deep and persistent poverty are much needed.
- ▶ **Document and explain unequal obstacles.** Researchers have amply documented the disparate obstacles that contribute to higher poverty rates among communities of color, women, immigrants, and other demographic groups. Yet our analysis found virtually no reporting on those dynamics and for that reason, among others, many audiences are skeptical that such obstacles still exist. Research and experience show, moreover, that if left unchallenged, subconscious stereotypes will infect attitudes about poverty generally and erode support for all positive solutions. Communications are needed to both explore and explain this evidence, as well as to tell the human stories behind it. A focus on unequal obstacles—not only unequal outcomes or disparities—is an important part of that formula.

- ▶ **Highlight systemic solutions.** Americans are not knowledgeable about effective solutions to poverty, and news reporting barely scratches the surface of this topic. Anti-poverty policies and programs that have demonstrable positive results, and research pointing the way to positive outcomes, should be made more visible, as should the positive role that government plays in creating ladders of opportunity.
- ▶ **Build on policies with high levels of support.** A number of anti-poverty strategies receive high levels of support from the public. Lifting up these popular solutions while explaining and promoting more complex or less popular ones can help to build broader and more lasting support. Solutions with the greatest support include:
 - ✓ Raising the federal minimum wage
 - ✓ Helping low-wage workers afford quality child care
 - ✓ Availability of universal pre-K
 - ✓ Lowering the cost of college
- ▶ **Show the connections.** The idea that we are interconnected and all in this together is crucial to the success of anti-poverty communications. Americans intuitively understand that increasing inequality and poverty hold back the economy and country as a whole and also create an environment in which serious social problems develop and worsen. But their thinking on poverty easily defaults to an extreme “personal responsibility” and “bad decisions” frame. Both showing and telling how we’re all affected and connected—through images, research, spokespeople, and storytelling, as well as specific messaging—is crucial.

Strategic audiences

Key to building the national will to address poverty is activating the base of existing supporters while persuading undecided groups over time. That, in turn, requires prioritizing key audiences.

- ▶ **Activate the base.** The most fertile ground for anti-poverty policy and activism lies with Democrats, African Americans and Latinos. These groups should be prioritized for organizing and calls to action.
- ▶ **Persuade undecided audiences.** Millennials, independent voters, women, and people of faith are disproportionately open and persuadable on poverty issues, and should be prioritized for that purpose.
- ▶ **Engage those most affected.** Public opinion research suggests that more work needs to be done to raise the awareness of low-income people themselves about the structural causes of poverty, available solutions, and their ability to contribute to change. A credible message of agency and activism, as well as information about causes and solutions, should be a priority for this group. Current and formerly low-income people are also particularly important spokespeople.

Creating an echo chamber

Traditional and social media trends show a predictable pattern: national election events, the release of census numbers, budget debates, and anniversaries of anti-poverty and civil rights events reliably increase attention to poverty. Demonstrations, strikes, and major think-tank reports also frequently generate coverage. We recommend that anti-poverty communicators chart these events well in advance, and prepare a multi-platform media strategy that is both proactive and builds upon the activity of high profile voices. The field should also be more intentional and collaborative about sharing and jointly promoting new research and analysis. These efforts should complement the readiness to respond quickly when relevant, but unpredictable, events occur.

Further research

Additional research is needed to fully understand and inform public attitudes about poverty.

- ▶ **Understanding specific populations.** Few existing polls oversample populations such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, or LGBT Americans in adequate numbers to explore their views. Research of this kind is an important missing piece, as is multilingual research that can engage respondents who are not fluent in English. These methods can help reach and understand fast-growing communities and many of those most profoundly affected by poverty.⁶
- ▶ **Exploring views on causation.** Research is needed to explore if and how Americans connect poverty with economic forces and systems such as globalization, outsourcing, unequal education, and tax, trade, and immigration policies, as well as the decline of unionized workplaces.
- ▶ **Deconstructing bias and stereotypes.** Social science research shows that conscious and implicit biases play an important role in shaping attitudes about poverty, and undermine support for solutions. Stereotypes based on race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and other aspects of identity lie just beneath the surface of much of the public discourse on these issues. More work is needed to develop communications that root out and overcome bias while educating and activating audiences on the subject of unequal opportunity.
- ▶ **Message testing.** Additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed to test specific messages, facts, images, and stories for their ability to inform long-term attitude formation and short-term decision-making. The views, voices, and ideas of people living in poverty should be a significant element of that inquiry. For some audiences, social media provide rapid and relatively inexpensive platforms for testing the effectiveness of competing messages.
- ▶ **Analyzing ethnic and alternative media.** Ethnic media is the fastest growing sector of American journalism, with over 3,000 media outlets reaching more than 57 million consumers.⁷ While it can be more difficult to study, understanding poverty discourse in these media sources is crucial, especially given the disproportionate support for solutions among many ethnic audiences. Alternative media sources, many of which engage progressive and activist audiences, also warrant close attention.
- ▶ **Examining cultural trends.** Art, entertainment, and other cultural content reach large audiences and are crucial in moving hearts and minds over time. But while poverty has long been a subject of artistic content and activism, that body of work has not been adequately studied, and cultural strategies are often an afterthought for anti-poverty leaders and coalitions. Studying current cultural trends and connecting with artists and entertainers are much-needed steps in this process.⁸

6 A recent national survey by The Opportunity Agenda did oversample Asian Americans, low-income Americans, and several other groups, and was administered in Spanish as well as English, where appropriate. Analyses from that research are forthcoming, and will be available at www.opportunityagenda.org.

7 New America Media, <http://newamericamedia.org/about> (accessed April 19, 2014). According to Nielsen, for example, Univision averaged 1.8 million viewers ages 18 to 49 nightly, beating out FOX, NBC, CBS and ABC. Pew Research Center, “What Univision’s Milestone Says about U.S. Demographics,” <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/29/what-univisions-milestone-says-about-u-s-demographics/> (accessed April 19, 2014).

8 In prior research, The Opportunity Agenda has studied media depictions of African-American men and boys, as well as cultural strategies to uphold the rights and integration of immigrants in U.S. society. See, respectively, The Opportunity Agenda, *Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys*, 2012, http://opportunityagenda.org/literature_review_media_representations_and_impact_lives_black_men_and_boys; The Opportunity Agenda, *Immigration: Arts, Culture and Media—A Creative Change Report*, 2010, http://opportunityagenda.org/files/field_file/2010.09.02%20Immigration-Arts,Culture&Media2010.pdf.

Conclusion

More than at any other time in the last half-century, Americans are ready to hear a new, more accurate story about poverty, and to take action to end it. That this is no ordinary time was conveyed by almost all of the leaders whom we interviewed:

“I do think there is an emerging sense of indignation at the levels of inequality and the spark that the fast food workers lit points the way forward—the idea that work should be respected and valued, not degraded and exploited, seems like a critical way to come at poverty in the twenty-first century.”

“More people believe poverty results from an economy that has failed Americans; there is support for solutions involving jobs, wages, and education.”

“Priority audiences now believe that Social Security and Medicare have worked, have helped everyone, and that they are fair, not hand-outs. I’d like to build on these programs to enable more opportunity.”

“[Audiences believe] that Native peoples face disadvantages because of historic challenges. We need to build from this to contemporary impact.”

“Priority audiences understand that there are often multiple barriers to economic security and mobility, particularly for people living in poverty or in high-poverty neighborhoods, and understand that government has a role in helping to reduce these barriers.”

As the economy gradually improves, however, empathy for poor people is likely to diminish. And, even today, significant obstacles persist in attitudes as well as media discourse. Anti-poverty leaders and their allies likely have a limited window of opportunity to build public support for transformative change. By combining a sophisticated communications strategy with ongoing research, advocacy, and other approaches, they can meet that challenge.

Public Opinion Meta-Analysis

Executive Summary

In this report, we look at a large body of public opinion research on American attitudes toward poverty and poor people. The report is intended to provide those working to end or reduce poverty with new insights into current public perception and ways of building support for effective solutions.

The public opinion landscape presents major opportunities and substantial challenges. Americans consider poverty to be a significant national problem, and they possess a greater understanding of the obstacles facing poor people than they have in past decades. A consistent majority of Americans feel that government has a role to play in reducing poverty, and support several high-profile policy solutions. The fastest-growing segments of the electorate, moreover, are among the most supportive audiences. Yet stereotypes and a lack of information about causes and solutions stand in the way of greater support for change. The task for those seeking to address poverty is to tell a new story, rooted in shared values, that informs, persuades, and activates key audiences.

Findings

American attitudes toward poverty, poor people, and government responsibility tend to be grounded in two competing sets of values: individualism and personal responsibility on the one hand, and equal opportunity and shared responsibility on the other. This duality leads to opinions that might seem to be in conflict. Most Americans hold both of these sets of values simultaneously, but they are not always in equipoise. During periods of economic prosperity, reliance on the values of individualism and personal responsibility tend to trump the belief in shared responsibility. When the economy worsens, a sense of shared responsibility typically increases and the public is more disposed to support investments in public assistance to poor people. The strength of the economy is one of several factors that can influence perceptions of poverty's causes and solutions.

There are indications that Americans' attitudes toward poverty and poor people are moving in a favorable direction. First, the widening gap between rich and poor has seen a growing disquiet. Second, poor people are viewed more sympathetically than in the past. Third, hopeful signs suggest that Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2001) may not be saddled with the same conscious or unconscious racial biases as their parents and grandparents. Millennials are also more likely than other age groups to believe that the government should do more to solve problems. Finally, support for government safety net programs in general and for several specific anti-poverty programs is fairly strong. These trends indicate that opportunities exist for promoting a constructive public discourse about poverty, one that elevates community values over individualism.

Causes of poverty

For more than 40 years, public opinion researchers have been asking some formulation of the following question: "In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on their own part or circumstances beyond their control?" Overall, the public is almost evenly divided on this question, but the trend over time does suggest that responses are affected by the state of the economy. In the years just prior to the 2008 economic crisis, as in previous periods of relative economic stability, Americans were evenly split on this question. But the first time this question was asked post-crisis, in

2010, responses citing “lack of effort” decreased by 15 points.¹ Evidence suggests that a majority of Americans now embrace a structural explanation for the existence of poverty.

Upward mobility and poverty

Can Americans who come from poor backgrounds achieve the American Dream? A majority of Americans (60 percent) believe that “most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard.”² Is it possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich? Over the past 30 years, the percentage of people responding to this question in the affirmative has ranged from a low of 57 percent in 1983 to a high of 84 percent in 2000. In 2012, 71 percent of Americans still professed belief in that dream.³ Even in the worst of times the belief in the values of “hard work” and “effort” (personal responsibility) overcomes concerns that insurmountable structural barriers stand in the way of getting ahead.

Perceptions of poor people

There are indications that attitudes toward poor people are moving in a positive direction. In 1994, the year of President Clinton’s reform of the welfare system, two-thirds of Americans responded that most people who received welfare payments were “taking advantage of the system” rather than “genuinely in need of help.”⁴ By 2012, in response to the same question, the public was evenly split, and the percentage of negative responses had fallen by 22 points, from 68 percent to 46 percent.⁵ And a large majority (79 percent) agreed that “most people living in poverty are decent people who are working hard to make ends meet in a difficult economy.”⁶ Poor people are also viewed as having less ability than other marginalized groups to change things for the better on issues that are important to them.⁷

Race and identity

The research shows that race, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity play an important role in shaping attitudes about poverty. First, a substantial body of social science literature demonstrates that conscious and subconscious racial attitudes and stereotypes influence perceptions of poor people and support for anti-poverty policies. For example, those who perceive African Americans as “lazier” compared to other Americans have been found to be far more likely to oppose welfare spending.⁸ Second, although there are twice as many poor non-Hispanic whites in America today as poor African Americans, a large portion of the public perceives poverty as an African-American problem.⁹ Third, attitudes about the causes of and solutions to poverty differ significantly among different racial and ethnic groups. For example, in 2012 whites were twice as likely as African Americans and Latinos to ascribe poverty to lack of effort on the

1 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Trust in Government Survey, March 2010, <http://www.people-press.org/2010/04/18/march-2010-trust-in-government-survey/>.

2 Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

3 CBS News/New York Times Poll, July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/07/19/us/nytcbspoll-results.html?ref=politics>.

4 Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, Apr, 1994. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

5 PRRI American Values Survey, September 2012, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/10/american-values-survey-2012/>.

6 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes About Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2014/01/07/81702/50-years-after-lbjs-war-on-poverty/>.

7 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates. National representative probability-based survey of 2,000 adults with oversamples of black men, Asian Americans, and people living 200% below the poverty level, March 2014 (hereinafter “The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates”). The survey results and analysis can be seen at www.OpportunityAgenda.org.

8 Martin Gilens, “Race Coding’ and White Opposition to Welfare,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3, September 1996.

9 See Daniel J. Hopkins, “Partisan Reinforcement and the Poor: The Impact of Context on Explanations for Poverty,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 2009, 90(3):744-764.

part of poor people.¹⁰ There is similar disagreement among demographic groups regarding the role that racial discrimination plays as a cause of poverty.¹¹

Government responsibility to care for the needy

A consistent majority of Americans over time believe that it is the responsibility of the government to provide some support for those who require it. Researchers have found that while changing rhetoric has affected opinions on government assistance in general, “support for the safety net and specific programs remained remarkably strong, which allowed for the maintenance of most programs.”¹² In a poll conducted midway into 2013, for example, 62 percent of Americans said that it is the government’s responsibility to “care for people who can’t take care of themselves.”¹³

There are major differences in opinion between demographic groups, with African Americans and Latinos more supportive of the government safety net than non-Hispanic whites are. Gender and age differences are much less pronounced.

Is poverty a serious problem in U.S. society?

Recent polls show that concern about the problem of poverty is relatively high on the public’s policy agenda, and that Americans think reducing poverty should be a priority for the federal government. Sixty-five percent agreed, for instance, that reducing inequality and poverty should be a top or high government priority.¹⁴

Dependency

For the past 10 years, despite the majority’s belief in government’s responsibility to take care of people in need, a consistent majority hovering around 70 percent have agreed with the statement, “Poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs.”¹⁵ Although this majority has decreased from a high point of 85 percent in 1994 before welfare reform was adopted, current data demonstrate the enduring strength of the public’s belief in such dependency. The belief in over-dependency appears deeply entrenched and exists across racial, ethnic, gender, and age lines.

Gap between rich and poor

A substantial majority of the public believes that the “gap between the rich and poor in the United States” has gotten larger over time. Almost half of the public regards the widening gap as “a very big problem in our country,” and another 27 percent think it’s a “moderately big problem.”¹⁶ A majority of Americans say that “society would be better off if the distribution of wealth were more equal”; low-income Americans express stronger support for more equal distribution of wealth than higher-income Americans, but even among the latter, 50 percent are supportive.¹⁷ In advance of the last presidential election, a poll done by

10 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012. <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

11 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2014/01/07/81702/50-years-after-lbjs-war-on-poverty/>.

12 Max Rose and Frank R. Baumgartner, “Framing the Poor: Media Coverage and U.S. Poverty Policy, 1960-2008,” *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2013.

13 Public Religion Research Institute Economic Values Survey, May 2013, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2013/07/economic-values-survey-07-2013/>.

14 Gallup Poll, May, 2013. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPoll Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

15 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Survey, April 2012. <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

16 Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll, March 4–18, 2013. <http://www.pewglobal.org/>.

17 PRRI, American Values Survey 2011, September 2011. <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/11/2011-american-values>

the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) showed that approximately one-third more Americans (60 percent) agreed that “the government *should do more* to reduce the gap between the rich and poor” than disagreed (39 percent), and answers were significantly different among different demographic groups. Eighty-four percent of African Americans and 88 percent of Latinos agreed, compared to 58 percent of whites. Seventy-one percent of women agreed, compared to 62 percent of men.¹⁸

Support for anti-poverty policies

Recent surveys show that Americans support a range of policies designed to reduce poverty. In descending order of support, these include helping low-wage workers afford quality child care, expanding nutrition assistance to provide families with healthy food and enough to eat, improving public education, and avoiding cutbacks in Social Security.¹⁹

A majority of the public opposes reducing the federal budget deficit by cutting back “programs that help the poor and needy.” When queried about specific programs, a plurality of 42 percent oppose cutting government spending on food stamps and housing vouchers in order to reduce the budget deficit, while 39 percent support cutting “some spending,” and only 17 percent support cutting “a lot.”²⁰ A majority of Americans (63 percent) are in favor of a one-year extension of federal unemployment benefits for people who have been out of work for a long time.²¹ More than two-thirds of Americans are opposed to cutting spending on Medicaid to reduce the federal budget deficit.²²

The public is concerned about the prevalence of low-wage jobs in the United States. This concern translates into strong support for increasing the federal minimum wage. According to a poll conducted during the fall of 2013, there was little opposition to raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10 per hour—with only 24 percent in opposition.²³

Allies and persuadables

The strongest and most consistent supporters of anti-poverty policies are Democrats, African Americans, and Latinos. Low-income people are also allies, but they are a bit less firm in their support on several key indicators. Independents, women, various religious denominations, and Millennials, while not uniformly supportive, show a stronger than average understanding or level of support on specific issues relating to addressing poverty.

survey/.

18 PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2011. <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/11/november-2011-rns/>.

19 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

20 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2013 Political Survey. <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/12-19-13%20Deficit%20topline%20for%20release.pdf>.

21 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

22 Quinnipiac University Poll-Nationwide poll on cutting Medicaid spending, November 28-December 3, 2012. Quinnipiac University Poll, Nov, 2012. Retrieved Jan-9-2013 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

23 PRRI American Values Survey, September 2013. <http://publicreligion.org/research/2013/10/2013-american-values-survey/>.

Recommendations

These findings lead to several clear recommendations for building support to address poverty. They call for changes to anti-poverty messaging and to the prioritization of audiences for persuasion and activism.

Narrative, messaging, and storytelling

Both qualitative research and comparison of differently-worded survey questions show that the way in which poverty issues are framed significantly affects audiences' perceptions and support for change. Emphasizing the value of equal opportunity, reminding audiences of high unemployment, describing a path from poverty to economic participation, and highlighting effective solutions all improve perceptions of poor people and increase support for anti-poverty policies. We recommend that anti-poverty leaders and spokespeople adopt a shared narrative that is anchored by these pillars, with specific messages for different audiences and sub-issues tying back to the core narrative.

- ▶ **Lead with values.** A large body of research shows that starting conversations with shared values instead of dry facts or argumentative rhetoric is more effective in building support for social justice. A new narrative about poverty in America should begin with values already held by a majority of Americans, including:
 - **Equal opportunity.** Most Americans agree that one of our big problems as a country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance in life.
 - **Interconnection.** Americans increasingly see that we are all in it together when it comes to our economy, and agree that "income and wealth inequality holds back economic growth"²⁴ to the detriment of the country as a whole. They also think the increasing gap between the rich and the poor is bad for the country, and that the government should do more to reduce the gap.
 - **Emphasize structural barriers to upward mobility.** Although the belief in individual responsibility remains strong, most Americans agree that structural barriers stand in the way of poor people who want to climb the ladder of social and economic mobility. All audiences need to be reminded whenever the opportunity arises that the main causes of poverty are structural and not individual. It is important to document and emphasize the unequal barriers facing different groups and communities, not just the unequal outcomes.
- ▶ **Show that solutions are possible.** Americans are tired of ideological debates. They want solutions. Although skeptical about whether poverty can ever be eradicated, Americans overwhelmingly agree that raising the living standards of the poorest among us is an important economic priority. Anti-poverty policies and programs that have demonstrable positive results, in addition to research pointing the way to positive outcomes, should be made more visible, as should the positive role that government plays in creating ladders of opportunity.

24 Matt A. Barreto, Ph.D., co-founder, Latino Decisions, "The Importance of Race and Ethnicity in Thinking about the Future of Income Inequality," presentation at the Ford Foundation based on national poll with oversamples of Blacks, Latinos and Asians, September 23, 2013. On file with The Opportunity Agenda.

- ▶ **Start with solutions that have high levels of support.** A number of anti-poverty policies have been tested in the past year, and many received strong majority support. They include:
 - ✓ Raising the federal minimum wage
 - ✓ Helping low-wage workers afford quality child care
 - ✓ Availability of universal pre-K
 - ✓ Lowering the cost of college
- ▶ **Engage on race and identity.** Even when facially neutral, public discourse on poverty is frequently about race, gender, and ethnicity. Research and experience show, moreover, that if left unchallenged, subconscious stereotypes will infect attitudes about poverty and erode support for positive solutions. Activating audiences’ positive, conscious values of equal opportunity and interconnection, avoiding harmful stereotypes, amply documenting unequal obstacles, and lifting up common-sense solutions can help to counter those effects.
- ▶ **Show the connections.** The idea that we are interconnected and all in this together is crucial to the success of anti-poverty communications. Americans intuitively understand that increasing inequality and poverty hold back the economy and country as a whole and also create an environment in which serious social problems develop and worsen. But their thinking on poverty easily defaults to an extreme “personal responsibility” and “bad decisions” frame. Both showing and telling how we’re all affected and connected—through images, research, spokespeople, and storytelling, as well as specific messaging—is crucial.
- ▶ **Explain the role of less-popular approaches on the road to opportunity.** It is important to both properly frame and adequately explain more complex or controversial anti-poverty solutions. Showing how some services help to tide people over in rough periods, while other programs address root causes and enable people to move forward economically, can build support over time.

Prioritizing strategic audiences

Key to building the national will to address poverty is activating the base of existing supporters, while persuading undecided groups over time. That, in turn, requires prioritizing key audiences.

- ▶ **Activate the base.** The most fertile ground for anti-poverty policy and activism lies with Democrats, African Americans, and Latinos. These groups should be prioritized for organizing and calls to action. Advocates should give these target audiences opportunities to express their support for policies that are easily achievable, such as increasing the minimum wage, and then gradually draw them into supporting other anti-poverty policies and campaigns.
- ▶ **Engage those most affected.** Public opinion research suggests that more work needs to be done to raise the awareness of low-income people themselves about the structural causes of poverty. Self-blame obstructs activism and encourages pessimism. A third of people who describe themselves as poor or low-income think that they have little or no ability to change things for the better on issues that are important to them, while they are much more optimistic about the power of other marginalized groups, including blacks, women, and gays and lesbians. A credible message of help, agency, and activism, as well as information about causes and solutions, should be a priority for this group.
- ▶ **Persuade undecided audiences.** We recommend reaching out to Millennials, independent voters, women, and people of faith on issues they are most concerned about. Independents, for example, are extremely supportive of improving public education in order to reduce poverty:

94 percent of independents think it is a high priority, compared to 77 percent of the population as a whole.²⁵ Millennials are more sensitive than other age groups to the role that racial discrimination plays in determining who lives in poverty and who does not.²⁶ Messages linking poverty to racial and ethnic discrimination are likely to resonate with them. A strong majority of Catholics agree that “society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal,”²⁷ and given Pope Francis’ emphasis on reducing world poverty, it is possible that this segment of U.S. society will become increasingly concerned about domestic poverty as well. White evangelical Christians may also be in play. According to the Rev. Jim Wallis of the progressive evangelical organization Sojourners, “Many evangelicals, and especially their younger generation, now see poverty as a fundamental biblical issue and believe budgets are moral documents.”²⁸ While only 35 percent of Republicans agree that “society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal,” 53 percent of white Evangelicals do.²⁹

Further research

Additional research is needed to fully understand and inform public attitudes toward poverty. Few existing polls oversample populations such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, or LGBT Americans in numbers adequate to explore their views. Research of this kind is an important missing piece, as is multilingual polling that can reach respondents who are not fluent in English. These methods can help advocates reach and understand fast-growing communities and many of those most deeply affected by poverty.³⁰ Research is also needed to explore whether and how Americans connect poverty with economic forces and systems such as globalization, outsourcing, and tax, trade, and immigration policies, as well as the decline of unionized workplaces. Qualitative and quantitative research is also needed to test specific messages, facts, images, and stories for their ability to inform long-term attitude formation and short-term decision-making. The views, voices, and ideas of people living in poverty should be a significant element of that inquiry.

25 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, February-March 2014.

26 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014. <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2014/01/07/81702/50-years-after-lbjs-war-on-poverty/>.

27 Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2011, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/11/2011-american-values-survey/>.

28 Electa Draper, “More than Half of Evangelicals Oppose Cuts in Government Funds for Poor, Survey Shows,” *Denver Post*, November 25, 2011.

29 Public Religion Research Institute, “Do Americans Believe Capitalism & Government Are Working? Findings From the Economic Values Survey,” 2013. <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

30 A recent national survey by The Opportunity Agenda did oversample Asian Americans, low-income Americans, and several other groups, and was administered in Spanish as well as English, where appropriate. Analyses from that research are forthcoming, and will be available at www.opportunityagenda.org.

Introduction

In this report, we look at a large body of public opinion research on American attitudes toward poverty and poor people. Because polling organizations have been asking many of the same questions about these issues over a period of decades, it is possible to examine long-range trends and identify areas where opinion appears to be shifting. What are the causes of poverty? Do people from humble beginnings still have a shot at the American Dream? What is the responsibility of government to ameliorate poverty's effects? We wanted to understand how Americans' answers to these questions have evolved, and whether people from different demographic groups tend to answer these questions differently. By analyzing and reporting the results, we hope to give those working to reduce poverty a roadmap for building public understanding and support.

Public opinion researchers have been probing Americans' attitudes toward poverty, poor people, and government responsibility to assist the poor for more than 75 years. In 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression, the first question in the very first Gallup Poll was, "Do you think expenditures by the Government for relief and recovery are too little, too great, or just about right?"³¹

Over these decades, opinion about poverty has largely been grounded in two competing sets of values: individualism and personal responsibility on the one hand, and equal opportunity and shared responsibility on the other. As political scientists Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have described this dichotomy, Americans' policy preferences in the area of social welfare:

reflect a fundamental individualism that esteems individual responsibility and individual initiative, and relies primarily upon free enterprise capitalism for economic production and distribution. Yet, they also reflect a sense of societal obligation, a strong commitment to government actions in order to smooth capitalism's rough edges, to regulate its excesses, to protect the helpless, and to provide a substantial degree of equal opportunity for all.³²

This duality leads to opinions that might seem to be in conflict. As shown below, a large majority of Americans, cutting across race, ethnicity, gender, and age, believe that poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs.³³ At the same time, an equally large majority is opposed to cutbacks in aid to poor people in order to reduce the federal deficit.³⁴

31 Sixty percent said "too great," nine percent said "too little." Cited in Robert Y. Shapiro, "From Depression to Depression? Seventy-Five Years of Public Opinion toward Welfare," unpublished paper on file with The Opportunity Agenda, October 25, 2009, p. 9.

32 Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, "The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences," University of Chicago Press, 1992, cited in Robert Y. Shapiro, "From Depression to Depression? Seventy-five Years of Public Opinion Toward Welfare," p. 6.

33 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

34 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2013 Political Survey, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/12-19-13%20Deficit%20topline%20for%20release.pdf>.

Competing Values

Individualism/personal responsibility/ small role for government

Most Americans think:

- It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich.
- Poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs.
- It is not the responsibility of government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.
- Poverty is an acceptable part of our economic system that does not need to be fixed.

Equal opportunity/shared fate/ government responsibility

Most Americans think:

- One of our nation's big problems is that we don't give everyone an equal chance in life.
- Government programs serve as a critical safety net that helps people undergoing hard times get back on their feet.
- The government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.
- Income and wealth inequality holds back economic growth.

Most Americans hold both of these sets of views simultaneously, but they are not always in equipoise. Two variables that we know influence opinions about poverty and poor people are the state of the economy and racial attitudes. During periods of economic prosperity, such as during the Clinton years, individualism and personal responsibility values tend to trump the belief in shared responsibility. When the economy worsens, a sense of shared responsibility typically increases and the public is more disposed to support spending on public assistance. As we will describe further in this report, since the beginning of the Great Recession, a growing majority believes the widening gap between rich and poor is a “very big problem,” and by a margin of two to one, Americans support the idea that the government should do more to reduce the gap. The effect of economic conditions is limited, however. Attitudes since 2008, for example, have not changed as much as one might expect. As two close observers of public opinion point out:

Although the Great Recession has shaken people's confidence in the political and economic system and dampened their outlook on the nation's future, most Americans remain optimistic. There is little indication that beliefs in individualism, the efficacy of hard work, and the potential for personal progress have been seriously eroded by the economic body blows the American public has absorbed over the past four years.³⁵

A substantial body of social science literature demonstrates the important effect that racial attitudes have on the American public's support for government assistance to poor people.³⁶ A seminal study was done by political scientist Martin Gilens in which he analyzed responses from the 1990 and 1994 General Social Survey to questions about racial attitudes and about welfare. (A fierce national debate about welfare was taking place during those years, which culminated in the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996.)³⁷ In both 1990 and 1994, the survey asked whether blacks tend to be hardworking or tend to be lazy, allowing respondents to choose

35 Andrew Kohut and Michael Dimock, “Resilient American Values: Optimism in an Era of Growing Inequality and Economic Difficulty,” The Renewing America Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations, May 2013, pp. 2–3.

36 See, for example, Martin Gilens, “Racial Attitudes and Opposition to Welfare,” *Journal of Politics*, 57 (1995): 994-1014; M. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Anti-Poverty Policy*, University of Chicago Press, 1999; F.D. Gilliam, “The ‘Welfare Queen’ Experiment,” *Nieman Reports* 53, no. 2 (1999); Joy Moses, “Moving Away from Racial Stereotypes in Poverty Policy,” Center for American Progress, February 2012; Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*, Routledge, 2001.

37 The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996, signed into law by President Bill Clinton, added a workforce development component to welfare legislation, encouraging employment among the poor.

any point along a seven-point spectrum. Forty-four percent of the respondents selected a point on the “lazy” side of the scale, while 20 percent chose the “hardworking” half. Significantly, perceptions of the work ethic of African Americans were strongly related to attitudes about welfare spending. Of those who most strongly viewed blacks as “hardworking,” only 34 percent wanted to decrease welfare spending, while 47 percent thought spending for welfare should be increased. By contrast, 63 percent of respondents who viewed blacks as “lazy” would have cut welfare spending, while only 15 percent felt that welfare spending should be increased. From this, Gilens concluded that welfare had become a “race-coded” issue: an issue on which race is used to influence attitudes on policy matters that are, on their face, race neutral.³⁸

More recent research into whether the 1996 reform of “welfare as we know it” weakened the race–welfare connection indicates that racial bias still plays a significant role in the formation of opinion on social welfare spending and legislation. The race–welfare connection and the racialization of poverty continue to influence how Americans think about poor people and the kinds of programs and policies they are willing to support. From 1994 to recent times, for example, approximately 60 percent of Americans have believed that “Blacks who can’t get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.”³⁹

The forecast, however, is not all bleak. As will be shown below in our summary of recent research, there are indications that Americans’ attitudes toward poverty and poor people are moving in an encouraging direction. First, disquiet is growing over the widening gap between rich and poor. The Great Recession, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the 2012 Obama–Romney contest, and the accompanying media coverage have drawn attention to the issue of income and wealth inequality, and the American public believes this inequality gap is larger than ever. Furthermore, a majority of Americans thinks the government should do more to narrow the gap. Although narrowing the gap between rich and poor is not the same as addressing poverty or helping poor people, it still indicates an increasing sensitivity to the lack of equal economic opportunity in America and the desire to do something about it.

Second, there have been some changes in how poor people are perceived. According to a survey conducted in 2012, a majority (65 percent) of Americans define a poor person as someone who works, but can’t earn enough money to rise out of poverty. This represents a 16-point shift since 1994, when only 49 percent thought so, and 44 percent thought most poor people did not work.⁴⁰ It demonstrates a growing consciousness about the prevalence and consequences of low-wage jobs in this country and explains the near-universal support for increasing the minimum wage. It also cuts against the perception that poor people are “lazy” and “undeserving.” This might explain the fact that there has also been a favorable shift in how Americans view poor people’s moral values; more now believe that poor people have the same moral values as other Americans.

38 Martin Gilens, “‘Race Coding’ and White Opposition to Welfare,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3, September 1996. See also James M. Avery and Mark Peffley, “Race Matters: The Impact of News Coverage of Welfare Reform on Public Opinion,” in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, eds. S. F. Schram, J. Soss and R.C. Fording, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

39 See Times Mirror, People, The Press & Politics Poll, July 1994, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/19941028.pdf>; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Trust in Government Survey, September 1997, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Opinion Poll Experiment Survey, June 1997; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Methodology Survey, June 2003; Princeton Survey Research Associates International/Newsweek Poll, May 2008; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Methodology Survey, January 2012, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Communications & Methods Survey, Jan, 2012, retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

40 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>; Kaiser/Harvard Survey on Welfare Reform, December 1994, <http://kff.org/medicaid/poll-finding/national-survey-of-public-knowledge-of-welfare/>.

Third, there are hopeful signs that the Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2001) may not be saddled with the same conscious or unconscious racial biases as their parents and grandparents. Millennials are the most diverse generation in U.S. history and their experiences with people of different races is different from earlier generations. In 1972, nearly 9 in 10 young adults ages 18–24 (87 percent) were non-Hispanic whites. Now, just about 6 in 10 are white. Sixty-seven percent of 18-to-29-year-olds agree that increasing ethnic and racial diversity is a good thing, compared to 61 percent of the population overall who think so. And 77 percent “completely agree” that “it’s all right for blacks and whites to date each other” compared to 64 percent of the population overall. Millennials are also more likely than other age groups to believe that the government should do more to solve problems; 59 percent of Millennials think so compared to only 45 percent of those between the ages of 35 and 49.⁴¹

Finally, support for government safety net programs in general and for several specific anti-poverty programs is fairly strong, and 65 percent of the public believe that reducing poverty and inequality should be a “top” or “high” priority for Congress and the president.⁴² Fifty-nine percent reject the idea of cutting “programs that help the poor and needy” in order to reduce the federal deficit.⁴³ These trends indicate that there are opportunities for promoting a constructive public discourse about poverty that elevates community values over individualism and builds support for solutions.

41 David Madland and Ruy Teixeira, *New Progressive America: The Millennial Generation*, Center for American Progress, May 2009.

42 Gallup Poll, May, 2013. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

43 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2013 Political Survey, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/12-19-13%20Deficit%20topline%20for%20release.pdf>.

Methodology

The public opinion section of this report is based on a meta-analysis of attitudinal tracking surveys and recent public opinion studies by nationally known and reputable research organizations, media outlets, and issue groups. Most of the data examined are publicly available; some come from proprietary research that was made available to The Opportunity Agenda for the purposes of this report. We reviewed original data from more than 50 public opinion studies (listed in the appendix). These studies meet The Opportunity Agenda's standards and best practices for quality and objective public opinion research, including appropriate sample size and a methodologically sound design.

Because this scan investigates existing opinion research, we are limited by the data in our ability to analyze the views of all demographic groups on all issues. Whereas surveys often include adequate samples of African Americans and, more recently, Latinos, to disaggregate their views, this is generally not the case with Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other groups. Wherever the data allowed, we have analyzed separately and together the views of each identifiable demographic group for this report.

Since opinion research has largely adopted racial categories utilized by the federal government, this report uses these categories as appropriate. The categories are defined as follows:

- ▶ White: any person who self-identifies as white only and non-Hispanic
- ▶ Black: any person who self-identifies as black only
- ▶ Hispanic: any person of any race who self-identifies as Hispanic
- ▶ Asian: any person who self-identifies as Asian only

Findings

Definitional Issues: What Does “Being Poor” Mean?

One of the challenges in interpreting survey and polling data on poverty-related issues is definitional: what do the respondents think constitutes “poverty,” and who comes to mind when they are asked about “poor people”? Are they thinking about only the most destitute Americans—the homeless and the hungry? About those who have a hard time making ends meet? Or about people who fall somewhere in between those conditions?

The government has three methods of defining poverty: 1) the official Census Bureau method, which uses a set of income thresholds that vary by family size and composition; 2) an experimental income-based method called the Supplemental Poverty Measure, that factors in government programs designed to help people with low incomes; and 3) a consumption-based method that measures what households actually spend. Each of these methods has come under criticism for being incomplete,⁴⁴ and it is highly doubtful that many members of the general public refer to these measures when asked about the problem of poverty in America. In fact, according to very recent research, “Americans vastly overestimate the annual income necessary to be officially considered poor.” When asked what should constitute the poverty line for a family of four, the average response was just more than \$30,000 annually, quite a bit higher than the official line of \$23,550.⁴⁵ Given this gap in knowledge, it is not surprising that Americans also overestimate the percentage of people in this country living below the poverty line. In 2013 the official rate stood at 15 percent, but the public believes more than twice that number—39 percent—live in poverty today.⁴⁶

In their recent survey, researchers for the Half in Ten Campaign⁴⁷ and the Center for American Progress posed an open-ended question to respondents: “What do you think of when I say ‘the poor’?” What words, images, or phrases come to mind?” The responses were broken down into a number of categories, with most responses based either on the concept of need or on specific groups of people:

▶ Need (not enough money, unable to afford basics)	48%
▶ Groups (homeless, unemployed, unfortunate, children)	46%
▶ Economic conditions (bad/minimum wage jobs, bad schools)	16%
▶ Receiving government assistance	6%
▶ Personal characteristics (lazy, no ambition, don’t work hard)	4%

44 See, for example, Denton R. Vaughan, “Exploring the Use of the Views of the Public to Set Income Poverty Thresholds and Adjust Them Over Time,” (2004) at http://www.census.gov/hhes/povmeas/publications/other/wkppov20_cen.pdf; Shawn Fremstad, “One in Three Americans Lacked the Income Needed to ‘Make Ends Meet’ in 2009; Young Adults Among the Hardest Hit,” Center for Economic and Policy Research (2010) at <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/data-bytes/poverty-bytes/poverty-2010>; and Thomas B. Edsal, “Who is Poor?” *Opinionator*, *New York Times*, March 13, 2013, at http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/13/who-is-poor/?_r=0.

45 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2014/01/07/81702/50-years-after-lbjs-war-on-poverty/>. A 2007 Gallup Poll asked Americans to estimate the minimum amount of yearly income a family of four would need “to get along in your local community.” On average, the public said a family of four needed to earn at least \$52,087 per year. Gallup News Service, “Family of Four Needs to Earn Average of \$52,000 to Get By,” February 9, 2007, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26467/public-family-four-needs-earn-average-52000-get.aspx>.

46 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

47 The Half in Ten Campaign is a project of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, the Coalition on Human Needs, and The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. It is dedicated to building the political and public will to cut the U.S. poverty rate in half in 10 years. See <http://halfintencampaign.org/about/>.

Responses to the next question underscore the disconnect between the government’s definition of poverty and the public’s much broader perception of who is poor in America today; one can see that poverty is close to home for a majority of Americans.

“Thinking about your own family—both your immediate family living here and your other close relatives like aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on—as far as you know, is anyone in your family poor?”

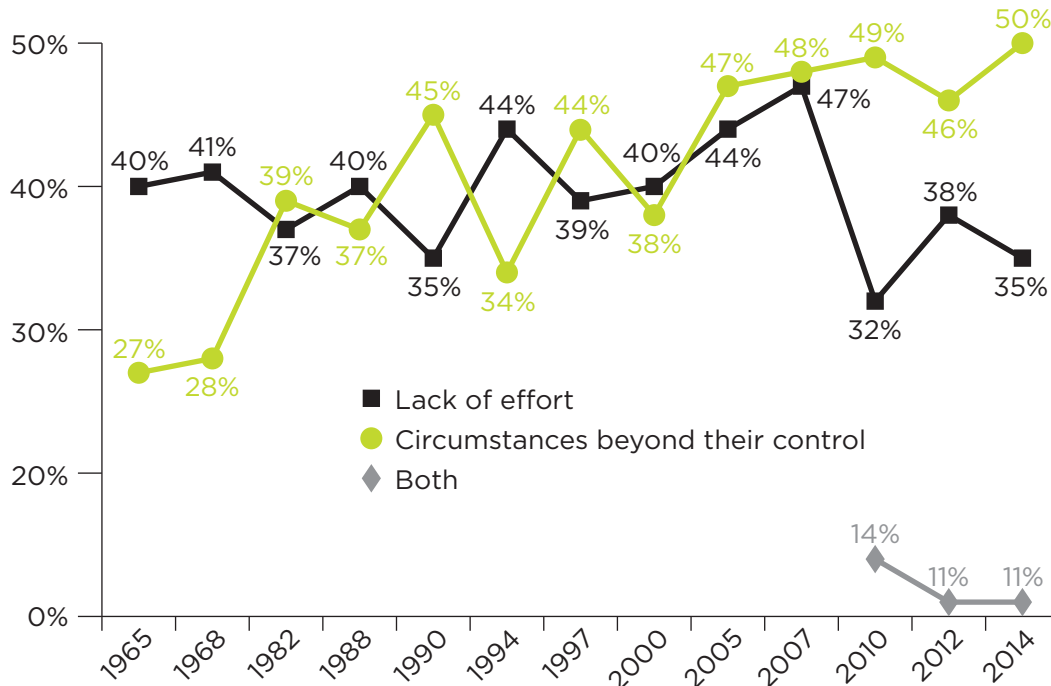
	Total	Millennials	Hispanics	African Americans
Yes	54%	53%	59%	65%
No	45%	46%	41%	34% ⁴⁸

Causes of Poverty

For more than 40 years, public opinion researchers have been asking the following question: “In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on their own part or circumstances beyond their control?” The results expose the continuing tug of war between the belief in the primacy of personal responsibility and the awareness of structural barriers to opportunity. Overall, the public is almost evenly divided on this question, but the trend over time does suggest that responses are affected by the state of the economy. As the chart below shows, in the years just prior to the 2008 economic crisis, as in previous periods of relative economic stability, Americans were evenly split on this question. The same was true during the final years of the Clinton administration, between 1997 and 2000, when the economy was strong. But the first time this question was asked post-crisis, in 2010, the picture looked more complicated. The “lack of effort” responses decreased by 15 points, from 47 percent in 2006 to only 32 percent in 2010, and the balance of responses were split between those who chose “circumstances” (49 percent) and those who responded to the question by volunteering “both” as the answer (14 percent). In 2014, in spite of improvements in the economy, “circumstances” was chosen by 50 percent of the public, while 39 percent chose “lack of effort.”

48 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

FIGURE 1. “IN YOUR OPINION, WHICH IS GENERALLY MORE OFTEN TO BLAME IF A PERSON IS POOR—LACK OF EFFORT ON THEIR OWN PART OR CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND THEIR CONTROL?”



Source: Gallup Poll—1965, 1968, 1988, 1990, CBS/New York Times—1982, 1994, 2000; Princeton Survey Research—1997; Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation—2005; The Opportunity Agenda Human Rights in the US Survey—2007; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press—2010, 2012, 2014.⁴⁹

Cross-tabulation analysis of the 2012 responses shows a high degree of partisan differences: 57 percent of Republicans attributed poverty to lack of effort, compared to 24 percent of Democrats and 37 percent of Independents.⁵⁰ There are differences among demographic groups as well. Whites were twice as likely as African Americans or Latinos to ascribe poverty to lack of effort, and men were significantly more likely than women to choose “lack of effort.” Responses did not differ significantly by age.⁵¹

The Opportunity Agenda’s 2014 survey also revealed a preference for a structural explanation. A question in that survey asked: “To the extent that [poor people] experience inequality today, why do you think that is? Because of their own behavior? Equally because of their own behavior and conditions in society? Because of conditions in society?” Only 14 percent chose “their own behavior,” while 35 percent chose “equally because of their own behavior and conditions in society,” and 50 percent chose “conditions in society.” No significant differences were seen with regard to gender, religion, age, ethnicity, or income. There were, however, significant differences based on race, with only 5 percent of blacks choosing the “own behavior” response, 30 percent choosing the “equally” response, and 65 percent choosing “conditions in society,” a full 15 points higher than the population as a whole. Independent voters were also more supportive of the structural explanation than other groups; 64 percent chose “conditions in society.”⁵²

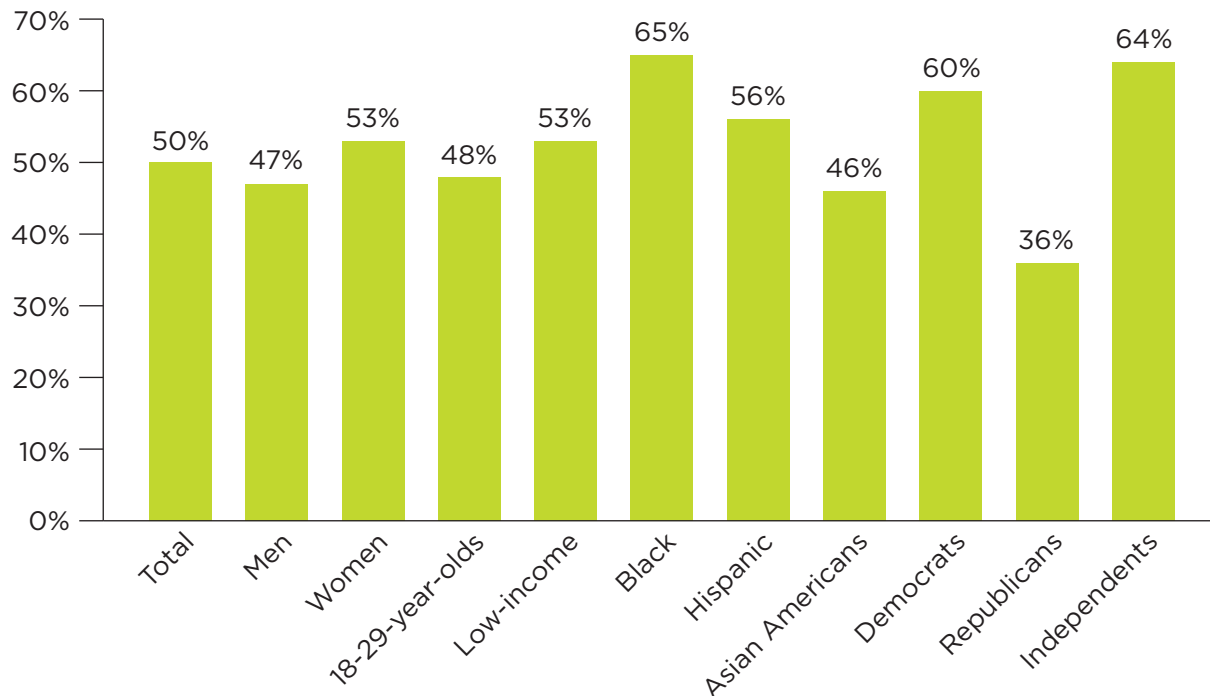
49 Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html;

50 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

51 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

52 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE ATTRIBUTING INEQUALITY FOR POOR PEOPLE TO “CONDITIONS IN SOCIETY”



The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, National representative probability-based survey of 2,000 adults with oversamples of black men, Asian Americans, and people living 200 percent below the poverty level, February–March 2014.

Results are different, however, when the concept of low-paying jobs is included. Another question in the Half in Ten survey asked:

I’m going to read you a pair of statements about poverty in America. After I read both statements, please tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right.

1. Most people who live in poverty are poor because their jobs don’t pay enough, they lack good health care and education, and things cost too much for them to save and move ahead.
2. Most people who live in poverty are poor because they make bad decisions or act irresponsibly in their own lives.

When phrased that way, a strong majority of 64 percent choose the first statement, and 25 percent choose the second.⁵³ The researchers point out that even more telling than the 40-point spread between the two statements is the fact that the “gap in intensity” is so pronounced—47 percent *strongly* prefer the structural causes statement and 16 percent *strongly* prefer the individual responsibility statement. Even white conservatives prefer the structural argument by a wide margin (63 percent to 29 percent); only strongly committed Republicans appear to be fairly evenly split between the two (46 percent to 44 percent).⁵⁴

53 Half in Ten, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty, A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

54 Half in Ten, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty, A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

Further evidence exists that a majority of Americans now embrace a structural explanation for the existence of poverty. In a different survey in 2012, 62 percent agreed with the statement that “the primary cause of America’s problems is an economic system that results in continuing inequality and poverty.”⁵⁵ A structural message tested very favorably in the Half in Ten survey. Seventy-seven percent of the total agreed with the statement: “The primary reason so many people are living in poverty today is that our economy is failing to produce enough jobs that pay decent wages.”⁵⁶

Most Americans, however, reject the structural barrier of racial discrimination as “the main reason why many black people can’t get ahead these days.” Only 23 percent agree with that statement, and 61 percent say, “blacks who can’t get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.”⁵⁷ African-American respondents are more evenly divided, with 40 percent saying discrimination is the main problem, and 46 percent answering that African Americans are mostly responsible for their own condition. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “Racial discrimination plays a large role in determining who lives in poverty and who does not,” 47 percent of the total agree. Here the demographic gap is huge, with 78 percent of African Americans in agreement.⁵⁸

Upward Mobility and Poverty

Can Americans who come from poor backgrounds achieve the American Dream, defined by most as having financial security, self-sufficiency, a good job, and home ownership?⁵⁹ The answer is a qualified yes. A majority of Americans believe that “Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard.”⁶⁰ Is it possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich? Over the past 30 years, the percentage of people responding affirmatively to this question has ranged from a low of 57 percent in 1983 to a high of 84 percent in 2000. More recently it stands at 71 percent.⁶¹ Even in the worst of times, belief in the value of “hard work” and “effort” (personal responsibility) overcomes concerns that insurmountable structural barriers stand in the way of success. Groups who are disproportionately poor, however, are not as optimistic. Fifty-seven percent of blacks and 64 percent of women believe in the possibility, compared to 73 percent of whites and 77 percent of men.⁶²

55 PRRI, American Values Survey 2012, September 2012, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/10/american-values-survey-2012/>.

56 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

57 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Communications & Methods Survey, Jan. 2012, retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

58 Fifty-eight percent of both Latinos and Millennials agree with the statement. Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

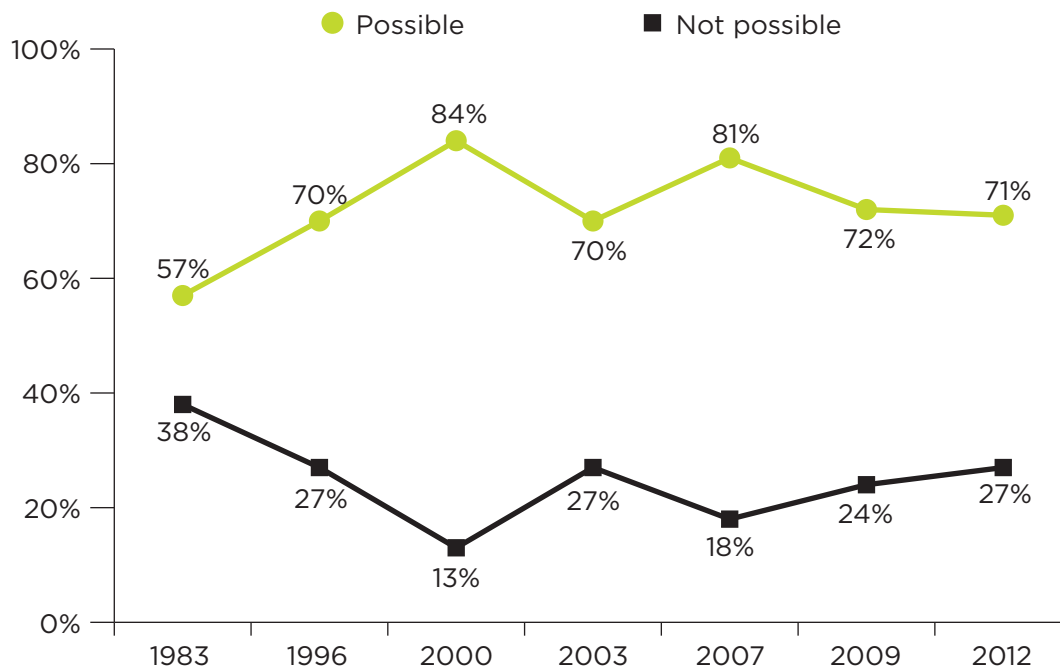
59 Time and The Rockefeller Foundation, “A Woman’s Nation Poll,” August 31–September 15, 2009, “The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Changes Everything,” August 31–September 15, 2009. According to a poll conducted in 2013, 75 percent of adults agreed strongly that the American Dream meant “to have freedom of choice in how to live one’s life,” and another 18 percent agreed somewhat. Washington Post-Miller Center poll, September 6–12, 2013, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/politics/washington-post-miller-center-poll-september-6-12-2013/489/>.

60 YouGov Omnibus Poll, August 2013, <http://today.yougov.com/economist-poll-archive/>. When asked to choose between the following statements, (1) “Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard”, and (2) “Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people,” 60 percent chose (1) and 38 percent chose (2). Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

61 CBS News/New York Times Poll, July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/07/19/us/nytcbspoll-results.html?ref=politics>.

62 CBS News/New York Times Poll, July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/07/19/us/nytcbspoll-results.html?ref=politics>.

FIGURE 3. "DO YOU THINK IT IS STILL POSSIBLE TO START OUT POOR IN THIS COUNTRY, WORK HARD, AND BECOME RICH?"



Source: New York Times Poll, June 1983; CBS News/New York Times Poll, Feb, 1996; CBS News Poll, Feb, 2000; CBS News/New York Times Poll, Jul, 2003; CBS News Poll, June 2007; CBS News/New York Times Poll, Apr, 2009 ; CBS News/New York Times Poll, July, 2012.⁶³

Most Americans accept the notion that poverty is a permanent feature of our economic system. Per a 2014 Half in Ten report, a total of 79 percent of Americans surveyed agree that “Regardless of what policies we create, there will always be a sizeable group of poor people living in America.”⁶⁴ A majority (61 percent) think that poverty is “an acceptable part of our economic system” that does not need to be fixed. This represents a shift from when the same question was asked in 1998. At that time only 45 percent said having a sizable group of poor people was acceptable and 52 percent said it was a problem that needed to be fixed.⁶⁵

There are other signs of deepening pessimism about poor people’s prospects. In 2012, when asked whether “most poor people in this country have a very good chance of escaping from poverty,” 42 percent said yes. By 2013 only 35 percent said yes, a drop of seven points in one year.⁶⁶ Fifty-seven percent believe that children born into poverty in America today are likely to remain poor for the rest of their lives.⁶⁷

That pessimism extends beyond the prospects for poor people. In a December 2013 poll, 64 percent of Americans surveyed responded that the United States no longer offers everyone an equal chance to get

63 Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

64 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

65 Reason Foundation/Arthur N. Rupe Foundation, September 13–17, 2012, <http://reason.com/assets/db/13481953038600.pdf>; Gallup Poll, April-May, 1998, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/9877/havenots-perceptions-fairness-opportunity-1998.aspx>.

66 Reason Foundation/Arthur N. Rupe Foundation, September 2012, <http://reason.com/assets/db/13481953038600.pdf>; Reason-Rupe Poll, Sep, 2013, retrieved Oct. 16, 2013, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

67 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

ahead, and 73 percent of those earning less than \$50,000 a year said the economy is “unfair.”⁶⁸ Fifty-three percent of all those surveyed agreed with the following statement in the spring of 2013: “One of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life,” with 77 percent of blacks and 62 percent of Latinos in agreement.⁶⁹

Opinion is divided on whether or not people from poor backgrounds have more opportunities to rise than they did in the past. Forty-four percent of those who responded to a 2012 Gallup poll said society has become more mobile, 29 percent said it is less mobile, and 17 percent said it’s about the same. In response to the question, “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the opportunity for a poor person in this nation to get ahead by working hard?” opinions were somewhat evenly split, with 50 percent saying they are satisfied and 48 percent saying they are dissatisfied.⁷⁰

Perceptions of Poor People

While the *poverty rate* is higher among black people than white people in this country, there are twice as many poor non-Hispanic white people in this country as poor black people.⁷¹ In spite of this, as noted above, racial stereotypes play a major role in the American public’s perception of poor people, and in the eyes of most Americans, poverty is an African-American urban problem.⁷² In 1996, 55 percent of the survey respondents thought that most recipients of welfare were black, 23 percent thought most recipients were white, and 13 percent thought that blacks and whites were represented in equal numbers.⁷³ Although attitudes may have changed over time, negative stereotypes that link poverty with African Americans are still embedded in the minds of many Americans. In 2010 close to half of the American public (47 percent) agreed that “African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people because most African Americans just don’t have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty.”⁷⁴

Some evidence exists that the conservative position, which argues that poor people are the passive recipients of government handouts, has gained traction in recent years. For the past 19 years the Pew Research Center has presented the following two statements, and asked respondents to pick the one that came closest to their views: (1) “poor people have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return,” and (2) “poor people have hard lives because government benefits don’t go far enough to help them live decently.” When the question was first asked in 1994 during the national debate over welfare, more people chose “have it easy” (54 percent) over “have hard lives” (39 percent). Those numbers began to shift immediately as “welfare to work” became better known, and

68 David J. Lynch, “Americans Say Dream Fading as Income Gap Hurts Chances,” Bloomberg.com, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-11/americans-say-dream-fading-as-income-gap-hurts-chances.html>.

69 PRRI, Economic Values Survey, May–June 2013, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Economic-Values-Survey-TOPLINE.pdf>.

70 Gallup/USA Today Poll - Nationwide poll on Americans’ perceptions of the opportunities available to poor people, May 10-13, 2012, Gallup/USA Today Poll, May, 2012. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

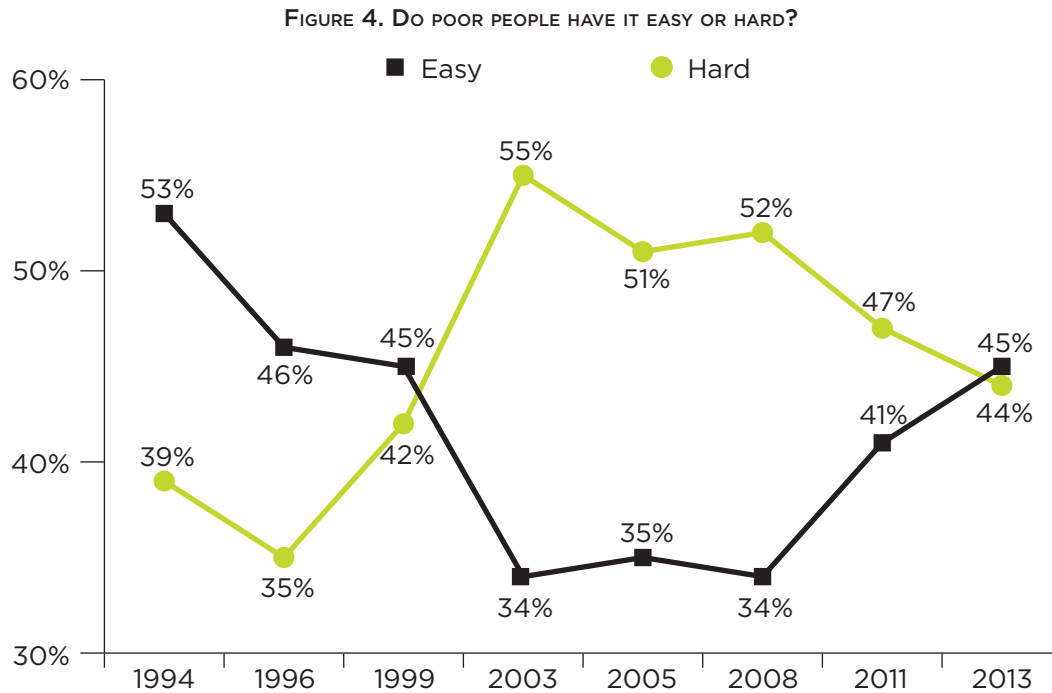
71 There are 26,223,200 poor white people in the U.S. compared to 13,027,600 poor black people, 17,717,000 poor Hispanics, and 5,530,200 “other.” “Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity,” Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, at <http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/#notes>, retrieved on April 29, 2014.

72 See Daniel J. Hopkins, “Partisan Reinforcement and the Poor: The Impact of Context on Explanations for Poverty,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 2009, 90(3):744-764; Heather Bullock, “Justifying Inequality: A Social Psychological Analysis of Beliefs about Poverty and the Poor,” *National Poverty Center Working Papers Series*, June 2006, citing Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, University of Chicago Press (1999); Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, Oxford University Press (1994); Ann Orloff, “Explaining US Welfare Reform: Power, Gender Race, and the US Policy Legacy,” *Critical Social Policy* 22(1): 96-118 (2002).

73 ABC News Poll, April 25-May 5, 1996. According to the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, this question has not been asked since 1996.

74 Gallup/USA Today Poll, June 2010. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

by 2003, the numbers were reversed, with 55 percent choosing “hard” and 34 percent choosing “easy.” Beginning in 2008, however, the two lines began to converge, and more recently, the public has been more evenly split on this question.



Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2011, <http://www.people-press.org/files/2011/05/Political-Typology-Topline.pdf>; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll, May, 2013.⁷⁵

Poor people are also viewed as having less influence in the public arena than other marginalized groups do. Only 29 percent of the public agree that poor people have either a “great deal” or a “good amount” of ability “to help change things for the better on issues that are important to them.” This puts poor people on a par, in the public’s mind, with undocumented immigrants—a group whom 28 percent of those surveyed think have the ability to make change on issues they deem important to them. A significantly higher percentage of survey respondents ascribe that power to those who are gay and lesbian (44 percent), black (52 percent), and women (58 percent).⁷⁶

There are, however, some indications that attitudes toward poor people are moving in a positive direction. In 1994, the year of President Clinton’s reform of the welfare system, two-thirds of Gallup poll respondents believed that most people who received welfare payments were “taking advantage of the system” rather than “genuinely in need of help.”⁷⁷ By 2012, in response to the same question, the public was evenly split, and the percentage of negative responses had fallen by 22 points, from 68 percent to 46 percent.⁷⁸ When embedded in the context of the economic recession, a majority of respondents (54 percent) agreed that people “receiving federal assistance like food stamps, housing vouchers, unemployment insurance, and Medicaid” are in real need because of high unemployment.⁷⁹ In 2012, 65

75 Retrieved May-22-2014 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

76 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

77 Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, Apr, 1994. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

78 PRRI American Values Survey, September 2012, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/10/american-values-survey-2012/>.

79 United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, February 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/>

percent of people polled thought that “most poor people in the United States are people who work but can’t earn enough money,” as opposed to being “people who don’t work.”⁸⁰ In 1994 only 49 percent held the former view, and 44 percent thought most poor people did not work.⁸¹ In 2001, 29 percent responding to a survey thought “people on welfare have lower moral values than other Americans”;⁸² by 2012 only 14 percent of respondents thought that, and 67 percent thought poor people had the same moral values as other Americans.⁸³

The recent (January 2014) Half in Ten/Center for American Progress survey further confirms the favorable trend in the public’s attitudes toward poor people. Seventy-nine percent of all respondents, including 82 percent of Millennials, 92 percent of African Americans, and 82 percent of Latinos, agreed that “Most people living in poverty are decent people who are working hard to make ends meet in a difficult economy.”⁸⁴

Government Responsibility to Care for the Vulnerable

A consistent majority of Americans over time believe that it is the responsibility of the government “to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves.” (The phrase “people who can’t take care of themselves” is a broad term that calls to mind not only poor people, but the elderly and the disabled as well). Researchers have found that while negative rhetoric about “government handouts” has affected opinions on government assistance more generally, “support for the safety net and specific programs remained remarkably strong, which allowed for the maintenance of most programs.”⁸⁵ Although there has been some slippage in support for the government safety net since 2007, when 70 percent responded to a poll by agreeing that taking care of those who can’t take care of themselves is the government’s responsibility,⁸⁶ public sentiment still remained favorable by a comfortable margin of 26 points, with 62 percent agreeing that the government has a responsibility to “care for people who can’t take care of themselves,” and 36 percent disagreeing.⁸⁷ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press attributes the slippage to the hardening of partisan attitudes: “When it comes to the social safety net, the drop in support has been driven largely by a substantial shift in the values of Republicans and, to a lesser extent, independents. At the same time, views among Democrats have remained relatively constant.”⁸⁸

There are major differences of opinion from one demographic to another, with blacks and Latinos more supportive of the government safety net than whites are. Blacks and Latinos agree with the statement that it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves,

nationaljournal/d/82601915-NJ-CC-Poll-Topline-Results-Feb-13.

80 Pew Research Center for the People & Press Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

81 Kaiser/Harvard Survey on Welfare Reform, December 1994, <http://kff.org/medicaid/poll-finding/national-survey-of-public-knowledge-of-welfare/>.

82 NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School, Poverty in America Survey, January 2001, <http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/poverty/staticresults.html>.

83 Pew Research Center for the People & Press Values Survey, April 2012. This study showed that Americans do perceive a values gap between the rich and the middle class: seven in ten said the values of the rich and middle class have become more different over the past 10 years; only four-in-ten said the same about values held by the poor and the middle class. <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

84 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

85 Max Rose and Frank R. Baumgartner, “Framing the Poor: Media Coverage and U.S. Poverty Policy, 1960-2008,” *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2013.

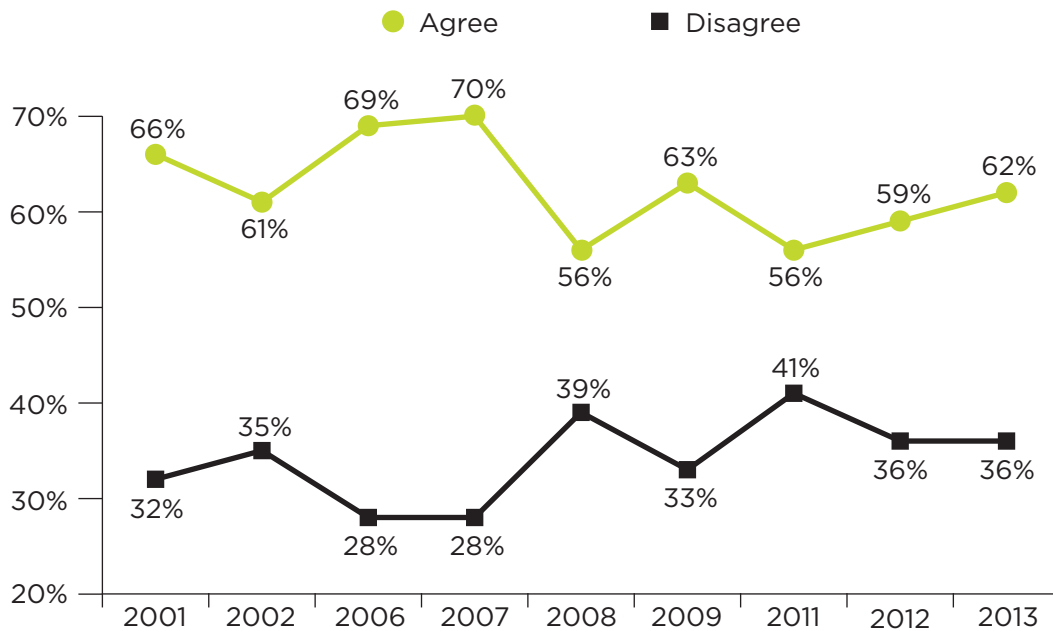
86 Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll, Apr, 2007. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

87 Public Religion Research Institute Economic Values Survey, May 2013 <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Economic-Values-Survey-TOPLINE.pdf>.

88 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years - Trends in American Values: 1987-2012,” June 4, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/06-04-12%20Values%20Release.pdf>.

at the rate of 70 percent and 75 percent, respectively, compared to agreement by 53 percent of whites. Gender and age differences are much less pronounced.⁸⁹ A majority of white evangelical Protestants (56 percent), white mainline Protestants (54 percent), Catholics (68 percent), and those who are unaffiliated with a religion (62 percent) believe it is the government’s responsibility to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves.⁹⁰

FIGURE 5. “IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE CARE OF PEOPLE WHO CAN’T TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES.”



Source: Democracy Corps Survey, December 2001, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Update Survey, July 2003; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Update Survey, December 2006; Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll, April 2007; Pew Social Trends Poll, January 2008; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, March 2009; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll, September 2011; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012; Public Religion Research Institute Economic Values Survey, May 2013.⁹¹

Dependency

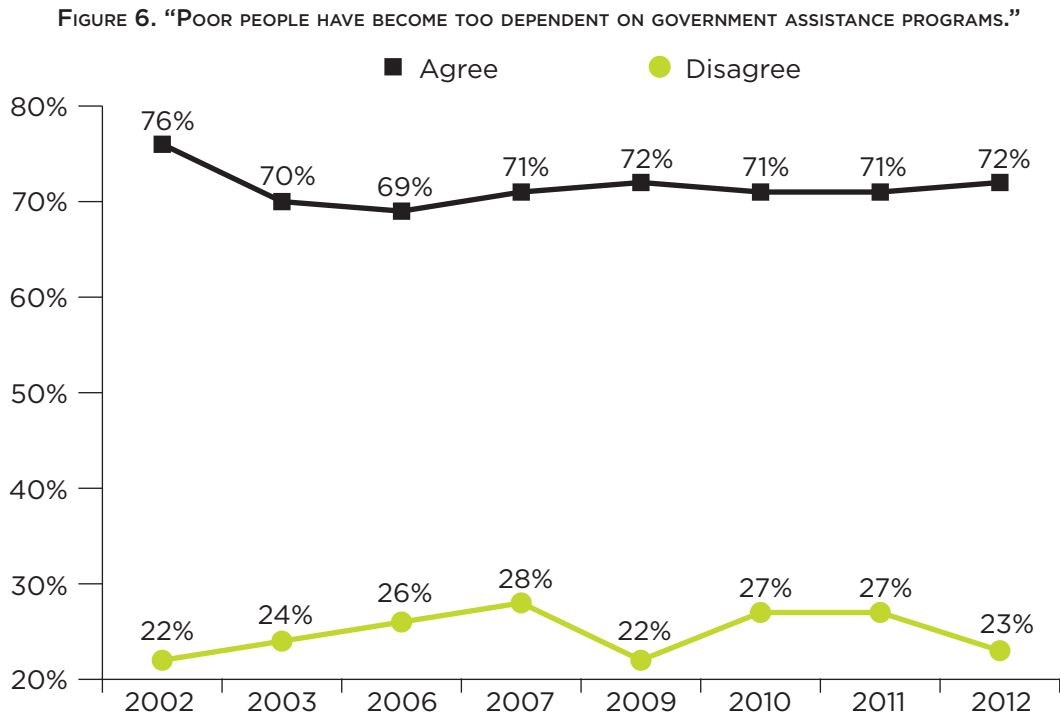
For the past 10 years, despite a majority belief in government’s responsibility to “take care of the needy,” a consistent majority hovering around 70 percent has agreed with the statement that “Poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs.” Although this majority has decreased from its high point of 85 percent in 1994 before welfare reform was adopted, current data demonstrate the enduring strength of the public’s belief in such dependency. When given the choice of eight reasons for “the continuing problem of poverty,” a plurality (24 percent) chose “too much government welfare that prevents initiative,” as compared to lack of job opportunities (18 percent), lack of good educational opportunities (13 percent), breakdown of families (13 percent), lack of work ethic (10 percent), lack of government funding (4 percent), drugs (3 percent), and racial discrimination (2 percent).⁹²

89 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

90 Public Religion Research Institute, “Do Americans Believe Capitalism & Government are Working? Findings From the Economic Values Survey,” 2013, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

91 Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

92 Four percent chose “other”; 8 percent chose “all equally”; and 1 percent chose “not sure.” NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey, May-June 2013 at online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/WSJpoll060513.pdf.

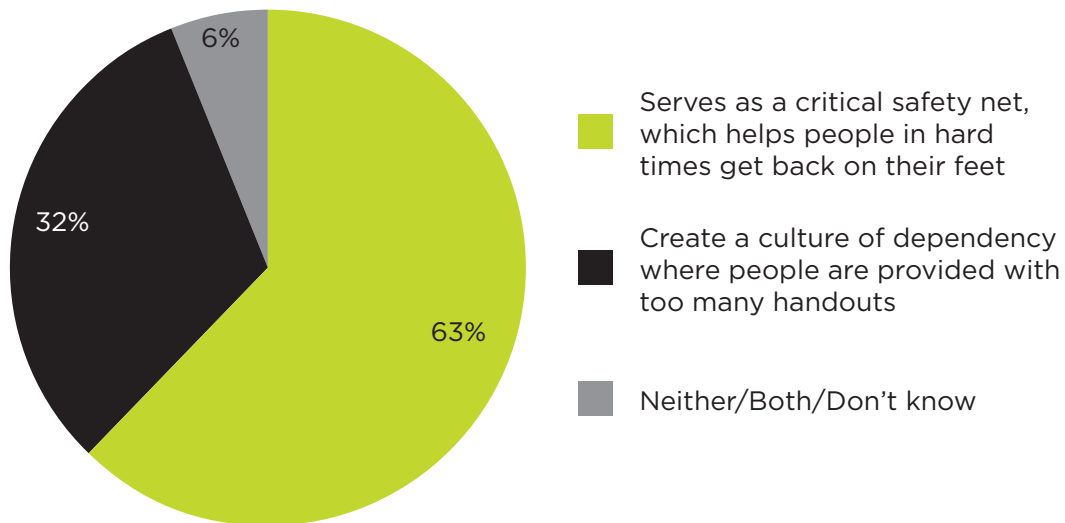


Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, July 2002; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Update Survey, July 2003; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Update Survey, December 2006; The Opportunity Agenda Human Rights in the US Survey, June 2007; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, March 2009; Public Agenda Foundation Slip-Sliding Away: Today’s Economy and the American Dream Survey, November 2010; PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2011; Pew Research Center for the people & the Press Values Survey, April 2012.⁹³

The belief in over-dependency appears deeply entrenched and exists across racial, ethnic, gender and age lines. At the same time, as illustrated in Figure 7, when asked to choose which of two statements describes “government programs to help the poor,” Americans reject the “create a culture of dependency” description in favor of the “critical safety net” explanation by a margin of two to one.

93 Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

FIGURE 7. GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS TO HELP THE POOR



Source: PRRI, The 2012 American Values Survey, September 2012.⁹⁴

However, the split is much closer when respondents are asked to choose between two other opposing statements about government aid to the poor. Forty-nine percent agree that it “does more good than harm because people can’t get out of poverty until basic needs are met,” and 44 percent agree that it “does more harm than good by making people too dependent on the government.”⁹⁵

Gap between Rich and Poor

A substantial majority (70 percent) of those polled by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in a 2013 study believe that the “gap between the rich and poor in the United States” has gotten larger over time, 5 percent believe the gap has gotten smaller, and 21 percent believe it has stayed about the same.⁹⁶ Americans are not sanguine about closing the gap. Only 5 percent think the country is making progress in dealing with the “problem” of “the gap between rich and poor” and 58 percent think we are “losing ground.”⁹⁷ Almost half of those polled regard the widening gap as “a very big problem in our country,” and another 27 percent think it’s a “moderately big problem.”⁹⁸

A majority (60 percent) of respondents said that society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal, and agreement with that statement cuts across the major religious denominations. Low-income Americans express stronger support for more equal distribution of wealth than high-income Americans, but even among those earning more than \$100,000 a year, 50 percent are supportive.⁹⁹

94 <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/10/american-values-survey-2012>.

95 Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

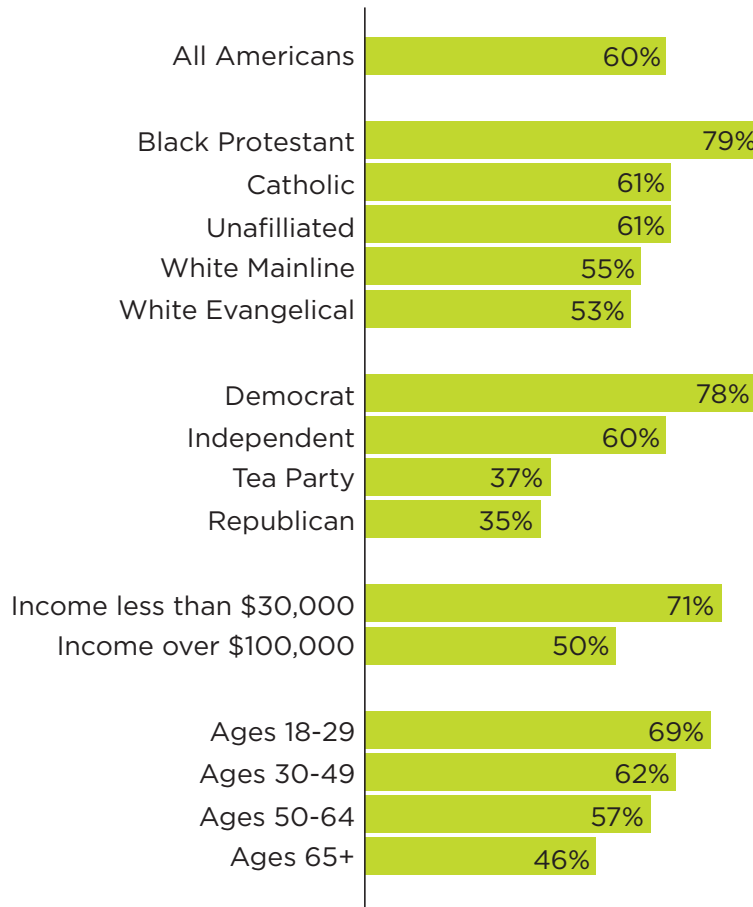
96 Public Religion Research Institute Economic Values Survey, May 2013. In response to the question, “Compared to ten years ago, do you think there is a wider gap or a narrower gap between the standards of living of middle class people and poor people?” 61 percent in the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Survey, April 2012, said “wider” and 28 percent said “narrower.” In response to the question, “In the past 10 years, has the gap between the rich and everyone else increased, decreased or stayed the same?”, 65 percent said increased, 8 percent said decreased, and 25 percent said stayed the same, in a poll by Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

97 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey, December 2010, <http://www.people-press.org/2010/12/15/for-public-tough-year-ends-on-a-down-note/>.

98 Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll, March 4–18 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/>.

99 Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2011, <http://publicreligion.org/>

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS WHO SAY SOCIETY WOULD BE BETTER OFF IF THE DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH WAS MORE EQUAL



Source: Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, September 2011 (N=1,505).

When asked to choose between two statements, (1) “Income and wealth inequality holds back economic growth” and (2) “income and wealth inequality is a natural outcome and not a problem,” 55 percent choose the first statement. Blacks and Latinos choose the first statement at higher rates than other groups (blacks, 64 percent; Latinos, 59 percent).¹⁰⁰

A majority of Americans polled in a 2011 PRRI study (60 percent) agreed that “The government *should do more* to reduce the gap between the rich and poor” while 39 percent disagreed,¹⁰¹ and there are significant differences on this question among different demographic groups. Eighty-four percent of blacks and 88 percent of Latinos agreed the government should do more, as compared to 58 percent of whites who felt that way. Seventy-one percent of women agreed, but only 62 percent of men did. Age, however, was not a significant factor.¹⁰²

research/2011/11/2011-american-values-survey/.

100 Matt A. Barreto, Ph.D., co-founder, Latino Decisions, “The Importance of Race and Ethnicity in Thinking about the Future of Income Inequality,” presentation based on national poll with oversamples of Blacks, Latinos and Asians, September 23, 2013. On file with The Opportunity Agenda.

101 Public Religion Research Institute Post-election American Values Survey 2012, Nov, 2012. Retrieved Dec. 4, 2012, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

102 PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2011, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/11/november-2011-rns/>.

Research suggests that including children in the picture heightens concern about lack of opportunity and the need for government action. Seventy-four percent of those polled agree with the following statement:

A lot of kids don't get an equal start in life, because their families struggle just to make ends meet. Government should offer struggling families proven tools to help parents become more financially secure and save to send their kids to college, so that their children have an opportunity to become successful, independent adults.¹⁰³

However, when asked if it is *the responsibility* of government “to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes” the public reverses course: 67 percent say no.¹⁰⁴

Government Actions to Reduce Poverty

In a survey conducted in January 2014, respondents were asked which of two approaches “would do more to reduce poverty”: (1) “Raising taxes on the wealthy and corporations to expand programs for the poor;” or (2) “Lowering taxes on the wealthy and corporations to encourage investment and growth.” Fifty-four percent chose the first statement and 35 percent chose the second statement. Partisan differences were stark: only 29 percent of Republicans agreed with the first statement, compared with 75 percent of Democrats and 51 percent of Independents.¹⁰⁵

Two recent surveys have explored the public's support for specific policies to narrow the gap between rich and poor and reduce poverty overall: one by the Center for American Progress/Half in Ten Campaign, and one by The Opportunity Agenda. According to the Center for American Progress:

Americans are very clear about which areas they believe state governments and the federal government should invest in to help reduce poverty: jobs, wages, and education. Asked which two areas they believe are most important for new investments, 40 percent of Americans choose creating jobs and increasing wages; 30 percent choose job training and workplace preparation; 25 percent choose elementary and secondary education; 23 percent choose college access and affordability; and 21 percent choose early childhood education.¹⁰⁶

Of the 11 concrete policy ideas tested by the Half in Ten Campaign, five proposals received 80 percent or higher total support:

1. Help low-wage workers afford quality child care (86 percent support, 52 percent strong support).
2. Expand nutrition assistance to provide families with healthy food and enough to eat (85 percent total support, 50 percent strong support).
3. Make universal pre-kindergarten available for all children (84 percent total support, 59 percent strong support).
4. Expand publicly funded scholarships to help more families afford college (84 percent total support, 54 percent strong support).

103 Hattaway Communications, “Message Memo: Expanding Support for Government Action to Build the Middle Class,” 2013, based on survey conducted in conjunction with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. On file with The Opportunity Agenda.

104 Reason Foundation/Arthur N. Rupe Foundation, September 13–17 2012, Reason-Rupe Poll, Sep, 2012. Retrieved Oct-3-2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

105 Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

106 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ's War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

5. Increase the minimum wage and make sure it rises with inflation (80 percent total support, 58 percent strong support).

A second tier of anti-poverty proposals receives support from three-fourths of respondents:

1. Expand tax credits targeted to families with low-wage jobs (77 percent total support, 43 percent strong support).
2. Help struggling homeowners refinance mortgages on affordable terms (75 percent total support, 45 percent strong support).
3. Expand tax credits for low-income families with children (75 percent total support, 42 percent strong support).
4. Provide quality, affordable health care coverage for every American (74 percent total support, 51 percent strong support).
5. Create subsidized jobs for low-income and long-term unemployed workers (74 percent total support, 41 percent strong support).

Even the least popular proposal has the support of a majority of respondents: 68 percent support extending the time limit for unemployment insurance benefits during economic downturns.¹⁰⁷

The Opportunity Agenda asked respondents to assign a level of priority to each of seven policies to reduce poverty in the United States. As the responses below indicate, the public prioritizes improving public education above all else, followed by avoiding cutbacks in Social Security, and holding down interest on student loans (a further indication of the premium placed on education).

Seven Policies to Reduce Poverty¹⁰⁸

	High priority	Moderate priority	Low priority
a. Increasing the minimum wage	52%	27%	21%
b. Improving public education	77	17	6
c. Expanding government-funded job-training programs	45	36	19
d. Cutting business taxes in an effort to encourage job creation	43	34	22
e. Increasing spending on highways, bridges, and other public work projects in an effort to encourage job creation	44	39	16
f. Avoiding cutbacks in Social Security	65	24	10
g. Holding down interest rates on student loans	62	27	10

Demographic variances included the following:

- ▶ African Americans and Latinos were much more likely than respondents in general to select increasing the minimum wage as a “high priority”: 74 percent of African Americans and 72 percent of Latinos compared to 52 percent of total chose this option. Sixty percent of low-income Americans said increasing the minimum wage should be a high priority.

107 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

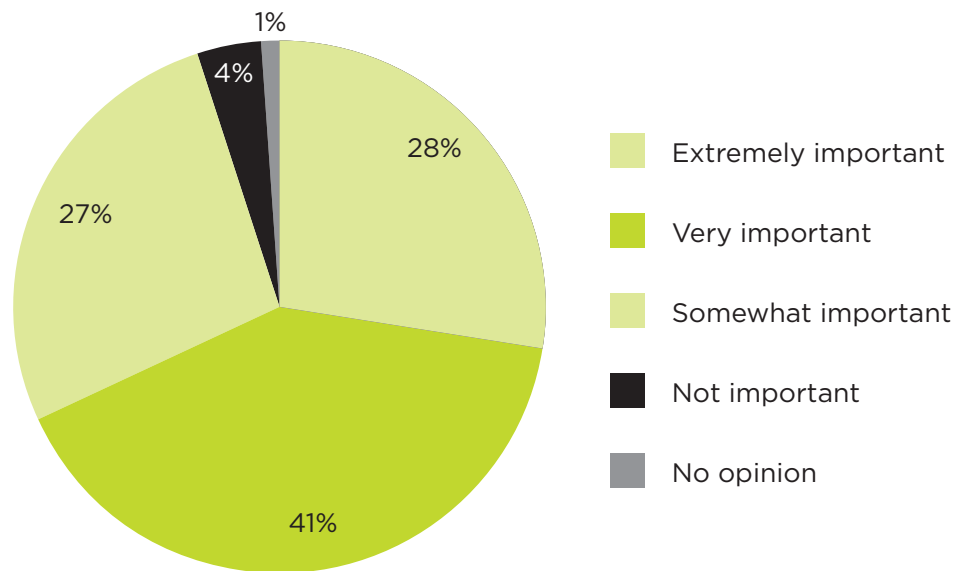
108 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

- ▶ African Americans, Latinos, and low-income Americans were more likely than the aggregate of respondents to assign high priority to expanding government-funded job training programs: 62 percent, 66 percent, and 51 percent, respectively, compared to 45 percent of the total.
- ▶ Millennials (between 18 and 29) hewed closely to the total on all the policies, including holding down interest rates on student loans. Fifty-eight percent of Millennials said that should be a high priority, compared to 62 percent of the total.¹⁰⁹

Is Poverty a Serious Problem in U.S. Society?

Polls conducted in 2012, 2013, and 2014 show that concern about the problem of poverty is relatively high on the public’s policy agenda, and that Americans think reducing poverty should be a priority for the federal government. In The Opportunity Agenda’s survey, 76 percent said they thought that “unequal treatment that disadvantages [poor people] is a serious problem in U.S. society” (37 percent said it was a “very serious” problem; 38 percent said it was a “somewhat serious” problem).¹¹⁰ In a May 2013 Gallup Poll, 65 percent said reducing poverty and inequality should be a top or a high government priority, 21 percent said it should be a medium priority, and only 13 percent said it should be a low priority, or not a priority at all.¹¹¹ A May 2012 Gallup/USA Today Poll showed majority support for the statement that living standards for the poorest Americans was an “extremely” or “very important” economic issue facing the country.

FIGURE 9. “HOW IMPORTANT IS THE ISSUE OF LIVING STANDARDS FOR THE POOREST AMERICANS?”



Source: Gallup/USA Today Poll, Nationwide poll on Americans’ perception of the importance of living standards for the poorest Americans, May 10-13, 2012.¹¹²

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 “Creating more jobs” was a top or high priority for 86 percent of respondents. Other responses were: “helping the economy grow” (86 percent); “making government work more efficiently” (81 percent); “improving the quality of education received by American schoolchildren” (81 percent); “addressing the financial problems with Social Security and Medicare” (77 percent); “reducing the costs of healthcare” (70 percent); “reducing the federal deficit” (69 percent); “improving access to healthcare” (68 percent); “reducing poverty and inequality” (65 percent); “reforming the tax code” (59 percent); “reducing gun violence” (55 percent); and “reforming immigration” (50 percent). Gallup Poll, May, 2013. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

112 Chart from <http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/polling.aspx?id=f19abd4a-4291-4d06-8035-75d6fa02726a>.

In response to a somewhat differently worded Pew Research Center question, “Should **dealing with the problems of poor and needy people** be a top priority for President Obama and Congress, an important but lower priority, not too important, or should it not be done?” Fifty-seven percent said it should be a top priority and 32 percent said it should be an important but lower priority. Small minorities said it was not too important (6 percent) or it should not be done (3 percent). The dial on this question has moved hardly at all in the past 16 years. Between 1997 and 2013 no more than 7 percent of the public has ever said that dealing with the problems of poor people was “not too important” and 1–3 percent have said it “should not be done,” with the great majority divided between “top priority” and “important but lower priority.”¹¹³

Cuts in Safety Net Programs

According to a survey completed in December 2013, when asked to choose between “taking steps to reduce the budget deficit or keeping spending for programs that help the poor and needy at current levels,” 59 percent said it was more important to keep at current levels the spending on programs that assist poor people, and 33 percent chose taking steps to reduce the deficit. While cherished programs like Medicare and Social Security garnered somewhat more support (69 percent favored keeping spending; 23 percent favored taking steps), this split compares favorably with responses to a similarly worded question about keeping military spending at current levels. In that case, only 40 percent of the public thought it more important to keep spending at current levels, and 51 percent thought reducing the budget deficit is more important.¹¹⁴

Partisan differences are stark, when it comes to views on cutting back aid to poor people to reduce the deficit, with 84 percent of Democrats and 53 percent of Independents supporting maintaining spending for programs that assist poor people at current levels as compared to 35 percent of Republicans.¹¹⁵ It is notable, however, that among evangelical Christians, who tend to lean toward Republican Party positions, 58 percent opposed “cutting federal funding for social programs that help the poor” in order to help reduce the budget deficit.¹¹⁶

Food Stamps, Housing Vouchers, and Unemployment Insurance

Polling on food stamps and housing vouchers for low-income families has had mixed results. On the one hand, in a 2010 Kaiser Foundation study, a large majority of Americans (82 percent) noted their belief that the food stamp program is important.¹¹⁷ And in a 2013 poll, a plurality (42 percent) opposes cutting government spending on food stamps and housing vouchers in order to reduce the budget deficit, with 39 percent supporting cutting “some spending” and only 17 percent supporting cutting “a lot.”¹¹⁸ Nearly half of those polled (47 percent) believed federal funding for food stamps should be “kept the same,”

113 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January 2013 Political Survey, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/01/13/january-2013-political-survey/>.

114 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2013 Political Survey, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/19/in-deficit-debate-public-resists-cuts-in-entitlements-and-aid-to-poor/>

115 Ibid

116 PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 10-14, 2011, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/November-PRRI-RNS-2011-Topline.pdf>. According to the Rev. Jim Wallis of the progressive evangelical organization Sojourners, “To careful observers it shouldn’t be shocking. Many evangelicals, and especially their younger generation, now see poverty as a fundamental biblical issue and believe budgets are moral documents.” Electa Draper, “More than half of evangelicals oppose cuts in government funds for poor, survey shows,” *Denver Post*, November 25, 2011.

117 Kaiser/Harvard/Washington Post Role of Government Survey, September 2010 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/Post-Kaiser-Harvard-Role-of-Government-2010.pdf>.

118 United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, Oct, 2013. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

31 percent thought funding should be increased, and only 22 percent thought it should be decreased.¹¹⁹ However, when asked if the “more than 46 million people living in the US who received food stamps in 2012” were “truly in need of assistance or taking advantage of the system,” 57 percent chose “taking advantage.”¹²⁰

Most of those polled (63 percent) in a recent Pew Research Center study are in favor of a one-year extension of federal unemployment benefits for people who have been out of work for a long time.¹²¹ A slight majority (53 percent) in a recent study by The Opportunity Agenda think federal funding for unemployment benefits should be “kept the same.”¹²²

Medicaid

When it comes to Medicaid, large majorities have a hands-off attitude. The belief that Medicaid is an important program is virtually universal, with 69 percent saying it’s “very important” and another 23 percent saying it’s “somewhat important.”¹²³ More than two-thirds of Americans are opposed to cutting spending on Medicaid to reduce the federal budget deficit.¹²⁴ Blacks overwhelmingly oppose cuts (86 percent), but age and gender are not significant factors. The partisan divide, however, is deep, with only 37 percent of Republicans opposing cuts as compared to 78 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of independents.¹²⁵

Minimum Wage and Low-Wage Work

The public is concerned about the prevalence of low-wage jobs in the United States. In response to the following statement, “A quarter of all jobs in the United States now pay below poverty-level wages. Is this a problem for our country?” 86 percent said yes (48 percent said it’s a very big problem; 38 percent said it’s somewhat of a problem). Ninety-one percent of blacks see it as a problem (61 percent, very; 30 percent, somewhat) as do 91 percent of Latinos (53 percent, very; 38 percent, somewhat); 80 percent of Asian Americans (40 percent, very; 40 percent, somewhat), and 84 percent of whites (39 percent, very; 45 percent, somewhat).¹²⁶ This concern translates into strong support for increasing the federal minimum wage.

119 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

120 Fox News Poll, August 2013. See also Resurgent Republic Survey, April 2012 in which 50 percent said the increase in numbers of people receiving assistance was a result of the recession, and 42 percent said it was the result of people taking advantage of the system. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

121 Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/01/23/most-see-inequality-growing-but-partisans-differ-over-solutions/>.

122 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

123 Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, Feb, 2012. Retrieved Mar-6-2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

124 Quinnipiac University Poll-Nationwide poll on cutting Medicaid spending, November 28-December 3, 2012; United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, November 2012; McClatchy/Marist Poll-Nationwide poll on spending cuts for Medicaid, December 4–6, 2012; ABC News/Washington Post Poll, December 13–16, 2012 at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postabcpoll_20121216.html; Bloomberg Poll, Dec, 2012. Retrieved Jan-9-2013 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html. ABC/Washington Post Poll, March 7-10, 2013 at <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/politics/post-abc-poll-march-7-10-2013/70/>.

125 United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, November 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/nationaljournal/d/82601915-NJ-CC-Poll-Topline-Results-Feb-13>.

126 Matt A. Barreto, Ph.D., co-founder, Latinos Decisions, “The Importance of Race and Ethnicity in Thinking about the Future of Income Inequality,” presentation, September 23, 2013.

According to polls conducted during the fall of 2013, there was little opposition to raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$9 or \$10 per hour:

- ▶ 71 percent favored increasing the minimum wage from \$7.25/hour to \$10/hour, 35 percent strongly. Only 24 percent were opposed, 7 percent strongly.¹²⁷
- ▶ 69 percent would vote for a law that would raise the federal minimum wage to \$9/hour, with automatic increases tied to inflation.¹²⁸
- ▶ 33 percent thought minimum wage should be raised to \$9/hour, 36 percent to \$10/hour, and 25 percent would have it remain at \$7.25.¹²⁹

Support for a \$10 federal minimum wage has been strong since 2010 when 67 percent favored such an increase.¹³⁰ Opposition grows once the \$10/hour threshold is passed: 56 percent oppose a raise to \$12.50/hour, and 70 percent oppose \$15/hour.¹³¹

Support for a \$10.10 minimum wage varies by race, gender, and income level (but not by age). Eighty-six percent of blacks polled support such an increase, compared to 56 percent of whites; women support it by 67 percent compared to 56 percent of men, and lower-income people (earning less than \$40,000 per year) support it by 67 percent compared to 60 percent of those earning between \$40,000 and \$80,000 per year and 55 percent of those earning more than \$100,000.¹³²

127 PRRI American Values Survey, September 2013. In January 2014, 73 percent were in favor of raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour, 40 percent “strongly.” Pew Research Center/USA TODAY, January 15–19, 2014.

128 Gallup Poll, Nov, 2013. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

129 CBS News Poll, Nov, 2013. Retrieved April 30, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

130 Public Religion Research Institute Pre-election American Values Survey 2010, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2010/10/religion-tea-party-2010/>

131 NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, Dec, 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/wsjnbc12132013.pdf>

132 You.Gov, January , 2014. http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/9kn0zzd82j/tabs_HP_min_wage_20140129.pdf

Allies and Persuadables

Our strongest and most consistent allies in pushing for anti-poverty policies are Democrats, African Americans, and Latinos, who are significantly more supportive than other groups on a range of issues. They are more likely to attribute poverty to structural problems in society, more likely to prioritize specific anti-poverty policies and programs, and more likely to oppose reducing the federal deficit through cutbacks in aid to poor people. Low-income people are also allies, but they are a bit less firm in their support on several key indicators. For example, low-income people are less likely to attribute the inequality experienced by poor people today to conditions in society than are Democrats, African Americans, and Latinos (53 percent, as compared to 60 percent, 65 percent, and 56 percent, respectively).

Arguably, Republicans are the only demographic that does not fit into the “persuadable” column. Although Independents, women, members of various religious denominations, and Millennials are not as reliable as the allies identified above, each of those groups shows a stronger than average understanding or level of support on specific issues. A strong majority of independents subscribe to the structural explanation for poverty.¹³³ Women voice stronger opposition to cutbacks in safety net programs than men do, and a larger percentage of women than men believe the government should do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor.¹³⁴ A majority of white evangelical Protestants, white mainline Protestants, Catholics, and the unaffiliated believe it is the government’s responsibility to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves.¹³⁵ And a majority of Millennials recognize that racial discrimination plays a large role in determining who lives in poverty and who does not.¹³⁶

Public opinion research shows that there are real opportunities for moving the national discourse about poverty to a new level. Anti-poverty advocates can be optimistic that with concerted effort, many more people can be activated to support and push for improvements in the nation’s safety net and policies that confront and challenge the structural causes of poverty in America. The “rising American electorate”—unmarried women, people of color, and people under the age of 30—are all receptive to government action on behalf of poor people.

133 Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/04/15/april-2012-values-survey/>.

134 United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, November 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/nationaljournal/d/82601915-NJ-CC-Poll-Topline-Results-Feb-13>; PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2011, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/11/november-2011-rns/>.

135 Public Religion Research Institute, “Do Americans Believe Capitalism & Government are Working? Findings From the Economic Values Survey,” 2013, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

136 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

Recommendations

These findings lead to several clear recommendations for building support to address poverty. They call for changes to anti-poverty messaging and to the prioritization of audiences for persuasion and activism.

Narrative, Messaging, and Storytelling

Both qualitative research and comparison of differently-worded survey questions show that the way in which poverty issues are framed significantly affects audiences' perceptions and support for change. Emphasizing the value of equal opportunity, reminding audiences of high unemployment, describing a path from poverty to economic participation, and highlighting effective solutions improves perceptions of poor people and increases support for anti-poverty policies. We recommend that anti-poverty leaders and spokespeople adopt a shared narrative that is anchored by these pillars, with specific messages for different audiences and sub-issues tying back to the core narrative.

- ▶ **Lead with values.** A large body of research shows that starting conversations with shared values instead of dry facts or argumentative rhetoric is more effective in building support for social justice. A new narrative about poverty in America should begin with values already held by a majority of Americans:
 - **Equal opportunity.** Most Americans agree that one of our *big problems as a country* is that we don't give everyone an equal chance in life.
 - **Interconnection.** Americans increasingly see that we are all in it together when it comes to our economy, and agree that income and wealth inequality *hold back economic growth* to the detriment of the country as a whole. They also think *the increasing gap between the rich and the poor is bad for the country*, and that the government should do more to reduce the gap.
 - **Emphasize structural barriers to upward mobility.** Although the belief in individual responsibility remains strong, most Americans agree that *structural barriers stand in the way* of poor people who want to climb the ladder of social and economic mobility. All audiences need to be reminded whenever the opportunity arises that the main causes of poverty are structural and not individual. It is important to document and emphasize the unequal barriers facing different groups and communities, not just the unequal outcomes.
- ▶ **Show that solutions are possible.** Americans are tired of ideological debates. They want solutions. Although they are skeptical about whether poverty can ever be eradicated, Americans overwhelmingly agree that raising the living standards of the poorest among us is an important economic priority. Anti-poverty policies and programs that have demonstrable positive results, in addition to research pointing the way to positive outcomes, should be made more visible, as should the positive role that government plays in creating ladders of opportunity.

- ▶ **Start with solutions that have high levels of support.** A number of anti-poverty policies have been tested recently, and many receive strong majority support. They include:
 - ✓ Raising the federal minimum wage
 - ✓ Helping low-wage workers afford quality child care
 - ✓ Availability of universal pre-K
 - ✓ Lowering the cost of college
- ▶ **Engage on race and identity.** Even when facially neutral, the public discourse on poverty is frequently about race, gender, and ethnicity. Research and experience show, moreover, that if left unchallenged, subconscious stereotypes will infect attitudes about poverty and erode support for positive solutions. Activating audiences’ positive, conscious values of equal opportunity and interconnection, avoiding harmful stereotypes, amply documenting unequal obstacles, and lifting up common-sense solutions can help to counter those effects.
- ▶ **Show the connections.** The idea that we are interconnected and all in this together is crucial to the success of anti-poverty communications. Americans intuitively understand that increasing inequality and poverty hold back the economy and country as a whole and also create an environment in which serious social problems develop and worsen. But their thinking on poverty easily defaults to an extreme “personal responsibility” and “bad decisions” frame. Both showing and telling how we’re all affected and connected—through images, research, spokespeople, and storytelling, as well as specific messaging—is crucial.
- ▶ **Explain the role of less popular approaches on the road to opportunity.** It is important to both properly frame and adequately explain more complex or controversial anti-poverty solutions. Showing how some services help tide people over in tough times while others address root causes and enable people to move forward economically can build support over time.

Prioritizing Strategic Audiences

Key to building the national will to address poverty is activating the base of existing supporters while persuading undecided groups over time. That, in turn, requires prioritizing key audiences.

- ▶ **Activate the base.** The most fertile ground for anti-poverty policy and activism lies with Democrats, African Americans, and Latinos. These groups should be prioritized for organizing and calls to action. Advocates should give these target audiences opportunities to express their support for policies that are easily achievable, such as increasing the minimum wage, and then the target audiences can gradually be drawn into supporting other anti-poverty policies and campaigns.
- ▶ **Engage those most affected.** Public opinion research suggests that more work needs to be done to raise the awareness of low-income people themselves about the structural causes of poverty. Self-blame obstructs activism and encourages pessimism. One-third of people who describe themselves as poor or low-income think that they have little or no ability to change things for the better on issues that are important to them, yet they are much more optimistic about the power of other marginalized groups, including blacks, women, and gays and lesbians. A credible message of help, agency, and activism, as well as information about causes and solutions, should be a priority for this group.

- ▶ **Persuade undecided audiences.** We recommend reaching out to Millennials, independent voters, women, and people of faith on issues about which they are most concerned. Independents, for example, are extremely supportive of improving public education in order to reduce poverty: 94 percent of them think it is a high priority, compared to 77 percent of all respondents.¹³⁷ Millennials are more sensitive than other age groups to the role that racial discrimination plays in determining who lives in poverty and who does not. Messages linking poverty to racial and ethnic discrimination are likely to resonate with them.¹³⁸ A strong majority of Catholics agree that “society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal,”¹³⁹ and given Pope Francis’ emphasis on reducing world poverty, it is possible that this segment of U.S. society will become increasingly concerned about domestic poverty as well. White evangelical Christians may also be in play. According to the Rev. Jim Wallis of the progressive evangelical organization Sojourners, “Many evangelicals, and especially their younger generation, now see poverty as a fundamental biblical issue and believe budgets are moral documents.”¹⁴⁰ While only 35 percent of Republicans agree that “society would be better off if the distribution of wealth was more equal,” 53 percent of white evangelicals do.¹⁴¹

Further Research

Additional research is needed to fully understand and inform public attitudes toward poverty. As noted, few existing polls oversample populations such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, or LGBT Americans in numbers adequate to explore their views. Research of this kind is an important missing piece, as is multilingual polling that can reach respondents who are not fluent in English. These methods can help reach and understand fast-growing communities and many of those most deeply affected by poverty.¹⁴² Research is also needed to explore whether and how Americans connect poverty with economic forces and systems such as globalization, outsourcing, tax, trade, and immigration policies, as well as the decline of unionized workplaces. Qualitative and quantitative research is also needed to test specific messages, facts, images, and stories for their ability to inform long-term attitude formation and short-term decision-making. The views, voices, and ideas of people living in poverty should be a significant element of that inquiry.

137 The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, March 2014.

138 Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes about Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014.

139 Public Religion Research Institute, “Do Americans Believe Capitalism & Government are Working? Findings From the Economic Values Survey,” 2013, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

140 Electa Draper, “More than Half of Evangelicals Oppose Cuts in Government Funds for Poor, Survey Shows,” *Denver Post*, November 25, 2011.

141 Public Religion Research Institute, “Do Americans Believe Capitalism & Government are Working? Findings From the Economic Values Survey,” 2013, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

142 A recent national survey by The Opportunity Agenda did oversample Asian Americans, low-income Americans, and several other groups, and was administered in Spanish as well as English, where appropriate. Analyses from that research are forthcoming, and will be available at www.opportunityagenda.org.

Conclusion

The public opinion landscape presents major opportunities for building the national will to address poverty. Americans consider poverty to be a significant national problem and have a greater understanding of the challenges facing poor people than in past decades. They feel that government has a role to play in reducing poverty, and support several high-profile policy solutions. The fastest-growing segments of the electorate, moreover, are among the most supportive audiences. Yet, stereotypes and a lack of information about causes and solutions stand in the way of greater support for change. The task for those seeking to address poverty is to tell a new story, rooted in shared values, that informs, persuades, and activates key audiences.

Appendix

PUBLIC OPINION SOURCES

ABC News/Washington Post Poll, December 13–16, 2012

ABC/Washington Post Poll, March 7–10, 2013

Matt A. Barreto, Ph.D., Co-Founder, Latinos Decisions, “The Importance of Race and Ethnicity in Thinking about the Future of Income Inequality,” presentation, September 23, 2013

Bloomberg Poll, December 7–10 2012

Ronald Brownstein, “Poll: Americans Split on Concern for Very Poor,” National Journal, February 13, 2012

CBS News/New York Times Poll, July 2012

Democracy Corps Survey, December 2001

Fox News Poll, August 2013.

Gallup Poll Social Audit (April 1998)

Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, April 1994

Gallup Poll, June 20–24 2013

Gallup Poll, May 4–5, 2013

Gallup, World Values Survey, 1995

General Society Survey, National Opinion Research Center, August 2010

Hattaway Communications, “Message Memo: Expanding Support for Government Action to Build the Middle Class,” 2013, based on survey conducted in conjunction with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress, “50 Years After LBJ’s War on Poverty: A Study of American Attitudes About Work, Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net,” January 2014

Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Health Poll, October 2005

Daniel J. Hopkins, “Partisan Reinforcement and the Poor: The Impact of Context on Explanations for Poverty,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 2009, 90(3):744–764

Kaiser/Harvard Survey on Welfare Reform, December 1994

Kaiser/Harvard/Washington Post Role of Government Survey, September 2010

Kaiser/Harvard The Public’s Health Care Agenda for the 112th Congress Survey, January 2011

Kaiser Health Tracking Poll – Nationwide poll on the importance of Medicaid, June 28–30, 2012

McClatchy/Marist Poll Nationwide poll on spending cuts for Medicaid, December 4–6, 2012

Joy Moses, “Moving Away from Racial Stereotypes in Poverty Policy,” Center for American Progress, February 23, 2012

National Exit Poll, November 2012

NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School, Poverty in America Survey, January 2001

The Opportunity Agenda Human Rights in the US Survey, June 2007

The Opportunity Agenda/Langer Associates, National representative probability-based survey of 2,000 adults with oversamples of black men, Asian Americans and people living 200% below the poverty level, February–March 2014

Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll, April 2007

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Trust in Government Survey, March 2010

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, April 2012

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2011 March Political Typology

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years—Trends in American Values: 1987–2012,” June 4, 2012

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, July 2002

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Update Survey, July 2003

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Values Update Survey, December 2006

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Values Survey, March 2009

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll, September 2011

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2013 Political Survey

Pew Research Center and USA Today, January 15–19, 2014

Pew Social Trends Poll, January 2008

Public Agenda Foundation Slip-Sliding Away: Today’s Economy and the American Dream Survey, November 2010

PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey, November 2011

PRRI, American Values Survey 2012, September 2012

PRRI, Economic Values Survey, May–June 2013

Quinnipiac University Poll—Nationwide poll on cutting Medicaid spending, November 28–December 3, 2012

Reason Foundation/Arthur N. Rupe Foundation, September 13–17, 2012

Resurgent Republic Survey, April 2012

Max Rose and Frank R. Baumgartner, “Framing the Poor: Media Coverage and U.S. Poverty Policy, 1960–2008, *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2013

United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, February 2012

United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll, November 2012

Time and The Rockefeller Foundation, “A Woman’s Nation Poll,” August 31–September 15, 2009

Washington Post-Miller Center poll: American Dream and economic struggles, September 6–12, 2013

YouGov Omnibus Poll, January 2014

Media Analysis

Executive Summary

This media analysis examines U.S. mainstream media coverage of poverty, poor people, and poverty-related issues during three time periods: August–October 2009, August–October 2011, and August–October 2013. It is based on an examination of journalistic coverage and commentary in 16 mainstream newspapers, including 11 of the largest national newspapers in the country and five regional outlets; a selection of transcripts of public affairs programs from seven network and cable outlets; and posts from three right-leaning and three left-leaning blogs.

Based on this sample, our inquiry examines the dominant storylines, spokespeople, facts, and opinions to which consumers of mainstream news media are exposed. Our analysis and resulting recommendations are intended to foster improved reporting that will better inform the public about the causes of and solutions to poverty, while more fully portraying the reality of the lives of poor people. This report also offers guidance to anti-poverty leaders and allies seeking to build support for effective solutions.

Key Findings

- ▶ News reports carry five major storylines:
 - Poverty and children
 - The poverty rate and the “new poor”
 - The safety net
 - Health care and the poor
 - Anti-poverty programs
- ▶ A comparison of the three time periods in our study reveals no noticeable shifts in the content or tone of media coverage. There was, however, an increase in the volume of coverage between 2009 and 2013, as the economic crisis deepened and more people fell below the poverty line.
- ▶ News reports describe the plight of the “newly poor” sympathetically, with the unstated subtext that these “newly poor” are different from the “old poor.” Stories rarely describe those in deep poverty in detail, and unlike the newly poor, their voices are rarely heard through direct quotes. The implicit message is that the newly poor are victims of structural problems in the economy, while those living in deep poverty are poor for other (unstated) reasons.
- ▶ While news stories generally ascribe poverty to systemic causes, they do so fleetingly by mentioning in passing general trends such as plant closings and the scarcity of jobs.
- ▶ Commentary on opinion pages, blogs, and public affairs broadcasts reflect an ideological battle that mirrors the extreme partisanship in Washington, D.C., with conservatives arguing that people are poor because of bad choices they have made and that “government entitlements” create dependency that weakens us as a nation. Progressives argue just as forcefully that poverty’s causes are structural, not individual; that government has an obligation to address it; and that the nation as a whole will be better if poverty is reduced or eradicated.

- ▶ The widely disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender receives very little attention.
- ▶ While there is some coverage of promising anti-poverty programs, almost exclusively at the municipal level, media consumers received little information about the success or failure of state and federal policies that might pose solutions.
- ▶ In our sample of news stories, the sources of quotes were fairly evenly distributed among six different categories: anti-poverty advocates, service providers, poor people, experts, educators, and politicians. These voices were overwhelmingly sympathetic to poor people. They did not, however, deliver a coherent, solution-oriented narrative. Progressive voices outnumber conservative voices in our sample of print and broadcast pieces; in our sample of blog posts, opinions are more evenly divided.
- ▶ The dominant media narrative about poverty in America has several component parts: (a) poverty is a bigger problem than ever; (b) the government does not have a plan for eradicating, much less ameliorating, poverty; (c) there is a highly partisan debate among elected officials and commentators about the causes of poverty and what the government's role should be; (d) solutions are as elusive as ever.

In short, while journalistic coverage of poverty is generally evenhanded, and at times sympathetic toward some categories of poor people (such as the newly poor, the elderly, or those who are disabled), the media are not delivering the depth of inquiry or analysis necessary for the American public to make informed judgments about the causes of or solutions to poverty. The lives of poor people, and particularly those in deep and persistent poverty, remain unexplored. Important dynamics such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequity are going largely unreported.

Recommendations

Our findings carry significant implications for journalists, commentators, and news outlets that seek to improve their coverage. The findings also lead us to recommend changes in the media outreach strategies of anti-poverty leaders and organizations, particularly when viewed in light of our research on public opinion and social media discourse relating to poverty. Our recommendations include:

For improved coverage of poverty and poor people:

- ▶ **Examine systemic causes in greater depth.** Recent coverage of the systemic causes of poverty has been thin at best and, when it occurs, consists largely of cursory references to broad dynamics such as “high unemployment.” Journalists, anti-poverty advocates, and others who seek to obtain increased media coverage should focus increased attention on explanatory reporting and more nuanced storytelling that describes contributing factors.
- ▶ **Explore and explain unequal obstacles.** Researchers have amply documented the disparate obstacles that contribute to higher poverty rates among communities of color, women, immigrants, and other demographic groups. Yet our analysis found virtually no reporting on those dynamics. Reporting is needed to both explore and explain this evidence and to tell the human stories behind it and present the implications.
- ▶ **Identify and explain policy solutions.** Coverage of anti-poverty strategies currently focuses primarily on local programs and small-scale interventions. While this coverage is important and should continue, there should be increased coverage of state and federal policies and programs,

including a clear-eyed assessment of their effectiveness and impact. This includes policies dating back to the New Deal and Great Society eras, and newer interventions that are working around the country.

- ▶ **Avoid the simplistic “new poor”/“old poor” dichotomy.** While the recent media focus on the “new poor” has raised the visibility of certain poverty issues, the framing of those stories also tends to reinforce inaccurate stereotypes about poor people, and race, and obscures systemic factors (such as the decline of manufacturing jobs, shrinking wages, predatory lending, and unequal educational opportunity) that affect both recently- and persistently-poor people. Reporting should move beyond this illusory distinction and explore the barriers to economic opportunity facing all Americans.
- ▶ **Examine the causes and circumstances of deep and persistent poverty.** Americans who have faced poverty for years or generations rarely receive the kind of personalized, empathetic coverage that recently-poor people have been receiving. Stories about the challenges and progress of communities facing deep poverty are needed to ensure a full and accurate picture. Long-form broadcast journalism, both television and radio, can be particularly effective vehicles for telling a more coherent story about deep poverty in America. One of the most effective pieces included in our sample of broadcasts, for example, is a segment aired by NBC’s Dateline in 2011: “America Now: The Town that Jobs Forgot; Residents of Millen, Georgia, Dealing with Slowing Economy and Unemployment.”

For improved media outreach and anti-poverty communications:

- ▶ **Develop and deliver a coherent shared narrative.** A critical mass of conservative spokespeople are delivering a disciplined poverty narrative rooted in “personal responsibility,” government dependency, the centrality of marriage, and free-market capitalism. By contrast, anti-poverty leaders concerned about root causes and systemic factors lack a shared or consistent narrative. Experience shows that developing such a narrative, and delivering it consistently through a variety of messages and media, is crucial to both media visibility and audience engagement. Public opinion research indicates, moreover, that Americans are receptive to an anti-poverty narrative that emphasizes equal opportunity, interconnection, systemic causes, and common-sense solutions that give agency to people currently living in poverty. It is particularly important to advance solutions and their societal benefits, as many audiences are unaware of recent and historical progress and see poverty as an intractable reality.
- ▶ **Increase advocate presence in broadcast media.** While anti-poverty advocates have a significant presence in print news stories, their voices are largely lacking in broadcast media. Advocates and their organizations should be proactive in making themselves available to network and cable news outlets, including through rapid response to breaking news events and new research.
- ▶ **Connect journalists to “affected change agents.”** People living in poverty who are organizing with others to challenge systemic barriers and expand opportunity—an example of what The Opportunity Agenda calls “affected change agents”¹—are especially important spokespeople whom reporters are not currently finding on their own. These Americans have credibility through their life experiences; they break stereotypes, and serve to illustrate the systemic factors often overlooked in current coverage.

¹ The Opportunity Agenda, *Vision, Values, and Voice—A Communications Toolkit*, http://toolkit.opportunityagenda.org/documents/oa_toolkit.pdf, p. 20 (2013).

- ▶ **Translate research into media-friendly forms.** Much of the academic and think-tank research on poverty is dense and in a form that journalists find difficult to digest or report on. Yet new research provides a string of potential news hooks, and can be used to elucidate problems and solutions if clearly translated and explained. Research also tends to be inherently systemic, though work is often needed to connect abstract data with people’s lived experiences.
- ▶ **Package stories for busy journalists.** We recommend approaching reporters with a news “package” that includes compelling human stories that break stereotypes, reliable facts about systemic problems and solutions, well-prepared spokespeople, and clear action items, all tied to solid news hooks.
- ▶ **Step up blogging.** There is a relative paucity of anti-poverty posts in major political and policy blogs. Leaders and thinkers committed to addressing poverty should increase their blog presence, including by capitalizing on relevant news hooks and trending topics. Promoting relevant blog posts in other social media will also aid readership and the likelihood of posts going viral.

Introduction

The United States is one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. Known around the globe as a land of opportunity, the promise of economic security and mobility has long been among America's hallmarks. Yet in 2013, 46.5 million Americans—15 percent of our population—lived in poverty. Twenty million people, one-third of them children, lived in *deep* poverty, meaning their income was less than half of the poverty rate. This reality comes in the wake of a historic recession, a high-profile movement focused on inequality (Occupy Wall Street), and an ongoing political debate over safety net programs and the role of government. In this volatile environment, the way in which the news media cover poverty and poor people can tell us much about the nation's priorities and its collective resolve to take action.

This analysis examines mainstream media coverage of poverty, poor people, and poverty-related issues during three time periods: August–October 2009, August–October 2011, and August–October 2013. Based on this representative sample, our inquiry seeks answers to several questions: What were the most frequent topics covered in articles, broadcasts, and blogs about poverty and people who are poor, and did those topics change over time? Whose voices were elevated as sources for quotes in articles or as guests on television programs, and what messages did they communicate? What overarching story is the media telling about poverty in America today? And does that story help or hinder the mobilization of public opinion in support of anti-poverty policies that can bring about real and lasting change?

Studies confirm what has long been evident to those working in the anti-poverty arena: the mainstream media's coverage of poverty and the lives of people living in poverty is sparse. Lack of media coverage leads to invisibility, which results in a low level of public concern. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism conducts an ongoing weekly quantitative analysis of reporting by 48 outlets from five sectors of the media: network television news, newspapers, online news sites, cable news, and radio news.² The center's News Coverage Index shows that from 2007 through the first half of 2012, during which the official number of people living in poverty increased by more than 9 million people (from 37.3 million to 46.5 million), poverty coverage accounted for less than 1 percent of the "news hole" (the percent of newspaper or broadcast space that can be devoted to news as opposed to advertising). "It's fair to say," said project Associate Director Mark Jurkowitz, "that when you look at that particular topic [the coverage of poverty], it's negligible."³

While events occasionally cause blips of increased media coverage, they do not necessarily translate into the kind of sustained coverage necessary to bring about heightened awareness and political will. The spike in coverage of poverty issues after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 lasted barely a month, according to an analysis by Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).⁴ Much more recently, but outside of the time period covered by our analysis, the 50th anniversary of the start of the War on Poverty generated a significant increase in news and commentary. Whether that will lead to an increase in coverage over time is an open question. The chart below suggests that coverage of poverty has been increasing gradually since 2010, no doubt reflecting the media's growing interest in the effects of the Great Recession on the economy as a whole. Yet coverage today is still below the high point in 2006.

2 "Our Work," Pew Charitable Trusts, http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_detail.aspx?id=456.

3 Dan Froomkin, "It Can't Happen Here: Why is There So Little Coverage of Americans Who Are Struggling with Poverty?," Nieman Reports, Winter 2013. See also Mariana Garces and Steve Randall, "Media Not Concerned About the Very Poor," FAIR EXTRA!, September 1, 2012; Neil deMause and Steve Randall, "The Poor Will Always Be With Us—Just Not on the TV News," FAIR EXTRA!, September 1, 2007; Neil deMause, "Katrina's Vanishing Victims: Media Forget the 'Rediscovered' Poor," FAIR EXTRA!, August 1, 2006.

4 Neil deMause, "Katrina's Vanishing Victims: Media Forget the 'Rediscovered' Poor," FAIR EXTRA!, August 1, 2006.

FIGURE 1. TREND OF POVERTY COVERAGE IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA



Based on number of stories identified in a Nexis search of major U.S. newspapers using search terms: “poverty” AND (“poor families” OR “poor people” OR “low-income families”).

Poverty in Context

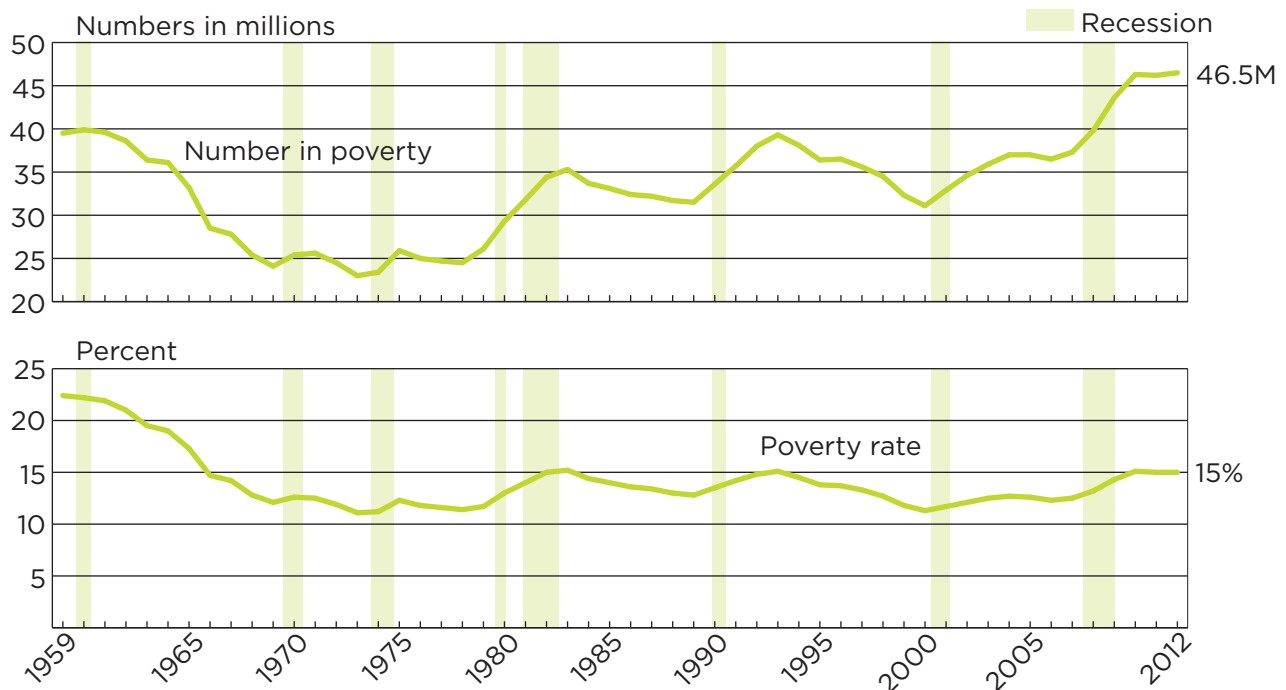
First some definitional explanations: when used by the media, the term “poverty rate” refers to the official rate established annually by the Census Bureau. It is based on the number of people living below an income “threshold,” which is in turn based on the size of a family and its number of related children under the age of eighteen. In 2012, the poverty threshold for a two-parent family with two children was an annual income of \$23,283. The definitions of other terms commonly used by the media, such as “the poor,” “low-income,” and “working poor,” are much more fluid. “Newly poor” is a more recent addition to the lexicon and refers to individuals or families who have fallen below the poverty threshold since the beginning of the Great Recession. “Deep poverty” describes people having incomes of less than half the poverty level. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 6.6 percent of the population—more than 20 million adults and children—experience deep poverty today.⁵ Unlike “situational poverty,” which is caused by a specific event such as divorce or loss of a job and is usually temporary, “intergenerational poverty” is the state of generations of a family being impoverished. Studies focusing on the intergenerational continuation of poverty find that while individuals can break out of intergenerational cycles of poverty, they are less likely to do so than is commonly thought.⁶

During the time span covered by this media analysis, from 2009 to 2013, the poverty rate rose and then stabilized at 15 percent, 2.5 percentage points higher than in 2007, the year before the Great Recession began.

⁵ Laudan Aron, Wendy Jacobson, and Margery Austin Turner, “Addressing Deep & Persistent Poverty—A Framework for Philanthropic Planning and Investment,” The Urban Institute, December 2013, p. 3.

⁶ Caroline Harper, Rachel Marcus, and Karen Moore. 2003. Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood: Life Course and Intergenerational Poverty Transitions. World Development 31(3): 535-554 cited in Robert Lee Wagmiller and Robert M. Adelman, “Childhood and Intergenerational Poverty: The Long-Term Consequences of Growing Up Poor,” National Center for Children in Poverty, November 2009.

FIGURE 2. NUMBER IN POVERTY AND POVERTY RATE: 1959 TO 2012



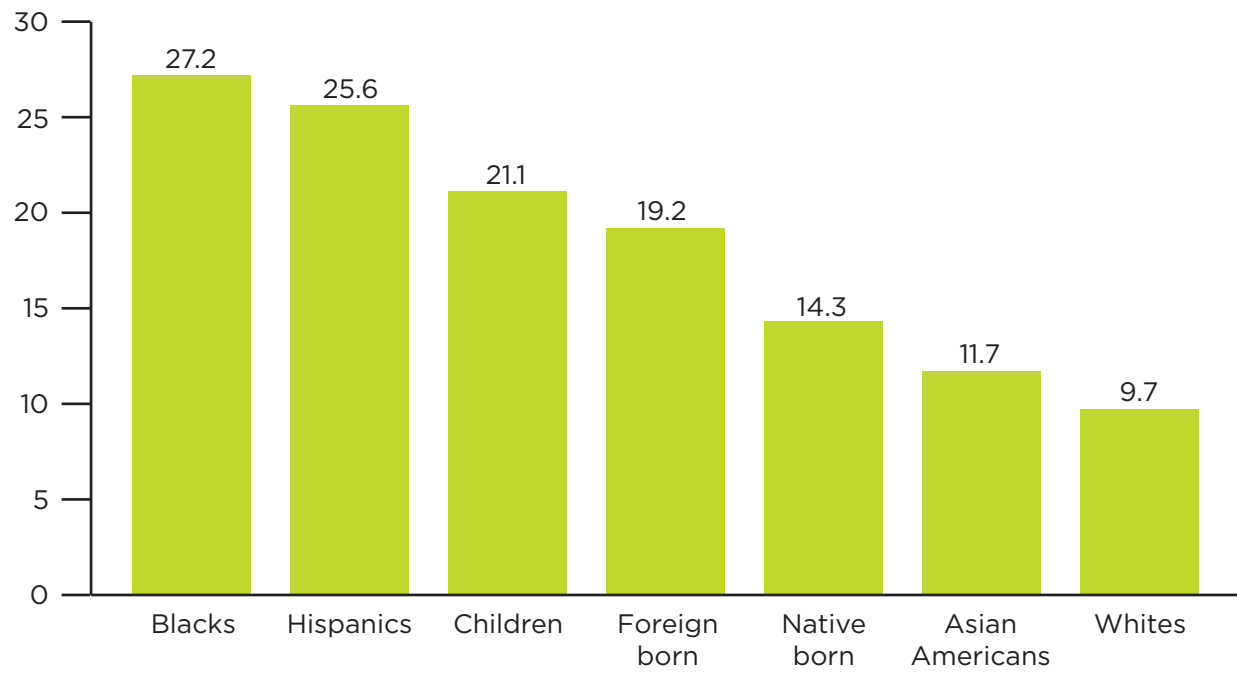
Note: The data points are placed at the midpoints of the respective years.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960 to 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

In 2012 the poverty rate among children under eighteen was 21.1 percent. The poverty rate for whites was 9.7 percent in 2012, compared to 27.2 for blacks, 11.7 percent for Asian Americans, and 25.6 percent for Hispanics. Numerically, those percentages translate into 31 million whites, 10.9 million blacks, 1.9 million Asian Americans, and 13.6 million Hispanics. The poverty rate for the foreign-born is higher than for the native-born (19.2 percent compared to 14.3 percent).⁷ Of the 20 million deeply poor, one-third are children under age 18, and blacks and Hispanics account for half of all deeply poor people. Three-quarters of the adults in this category have not worked in the past year, and more than two-fifths live in single-parent families, most of which are headed by mothers. The incidence of deep poverty is much higher in cities and rural areas than in suburban communities, and more than one-third of all deeply poor people live in central cities.⁸

7 Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, U.S. Census Bureau, “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012,” <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf>, 2013.

8 Laudan Aron, Wendy Jacobson, and Margery Austin Turner, “Addressing Deep & Persistent Poverty—A Framework for Philanthropic Planning and Investment,” Urban Institute, December 2013, p. 10.

FIGURE 3. POVERTY RATE PER 100,000 IN 2012



Source: A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

Methodology

This media analysis is based on an examination of the content of 16 mainstream newspapers, including 11 of the largest national papers and five regional outlets; transcripts of public affairs programs from seven network and cable outlets; and posts from three right-leaning and three left-leaning blogs.

Using the Nexis service database for print and broadcast media and the Radian6 database for blogs, we entered the following search terms: “poverty” AND (“poor families” OR “poor people” OR “low-income families”). Our search terms were deliberately broad in order to capture a wide range of stories dealing with poverty.

The time span for the search covers August 1 through October 30 during three different years: 2009, 2011, and 2013. We looked at three different years in order to gauge how the stories and media narratives about poverty were trending over time. Because the volume of coverage of poverty-related stories has been relatively low, as noted above, we selected August, September, and October of each year in order to generate a large enough sample. During those months, two annual events occur that typically generate stories about poverty and the government’s safety net: the Congressional budget debate takes place every summer in anticipation of the beginning of the federal government’s new fiscal year in October, and the government releases the Census Bureau’s report, “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage.”

The searches produced a pool of hundreds of print articles, broadcast transcripts, and blog postings, from which a sample was drawn by applying a random sequence generator to ensure a representative sample. The final sample contained 70 newspaper articles, 32 television transcripts, and 18 blog posts, for a total of 120 items.

The newspapers, television outlets, and blogs included in the analysis were:

National Newspapers	Circulation
<i>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	196,200
<i>The Boston Globe</i>	232,432
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	268,803
<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	174,876
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	616,606
<i>The New York Times</i>	951,063
<i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	356,189
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	241,330
<i>USA Today</i>	1,826,622
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	2,092,523
<i>The Washington Post</i>	578,482

Regional Newspapers	Circulation
<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i> (Little Rock, Ark.)	185,222
<i>The Clarion-Ledger</i> (Jackson, Miss.)	65,300
<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i> (Columbus, Ohio)	170,179
<i>The Denver Post</i> (Denver, Colo.)	333,675
<i>The Times-Picayune</i> (New Orleans, La.)	157,068

Television
ABC News
CBS News
NBC News
CNN
MSNBC
Fox News Network
PBS NewsHour

Left-Leaning Blogs	Right-Leaning Blogs
<i>The Huffington Post</i>	<i>Breitbart</i>
<i>The Nation</i>	<i>National Review</i>
<i>Talking Points Memo</i>	<i>Red State</i>

It is important to note some of the limitations of this research. The Nexis database of articles and transcripts does not deliver images, so we are not able to comment on how people living in poverty are visually depicted in photographs or broadcasts. We did not include *local* print or broadcast media in our scan, nor did we include how poverty is depicted by the entertainment media. We did, however, conduct an analysis of how poverty is being discussed in social media; those findings appear on page III-8.

Findings

Based on our sample, journalistic reportage about poverty can be characterized as a “bad news/good news” story. On the negative side are reports about the huge increase in poverty resulting from the Great Recession, accompanied by cuts in safety net programs due to partisan budget struggles in Washington and the diminishing resources of states and localities during a time of economic setbacks. On the other side, we found a significant number of positive news reports about successes in tackling poverty, all of which occurred at the local level. These include stories about new approaches to educating poor children and strengthening impoverished communities through a range of support services.

A different story plays out on opinion pages, blogs, and public affairs broadcasts. There we see an ideological battle that mirrors the extreme partisanship in Washington, D.C. Conservative talk show hosts, commentators, politicians, and experts argue that “government entitlements” create dependency and weaken us as a nation. They overwhelmingly attribute poverty to the demise of the two-parent family and the rise in “out-of-wedlock” births. Progressives argue, just as forcefully, that poverty’s causes are structural rather than individual, that government has an obligation to eradicate poverty, and that the nation as a whole will be better for it. There are few centrist commentators in the debate.

While news reporters generally ascribe poverty to systemic causes, they do so fleetingly, mentioning in passing plant closings, low educational levels, a shift from full-time to part-time work, the collapse of the housing industry, and even more generally, “a weak economy” and “not enough employment.” The disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender receives practically no attention. In other words, the depth of news coverage of the causes of poverty does not equip media consumers to evaluate the claims of progressives or of conservative commentators.

In our samples, the increase in the rate of poverty and the phenomenon of the “newly poor” are frequent subjects. Their plight is described sympathetically and is often told through the words of people who were once members of the middle class and are now unemployed and reluctantly receiving public assistance. The unstated subtext is that these “newly poor” are different from the “old poor.” In stories about deep poverty, however, the life circumstances of people living in “poverty-stricken neighborhoods” and children going to “high-poverty schools” are described in more general terms, and their voices are not often heard through direct quotes.

A comparison of the three time periods in our study does not reveal a noticeable shift in the content or tone of media coverage. There was a slight increase in the number of articles and broadcasts over time, from 2009 to 2013, as shown in Figure 1 on page II-6. The storylines are consistent from year to year and the ideological debate reflected in commentary hits the same notes throughout.

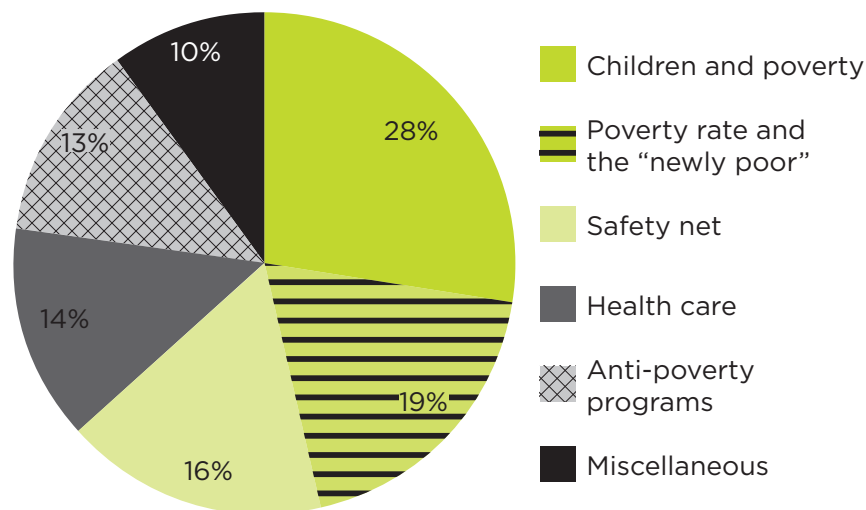
Whereas the 1960s were marked by a “War on Poverty,” and the 1990s by “Welfare-to-Work,” this sample of more than 100 media items lacks any coherent mention of a national plan or approach to ending poverty. In commentary, conservatives call for reducing “out-of-wedlock births” without saying how this would be accomplished. Progressive commentary typically calls for shoring up existing programs and, in one case, for a White House conference on poverty. Unlike issues such as immigration, where the president is widely quoted calling for policy reform, his voice is largely missing on solutions to poverty.

News Stories

Storylines

The topics in our sample fall into six categories. The most common stories are about children and poverty, which constitute 28 percent of the total. The poverty rate and the “newly poor” are the second most common at 19 percent of the total. Coverage of the safety net, health care and the poor, anti-poverty programs, and “miscellaneous” comprise 16 percent, 14 percent, 13 percent, and 10 percent, respectively.

FIGURE 4. STORYLINES



Source: *A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America*, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

Children and poverty (28%)

Half of the 25 print articles in this category are from 2013, and most focus on poor children and the education system, from pre-K through elementary school. The stories convey a sense of positive change, as they describe efforts in various locales to improve both the academic achievement and the social well-being of students in schools where the majority of children are poor. These articles stress the fact that reforms are based on approaches designed to address both academic and non-academic needs so that children from poor families can focus on their studies. For example, *The Boston Globe* reported that in addition to more computers, more professional development for teachers, and smaller classes, the schools in Lynn, Massachusetts, where 93 percent of the students come from low-income families, “have hired social workers, given teachers trauma-sensitive classroom training, and had the Lynn Community Health Center set up medical clinics ... in the building.”⁹ We also found several pieces about efforts to establish charter schools and school vouchers as alternatives to the public school system for educating poor children, and opposition from both government and educators.¹⁰

Several articles in this category focus on early childhood literacy and education, and a *Washington Post* story alludes to research showing that before the age of four, children from low-income families hear as many as 30 million fewer words than other children and come to elementary school less prepared

⁹ Steven A. Rosenberg, “Low-Rated Schools Show Improvement; Changes Made to Help Students Focus on Studies,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 2013.

¹⁰ Evie Blad, “Charter School Plans Face Opposition,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, September 27, 2009; Jillian Kay Melchior, “DOJ vs. Louisiana School Choice: A Cynical Maneuver,” *National Review Online*, September 24, 2013.

than their peers.¹¹ Articles also point out that in spite of the efficacy of pre-K education programs, the country is a long way from providing universal pre-K, and low-income families who cannot afford private programs are left fighting over a limited number of seats.¹² *The Columbus Dispatch* reported on the release of a study by the Pre-K Now Campaign, which revealed that Ohio slashed preschool programs more than any other state, resulting in fewer seats for low-income children.¹³

The most in-depth coverage in our sample was a broadcast segment on MSNBC in September 2009 that discussed the question of whether the solution to childhood poverty rested with the individual family or with society as a whole.¹⁴ Journalist and author Michelle Bernard hosted the MSNBC special, “About Our Children,” live from Howard University. Her guest, Bill Cosby, announced at the outset that “It’s time to talk about our children and their future. We have to talk honestly about our problems and solutions—parenting, health, education, poverty.” Bernard then set the frame by quoting Cosby: “The revolution begins at home.” For the most part, quotations from guest panelists Ben Jealous of the NAACP and comedian Paul Rodriguez, described as a “parent activist,” focused on their own upbringing, the mentors who influenced them, and the choices they made to overcome adversity. The third panelist, Maria Cancian, an associate dean and professor at the University of Wisconsin, who has published original research on women in low-income families, by contrast, stressed the need to expand opportunity.¹⁵

The poverty rate and the “newly poor” (19%)

Most of the articles and broadcasts in this category are pegged to the release of the U.S. Census Bureau’s annual report, “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage,” which comes out in September, and all of them lead with news of the escalating poverty rate. Some focus on a state or locality, others on national trends. Many recite the Census Bureau’s definition of poverty (in 2012, \$23,283 for a family of two adults and two children), and tally the number of poor people and the percentage of the increase since the beginning of the economic downturn. Adjectives like “staggering” and “discouraging” help paint a grim picture of the Great Recession’s impact on many American families. A sampling of headlines is illustrative:

- ▶ “Millions More Thrust Into Poverty; Decade of Headway in Household Income Erased, Census Data Find” (Carol Morello and Dan Keating, *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2009)
- ▶ “Poverty Seeping into Suburbs; Job Scarcity is the Main Reason for Increasing Numbers of Newly Poor” (Francine Knowles, *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24, 2011)
- ▶ “6 Million in State Live in Poverty; The Rate Creeps Up for the 4th Year in a Row. One in 5 Residents Lacks Health Insurance” (Alana Samuels and Duke Helfand, *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 2011)

The 11 broadcast segments in this category cover much of the same ground, highlighting the soaring numbers of people living in poverty and the fact that “more middle class are slipping into the ranks of the poor.”¹⁶ On-camera interviews with newly poor people are quite emotional. Some convey a sense of surprise and bewilderment on the part of people who thought they were economically secure but

11 Valerie Strauss, “There from the Start,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2011.

12 See, for example, Sarah Carr, “Fighting for an Early Edge,” *Times-Picayune*, September 19, 2009; Catherine Candisky, “Ohio Led States in Preschool Cutbacks,” *Columbus Dispatch*, October 23, 2009.

13 Catherine Candisky, “Ohio Led States in Preschool Cutbacks,” *Columbus Dispatch*, October 23, 2009.

14 MSNBC special, “About Our Children,” September 20, 2009.

15 Maria Cancian was recently nominated by President Obama to be assistant secretary for children and families (family support) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The University of Wisconsin’s news story by Megan Costello appears here: www.news.wisc.edu/22551.

16 “Record 46.3 Million Americans in Poverty,” *American Morning*, CNN, September 14, 2011.

now find themselves in hard times. In an illustrative segment on NBC News that focused on a once-prosperous community in Georgia, reporter Lester Holt interviewed a young woman:

Young woman: Maybe in the whole scheme of the world we weren't rich, but to us in Millen we were pretty rich.

Holt (voiceover): Whitley had grown accustomed to getting what she wanted. Now the family's restaurant was gone, the parents were unemployed and struggling to save their home. But Whitley was having trouble letting go. Her fall from privilege would be swift. It would compromise a childhood dream and bring her family face-to-face with something that just a few months before had been unimaginable. (ON CAMERA) Did you look around at some point and go, "These are the people I see on TV. These are those stories I read about and we're them."

Young woman: It's like, "We are the poor people." You know, "How did we get to this?"¹⁷

Other interview subjects expressed a sense of humiliation about their newly poor status and fear about the future:

Woman: Right now I'm living on approximately \$200 cash a month, \$360 food stamps. I do not have a full-time job on a daily basis. The safety nets are very important. And the more that they get cut, the scarier it is to think about tomorrow.¹⁸

The reported causes of the rise in poverty, usually noted fleetingly, are systemic, including plant closings, low educational levels, a shift from full-time to part-time work, the collapse of the housing industry, and, even more generally, "a weak economy" and "not enough employment." A more in-depth description of causes is found in a *New York Times* article about Reading, Pennsylvania, "a city of 88,000 that has earned the unwelcome distinction of having the largest share of its residents living in poverty, barely edging out Flint, Mich., according to new Census Bureau data."¹⁹ The article describes how the closings of several large plants in the past decade threw thousands out of work, and points out that Reading's educational level is far lower than the national average: just 8 percent of the residents have bachelor's degrees compared to 28 percent nationwide. This fact, the story explains, discourages companies from locating there.

Several articles feature specific families to illustrate the plight of the newly poor. They describe the families' changes in circumstance as both abrupt and radical. A *Los Angeles Times* piece, for example, quotes members of a family of four who were forced to live separately after the father lost his job as a mortgage broker.²⁰ A *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter writes that "fourteen months ago, Aurora resident Prentiss Bailey was going about happily living his life as usual. Today, he and his 10-year-old daughter live in a homeless shelter."²¹

The effect of "new poverty" on different demographic groups is a recurring theme. New poverty in the suburbs is the subject of several articles. Others point out regional differences, such as the Northeast "escaping with a lighter knock" than the Midwest and the West.²² In 2011, the elderly on fixed but

17 "America Now: The Town that Jobs Forgot; Residents of Millen, Georgia, Dealing with Slowing Economy and Unemployment," NBC News, August 14, 2011.

18 *American Morning*, CNN, September 14, 2011.

19 Sabrina Tavernise, "Reading, Pa., Knew It Was Poor. Now It Knows Just How Poor," *New York Times*, September 27, 2011.

20 Alana Samuels and Duke Helfand, "6 Million in State Live in Poverty; The Rate Creeps up for the 4th Year in a Row," *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 2011.

21 Francine Knowles, "Poverty Seeping into Suburbs; Job Scarcity is the Main Reason for Increasing Numbers of Newly Poor," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24, 2011.

22 Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, "Poor Are Still Getting Poorer, but Downturn's Punch Varies, Census Data Show," *New York Times*, September 15, 2011.

dependable incomes were reported to be faring better than those between the ages of 15 and 24, whose income had plunged 15.3 percent.²³ Race and ethnicity, however, are mentioned in only a couple of articles that point out that Hispanics, especially those born outside the United States, “experienced some of the biggest losses” in income, but that the poverty rate rose for all races.²⁴

The increase in poverty among children received some coverage. Two broadcast segments were pegged to a report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in August 2011.²⁵ The report’s findings got a mention on CBS News: “A new study finds a dramatic rise in child poverty in this country. From 2000 to 2009, it increased in 38 states. By 2009, almost 15 million American children were poor.”²⁶ CNN gave the report more coverage, including an interview with an unemployed couple who lived with their children in public housing. Their unemployment benefits had run out, and their power had been recently cut off. The mother said, “We did candles. We just, you know, some days during that six-week period, it was the kids who had to eat. We just had to make sacrifices.” Annie E. Casey Foundation spokesperson Laura Speer said, “We can’t forget about children as we make decisions in the fiscal crisis. We can’t cut these programs thinking eventually we might put money back into them because childhood is a very short time.”²⁷

Entitlement programs and the safety net (16%)

All 19 of the articles and broadcasts in this category describe political struggles over the funding of entitlement and safety net programs. Several are about threatened reductions in the food stamp program. These pieces are framed as conflicts between Republicans and Democrats. Many are from August and September 2013, when the rancorous budget debate was unfolding in Washington.

The inadequacy of some state cash assistance programs received some coverage. A 2013 study by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* revealed that the state of Pennsylvania was denying benefits in 8 out of every 10 cases because the applicants hadn’t complied with a new state law requiring every applicant to seek at least three jobs and document his or her efforts. The reporter pointed out that this is “a pattern being repeated in 17 other states.”²⁸ The *Denver Post* reported on an inquiry into the “cliff effect” conducted by a Colorado public broadcasting station. The cliff effect occurs when even a modest rise in family income can lead to the termination of a government benefit. The article focuses on the loss of subsidized child care faced by many poor working parents if they get even a small wage increase.²⁹

Also in this group are several articles about challenges faced by service providers in the nonprofit sector because of increasing demand. The leads in those articles emphasize scarcity and competition. For example:

“Hundreds of people form a line snaking down the side of the building, many having arrived hours before. They are assigned numbers to ensure there’s some semblance of order after fights began breaking out in line many months ago.”³⁰

23 Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, “Poor Are Still Getting Poorer, but Downturn’s Punch Varies, Census Data Show,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2011.

24 Carol Morello and Dan Keating, “Million More Thrust into Poverty,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2009; Francine Knowles, “Poverty Rate: 14.1%; More than 46 Million below Mark in U.S.,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 14, 2011.

25 Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Annual Kid’s Count report, <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/KIDSCOUNT.aspx>.

26 *CBS Morning News*, August 17, 2011.

27 *CNN Sunday Morning*, August 21, 2011.

28 Alfred Lubrano, “As Many as 8 of Every 10 Welfare Applications in 2013 Denied by Pa., Inquirer has Found,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 16, 2013.

29 Burt Hubbard, “The Cliff Effect,” *Denver Post*, August 18, 2013.

30 Heather Knight, “S.F. Food Banks Starving for Funds,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 20, 2011.

Health care (14%)

All of the health care articles and broadcast segments are about health insurance, and most of them are from 2009, during the height of the debate over health care reform in Washington. News-show segments from 2009 covered political opposition to the health care reform measures under debate and the affordability of insurance for low-income people. Anchor Judy Woodruff on PBS, for example, conducted a lengthy interview with Susan Dentzer, then editor of the journal *Health Affairs*, about the dispute in Congress over the size of health care subsidies the new law would provide to those who weren't poor enough to be on Medicaid, but who were too poor to afford health insurance.³¹

Print articles from 2009 covered much the same ground. The so-called Baucus bill, named for Max Baucus, chair of the Senate Finance Committee, was attacked by Republicans, who argued that "his plan spent too much on insurance subsidies for low-income people." Democrats said it "did not spend enough." Consumer groups and patient advocacy organizations criticized the bill for being "unaffordable for millions of Americans" because those earning 150 to 200 percent of the poverty level would have to pay 5.5 percent of their income for health insurance.³² By October, the struggle to reconcile House and Senate proposals was still ongoing, and the question of subsidies for low-income families was still an issue.³³

Four articles from 2013 covered the roll-out of the Affordable Care Act and the challenges and difficulties the new law faces, including the refusal of some states to participate in the expansion of Medicaid.³⁴ In an overview of the implementation challenges faced by the new law and by President Obama, "both substantive and political, and a degree of difficulty that has no historical parallel," the reporter noted that about 6.4 million poor people "will be left behind because they live in states that either have chosen not to broaden eligibility for their Medicaid programs or have not made a decision."³⁵

Anti-poverty programs (13%)

Most of the articles in this category cast anti-poverty programs in a generally positive light and described modest successes at the local level. Some of the programs are exclusively governmental, and some are public-private partnerships. All of these pieces target persistent or intergenerational poverty, and phrases like "poverty-stricken neighborhoods," "concentrated poverty," "breaking the cycle of poverty," and "escaping poverty" are common. They go into some detail about programmatic goals and strategies. For example, a *New York Times* article describes a Philadelphia program called Shared Opportunity as:

an attempt to break a cycle in which successive generations live in poverty. The program hopes to increase the number of children entering kindergarten with pre-literacy skills, and to increase enrollment in high-quality child care. And to reduce the impact on the poor of predatory lending and costly check-cashing services, it will offer financial counseling to help clients open bank accounts, raise credit scores, and reduce debt. The services will also help former inmates, who face some of the biggest challenges in finding work.³⁶

Other anti-poverty programs covered by the media in our sample include:

31 *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, PBS, September 22, 2009.

32 Lisa Wangsness, "All Sides Go on Attack As Senator Issues Health Plan," *Boston Globe*, September 17, 2009.

33 John Fritze, "Health Care Bills Leave Millions Uninsured; No Version Would Result in Total Coverage," *USA Today*, October 26, 2009.

34 Bruce Alpert, "State Refuses Another Provision of Health Law," *Times-Picayune*, August 23, 2013.

35 Karen Tumulty, "Obamacare is Here, with a Long Way to Go," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2013.

36 John Hurdle, "Making the Safety Net More Visible," *New York Times*, August 31, 2013.

- ▶ San Francisco’s plan to use federal stimulus funds allocated to the state to create jobs for low-income workers hired by local government, private businesses, and nonprofits³⁷
- ▶ Philabundance, a privately-funded nonprofit supermarket offering free items along with low-priced staples in one of Philadelphia’s poorest neighborhoods³⁸
- ▶ New York City’s “experimental anti-poverty program” that pays poor families up to \$5,000 a year for going to regular medical checkups, attending school, and keeping jobs³⁹
- ▶ The Harlem Children’s Zone, Geoffrey Canada’s nonprofit, offering a range of programs for poor children⁴⁰
- ▶ The W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s grant-making to organizations that come up with “effective family-engagement models” for low-income students⁴¹

The tone of these articles is generally upbeat, with positive quotes from program supporters and beneficiaries. A private sector employer who hired workers under the San Francisco program to use stimulus funds to create jobs said, “It has been a shot in the arm for us, absolutely beneficial. We have the technology, we have the equipment, but as the economy was drying up, so was our funding. ... What we didn’t have was the labor.”⁴² The executive director of the Robin Hood Foundation said of New York’s cash incentive program, “We’re thrilled with our partnership with the city and the results are very very promising.”⁴³ A 14-year-old student at the Harlem Children’s Zone Promise Academy said, “All the teachers want you to go to college. They’ll help you even on their lunch break.”⁴⁴

Race, gender, and immigration status

We found virtually no substantive news coverage of the links between poverty and race, gender, or immigration status. Some of the articles about the increase in the poverty rate mentioned in passing the differential rates based on race and ethnicity. A 2011 article, for example, reported that according to the Census Bureau, the poverty rate for blacks had risen to 27.4 percent, for Hispanics to 26.6 percent, and for whites to 9.9 percent.⁴⁵ Another article mentioned that although a decline in income was experienced by all groups, “the decline was felt most keenly by people born outside the United States,” and an expert explained that the statistics showed that immigrants “are on the most tenuous rungs of the ladder. When the economy gets shaken, they’re the first to get jettisoned.”⁴⁶

As will be seen below in the section headed “Opinion & Commentary,” gender plays a prominent role in the conservative argument about the causes of and solutions to poverty. But the relationship between poverty and gender was highlighted only inferentially in broadcast segments in which the interview subjects were poor mothers. The alarming rise in poverty among single mothers was mentioned in passing in a *New York Times* article about the 2011 Census Bureau report, which found that “more than 40 percent of households headed by a woman now live in poverty, which is defined as \$17,568 for a family of three.”⁴⁷

37 John Cote, “City to Pay for 200 Jobs Using Funds from Feds,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 12, 2009.

38 Alfred Lubrano, “Hunger Experts, Meeting in Phila., Stew over ‘Food Desserts,’” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 23, 2011.

39 Julie Bosman, “Cash Incentive Program for Poor Families Is Renewed,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2009.

40 Robin Shulman, “Harlem Program Singled Out as Model; Obama Administration to Replicate Plan in Other Cities to Boost Poor Children,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2009.

41 Rita Price, “Philanthropy; Family Role in Education Sought,” *Columbus Dispatch*, September 2, 2013.

42 John Cote, “City to Pay for 200 Jobs Using Funds from Feds,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 12, 2009.

43 Julie Bosman, “Cash Incentive Program for Poor Families Is Renewed,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2009.

44 Robin Shulman, “Harlem Program Singled Out as Model; Obama Administration to Replicate Plan in Other Cities to Boost Poor Children,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2009.

45 Francine Knowles, “Poverty Rate: 14.1% More than 46 Million Below Mark in U.S.,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 14, 2011.

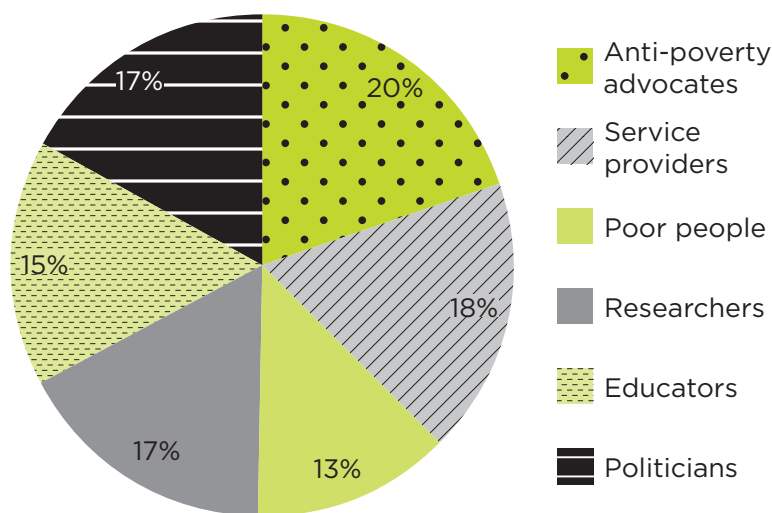
46 Carol Morello and Dan Keating, “Millions More Thrust into Poverty,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2009.

47 Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, “Poor Are Still Getting Poorer, but Downturn’s Punch Varies, Census Data Show,” *New*

Voices

The voices elevated in the news media as sources for quotes or as guests in the broadcast context play an important role in framing and positioning the way a story is told. Who gets quoted in news reports or selected for broadcast interviews, and what they say, influences the audience’s perception of an issue. Choice of sources also conveys the legitimacy of particular people or institutions on an issue. Our analysis of spokespeople looks at the types of speakers who appeared most frequently in print and broadcast news stories. In our sample, the types of sources were fairly evenly distributed across the six different categories, and these voices were overwhelmingly sympathetic to poor people. They did not, however, deliver a coherent, solution-oriented message.

FIGURE 5. VOICES



Source: *A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America*, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

Anti-poverty advocates

Twenty percent of the quotes in our sample come from leaders of anti-poverty advocacy organizations. A majority of spokespeople represent statewide organizations, examples of which include the Colorado Children’s Campaign, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights, Health Access California, Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, and the Louisiana Consumer Healthcare Coalition. Leaders of local and national organizations are also quoted, but less frequently than statewide organizations. Examples on the local level include Community Legal Services of Philadelphia and New York City’s Community Service Society, and on the national level, the D.C.-based Pre-K Now Campaign and the Poverty and Race Research and Action Council. The quotes from advocates did not have a unifying theme or narrative. Few advocates appeared in broadcast segments.

Quotes included:

“While the dramatic new numbers from the census depict working-class Americans newly fallen into poverty, it’s important to remember the long-term poor. People who’ve always been down are now down and out.”⁴⁸ – Advocate with the Food Research and Action Center

York Times, September 15, 2011.

48 Gary Pettus, “Summit Focuses on Reaching Poor,” *Clarion-Ledger*, August 18, 2011.

“The state refused to take advantage of increased federal subsidies to expand some health care services to poor families that need the assistance, so they will continue to do without and scrape together money that they don’t have.”⁴⁹ – Director of the Louisiana Consumer Healthcare Coalition

“We see poverty as this overarching umbrella that impacts every other part of the child’s well-being and success. The long-term implications for kids are tragic.”⁵⁰ – President of Colorado Children’s Campaign

Service providers

Eighteen percent of the quotes were from service providers representing food banks, homeless shelters, and free health clinics. Most of the individuals quoted were from local service agencies such as Opportunity House, a homeless shelter in Reading, Pa.; the San Francisco Food Bank; and the Arlington Free Clinic. Others were from state and local chapters of national organizations, including United Way and the Red Cross. Their quotes emphasized the increasing pressure on their agencies because of the growing number of people living in poverty.

Quotes included:

“I think the recession has really hit a lot of people who were probably doing OK but now are put below the poverty line. People are coming to us for emergency assistance, food, shelter, clothes. The numbers are extraordinary.”⁵¹ – Chief executive officer, Catholic Charities

“When I first started here in ’08, if we had 80 families, 90 families come in one distribution day, that was a big day. Now we have routinely 260, 280 families come.”⁵² – Executive director, Aurora Area Food Pantry.

“People are here because they honestly and truly can’t find work. It didn’t used to be that way.”⁵³ – Director of a homeless shelter

Politicians

The politicians quoted represent both state and federal office holders and are equally divided between Republicans and Democrats. They constitute 17 percent of the quotes in our sample. Quotes from state office holders appear in articles about state budget battles, with Republicans and Democrats sparring over cutting back entitlement programs. The following statements by Michigan state representatives are illustrative:

Republican: “In this state, we are losing hard-working families and taxpayers and gaining people who were moving here for our entitlement programs. The bill is designed with the simple idea that there should be a safety net but it should not be a lifestyle.”⁵⁴

Democrat: “Sometimes you’ve got what’s fiscally sound, and you’ve got what is morally and ethically the right thing to do. Those don’t always jell well together. You can’t take grandmas away and put them on the street, and you can’t take milk from babies.”⁵⁵

49 Bruce Alpert, “State Refuses Another Provision of Health Law,” *Times-Picayune*, August 23, 2013.

50 Burt Hubbard, “Census Report: Comparing 2008 with 2000 Poverty Hits Harder across Front Range,” *Denver Post*, September 29, 2009.

51 Francine Knowles, “Poverty Seeping into Suburbs,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24, 2011.

52 Francine Knowles, “Poverty Seeping into Suburbs,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24, 2011.

53 Sabrina Tavernise, “Reading, Pa., Knew it Was Poor,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2011.

54 Monica Davey, “Families Feel Sharp Edge of State Budget Cuts,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2011.

55 Monica Davey, “Families Feel Sharp Edge of State Budget Cuts,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2011.

Members of Congress are, for the most part, quoted in the context of the extremely partisan debates over health care reform in 2009, and the lowering of the federal deficit by cutting back on the food stamp program in 2013. For example:

Democrat: “We want to eliminate fraud and abuse, but we’re not going to try to balance the budget on the backs of these disabled children.”⁵⁶ – Member of Congress, D-Ga.

Republican: “The role of citizens, of Christianity, of humanity, is to take care of each other, not for Washington to steal from those in the country and give to others in the country.”⁵⁷ – Member of Congress, R-Tenn.

Researchers and analysts

The quotes in this category, which are 17 percent of the total, are about evenly divided between academics and researchers and analysts from research institutes. Areas of expertise include health policy, economics, demography, and education policy. Institutes considered progressive-leaning, such as the Urban Institute, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, The Commonwealth Fund, the Center for American Progress, and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies are all represented. Only one researcher from a conservative institute (the libertarian Cato Institute) is quoted. Academics, all of them expressing a progressive outlook and emphasizing systemic causes of poverty, appeared as guest panelists in several broadcasts.

Quotes included:

“Poor and low-income children begin school as curious as affluent children. We know from research that what predicts their comparatively lower school success are the lack of sufficient ‘inputs’ into their educational lives.”⁵⁸ – Professor of Education, Stanford University

“There’s been a suburbanization of poverty. The notion of poverty being only in inner cities and isolated rural areas is increasingly out of step with reality.”⁵⁹ – Demographer with Brookings Institution

“We’ve basically seen a lost decade. We had a plutocratic boom. Then we have egalitarian recessions. Taken together, only the top ends are growing, on average. For the typical American family, the 2000s have been a disaster.”⁶⁰ – Economist, Harvard University

“The asthma problem here is really a problem of poverty. If you’re poor, you don’t have time, you don’t have money, you can’t get refills easily and you have triggers in the environment you can’t deal with. That’s what makes it so difficult to manage.”⁶¹ – Researcher, Urban Institute

Educators

School superintendents, principals, and teachers are quoted in stories about poor children and the educational system, and represent 16 percent of all quotes. Their comments tend to underscore the importance of providing social supports to students from poor families.

56 Patricia Wen, “Children’s SSI Program Examined; Research Cites a Cycle of Dependency,” *Boston Globe*, October 28, 2011.

57 Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “On the Edge of Poverty, at the Center of a Debate,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2013.

58 Brenda Bernet, “7 Poor Schools on List for High Marks,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, October 13, 2013.

59 Jason De Parle and Sabrina Tavernise, “Poor Are Still Getting Poorer, but Downturn’s Punch Varies, Census Data Show,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2011.

60 Carol Morello and Dan Keating, “Millions More Thrust Into Poverty,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2009.

61 Brigid Schulte, “D.C. Clinic Aims to Curb Epidemic of Kids’ Asthma,” *Washington Post*, October 13, 2013.

“I can’t teach science to a kid whose father went to jail the night before. Sometimes you have to let some of the academics go and focus on social and emotional needs.”⁶²
– Teacher in Cincinnati

“The traditional system hasn’t met their needs. There’s more than just academics at stake. It’s basically systemic poverty. They fall through the cracks in the first or second grade, and the rest of their life stays on that path.”⁶³ – Superintendent of proposed charter school system in Arkansas

Poor people

The voices of poor people represent 13 percent of the quotes, and they appear in both print and broadcast coverage. Many of the quotes are from the newly poor and describe a sense of fear and shame about falling into poverty and even homelessness. Another frequent theme is the difficulty of getting by on minimum wage jobs. For example:

“Just when someone is moving forward, the rug is ripped out from under them. This cycle pushes people deeper into poverty than they were before they took the job. This system needs to change in order for people like myself to forge a better future for myself and my children, one where I will never need to turn to public assistance again.”⁶⁴ – Woman discussing the “cliff effect”

“I always had my own place, my own car, bought my own food. I was making it. Then this happened. I’ve been working and paying taxes my whole life, and now all of a sudden I can barely get into the door for an interview. I’m a strong guy. I can work. I know I don’t belong here.”⁶⁵ – Man in a homeless center

Reporter: Ben and Sue Harbett’s comfortable life in Naperville, Illinois, has taken an abrupt turn in the last five years—they both lost their jobs.

Ben Harbett: I came home and said, “Remember how we thought things couldn’t get worse when you got laid off?”

Reporter: A solidly middle class two-income household became a non-income household. Once volunteers at the local food bank, they became clients.

Sue Harbett: I didn’t tell a lot of people. I told mainly my closest friends.

Reporter: Ben is working again, packing ties, but they have gone from an income of one hundred fifty thousand dollars to thirty thousand dollars.

Ben Harbett: We just have to live a different lifestyle for right now, at least.⁶⁶

62 Javier C. Hernandez, “Candidates for Mayor See Cincinnati as a Model for Schools in New York,” *New York Times*, August 12, 2013.

63 Evie Blad, “Charter School Plans Face Opposition,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, September 27, 2009.

64 Greg Kaufmann, “This Week in Poverty: The Expert Testimony of Tianna Gaines-Turner,” *The Nation.com/blog*, August 9, 2013.

65 Francine Knowles, “Poverty Seeping into the Suburbs,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24, 2011.

66 *NBC Nightly News*, September 17, 2013.

Opinion & Commentary

It is on the opinion pages of the print media, on left- and right-leaning television shows, and in the blogosphere that columnists, commentators, advocates, and experts debate the causes of poverty and the government's responsibility to reduce or eradicate it. We found 11 columns and op-eds, 11 broadcasts, and 12 blogs that, taken together, reflect an ongoing debate and a deep divide among these opinion leaders. Progressive voices outnumber conservative voices in our sample of print and broadcast pieces by a ratio of five to one. Since we chose to analyze an equal number of left- and right-leaning blogs, opinions are more evenly divided in our sample of blog posts. All three years are represented.

The progressive pieces carry a number of concerns and arguments. They can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ **Our political leaders and society at large have turned their backs on the poor. For politicians, including President Obama, ignoring poverty is a political calculation. For the general public, it is simply easier not to think about society's outliers.**

"Poor people are invisible in our nation's capital. Republicans defend the affluent, calling them 'job creators.' Democrats champion the middle class, and those boldest stand with 'working families.' The poor go without mention."⁶⁷ – Jesse Jackson

"The poor are invisible. The poor are growing exponentially in this country, but at the same time being rendered invisible. Poverty is at the periphery of our political conversation and it ought to be at the epicenter."⁶⁸ – Tavis Smiley

"In today's America, poverty and homelessness can easily seep beneath the wall we erect in our minds to define it."⁶⁹ – Charles Blow

- ▶ **By ignoring poverty we are losing the opportunity to create a better future for all of us. Endemic poverty saps our strength as a nation; dealing with it effectively lifts all boats.**

"Georgia cannot afford, financially or morally, to ignore child poverty. ... Children who live in poverty are more likely to have poor educational outcomes and poor health and to engage in criminal activity. The impact touches all Georgians. Persistent poverty prevents Georgia from becoming a prosperous state with educated productive workers and stable families."⁷⁰ – Clare S. Richie, Georgia Budget & Policy Institute

"Let's focus on reducing joblessness and poverty. Our next mayor must lead a citywide conversation about economic justice and how to implement policies that will increase the income and opportunities for all Bostonians. If effectively implemented, these policies could lift families and neighborhoods. To do less will maintain the status quo, or even worse, the gap will widen."⁷¹ – Don Gillis, Economic Development Industrial Corporation of Boston

"What I think we need to do is make sure everyone understands we are in this together. This is not about us against each other. The 100 percent benefits when people eat, when children get nourished. The longitudinal studies indicate children that get food stamps do better. They have a higher graduation rate from high school. More go to college. This is a benefit for our entire nation."⁷² – The Rev. Al Sharpton

67 Jesse Jackson, "We Ignore Poverty, But it is on the Rise," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 20, 2011.

68 Tavis Smiley on *CNN Newsroom*, August 11, 2011.

69 Charles Blow, "A Town Without Pity," *New York Times*, August 10, 2013.

70 Clare S. Richie, Georgia Budget & Policy Institute, quoted in "Georgia is Failing its Poor Families," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 16, 2009.

71 Don Gillis, Economic Development Industrial Corporation of Boston, quoted in "Poverty Must Be a Top Priority for Candidates," *Boston Globe*, August 17, 2013.

72 The Rev. Al Sharpton, appearing on *Politics Nation*, *MSNBC*, September 18, 2013.

- ▶ **Conservatives argue that “personal responsibility” is the solution to entrenched poverty and that the government’s role in ameliorating poverty should be a minor one. But the causes of poverty are systemic, and government—and society as a whole—have a responsibility to find solutions.**

“My colleagues on the other side of the aisle and newscasters like O’Reilly do not have a clue how poor people live. The fact of the matter is that a majority of poor folks work. The problem is that people might work one, two, three jobs, but they don’t earn enough now in order to support themselves and that’s a problem of our society overall.”⁷³ – Rep. Karen Bass, D-Calif.

“I cringe when I hear people say responsibility for student achievement and the blame for struggling schools rests largely upon parents’ shoulders. Why? Because that perspective slides into: We as schools, as teachers, as a society, can’t do anything with these kids. Their parents didn’t prepare them.”⁷⁴ – Tina Griego, *Denver Post* columnist

“Republicans have become the party of ‘blame the victim.’ Whatever your lesser lot in life, it’s completely within your means to correct, according to their logic. Poverty, hunger, homelessness and desperation aren’t violence to the spirit but motivation to the will. If you want more and you work harder, all your problems will disappear. Sink or swim. Pull yourself up. Get over it. Of course, that narrow conservative doctrine denies a broader reality: that there are working poor and chronically unemployed—people who do want to work, but who remain stuck on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder.”⁷⁵ – Charles Blow

- ▶ **The government can make a difference; anti-poverty programs can work.**

“In the age of inequality, such anti-poverty policies are more important than ever, as higher inequality creates both more poverty along with steeper barriers to getting ahead, whether through the lack of early education, nutrition, adequate housing, and a host of other poverty-related conditions that dampen ones chances in life.”⁷⁶ – Jared Bernstein, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

“SNAP benefits [food stamps] not only reduce food insecurity and poverty this year; they also reduce poverty in the next generation. Recent research that tracked children into adulthood found that families’ access to food stamps improved their infants’ health and birth weight. Children who benefited from the program later posted better health, higher educational attainment, less heart disease, and, for women, greater earnings and less reliance on welfare as adults.”⁷⁷ – Sheldon Danziger, Russell Sage Foundation

“The poor, we’re taught to believe, will always be with us. But we know how to reduce poverty. When Lyndon Johnson launched the war on poverty, millions were given hope. The Job Corps, Head Start, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps, the Teacher Corps, a rising minimum wage, and much more—these programs worked.”⁷⁸ – Jesse Jackson

73 Rep. Karen Bass, D-Calif., Politics Nation, *MSNBC*, August 27, 2013.

74 Tina Griego, “Morning Brew: Who Helps the Parents Succeed?” *Denver Post*, September 10, 2009.

75 Charles Blow, “A Town Without Pity,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2013.

76 Kevin Drum, “We Can Reduce Poverty If We Want To. We Just Have To Want To,” *Motherjones.com*, September 26, 2013.

77 Sheldon H. Danziger, “The Mismeasure of Poverty,” op-ed, *New York Times*, September 18, 2013.

78 Jesse Jackson, “We Ignore Poverty, But it is on the Rise,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 20, 2011.

Conservative arguments can be summarized as follows:

► **The main cause of poverty is the breakdown of the two-parent family and the rise of “out-of-wedlock births.”**

“If you do three things you won’t wind up in poverty. Finish high school. Don’t have a baby until you are married. Don’t have a baby until you are at least 20 years old. People who did those three things, only eight percent of them wound up in poverty. People who didn’t 79 percent wound up in poverty.”⁷⁹ – Journalist Bernie Goldberg

“Another area of great concern would be the fact that 73 percent of black babies are born out of wedlock. When this occurs, in most cases the educational pursuits of the mothers are terminated and the babies are condemned to a life of poverty and deprivation, which makes them more likely to end up in the penal system or the welfare system.”⁸⁰ – John Hayward, columnist

“The real cause of poverty is the breakdown of the two-parent family and births out of wedlock. No other social factor comes closer to explaining why some people are poor and others aren’t.”⁸¹ – Kyle Wingfield, columnist

► **The free enterprise system holds the best hope for pulling people out of poverty. The government should just get out of the way.**

“Public policy should promote free enterprise growth because the free enterprise system does not leave people behind.”⁸² – Kyle Wingfield, columnist

“Republican economic policies are good for the poor: Republicans encourage the creation of wealth, which tends to drive out poverty.”⁸³ – Nicholas Frankovich, *National Review* editor

► **Poverty programs and entitlements don’t work; they just make poor people more dependent on government handouts.**

“So now we have millions of poor people in America and the government is flooding them with entitlements. So in some states you can make up to \$40,000 in entitlements if you don’t work. That I believe is creating a poverty class that doesn’t want to work because they have enough. They get color TV, cell phone, computers; and it’s unending, it’ll keep coming in.”⁸⁴ – Bill O’Reilly, journalist

“Today, the government is issuing electronic benefits transfer cards and even recruiting for enrollment. The government is issuing free cell phones. This is not the dream [Martin Luther] King wanted. It’s the nightmare of dependence.”⁸⁵ – William Bigelow, writer for Breitbart

“We’ve had decades of government programs, entitlement spending. You still see the disparity numbers, you still have those numbers you’ve showed us earlier about the African-American unemployment rate, about the challenges to joining the middle class. The reality is, it’s time for a new approach.”⁸⁶ – Bobby Jindal, governor of Louisiana

79 Bernie Goldberg on *The O’Reilly Factor*, Fox News Network, October 12, 2011.

80 John Hayward, “Ben Carson Tells It Straight,” Breitbart.com, August 28, 2013.

81 Kyle Wingfield, “Expose Real Roots of Poverty,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 23, 2011.

82 Kyle Wingfield, “The Spirit of Reagan in Rubio,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 28, 2011.

83 Nicholas Frankovich, “Conservative Catholics, the GOP, and the Pope,” National Review Online, August 3, 2013.

84 Bill O’Reilly, *The O’Reilly Factor*, Fox News Network, September 12, 2013.

85 William Bigelow, “Allen West Illuminates the True Unfulfilled Parts of MLK’s Dream,” Breitbart.com, August 29, 2013.

86 Bobby Jindal on *Meet the Press*, NBC News, August 25, 2013.

Dominant Media Narrative

Taken together, the story the mainstream media is telling about poverty in America has several component parts:

- ▶ Poverty is a bigger problem than ever. The safety net has helped, but it has not prevented millions more Americans from falling into poverty during the Great Recession. Many children are affected.
- ▶ The federal government doesn't have a plan. Some local governments are experimenting with anti-poverty programs, but their approach is piecemeal.
- ▶ Liberals and conservatives disagree about what causes poverty and what the government's responsibility should be in ameliorating its effects.
- ▶ The poverty rate rises and falls with the state of the economy and is largely beyond our control. Solutions to this problem are elusive.

Recommendations

Our findings carry significant implications for journalists, commentators, and news outlets that seek to improve their coverage. The findings also lead us to recommend changes in the media outreach strategies of anti-poverty leaders and organizations, particularly when viewed in light of our research on public opinion and social media discourse relating to poverty. Our recommendations include:

For improved coverage of poverty and poor people:

- ▶ **Examine systemic causes in greater depth.** Coverage of the systemic causes of poverty has been thin at best and, when it occurs, consists largely of cursory references to broad dynamics like “high unemployment.” Journalists, anti-poverty advocates, and other seeking improved coverage should focus increased attention on explanatory reporting and more nuanced storytelling about contributing factors.
- ▶ **Explore and explain unequal obstacles.** Researchers have amply documented the disparate obstacles that contribute to higher poverty rates among communities of color, women, immigrants, and other demographic groups. Yet our analysis found virtually no reporting on those dynamics. Reporting is needed to both explore and explain this evidence, and to tell the human stories and implications behind it.
- ▶ **Identify and explain policy solutions.** Coverage of anti-poverty strategies currently focuses primarily on local programs and small-scale interventions. While this coverage is important and should continue, there should be increased coverage of state and federal policies and programs, including a clear-eyed assessment of their effectiveness and impact. This includes both New Deal and Great Society era policies, and newer interventions that are working around the country.
- ▶ **Avoid the simplistic “new poor”/“old poor” dichotomy.** While the recent media focus on the “new poor” has raised the visibility of certain poverty issues, the framing of those stories also tends to reinforce inaccurate stereotypes about poor people, and race, and obscures systemic factors (such as the decline of manufacturing jobs, shrinking wages, predatory lending, and unequal educational opportunity) that affect both recently- and persistently-poor people. Reporting should move beyond this illusory distinction and explore the barriers to economic opportunity facing all Americans.
- ▶ **Examine the causes and circumstances of deep and persistent poverty.** Americans who have faced poverty for years or generations rarely receive the kind of personalized, empathetic coverage that recently-poor people have been receiving. Stories about the challenges and progress of communities facing deep poverty are needed to ensure a full and accurate picture. Long-form broadcast journalism, both television and radio, can be particularly effective vehicles for telling a more coherent story about deep poverty in America. One of the most effective pieces included in our sample of broadcasts, for example, is a segment aired by NBC’s Dateline in 2011: “America Now: The Town that Jobs Forgot; Residents of Millen, Georgia, Dealing with Slowing Economy and Unemployment.”

For improved media outreach and anti-poverty communications:

- ▶ **Develop and deliver a coherent shared narrative.** A critical mass of conservative spokespeople are delivering a disciplined poverty narrative rooted in “personal responsibility,” government dependency, the centrality of marriage, and free market capitalism. By contrast,

anti-poverty leaders concerned about root causes and systemic factors lack a shared or consistent narrative. Experience shows that developing such a narrative, and delivering it consistently through a variety of messages and media, is crucial to both media visibility and audience engagement. Public opinion research indicates, moreover, that Americans are receptive to an anti-poverty narrative that emphasizes equal opportunity, interconnection, systemic causes, and common-sense solutions that give agency to people currently living in poverty. It is particularly important to advance solutions and their societal benefits, as many audiences are unaware of recent and historical progress and see poverty as an intractable reality.

- ▶ **Increase advocate presence in broadcast media.** While anti-poverty advocates have a significant presence in print news stories, their voices are largely lacking in broadcast media. Advocates and their organizations should be proactive in making themselves available to network and cable news outlets, including through rapid response to breaking news events and new research.
- ▶ **Connect journalists to “affected change agents.”** People living in poverty who are organizing with others to challenge systemic barriers and expand opportunity—an example of what The Opportunity Agenda calls “affected change agents”⁸⁷—are especially important spokespeople whom reporters are not currently finding on their own. These Americans have credibility through their life experiences, break stereotypes, and illustrate the systemic factors that are often overlooked in current coverage.
- ▶ **Translate research into media-friendly forms.** Much of the academic and think-tank research on poverty is dense and in a form that journalists find difficult to digest or report on. Yet new research provides a string of potential news hooks, and can be used to elucidate problems and solutions if clearly translated and explained. Research also tends to be inherently systemic, though work is often needed to connect abstract data with people’s lived experiences.
- ▶ **Package stories for busy journalists.** We recommend approaching reporters with a news “package” that includes compelling human stories that break stereotypes, reliable facts about systemic problems and solutions, well-prepared spokespeople, and clear action items, all tied to solid news hooks.
- ▶ **Step up blogging.** There is a relative paucity of anti-poverty posts in major political and policy blogs. Leaders and thinkers committed to addressing poverty should increase their blog presence, including by capitalizing on relevant news hooks and trending topics. Promoting relevant blog posts in other social media will also aid readership and the likelihood of posts going viral.

87 The Opportunity Agenda, Vision, Values, and Voice—A Communications Toolkit, http://toolkit.opportunityagenda.org/documents/oa_toolkit.pdf, p. 20 (2013).

Social Media Scan

Executive Summary

This report examines social media content and activity on issues of poverty and poor people in the United States. As Americans increasingly turn to interactive platforms like Facebook and Twitter for news, conversation, and activism, examining social media trends has become crucial to a full understanding of public opinion. To further that understanding, the report examines social media discourse on the causes of and solutions to poverty, the volume and nature of conversations and comments, and the forms of activism that are receiving the most traction.

A vast majority of Americans are online; 85 percent of U.S. adults 18 and over use the Internet. Internet use is strongly related to age, education, and household income. Ninety-five percent of teens age 12–17 use the Internet,¹ which is in line with 18–29-year-olds (98 percent) and 30–49-year-olds (92 percent). Notably, Hispanic adults and teens are underrepresented, as are adults age 65 and over.² In addition, adults with a high school education or less and adults with household incomes under \$30,000 per year are less likely to use the Internet. Adults in rural households are slightly less likely to use the Internet than their urban and suburban counterparts.

A majority of adults (91 percent) use the Internet to find information using a search engine; 78 percent use the Internet to get news; 67 percent to visit a local, state, or federal government website; 67 percent to use a social networking site; 61 percent to look for news or information about politics; 32 percent to read someone else’s online journal or blog; 32 percent to post comments to an online news group; website, blog, or photo site; 16 percent to use Twitter; and 14 percent to create or work on their own online journal or blog.³ As of 2010, a majority of Americans (59 percent) get news from a combination of online and offline sources, with the Internet ranking as the third most popular medium, behind local and national television news.⁴ Social networking sites are increasingly used to distill, evaluate, and respond to news.⁵ Familiarity with news and current events has always driven social engagement, and this experience is widespread online as well.

Key Findings

- ▶ Political events, such as elections or speeches, and statistics or findings from new research drove the discourse and received the most attention.
- ▶ Content that was most likely to trend or “go viral” was humorous or satirical in nature, and tended to take a progressive stance on the causes of and solutions to poverty. Video and Twitter content effectively used satire and were shared more frequently, showing greater promise for “going viral.”

1 Pew Internet Teens and Privacy Management Survey, July 26–September 30, 2012. N=802 parents of teens ages 12–17 and 802 teens ages 12–17. Margin of error is ±4.5 percentage points.

2 Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project Spring Tracking Survey, April 17–May 19, 2013. N=2,252 adults. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones. Margin of error is ±2.3 percentage points for results based on internet users.

3 Pew Internet & American Life Project Tracking surveys (March 2000–December 2012). Please note that the wording for some items has been abbreviated. For full question wording, please refer to the questionnaire.

4 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Understanding the Participatory News Consumer. Online News Survey, December 28, 2009–January 19, 2010. N=2,259 national adults 18 and over, and N=1,675 Internet users. Margin of error for national adults is ±2.3 percentage points. Margin of error for internet users is ±2.7 percentage points.

5 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Understanding the Participatory News Consumer.

- ▶ Platforms and voices with the greatest reach and the highest engagement overwhelmingly painted a sympathetic picture of Americans living in poverty, and framed the issue thematically by drawing attention to systemic causes of poverty in America, such as the lack of good jobs or the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with the cost of living. They also painted a thematic picture by presenting research and statistics that demonstrated the pervasiveness and impact of poverty in the United States.
- ▶ Among the “high visibility” content, progressive-leaning themes and narratives outweighed conservative narratives, with more content focusing on preserving and expanding government programs and advocating for good jobs and fair wages. The theme of personal responsibility emerged very infrequently in the content that reached the most audiences and was typically tied to conservative politicians. Republicans were painted, particularly during the election, as out of touch with the poor, at best, or hateful toward the poor, at worst. Republicans were less successful in painting Democrats as ineffectual, at least in the media that engaged the most people, although this theme does emerge in general public discourse.
- ▶ *The Huffington Post* engaged by far the most people through commenting, sharing, voting, and tweeting but tended to focus on politics or government. Other high-profile outlets that reached significant audiences, such as National Public Radio (NPR) and *The New York Times*, looked at the intersection of poverty and other social justice issues such as gender and criminal justice.
- ▶ Individuals who engaged the most people on Twitter also tended to take a progressive-leaning stance on causes and solutions to poverty. High-profile tweeters cited jobs, wages, and early education as solutions to poverty, although government programs received little attention (except from advocacy organizations). Many of these high-profile tweeters linked to additional content such as articles or reports, but some also expressed their own opinions, including the notion that a significant barrier for people living in poverty is overcoming the societal perception that they aren’t capable of achievement. Jobs, education, and the criminal justice system received more attention by high-profile tweeters than the rest of the online public.
- ▶ Organizations (for example, news outlets, associations, advocacy groups, and foundations) and individuals with the broadest reach lean progressive and speak primarily about causes of and solutions to poverty. In contrast, the discourse generated by the wider public (individual accounts irrespective of reach) is split between conservative and progressive views and rarely addressed solutions.
- ▶ One of the narratives reflected in general public discourse was that government safety-net programs have failed or have actually made things worse for poor people. Almost every reference to poverty-alleviation policies focused on safety net programs, and there were few if any direct mentions of economic policies, such as deregulation, privatization, or corporate oversight, as contributing to poverty. This frame may be emerging, however, because there were indirect references to these concepts, particularly about the decline of quality jobs and livable wages, and readiness among many to blame “greedy” corporations.
- ▶ A persistent theme, even among those who are sympathetic to poor people, is that the cycle of poverty is cultural and reflects the values and mentality of the poor. Frequently poverty is depicted as a family issue, and these frames put the problem beyond the influence of government or society. At worst, the discourse depicts poor people as incompetent, lazy, irresponsible, and parasitic. Many express the belief that poor people take advantage of the system at taxpayers’ expense. These narratives assert that poor people are the reason for their own poverty, and they are the only ones who can get themselves out of it.

- ▶ Conservative voices are extremely cohesive. They have a shared vision of who poor people are, what causes poverty, and what, if anything, can be done to alleviate poverty in the United States. By contrast, anti-poverty and progressive discourse generally fails to communicate a common idea of who poor people are, the challenges they face, why they are poor, or what can be done about it.
- ▶ As solutions to poverty, there is significant support for improved education, reproductive freedom, and government involvement with job creation and wages, even among some conservatives. Education, in particular, receives support across the ideological divide.
- ▶ There is a shared sense that the middle class is not very far away from poverty, potentially making it more of a universal concern.

Recommendations

- ▶ **Two-way communication:** The networked, relatively inexpensive, and ubiquitous nature of social media in the United States and many other countries is transforming the meaning of “mass communications,” which had previously been one-way, expensive, and highly exclusive. When planning for a social media strategy, prepare for a real-time, two-way communication.
- ▶ **Perceptions of poor people:** Given the ideological divide regarding the responsibility, morals, and agency of poor people, it is important to provide a fuller and more accurate picture of their lives, especially from people who are themselves living in poverty. We recommend elevating the reality and voices of the millions of poor people who are working multiple jobs, struggling for work, juggling family, health, and economic responsibilities, and others confronting systemic obstacles with dignity and agency.
- ▶ **Government programs:** Despite the research demonstrating that many programs such as Social Security and Medicaid/Medicare have alleviated poverty, the narrative that government programs are ineffective or harmful is a persistent one. Its proponents consistently make high-level attacks on “programs,” while anti-poverty voices are often jargony and “in the weeds” with regard to specific policies, which can be overwhelming to audiences. Advocates should prioritize a clear, often-repeated story about the success of the programs, including at the “big picture” level, while coherently conveying the impact of deregulation, tax policy, and other less-discussed policies.
- ▶ **New solutions:** At the state and local levels, there is a relative paucity of successful discussion or debate about emerging approaches to the causes of poverty. Elevating concrete examples will build hope and public resolve while presenting ideas and information across regions.
- ▶ **Audiences:** Overarching social media strategy should engage the base of existing supporters, persuade important undecided constituencies, and minimize the influence of opponents. An important persuadable group are those sympathetic to the plight of poor people but who attribute poverty largely to vague concepts outside of anyone’s control, such as “culture,” “mentality,” or “history.” These persuadables need a new frame that offers clear structural causes and pragmatic solutions, linked to shared values. Anti-poverty proponents should also ensure that existing supporters have immediate opportunities to take action, both online and through other activities. While we recommend against expending resources to try to persuade hard-core opponents, it remains important to counter their influence with persuadables through a proactive message that communicates our position, rather than try to dismantle the opposing narrative by repeating it.

- ▶ **Platforms:** *The Huffington Post*, which was represented in our sample more than other mainstream media sites, is engaging in meaningful dialogue about poverty in the United States, is friendly to progressive stories and solutions concerning poverty, and is equipped with the online infrastructure to blast our messages out to the progressive base and persuadables. In addition, potential allies with significant followings on social media networks like Twitter can elevate messages in the discourse, and push them out to millions more people. Engaging less traditional allies as spokespeople, such as musicians, comedians, media personalities, and politicians, can boost visibility. Incorporating comedy or satire, moreover, can lead to content going viral. Twitter is also underutilized as a platform for engaging people to take action, and advocates should better balance content-sharing and distribution with actionable solutions. For Facebook pages and Twitter streams, advocates should aim for a greater diversity and better balance of post “types”—action items, news stories, snapshots of statistics, infographics, videos, etc.—as well as employ a greater variety of calls to action. Oxfam America, which only rarely appeared in the sample content of this study because of its focus on international poverty, is an excellent example of an organization that makes use of balance and variety to maximize engagement with followers and fans.
- ▶ **Voices:** Although the most prominent voices tended to take a sympathetic stance on poor people in America, a number of voices with significant followings promoted the harmful blame and “failed programs” frames. They don’t have as many followers and their content didn’t gain as much traction, but their message was more confident and unified. Further, the loudest voices on poverty, although sympathetic, avoided mention of government programs and certainly didn’t tout their success (in some cases they sided with the opposition on the “failure” of welfare.) Anti-poverty allies with the biggest megaphones should begin to come together around a common narrative on who poor people are in all of their diversity, and the causes and solutions of poverty in the United States. The voices of poor people themselves will be important to this effort.
- ▶ **Values:** The base and persuadables indicate that expanding opportunity and access to opportunity are constructive values in reference to poverty. The common good is also a useful value, although its most prominent articulation is currently limited (“You should be concerned about poverty because it might be you someday”). Fairness, in the abstract, is less useful because it emerged in the discourse only in the context of what is “fair” to taxpayers who bear the brunt of funding poverty-alleviating government programs. Pragmatism and American ingenuity are important values largely missing from this discourse.
- ▶ **Calendar preparation and rapid response:** The peaks of social media activity over the period we studied (see Appendix D) show a predictable pattern: national election events, the release of census numbers, anniversaries of anti-poverty and civil rights events, and major think-tank reports reliably increase online attention to poverty. We recommend that anti-poverty communications chart these events well in advance and prepare a multi-platform social media strategy that is proactive and builds on the activity of high-profile voices. The field should also be more intentional and collaborative about sharing and jointly promoting new research and analysis. These efforts should complement the readiness to respond quickly when relevant but unpredictable events occur.

Introduction

Debates about the causes of poverty, ways of addressing it, and the perceptions of the people within its group are as old as civilization itself. They appear in our faith traditions and texts, in our political contests, in social movements, in our literary works, and in news and entertainment media. Not surprisingly, they also appear in the social media that have emerged as influential forces in the 21st century.

Social media, however, are qualitatively different from virtually any that came before. For the first time in human history, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs enable everyday people to communicate with millions of other people around the globe—and allows those people to communicate back.

Understanding the public conversation about poverty in this evolving communications landscape requires a nuanced understanding of social media discourse. That is the purpose of this report: to analyze and explain social media content, engagement, and trends on poverty and poor people, with an eye toward opportunities for informing the debate.

Many of the questions examined in the report are the same as those that we would ask about traditional media (which we do in a companion report released with this one)⁶: What are the dominant narratives, arguments, and storylines? What are the most active outlets on the issue? Other questions are unique to social media: What types of statements or stories were audiences most likely to share or react to? Which went “viral” across networks? Where are people organizing and taking online action on poverty? These are relatively new frontiers but critically important to understanding where the public stands. And for people engaged in advocacy to address poverty, they provide critical new insights.

Analyzing social media discourse about poverty yields fascinating new information, insights, and recommendations, which we share in the pages that follow.

In order to understand both users’ engagement on poverty in social media and the attitudes reflected by their engagement, we’ve divided our findings into two broad categories:

- 1. Overarching Trends and Analysis of Timeline Among the Most Highly Visible Content**
This sample includes Twitter updates from users in the 98th percentile for number of Twitter followers,⁷ news articles in the 98th percentile for number of comments, and news articles in the 98th percentile for number of likes or shares. We present the most influential storylines and dig deeper into the spikes in public discourse over the period studied, and analyze some of the content that reached or engaged the most people, as indicated by number of Twitter followers, number of likes or shares, or number of comments. This analysis also includes a section on “powerful voices,” which presents individuals or organizations with large followings who speak out on poverty-related issues.
- 2. General Public Discourse About Poverty: Public Expression**
This second section offers an analysis of the public expression based on samples of all online content generated by the wider public that was related to poverty in the target time frame, irrespective of audience reach. We analyzed content by platform, including Twitter posts, public Facebook pages, and user comments found on YouTube, blogs, and mainstream news sites.

⁶ A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America, Media Analysis (pp. II-1 - II-28), June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

⁷ The average number of followers per Twitter user is 208 (<http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/march-2013-by-the-numbers-a-few-amazing-Twitter-stats/#.UvhvJPlDwa8>).

To provide context for the methodology and findings of our analysis, we first provide a short overview of recent data on the online public Internet uses, and engagement in civic activities, particularly through social media.

A vast majority of Americans are online; 85 percent of U.S. adults 18 and over use the Internet. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of those who are online are also on social networking sites. Social networking sites are increasingly used to distill, evaluate, and respond to news.⁸

According to Pew, “For most politically active SNS users, social networking sites are not a separate realm of political activity. They are frequently active in other aspects of civic life. Even as online platforms have grown more prominent in political affairs, Americans’ day-to-day political conversations mostly occur offline.”⁹

Thirty-nine percent of all adults in the United States took part in some sort of political activity on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter in the 12 months preceding the Pew survey in August 2012, including:

- ▶ “Liking” or promote materials posted by others related to political or social issues (23 percent)
- ▶ Encouraging others to “like” (21 percent)
- ▶ Posting opinions or comments on political or social issues (20 percent)
- ▶ Reposting content related to political or social issues (19 percent)
- ▶ Encouraging others to take action (19 percent)
- ▶ Sharing links to political stories or articles (17 percent)
- ▶ Belonging to a political group or a group working to advance a cause (12 percent)
- ▶ Following elected officials, candidates, or other public figures (12 percent)¹⁰

Social networking sites also are having an impact on users’ behaviors: more than two in five (43 percent) decided to learn more about a political or social issue, and almost one in five (18 percent) were driven to take action involving a political or social issue because of content they encountered on a social networking site.¹¹ Online communicators and adults who are politically active on social networks particularly are more likely to lean progressive on social justice issues such as marriage equality and women’s right to choose (see Table 12 in Appendix A).

Blacks and whites have similar rates of participation when it comes to direct involvement in political activities or engagement in political issues through online social networks.¹²

8 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Understanding the Participatory News Consumer.

9 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Understanding the Participatory News Consumer.

10 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Civic Engagement Tracking Survey 2012.

11 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Civic Engagement Tracking Survey 2012.

12 Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, Civic Engagement Tracking Survey 2012.

Methodology

Data Sources

Except where otherwise noted, our research team collected online content using Radian6. The Radian6 platform is a subscription-based tool for monitoring and analyzing online content, including public Twitter feeds, public Facebook pages and discussions, blogs and their comments, publicly available online mainstream news sites and comments, forums and forum replies, videos, and images.

In addition, some information included in this report comes from existing attitudinal tracking surveys and recent public opinion studies by reputable, nationally known research organizations, media outlets, and advocacy groups; all of the data are publicly available. These studies meet The Opportunity Agenda's standards and best practices for quality and objective public opinion research, including appropriate sample size, a methodologically sound design and research instrument, and inclusion of a balanced questionnaire for surveys.

Search Parameters

For the purposes of this report, “deep poverty” is defined as Americans with incomes less than half of the poverty level.¹³ The time frame of the search is from October 1, 2012, to September 30, 2013. To cast a wide net for poverty-related content, the search terms used for all media are:

(poverty) OR (“poor people”) NOT (“world poverty” OR global OR international).

Some additional search terms were used for the analysis of Twitter content because of that platform's brevity. For further information, please see the appendix.

This analysis uses different, interchangeable terms to describe a racial category in an attempt to be consistent with the terminology used in each study cited, when applicable. The same is true for references to sexual orientation. This report uses the racial categories utilized by the federal government, which have been largely adopted by opinion research. The categories are defined as follows:

- ▶ White: any person who self-identifies as white only and non-Hispanic
- ▶ Black: any person who self-identifies as black only¹⁴
- ▶ Hispanic: any person of any race who self-identifies as Hispanic¹⁵
- ▶ Asian: any person who self-identifies as Asian only¹⁶

13 Aaron Laudan, Wendy Jacobson, and Margery Austin Turner, “Addressing Deep and Persistent Poverty: A Framework for Philanthropic Planning and Investment.” Urban Institute, 2013.

14 Terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably.

15 Terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably.

16 Terms “Asian” and “Asian American” are used interchangeably.

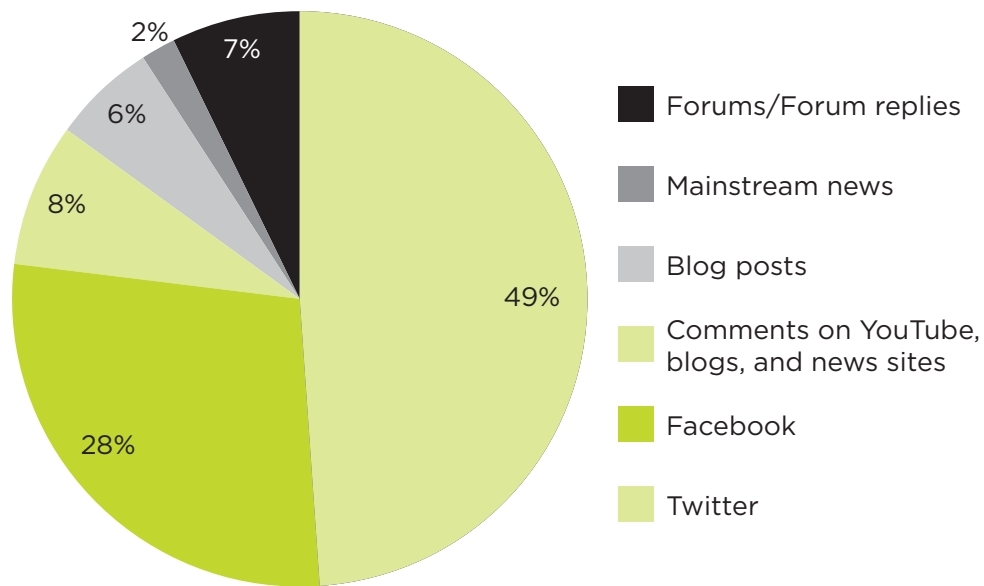
Findings

Overarching Trends and Analysis of Timeline among the Most Highly Visible Content

The search conducted for this report, using the terms “poverty” or “poor people,” yielded hundreds of thousands of results. Of those, we examined content that attracted a large audience, including Twitter updates from users in the 98th percentile for number of Twitter followers, news articles in the 98th percentile for number of comments, and news articles in the 98th percentile for number of likes or shares.

Our search returned more than 8.5 million individual posts related to poverty and poor people across all online media. Most of the posts came from public Twitter profiles or Facebook pages, which led in overall mentions of “poverty” or “poor people” over the period studied. (See Figure 1 for a breakdown by content type.)

FIGURE 1. ONLINE DISCOURSE RELATED TO POVERTY BY CONTENT TYPE, OCTOBER 1, 2012–SEPTEMBER 30, 2013



Source: *A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America*, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

The pattern of the volume of Twitter discourse tends to follow the general pattern across other media. Mainstream news and comment threads also had some meaningful spikes in activity that sometimes were reflected in spikes in Twitter discourse. The frequent drops in volume of discourse almost always occurred on weekends, when social media activity is generally at its lowest across the board.

Major events over the course of the time period studied that caused peaks in discourse about poverty or poor people included the presidential election, release of 2011 and 2012 census figures, and delivery of the 2012 State of the Union address. In October, the 2012 presidential debates caused the peaks in online discourse related to poverty. One of the highest spikes in poverty-related discourse over the time period occurred on October 3rd, the day of the first debate, and the “Twitter-verse” and “blogosphere,”

in particular, were buzzing. The blog Wonkette.com live-blogged the debate,¹⁷ and drew attention to Mitt Romney's tone when broaching the subject of poverty in America with the observation, "Did Romney just refer to America's tens of millions of poor people as 'your poor,' to Obama?" Twitter hashtags including #debate2012 and #debates were frequently referenced in the poverty-related Twitter content, but as Amnesty International and Suzanne Nossel, its executive director at the time, observed, neither candidate used the word "poverty."¹⁸

In the first quarter of 2013, the first spike in public discourse about poverty in America occurred in the blogosphere on Martin Luther King Day (January 21, 2013), although this uptick in blog activity did not substantially affect the total number of mentions. One of the biggest days for poverty-related discourse in social media, and the biggest day for poverty-related discourse on Twitter, was February 12, 2013, the day that President Obama delivered his State of the Union address, when he proposed raising the minimum wage to \$9 an hour and declared that "in the wealthiest nation on Earth, no one who works full-time should have to live in poverty."

On July 22, a study by the Albert Einstein Medical Center found that poverty had greater influence on the outcomes of inner-city youth than gestational exposure to cocaine.¹⁹ A week later, an Associated Press article with the headline "80 percent of U.S. Adults Face Near-Poverty, Unemployment," based on new research by an academic Mark Rank at Washington University in St. Louis, created a three-day surge in online discourse related to poverty across numerous platforms.²⁰

The 50th anniversary of the historic Civil Rights March on Washington at which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech created a spike in poverty-related discourse on August 28, particularly on Facebook, forums, and mainstream news sites.

Influential storylines and images

We used metrics such as number of Twitter followers, number of comments on a post, and number of votes such as "likes" or "shares," to evaluate potential reach of content and engagement of the online public with ideas and themes presented in the related content. An analysis of the influential poverty-related content that is being disseminated via social media sources can provide a greater understanding of the narratives and voices that inform perspectives on poverty in America.

Most commented

The Huffington Post far and away engaged the most people in commenting on poverty-related articles, with more than 59,000 comments on one article.²¹ Articles that mentioned poverty and had the highest engagement from readers focused on the election, politics, federal or state policy, and corporate accountability. Politicians were featured in many images tied to articles about politics. An example of a news story with high user engagement that mentioned poverty but was not only about poverty comes from a *Huffington Post* article covering the 2012 vice-presidential debate. The article mentioned Paul Ryan stating during the debate that 15 percent of Americans live in poverty under the Obama administration. The article received more than 24,000 comments addressing a variety of topics, beyond

17 Jim Newell and Ken Layne, "Ultimate Lectern Fighting 2012: Liveblogging Mitt & Barack's First Debate." October 3, 2012. Read more at <http://wonkette.com/485811/ultimate-lectern-fighting-2012-liveblogging-mitt-baracks-first-debate#X55GuATUCLTWYTRq>.99.

18 See the original tweet here: <https://Twitter.com/SuzanneNossel/status/253664595904966656>.

19 Tweets frequently linked to "'Crack baby' study ends with unexpected but clear results" at [philly.com](http://articles.philly.com/2013-07-22/news/40709969_1_hallam-hurt-so-called-crack-babies-funded-study) by Susan FitzGerald.

20 Yen, Hope. "80 Percent of U.S. Adults Face Near-Poverty, Unemployment: Survey." July 28, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/28/poverty-unemployment-rates_n_3666594.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003

21 See "Obama Takes Over White House Press Briefing To Speak on Trayvon Martin" by Jennifer Bendery on July 19, 2013: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/19/obama-trayvon-martin_n_3624483.html?utm_hp_ref=detroit&cir=Detroit.

poverty.²² Another *Huffington Post* article after the election covered vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan's claim that President Obama won because of urban and low-income voters, garnering heavy engagement with 24,390 comments.²³

FIGURES 2 AND 3. IMAGES RELATED TO *THE HUFFINGTON POST*'S COVERAGE OF PAUL RYAN'S PROPOSALS FOR ALLEVIATING POVERTY²⁴



Left: The caption on *The Huffington Post* reads, "Under Ryan's 'Path to Prosperity,' senior citizens would have to pay as much as 68 percent of their health care coverage, up from 25 percent today, CBS News reports."

Right: The caption on *The Huffington Post* reads, "Ryan's proposed 'Path to Prosperity' includes \$134 billion in cuts to SNAP, according to analysis from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities."

Walmart's mistreatment of its employees made headlines in a *Huffington Post* piece that subsequently attracted 18,909 comments. The article contended that Walmart's compensation policy inherently prevented advancement and that made it "difficult for most to rise much beyond poverty-level wages."²⁵ This headline was followed shortly by the news that Walmart employees had gone on strike, just a week before Black Friday.²⁶ *The Huffington Post* also covered Walmart's business practices when the company changed its health care policies, allowing it to deny more employees health coverage and effectively shifting the burden of coverage to public programs such as Medicaid. (The article garnered nearly 33,000 comments.)²⁷

22 David Espo and Matthew Daly, "Vice Presidential Debate: Joe Biden, Paul Ryan Clash in Kentucky," *Huffington Post*, November 22, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/vice-presidential-debate_n_1960019.html#176_paul-ryan-employs-same-failure-to-lead-gambit-he-uses-against-obama

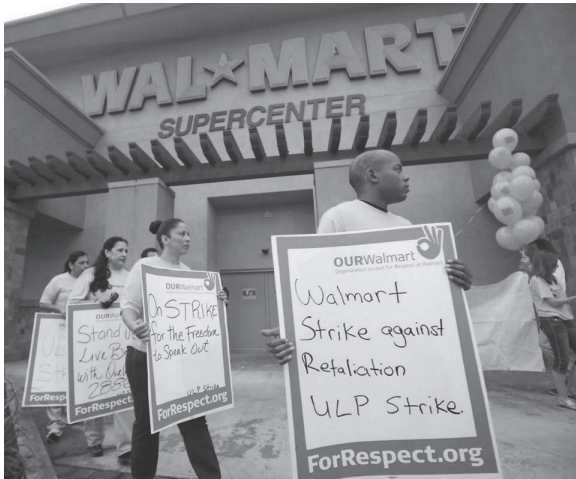
23 Luke Johnson, "Paul Ryan: Obama Win Given by 'Urban' Areas," *Huffington Post*, November 13, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/13/paul-ryan-obama-win_n_2121348.html

24 Both images from Delaney, 2012

25 Alice Hines and Christina Wilkie, "Walmart's Internal Compensation Documents Reveal Systematic Limit on Advancement," *Huffington Post*, November 14, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/16/walmarts-internal-compensation-plan_n_2145086.html

26 Alice Hines, "Walmart Strikers Promise Huge Black Friday Showdown with 1,000 Protests Nationwide," *Huffington Post*, November 15, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/15/walmart-strike-black-friday_n_2138871.html

27 Alice Hines, "Walmart's New Health Care Policy Shifts Burden to Medicaid, Obamacare," *Huffington Post*, December 1, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/01/walmart-health-care-policy-medicaid-obamacare_n_2220152.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003&cir=Politics

FIGURES 4 AND 5. IMAGES RELATED TO *THE HUFFINGTON POST* COVERAGE OF WALMART²⁸

The Huffington Post published a number of articles about the Affordable Care Act, including a favorable report on what premiums for the uninsured would look like under the program (which received more than 44,000 comments).²⁹ Also on the topic of health care, South Dakota Republican governor Dennis Daugaard rejected the Medicaid expansion as part of the largely federally-funded health care reform law and received attention in a *Huffington Post* article garnering 13,627 comments. Gov. Daugaard objected to the expansion on the grounds that the 40,000 uninsured people living in poverty who would be covered by the expansion were “able-bodied adults.”³⁰ The *Huffington Post* tackled a number of other topics that engaged a high volume of readers, including food stamps, voting rights, sequestration, and Social Security.

Several other news stories were included in the sample we analyzed, which did not result in as a large volume of comments as the aforementioned stories did. Nonetheless, several of them did generate significant engagement and are worth noting.

One article that garnered more than 2,000 comments concerned an American teenager’s attempts to escape poverty in a small Pennsylvania town by working hard both in school and numerous jobs.³¹ The article follows the challenges of the young woman as she balances the pressures from family that can lead to persistent poverty and her own aspirations to escape that path through education and hard work.

²⁸ Images from Alice Hines and Christina Wilkie, “Walmart’s Internal Compensation Documents Reveal Systematic Limit on Advancement.” *Huffington Post*. November 14, 2012.

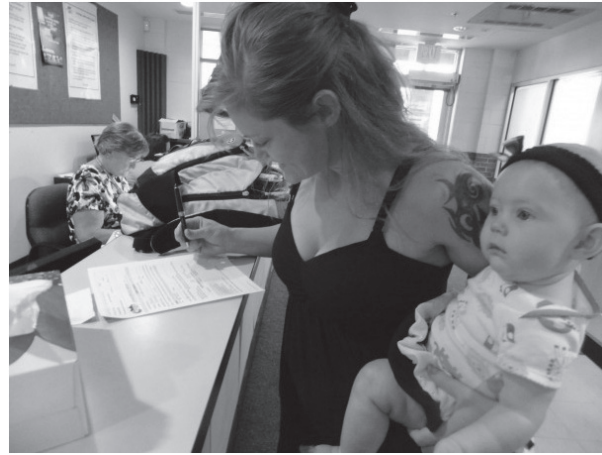
²⁹ Jeffrey Young, “Obamacare Premiums Report Shows Low Prices for Uninsured with Wide Variation.” September 25, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/25/obamacare-premiums_n_3984979.html?utm_hp_ref=business&ir=Business.

³⁰ Jeffrey Young, “Dennis Daugaard, South Dakota Governor, Rejects Obamacare Medicaid Expansion.” *Huffington Post*. December 5, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/05/dennis-daugaard-obamacare-rejects-medicaid_n_2244970.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003.

³¹ Anne Hull, “In Rust Belt, a Teenager’s Climb from Poverty.” *Washington Post*. December 8, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/in-new-castle-pa-trying-to-break-free-of-poverty/2012/12/08/f41f20ec-3985-11e2-8a97-363b0f9a0ab3_story.html.

FIGURES 6 AND 7. IMAGES FROM *THE WASHINGTON POST*'S COVERAGE OF POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Left: The caption from the *Washington Post* reads, “Tabitha Rouzzo, with her older sister Alex Rouzzo in the background, sits on the front steps of her rented home in New Castle, Pa. If all goes well, Tabi will be the first person in her family to graduate from high school.” Photo by Linda Davidson/*The Washington Post*.³²



Right: The caption from the *Washington Post* reads, “Laura Fritz, 27, left, with her daughter, Adalade Goudeseune, fills out a form at the Jefferson Action Center, an assistance center in the Denver suburb of Lakewood in July 2012. Fritz grew up in the Denver suburbs in a solidly middle class family, but she and her boyfriend, who has struggled to find work, are now relying on government assistance to cover food and \$650 rent for their family.” Photo by Kristen Wyatt/AP.³³

Most upvoted

Fox News outpaced all other news outlets on engaging readers to vote (i.e., submitting likes, shares, forwards, and tweets) on poverty-related content. Despite the conservative leanings of the Fox News network and its target audience, the article that received the most likes or shares (228,000) was an opinion piece written by progressive commentator Sally Kohn about the virtues of the Affordable Care Act and why the Republicans were trying so hard to defund the program before it went into effect.³⁴ A *Slate* article received a high volume of likes or shares (just over 100,000 on one article), as did a *Wall Street Journal* article (nearly 57,000 likes or shares) and an article in the *Huffington Post* (nearly 40,000 likes or shares on one article).

Slate's piece covered the troubling trend of viral Internet memes referencing low-income or working-class “‘hilarious’ black neighbors,” such as Charles Ramsey, an African-American man who rescued three women who had been kidnapped, and Antoine Dodson, an African-American man who saved his sister from an intruder.³⁵ The author attributed the popularity of this form to the subject’s “colorful style that is always immediately recognizable as poor or working-class,” along with humor and “theatrical flair.” The author notes, however, the detrimental nature of these types of memes in that they point to a “persistent, if unconscious, desire to see black people perform. ... The laughter... plays into the most basic stereotyping of blacks as simple-minded ramblers living in the ‘ghetto.’”

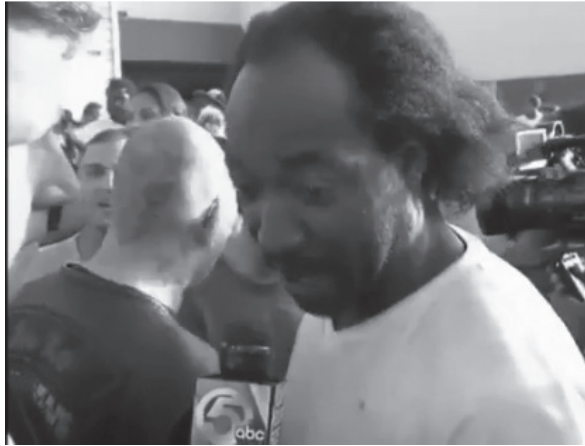
32 See Hull, Anne, footnote number 31.

33 Matthews, Dylan. “Millions of Americans live in extreme poverty. Here’s how they get by.” *Washington Post*. May 13, 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/05/13/millions-of-americans-live-in-extreme-poverty-heres-how-they-get-by/>

34 Sally Kohn, “Five Reasons Americans Already Love Obamacare—Plus One Reason Why They’re Gonna Love It Even More, Soon.” September 30, 2013. <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/09/30/five-reasons-americans-already-love-obamacare-plus-one-reason-why-theyre-gonna/>.

35 Aisha Harris, “The Troubling Viral Trend of the ‘Hilarious’ Black Neighbor.” May 7, 2013. http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/05/07/charles_ramsey_amanda_berry_rescuer_becomes_internet_meme_video.html.

FIGURES 8 AND 9. CHARLES RAMSEY, RESCUED THREE ABDUCTED WOMEN (LEFT) AND ANTOINE DODSON, RESCUED HIS SISTER (RIGHT). IMAGES TAKEN FROM VIDEO EMBEDDED ON SLATE.COM.³⁶



A *Wall Street Journal* article that received nearly 57,000 likes or shares was a lengthy opinion piece by Paul Ryan from March 2013, which proposed a plan from GOP lawmakers for reducing the national debt without any new taxes. In the piece, Ryan cited the decline of child poverty that followed welfare reform in the 1990s as a reason to extend those reforms to other aid programs.³⁷ *The Huffington Post* content that received the most likes largely coincided with *The Huffington Post* stories that received the most comments (see “Most Commented” above).

Videos with high visibility

Videos with the most views featured the work of advocacy organizations, media news clips, and satire. One of the most viewed videos on poverty in the U.S. was posted by the organization Why Poverty. The video, “Park Avenue: Money, Power, and the American Dream,” just short of 60 minutes long, garnered more than 355,000 views and more than 1,200 comments and 2,700 likes.³⁸ The documentary focused on disparities between Park Avenue in Manhattan, where some of the richest Americans live, and Park Avenue in the Bronx, one of the country’s most impoverished communities. The thesis of the video is that Americans with money are able to finance political campaigns and influence policies that favor the wealthy and exacerbate poverty by increasing inequality.

A short (less than two-minute) video on suburban poverty by the Brookings Institution garnered more than 68,000 views.³⁹ The video concerns a new book describing the rise in suburban poverty and proposing solutions to create “better connections between low-income residents and economic opportunity.” A video posted by “The Young Turks” is a segment from their online news show that discusses new research on poverty’s role in reducing cognitive functioning and decision-making abilities.⁴⁰

36 See Harris, 2013 (footnote 35).

37 Paul Ryan, “Paul Ryan: The GOP Plan to Balance the Budget by 2013.” March 12, 2013. http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323826704578353902612840488?mod=rss_opinion_main&cmg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2F%2FSB10001424127887323826704578353902612840488.html%3Fmod%3Drss_opinion_main.

38 “Park Avenue: Money, Power, and the American Dream.” Directed by Alex Gibney, produced by Blair Foster. January 5, 2013. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6niWzomA_So&noembed=1.

39 “Confronting Suburban Poverty in America.” Brookings Institution. May 22, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toVZqk6LDm0&noembed=1>.

40 “This is Your Brain on Poverty.” Hosted by John Iadarola. “The Young Turks.” September 13, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmtT3K6j6Gy4&noembed=1>.

Several satirical videos concerning poverty and poor people received thousands of views. The “Daily Show” featured Lewis Black on a segment, garnering nearly 50,000 views, about Republicans’ attempts to blame poor people for the country’s budget problems and demands to tax the 48 percent in some way, even if they just “kick in a buck.”⁴¹ Black was reacting to a comment made by Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney during a private fundraiser saying that he will never convince “47 percent of the people... who are dependent on the government” that “they should take responsibility.”⁴² In this segment Black says, “Yeah. The poor are so tightfisted, those pricks. ‘Kick in a buck!’ Because what problem can’t be solved the same way you organize a beer run?”

Another satirical video, by Blimey Cow, lists “Five Reasons I Don’t Care about Poor People,” garnering more than 200,000 views and 5,000 likes.⁴³ The reasons cited to not care about poor people include that poor people are scary, weird, lazy, not trustworthy, and there just isn’t enough time to worry about poor people. The narrator argues that poor people are lazy, and it’s alright to admit that because:

This is America, anyone can work anywhere with no threat of prejudice because we have laws against it so of course it can never happen. ... Look, most poor people are lazy and thank God they are because it gives me an excuse to generalize anybody having economic difficulties as a lazy bum. ... Broad generalizations are a lot easier and more comfortable to my way of living than getting to know people and their individual situations.

General Public Discourse about Poverty: The Public Expression

This second section offers an analysis of samples of all online content generated by the wider public in comments on blogs and YouTube, Facebook posts, and Tweets that was related to poverty in the target time frame. In comparison, the first section of this report analyzed only highly visible content at the top 98th percentile of audience reach.

We analyzed content by platform, including Twitter posts, public Facebook pages, and user comments found on YouTube, blogs, and mainstream news sites. We include descriptions of the different platforms, along with the methods used to retrieve and analyze the content, and present the poverty-related themes that emerge across the different platforms.

There were some notable similarities and differences across platforms. Twitter is an easy platform to engage users in some kind of action, particularly re-posting (i.e., sharing) content to boost its visibility. In the sample examined here, Twitter posts were used to primarily distribute existing content, such as links to articles, petitions, or campaigns. Facebook posts primarily contained original content and expression of opinions, often religious in nature or ideologically conservative. Comment threads allowed the online public to respond to content, such as articles and videos, and engage in some debate on the issues.

Twitter

We analyzed Twitter for insight into general user opinion and attitudes toward the poor and poverty. We also analyzed content produced specifically by the most followed accounts of media outlets and influential individuals, who tweeted about poverty.

Using the social media analytics platform Radian6, we identified 350 tweets from seven randomly selected days between October 1, 2012, and September 31, 2013. We used this sampling technique to

41 “Back in Black—the Moocher Class.” Featuring Lewis Black. *The Daily Show*. April 16, 2013. <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-april-16-2013/back-in-black---the-moocher-class>.

42 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2gvY2wqI7M>

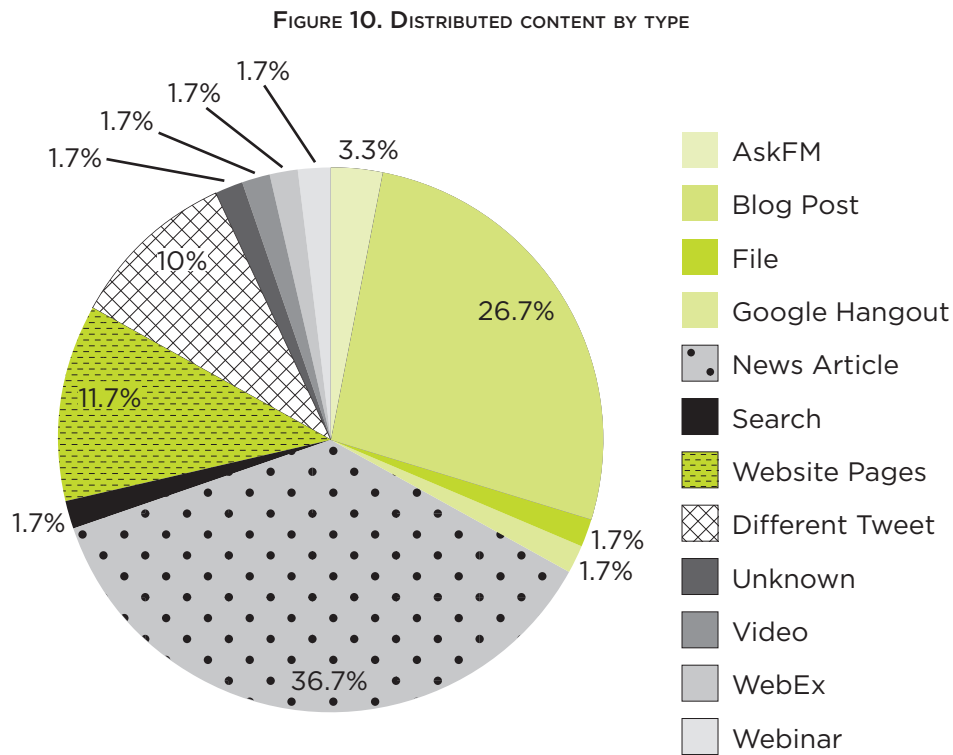
43 “Five Reasons I Don’t Care About Poor People.” Featuring Jordan Taylor. Blimey Cow. July 8, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9SQQgdxXzg&cnoredirect=1>.

ensure a digestible yet representative data set of tweets from a diverse range of Twitter users and further culled the group to 273 tweets to exclude some remaining content relating to non-U.S. poverty.

We then analyzed the sample for distributed content, retweets, mentions, hashtags, and common themes in relation to poverty.

Distributed content

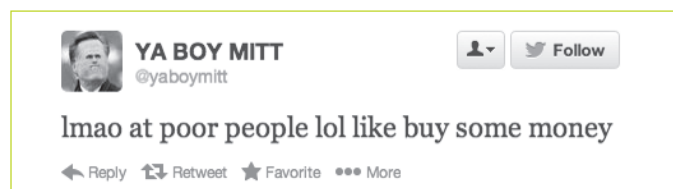
Twitter is frequently used as a platform to distribute content via links, such as news articles and videos. Out of 273 tweets, 60 (21.9 percent) were used to distribute content via an original tweet or a retweet. The type and percent of content distributed is displayed in Figure 10. The most frequently distributed type of content in the sample were news articles (36.7 percent), followed by blog posts (26.7 percent) and website pages (11.7 percent).



Source: A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

Retweets

A retweet is a redistribution of another user’s tweets to one’s own followers; within the sample, 44.7 percent (122) of poverty-related tweets were retweets (denoted on Twitter by an “RT”). The most frequently reposted tweet within the sample comes from @YABOYMITT, a comical Twitter account posing as Mitt Romney. The following tweet was found six times within the sample:



This retweet potentially reached at least 871 Twitter users (based on the sum of followers of each of the users who retweeted @YaBoyMitt had on the date of the event).

The following retweets were found in the sample three times each, the second highest frequency of retweets within the sample with each of them reaching 521 and 1,663 users, respectively.



A tweet containing the message “If I have to be drug free to keep my job you should be drug free for food stamps and welfare” was retweeted three times each from the account @Student_Pains. The same tweet was redistributed from four other accounts. In total, this message was retweeted seven times from five different Twitter accounts (as found within the sample), with a potential reach of 2,029 users (based on the sum of followers of each of the users who retweeted @Student_Pains had on the date of the event).



Mentions

“Mentions” are comments that reference another Twitter user, denoted by @username; 17.5 percent (48) of tweets in the sample had at least one mention, with four being the highest number of mentions within a single tweet. No single Twitter user was mentioned more than once within the sample. Politicians mentioned include @BarackObama, @SenJohnMcCain and @RepMcClintock.

Hashtags

Hashtags are labels or markers denoted by #, created by Twitter users to categorize and search for tweets. They are also used to hold topical discussions and connect with like-minded users. The sample consisted of 42 tweets (15.3 percent) that used a hashtag, with 92 hashtags used in total. Figure 11 is a word cloud of hashtags found in the sample; hashtags more frequently used appear larger on the word cloud. Three poverty-related hashtags appeared in the sample: #poverty, #suburbanpoverty, and #knowpoverty. None of the poverty-related hashtags seem to have specific audiences within Twitter. The hashtag #tcot (“top

“Hahah, yea, ever notice all the Escalades ? RT @MenzMindz: Oh, you’re on welfare? It must be really hard to pay for the note on the escalade.”
@ TRUTHGUNNER

A few tweets about poor people with jobs who are also on welfare appeared in the sample as well. Although these tweets did not speak directly about the poor, they often displayed disapproval of certain companies or the current minimum wage, which are implied to be causes of poverty among working individuals.

“If you want to get people off welfare raise the minimum wage. Taxpayers are subsidizing Walmart and McDonalds profits.”
@ IBTALKING

► **Political parties’ approaches toward the poor**

A great deal of discourse about poverty concerned political parties’ positions on poverty. The majority of tweets that mentioned political parties or party-affiliated politicians were negative and critical of the party or politician in question. There were 1.5 times more tweets about Republicans than Democrats in the sample.

In general, tweets about Republicans noted the party’s perceived disdain toward the poor and favoritism toward the rich and corporations. For examples, numerous tweets on October 21, 2012, relate to Mitt Romney and his perceived indifference toward the poor.

“I can’t understand why Mitt Romney wants to be President of a country that has so many women, minorities and poor people in it.”
@ ALCAZARFERNANDO

“I invented a new sexual position called ‘The Republican’ where I screw poor people”
@ SPENCE_HILL11

In contrast, Democratic elected officials, and particularly President Obama, are seen as responsible for the increase of welfare recipients and expenditures. Welfare is discussed as a method to keep the poor voting for Democrats.

“Hey @BarackObama, thanks for the health insurance increase you [expletive]. Stop giving out welfare checks to people who don’t need it.”
@ HAMILTONPAUL22

“Bailout Obama Joe on the ropes as Hoosiers say NO to his FAILED agenda that has caused \$4 gas, 8.3% unemployment & 43 mil on Welfare #INSen”
@ OASISUPERNOVA

“50yrs of DemParty (obama): Keep Blks poor,on welfare,DEPENDENT & always in fear EVIL GOP will take all away.”
@ MAXCUA

► **Lack of or poor education perceived as leading to poverty**

One of the leading causes of poverty, according to tweets within the sample’s discourse, is a lack of education or obtaining a poor education.

“Self education is the shortest distance between poverty and abundance.”
@ JESSHARPER_X

“RT @ RetentFrontiers: The lack of education is the number one perpetuator of the cycle of poverty.”
@ JUNTOSOUL

In these tweets, not obtaining an education (for whatever reason) is often connected with not being able to obtain a job and ending up on welfare. While going on welfare despite having a degree is seen as a last resort or a fallback, not having or wanting credentials and skills and going on welfare are heavily criticized.

“RT @UrFavritAsshole CAPRICORN: U WANT MONEY BUT U DON’T WANNA WORK OR GO TO SCHOOL. JUS SIGN UP FOR PUBLIC ASSISTANCE & BE DA BUM U WAS MEANT TO BE HOE”
@ LOVEECEDEZ

“Thank you to those who work hard to pay for my moms and I welfare when we absolutely needed it. No abuse tho, mom went to school”
@ SANCHEZJCS8

► **Welfare and government programs perceived as feeding the vicious cycle of poverty**

Welfare and government financial assistance are predominantly spoken of, directly or indirectly, as a system that ultimately does not help improve anyone’s individual financial situation. Tweets imply that government aid instead creates a cycle of dependency and unwillingness to get ahead and that this is an unnecessary and indefensible expense. In addition, government financial assistance is frequently depicted as a leftist control strategy.

“The Liberal welfare state has passed by the ideal of helping people and now is a tool with which to enslave them.”
@ RRICHR911

“RT @ HarrietBaldwin: “The difference between a welfare state and a totalitarian state is a matter of time.” - Ayn Rand...”
@ JEFFMIDDLEBROOK

“The poor will never prosper on welfare and handouts. Cell phones are not their right. Their votes were bought with entitlement programs.”
@ MARYCATARINEAU

“OBAMANOMICS... “The welfare state is merely a method for transforming the market economy step by step into socialism”- Ludwig Von Mises”
@ USAEVERLASTING

Most followed

As mentioned above, we also examined the content generated by the most popular media outlets on Twitter, such as CNN and NPR. Overall, there was scarcely any discussion about poverty distributed by these outlets compared to the total sum of tweets these outlets generated during the time frame of the sample. Nonetheless, it is important to understand how influential media outlets spoke about poverty or poor people on Twitter and take these insights into consideration when targeting these outlets in the future.

CNN Breaking News (@cnnbrk) was the media outlet Twitter account with the largest number of followers (upward of 13,250,000 during the time period studied) who posted tweets about poverty in the United States, followed by *The New York Times* (@nytimes, 9,479,359 Twitter followers) and CNN

(@cnn, 8,678,540 followers on the date of the event). Among the top 20 media outlets with the highest number of followers that mentioned U.S. poverty on Twitter, *The Huffington Post* (@huffingtonpost, 3,408,748 followers) had the highest volume of poverty-related tweets (86). The *Washington Post* (@washingtonpost, 1,946,731 followers) posted 22 tweets related to poverty in the United States, NPR News (@nprnews, 2,000,509 followers) posted 17, and *The New York Times* posted 13 tweets related to poverty during our study's time frame.

TABLE 1. TOP 20 MEDIA OUTLETS TWEETING ABOUT POVERTY (BY NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS)

Handle	# of Poverty-Related Tweets	# of Followers (approximate)
CNNBRK	2	13,255,367
NYTIMES	13	9,479,359
CNN	5	8,678,540
BREAKINGNEWS	1	6,176,463
TIME	10	4,970,276
THEECONOMIST	16	3,818,880
HUFFINGTONPOST	86	3,408,748
WSJ	12	3,365,895
REUTERS	14	3,338,510
FOXNEWS	4	3,019,092
CBSNEWS	3	2,732,778
ABC	5	2,671,444
AP	9	2,434,818
NEWSWEEK	1	2,044,513
NPRNEWS	17	2,000,509
WASHINGTONPOST	22	1,946,731
FORBES	7	1,849,347
NPRPOLITICS	3	1,827,880
LIFE	5	1,617,560
PBS	5	1,516,119

Number of followers was valid on a date within the timeframe of the sample between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013.

Common themes in these tweets about poverty referenced U.S. census figures and the 2012 election. A *Huffington Post* tweet that also made waves, reaching 2,287,176 Twitter followers, was about a study showing that women who were denied an abortion were more likely to fall into poverty.⁴⁴

Four poverty-related tweets from the *The Washington Post* referenced the 2012 election, and two mentioned the census numbers released in 2012.

Content from *The New York Times* included an article on the “word deficit” among poor children in New York, which garnered 200 comments and blasted out to more than 6,252,007 *New York Times* Twitter followers.⁴⁵ *The New York Times* also used thematic frames and drew connections between poverty and

44 Aaron Sankin, “Abortion Poverty Study Finds Link Between Lack of Access and Income.” *Huffington Post*. November 14, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/14/abortion-poverty-study_n_2130890.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003.

45 Ginia Bellafante, “Before a Test, a Poverty of Words.” *New York Times*, October 5, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/nyregion/for-poor-schoolchildren-a-poverty-of-words.html?smid=pl-share>

other social justice issues. Content from *The New York Times* that reached millions of Twitter followers framed poverty as an intersectional issue with systemic causes such as the dysfunctional criminal justice system,⁴⁶ problematic immigration policies,⁴⁷ and the health care system,⁴⁸ with far-reaching outcomes, drawing the connection between poverty and obesity in the United States.⁴⁹

NPR News, with more than 2 million Twitter followers, also covered poverty-related content thematically, drawing attention to the intersection of poverty, race, and gender. Numerous tweets linked to articles referencing the census figures released in 2013, and to work and related studies by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, on childhood poverty in the United States.⁵⁰ Twitter content also highlighted the higher rate of poverty among LGBT Americans⁵¹ and white women,⁵² the disparate impact of school closings due to budgetary constraints on communities of color,⁵³ and a new report by the Urban Institute on poverty among blacks and Latinos.⁵⁴

Powerful voices

A number of powerful individuals from the public and private sectors (spanning industries from entertainment to professional sports) spoke out on their views of poverty and progressive solutions to poverty. Similar to the activity of media outlets, the content about poverty was marginal compared to the overall Twitter content these individuals produced. High-profile tweeters such as President Barack Obama (35,215,206 followers), Oprah Winfrey (14,314,631 followers), and Russell Simmons (2,875,104 followers on the date of the event) had insights related to poverty to share with their millions of Twitter followers.

46 John Tierney, "Prison and the Poverty Trap." *New York Times*. February 18, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/science/long-prison-terms-eyed-as-contributing-to-poverty.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes>.

47 Jennifer Medina, "Being Legal Doesn't End Poverty." *New York Times*. July 20, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/sunday-review/being-legal-doesnt-end-poverty.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes>.

48 Klass, Perri. "Poverty as a Childhood Disease." *New York Times*. May 13, 2013. <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/poverty-as-a-childhood-disease/?smid=tw-nytimes>.

49 Bellafante, Ginia. "In Obesity Epidemic, Poverty is an Ignored Contagion." *New York Times*. March 16, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/nyregion/in-obesity-fight-poverty-is-patient-zero.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes&_r=0.

50 For example, a tweet from June 24, 2013, reads "More on kids & poverty at 340ET MT @AECFNews: From 2007-11, 12% of kids lived in high poverty areas @aefkidscount," with a link to the Kids Count Data Center. <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/publications/databook/2013>.

51 "Despite Images of Affluence, LGBT Poverty High." Hosted by Michel Martin. Tell Me More. *NPR*, June 10, 2013. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=190360185&ft=1&f=1001&sc=tw&utm_source=Twitterfeed&utm_medium=Twitter.

52 "Are White Women Harder Hit by Poverty?" Hosted by Michel Martin. Tell Me More. *NPR*, September 13, 2013. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=222099777&ft=1&f=1001&utm_campaign=nprnews&utm_source=npr&utm_medium=Twitter.

53 Sanchez, Claudio. "School Closures Pit Race and Poverty Against Budgets." *NPR*. March 23, 2013. http://www.npr.org/2013/03/23/175104850/race-poverty-central-to-national-school-closure-debate?ft=1&f=1001&sc=tw&utm_source=Twitterfeed&utm_medium=Twitter.

54 Grigsby-Bates, Karen. "Moynihan Black Poverty Report Revisited 50 Years Later." *NPR*. June 13, 2013. http://www.npr.org/2013/03/23/175104850/race-poverty-central-to-national-school-closure-debate?ft=1&f=1001&sc=tw&utm_source=Twitterfeed&utm_medium=Twitter.

TABLE 2. TOP 30 INDIVIDUAL TWEETERS MENTIONING POVERTY OR POOR PEOPLE (BY NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS)

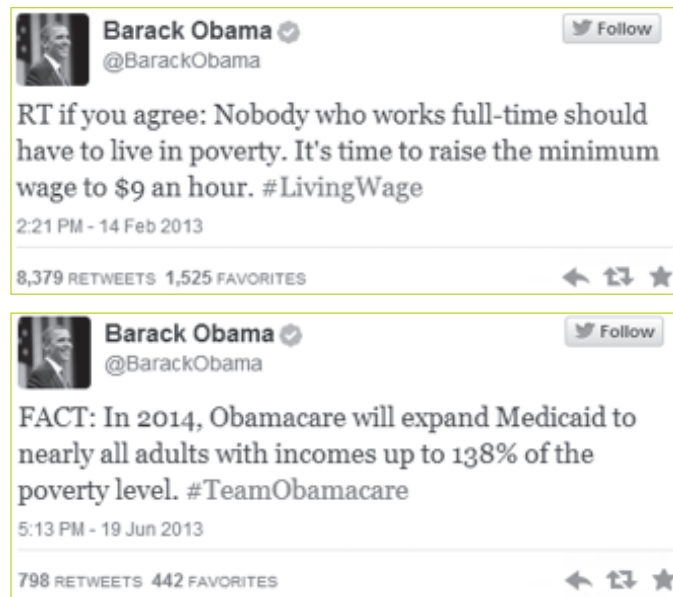
Handle	# of Poverty-Related Tweets*	# Following	# of Followers	Description
BARACKOBAMA	8	659,144	35,215,206	Barack Obama, president of the U.S.
OPRAH	1	78	14,314,631	Oprah Winfrey, media proprietor, talk show host
STEPHENATHOME	1	1	5,293,793	Stephen Colbert, comedian
NICKCANNON	1	3,807	4,346,832	Nick Cannon, actor, comedian, rapper
JOHNLEGEND	6	389	4,176,126	John Legend, singer-songwriter, actor
DJKINGASSASSIN	1	206,951	3,652,576	DJ King Assassin, rapper, hip-hop artist
MCHAMMER	4	48,570	3,158,528	M.C. Hammer, rapper, entrepreneur
YOKOONO	2	908,039	3,142,903	Yoko Ono, artist and activist
KOBEBRYANT	1	818	3,072,747	Kobe Bryant, basketball player
PIERSMORGAN	2	535	2,978,392	Piers Morgan, journalist, television host
UNCLERUSH	11	493	2,875,104	Russell Simmons, founder of Def Jam and Phat Farm
JACK	1	961	2,373,011	Jack Dorsey, founder and creator of Twitter
KINGSTHINGS	1	276	2,311,688	Larry King, television and radio host
MARIASHRIVER	7	220,192	2,273,484	Maria Shriver, journalist and author
QUESTLOVE	1	4,699	2,204,619	Questlove, musician
MICHAELIANBLACK	4	468	1,930,493	Michael Ian Black, comedian, actor, writer, director
WILLIECOLON	3	7,552	1,819,796	Willie Colon, football player
TIMOREILLY	3	1,111	1,725,514	Tim O'Reilly, founder of O'Reilly Media
REALTONYROCHA	3	97	1,678,715	Tony Rocha, radio and television director, entrepreneur
REALJOHNGREEN	3	501	1,674,414	John Green, author
MMFLINT	8	203	1,598,949	Michael Moore, filmmaker and author
NEWTGINGRICH	1	439	1,490,154	Newt Gingrich, politician
NICKKRISTOF	55	650	1,438,512	Nicholas Kristof, journalist and author
CORYBOOKER	37	75,946	1,417,071	Cory Booker, politician and senator
GUYKAWASAKI	2	291,312	1,403,623	Guy Kawasaki, author, speaker, and investor

Handle	# of Poverty-Related Tweets*	# Following	# of Followers	Description
LUPEFIASCO	2	18	1,390,643	Lupe Fiasco, rapper, record producer, entrepreneur
JDICKERSON	3	728	1,386,469	John Dickerson, CBS political director
ARIANNAHUFF	18	2,249	1,386,334	Arianna Huffington, author, Huffington Post owner o
SACCA	1	698	1,373,139	Chris Sacca, venture capitalist
ANAMARIECOX	7	1,017	1,355,923	Ana Marie Cox, blogger, author, founder of Wonkette

*Approximate number of poverty-related tweets found in a Radian6-generated sample of approximately 40,000 tweets from users with the highest number of followers.

Number of followers was valid on a date within the timeframe of the sample between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013.

President Barack Obama finally used the word “poverty” on Twitter about his State of the Union address in 2013 to elevate the need to raise the minimum wage, which was the theme of seven of his eight tweets between February and August 2013. One tweet from President Obama related to the Affordable Care Act.



After the president’s, the highest-profile tweet related to poverty was posted by Oprah Winfrey, reaching 14,314,631 followers based on the total sum of followers of the original account and everyone who retweeted the post. Touching on wrongful views of people living in poverty and the intersection of poverty and gender, she referenced the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls (#OWLAG) in a Twitter conversation with LGBT advocate Lonnell Williams.



Nicholas Kristof, a journalist and author who writes an opinion column for *The New York Times*, posted frequently about poverty in the United States. He acknowledges that poverty intersects with numerous issues, from family unity to the criminal justice system, and asserts that “there is no silver bullet,” but asserts that measures to improve early childhood education would have the greatest impact on poverty reduction in the United States. In August, Kristof tweeted about an article he wrote for the *Times* that criticizes U.S. poverty alleviation programs for creating dependency, and promotes early childhood education measures to fight poverty. This article was picked up by conservatives, and Kristof later tweeted numerous progressive critiques of his own column.⁵⁵

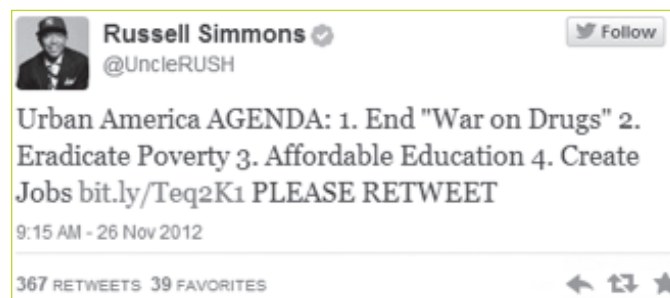


Cory Booker served as mayor of Newark, New Jersey, for seven years before becoming a U.S. senator. Many of his posts were Twitter “conversations” with followers to answer their questions about his stance on and ideas for poverty alleviation programs, or responses to followers who demonstrated support. As part of his senate campaign in 2013 he released a plan to end child poverty in the United States, demonstrating that it would be one of his legislative priorities in office.

⁵⁵ You can see Kristof’s opinion piece on poverty here: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/opinion/sunday/kristof-profiting-from-a-childs-illiteracy.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0&chp. You can see one of the critiques on his article, by Greg Kaufmann, at the *Nation’s* blog: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/171751/week-poverty-kristofs-swing-and-miss#>.



Russell Simmons, activist and co-founder of hip-hop music label Def Jam, posted powerful tweets to his more than 2 million Twitter followers about the connection between domestic poverty and the criminal justice system, access to education, and jobs.



Facebook

We utilized Radian6 to gather publicly available poverty-related posts made on Facebook between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013. After removing international and irrelevant returns, the final sample consisted of 101 Facebook posts.

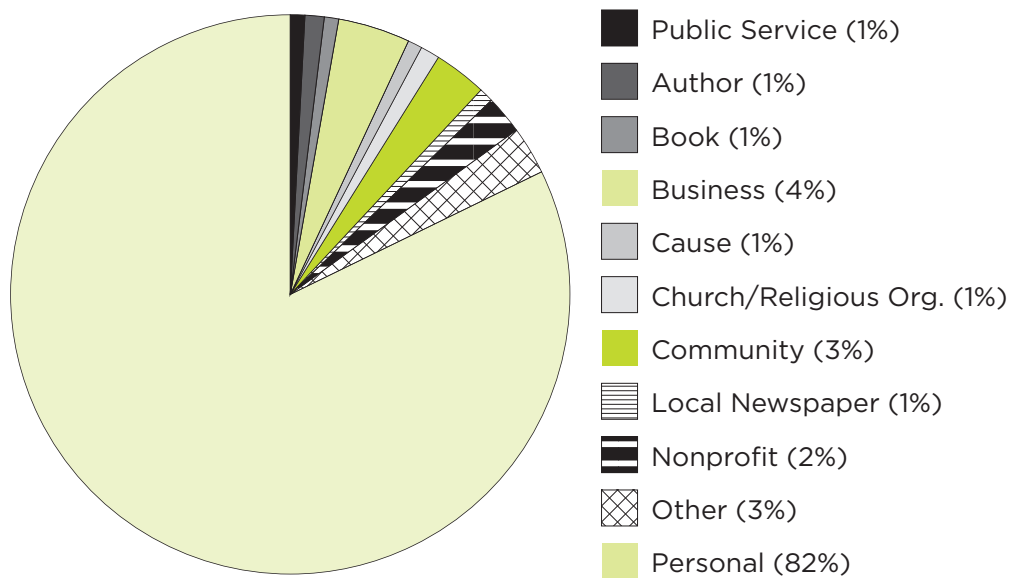
We analyzed the sample for origin of post—whether it appeared on a personal profile or a “page”—engagement (likes and/or sharing), potential reach, and common themes relating to poverty.

Post origin

Figure 12 displays the type of account from which retrieved posts within the sample came. Facebook allows users to establish personal profiles as well as “pages” for official profiles of organizations, such as nonprofits and businesses. As of January 2013, Facebook hosted more than 1.3 million monthly active users and 54 million total pages.⁵⁶ In total, the majority of posts relating to poverty (82 percent) were found within personal accounts, with the remaining posts originating from other pages, such as newspaper Facebook pages or religious organizations’ ones. These pages are broken down by user-defined tags in Figure 12, with “other” signifying lack of tags.

56 Facebook Statistics. <http://www.statisticbrain.com/facebook-statistics/> (accessed January 10, 2014).

FIGURE 12: TYPE OF FACEBOOK ACCOUNTS WITHIN SAMPLE



Source: A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

Engagement

The level of engagement each post elicited from followers was measured via Facebook likes and shares. Facebook “likes” are virtual thumbs-ups that indicate appreciation. Clicking on “Like” will provide a user the option to share liked content with others.

The post with the highest number of likes (98) came from a personal account, in which the user quoted a prayer she overheard from her son:

“...Please bless the poor people that they will be able to get five hundred dollars to buy a house and food. Please bless the people that have bad dreams that they will be able to wake up quickly and feel safe and better...”

– Alison Mitchell Bosen

Potential reach

Affiliating oneself with another Facebook account by “friending” someone or “liking” a page can expose users to posts created by the affiliation. Accordingly, we analyzed sample poverty posters’ friends (for personal accounts) and likes (for pages) to get a sense of the potential reach of our sample’s posts. Reach is define as the number of friends linked on a personal profile or the number of likes of a page. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the potential reach of accounts and pages within the sample, with “missing” signifying pages or profiles for which no friend or like data were available.

TABLE 3: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR POTENTIAL REACH (FRIENDS AND LIKES)⁵⁷

	Friends (Personal Timelines)	Likes (Pages)
Average	748	3,273.4
Median	328.5	221
Max	4,990	52,225
Min	6	19
Missing	14	0
Total	69	19

Number of “friends” and “likes” valid on a date within the timeframe of the sample between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013.

The personal profile with the highest potential reach (4,490 friends) that featured a poverty-related post appears to be that of a conservative-leaning woman from Michigan. The post in our sample from this profile is a shared link of a blog post: “Figures. Obama Sticks It to Workers Making Less Than \$30,000 a Year.” The page with the highest potential reach (52,225 likes) is one that provides followers with “inspirational stories, daily hot jokes, love quotes & more.” The post from this page asks followers to “type Amen” to receive a list of blessings, among them “separation from poverty.”

Common post themes

The following themes emerged from the sample of Facebook posts as a whole:

► **Religion, faith, and poverty**

Many posts within the sample had religious messages, written from a Christian or Muslim perspective. These posts included comments with religious overtones, sermons, psalms, Biblical or Quranic verses, and proverbs. There is the sense in these posts that faith in a higher power and prayer will help overcome the hardships of poverty. Those who live contently in poverty while maintaining faith are described as better off than those who are far from poverty but do not have faith. Being content while living in poverty is spoken of as a blessing.

“... MORAL LESSON: It’s not money that make us rich, it’s the simplicity of having God in our lives.”

– Diane Lefroy

“... Living well below the poverty level actually makes them a lot stronger both physically and spiritually. It has made me take inventory of those things we believe we can’t live without...”

– Lewis Denny

► **Poverty as a mentality**

As alluded to previously, a strong theme that emerged from Facebook posts is that poverty is a “mentality” more so than a condition of living and can be improved upon with modesty, faith, or hard work. This theme was found within both religious and non-religious posts.

⁵⁷ Facebook designates Personal Timelines, sometimes referred to as profiles, for use by individuals. Users with Personal Timelines can “friend” one another to see updates and exchange messages. Pages look similar to Personal Timelines but are intended for a business, brand, organization, or celebrity. Users can “like” a Page to have that Page’s updates appear on his/her Personal Timeline.

Poverty, really, has nothing to do with what you have or don't have. Poverty is a description of inability; it's a state of mind—a mentality that's not right for a child of God to have. Think and talk prosperity, for that's the will of God for you. Say like David, 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want' (Psalm 23:1)...

– Emeotu Charles

Rich people see opportunities, poor people see obstacles. Rich people focus on rewards. Poor focus on the risks.

– Samuel Maxwell

► **Conservative thought dominates**

Right-leaning commentary and shared links were more frequent than left-leaning commentary and shared links in the sample, by an 8:1 ratio. A blog post originally from a Tea Party website was continuously found in the sample, not as a link to the blog post itself, but as a post with its text copied from the blog and used as a plea for likes and shares. This blog post compares the government to Walmart, concluding that the business would be better suited to “fix the economy” and the government has transferred tax dollars to the poor and “they only want more.” A similar conservative argument is made by another post that directly quotes *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand.

“They claim defense of education and the poor but demand more failed programs and more subsidy to keep the poor locked into poverty.”

– Tar River Tea Party

Most conservative posts are links to outside blogs or quotes.

Online User Comments

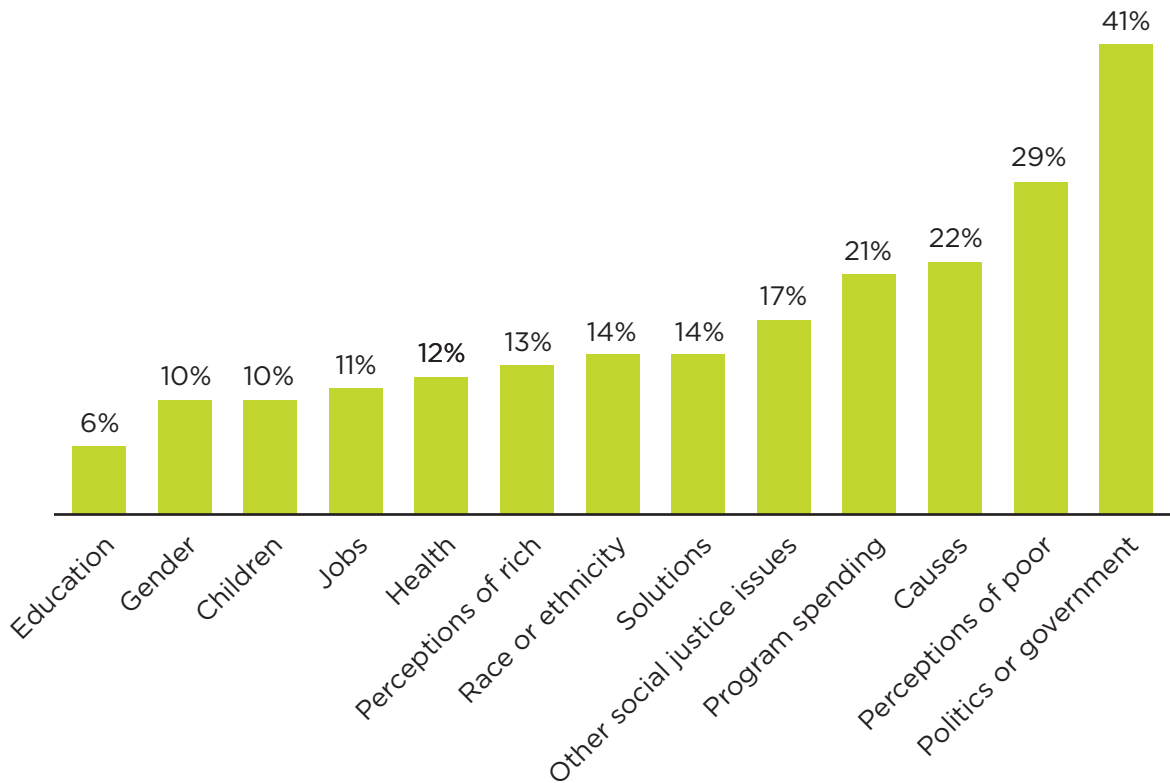
We collected more than 600,000 comments generated by individual accounts containing the search terms “poverty” or “poor people” in the bodies or subject lines of the comments in our October 1, 2012, to September 30, 2013, sample. Comments came from numerous platforms that engage readers through a commenting feature, including YouTube, blogs, and mainstream news sites. Comments are typically a reader’s reaction to the content posted on the site, whether articles, blog posts, or videos. Comments can also provide a reader’s reaction to the comment “thread” itself and relate more to previous comments than content posted to a website. We analyzed the content of a randomly selected sample of 195 comments for themes related to poverty.

Comments covered a diversity of topics, with some common themes emerging. Just over a quarter of the comments (29 percent) provided some commentary on or characterization of poor people themselves, while 13 percent offered depictions of rich people. Two-thirds of the comments describing poor people painted them in a negative light (e.g., as lazy, irresponsible, or “leeches”). Among the comments that painted a more sympathetic picture of people living in poverty, more than half still used language that repeated a negative stereotype (i.e., “poor people aren’t lazy”). Comments about rich people or corporations were almost all negative, painting them as greedy and a ruling class exploiting the poor.

Comments referencing children pertained more to the notion that poor people have children and qualify for services, rather than “child poverty” itself. Forty percent of the comments referenced government or politics, and 21 percent referenced government spending on poverty-related programs. Other common topics were jobs, wages, or unemployment (11 percent), race (14 percent), gender (10 percent), and health (12 percent).

Almost half of the comments (47 percent) took a critical stance toward progressive solutions to poverty, while 37 percent were in line with expanding opportunity for poor people. Approximately 17 percent were ideologically neutral, citing statistics or seeking clarity on a topic.

FIGURE 13: THEMES ACROSS COMMENTS RELATED TO POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE GENERAL PUBLIC DISCOURSE



Source: *A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America*, June 2014, The Opportunity Agenda.

Themes

► Government as the problem and ideological debates

Commenters frequently cited poverty as evidence that the government was failing, some referring directly to the Obama administration, while others referred to government more generally.

b. Social Security was established in 1935. You have had 74 years to get it right and it is broke. c.. Fannie Mae was established in 1938. You have had 71 years to get it right and it is broke. d.. War on Poverty started in 1964. You have had 45 years to get it right; \$1 trillion of our money is confiscated each year and transferred to “the poor” and they only want more.

That’s how I know we live under a tyranny. The U.S. is a cleverly (or not) disguised dictatorship that seeks to dominate the entire planet... Here at home, we are either first or second-place for number of children living in poverty...⁵⁸

Several commenters blamed the free market policies of conservatives. When ideological labels or party names were used, the comments were almost always negative.

58 http://news.yahoo.com/speaker-obama-resists-curbing-federal-172656585.html#ugccmt-comment_1355437113471-5419f2f0-e9f7-4b8f-aafe-eea8dd97bba4_1_4_0

*Conservatism is social Darwinism. They never intended to “trickle down” or “lift all boats.”*⁵⁹

*But a republican point of view chose to import goods and export more jobs for higher profits for an elite few. Tell me how starvation and poverty will help Americans again?*⁶⁰

► **Race, gender, and family**

Numerous comments referred to the intersection of poverty and race or gender, particularly African Americans and women, and there were a few mentions of American Indians. Most comments on this topic reveal a perception that poverty-alleviation programs focus mainly on communities of color. There was also debate at the intersection of race, gender, and poverty over new census statistics indicating that poverty among older white women has increased. Overtly racist language was used more often by conservative-leaning commenters against progressive stances on poverty.

*The real problem started with President Johnson and his “War on Poverty” where billions of dollars have gone to aid mainly African Americans and other minorities to no avail. These people keep over breeding irresponsibly and dumping their problems on the taxpayers. I hate to say it but Poverty won!*⁶¹

*White single women are doing fine, with nearly the same median wealth as white single men. It’s women of color who are suffering the most, with men of color doing far worse than white women.*⁶²

Commenters frequently refer to single mothers in depictions of the poor, and numerous commenters believe poverty is a result of the breakdown of the family. The right to family planning, including abortion, was explicit in some comments, and implied in others.

*The number one demographic of people in poverty is single mothers - that is solely a result of the breakdown of the nuclear family - PERIOD. Our economic problems are the result of SOCIAL ills, NOT vice-versa. Why ARE gay people rich?*⁶³

Yes, let’s grant personhood to a fertilized egg so as we can ignore it once it is a birth child. Especially if that child is born into poverty, needs healthcare, food, shelter and a public education. Then that child is no longer a person, but a leech on god fearing taxpayers.

*Not to sound mean about her plight but why would you ever have children if you are barely able to feed yourself?*⁶⁴

► **The rich, the middle, and the poor**

Many posts describe a fixed economic system, designed to benefit the wealthy.

*Severe hunger, poverty and anguish for millions about peanuts, cause through the loopholes and flagrant tax evasion there is thousands of times more money than needed to get out of the crisis.*⁶⁵

59 <http://mediamatters.org/video/2013/07/29/foxs-payne-raising-the-minimum-wage-rewards-med/195116#980795627>

60 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/12/state-of-the-union-minimum-wage-payroll-tax-cut-stands_n_2674029.html?utm_hp_ref=business#comment_229545507

61 <http://www.dailyfinance.com/2012/10/20/thanks-a-lot-for-the-disastrous-economic-legacy-baby-boomers/#aol-comments-x-BQAbbA>

62 <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/09/all-the-older-single-ladies-in-poverty/280036/#1061828736>

63 http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/the_coming_social_frakenstorm#484118801

64 http://www.reddit.com/r/unitedkingdom/comments/1iw4n2/jack_monroe_the_face_of_modern_poverty/#cb96n6j

65 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/david-cameron-is-clueless-ed-miliband-joins-austerity-protesters-in>

“You and your Tea Party-loving ilk rush out to vote for politicians who destroy union protections and lower wages, forcing more and more Americans into poverty and homelessness while your corporate masters rake in record profits year after year.”⁶⁶

A handful of comments defend the wealthy, at the expense of the poor, reflecting a zero-sum frame. And a number of comments reflect the belief that the poor don’t deserve or need help. There is the occasional hint at the notion that poor people are simply inferior by nature.

A single non-working parent on government assistance brings in an average of \$450.00 per child per month. You figure out the math!!! Every 20th of each month you can see the line ups at the local nail salon and the line ups at Walmart, shopping carts filled with television sets...⁶⁷

This research must be flawed. Everyone knows that poor people are inherently and fundamentally inferior.⁶⁸

► Denial

While not the most common theme, there was some amount of denial when it comes to poverty in America, often with references or links to conservative think tanks such as The Heritage Foundation.

Americans haven’t experienced poverty in generations. We do take very good care of our poor. They live very much like any working class person.⁶⁹

► Causes and solutions

While only 14 percent of comments referenced solutions to poverty, those that did focused on “root cause” issues and systemic causes (22 percent of comments referenced causes of poverty). Some pointed to systemic solutions such as education and family planning services, while others pointed to individual responsibility and bootstraps.

Spending should be, on a need basis. This is why military spending is different from the other forms of spending like on entitlements, food stamps, etc. because that is more needed. More people fall into poverty, the government should respond.⁷⁰

Reducing teen/unwanted pregnancies will undoubtedly reduce generational poverty and other societal ills caused by children having children.⁷¹

One of the best ways to end poverty is through education.⁷²

realize it isn’t the zip code that creates success or poverty but the choices of those in that zip code. Until liberals accept that their policies have incentivized the breakdown of the family and laziness, their policies will continue to have results the opposite of those intended....⁷³

london-8219204.html#688023235

66 <http://www.redding.com/news/2013/feb/05/redding-approves-rate-increases-moves-forward/?partner=RSS#c1235339>

67 http://ca.news.yahoo.com/ending-universal-child-benefits-could-lift-174-000-090008981.html#ugcmt-comment_1353586612507-191a6fc0-e76f-4fd0-af26-7547f403d20a_2_1_0

68 <http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2012/11/attention-scarcity-ego-depletion-and-poverty.html#comment-157683774>

69 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/21/american-dream-canada_n_2170323.html#comment_208060652

70 <http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/budget-appropriations/272021-conservatives-liberals-in-house-join-to-call-for-more-defense-cuts#732725986>

71 http://www.startribune.com/nation/201616291.html#comment_4681756

72 http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2012/12/21/fearing-young-black-men-in-hoodies-while-ignoring-while-young-white-men-with-glocks/?cxntfid=blogs_get_schooled_blog#comment-247280

73 <http://frontpagemag.com/2013/matthew-vadum/stopping-obamas-neighborhood-race-watch-program/#1001386867>

Several commenters also engaged in debate regarding systemic causes of poverty such as outsourced jobs and unsustainable wages. Equal opportunity, or lack thereof, did come up, although “poverty mentality” was cited as the cause of unequal opportunity.

The problem is, working a full time job at minimum wage no longer puts you above the poverty line.⁷⁴

Equal opportunity is all that is/should be demanded. What occurs to you to do with your life is a function of the socioeconomic context you were born into. We do not have equal opportunity if poverty grooms you for future poverty, and wealth encourages wealth.⁷⁵

Advocacy Organizations Covering Poverty on Twitter and Facebook

Table 4 displays Twitter accounts that largely focus on poverty and had a sizable audience at the time the data analyzed in this report were collected. These accounts were found through the Twitter analytics website Topsy.com using the hashtag #talkpoverty within the search. This hashtag was developed by Greg Kaufmann, former poverty correspondent at *The Nation*, and was first used during the 2012 presidential election. It continues to be used by organizations and individuals to tag tweets on issues of poverty. In addition to #talkpoverty, the hashtags #waronpoverty, #poverty, #SNAP, and #SNAPworks are common.

TABLE 4: TWITTER ACCOUNTS COVERING POVERTY, SORTED BY FOLLOWERS

Name	Twitter Handle	Followers	Type
Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity	povertynews	17,888	Non-partisan initiative
Center on Budget	centeronbudget	17,598	Non-profit, non-partisan policy organization
Half in Ten	halfinten	8,369	National campaign
Greg Kaufmann	gregkaufmann	3,930	Former poverty correspondent for The Nation
CFED	cfed	2,845	Non-profit organization
Coalition on Human Need	coalitionHN	2,116	Alliance of national organizations - policy
Barbara Raab	bbabbo1	900	Sr. producer for #inplainsight poverty project (NBC)
Poverty & Inequality	centerpovineq	788	Academia - research
Institute for Research on Poverty	irp_uw	609	Academia - research
UNC Poverty Center	uncpovertyctr	230	Academia - research

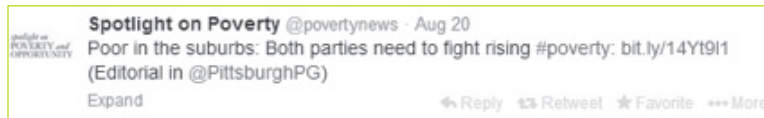
Number of followers was valid on a date within the timeframe of the sample between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013

These organizations use the Twitter megaphone to share resources, frequently on behalf of other organizations. In this manner, they become important aggregators of key information, breaking headlines, and recent research on the issue, which itself provides a meaningful resource for those who are interested

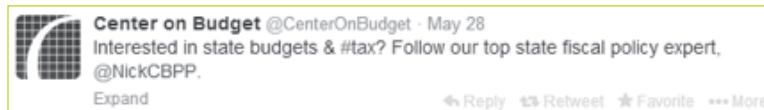
74 <http://blogs.ajc.com/jay-bookman-blog/2013/03/18/the-unspoken-secret-at-the-heart-of-the-gop-report/#comment-1261180>

75 http://www.reddit.com/r/Economics/comments/18radi/the_life_prospects_of_an_american_are_more/#c8hp8ex

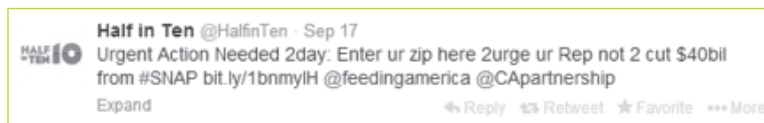
in poverty in America. Spotlight on Poverty (@povertynews) served this function very well, posting links to online content such as news, articles, op-eds, and resource hubs related to domestic poverty, particularly government efforts on both sides of the aisle, and from the local to the federal level.



Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (@centeronbudget) used Twitter to share links to their own work, such as research reports and blogs posts, and to advertise events such as webinars and panels. They also posted infographics, and a “chart of the week” that garnered some reposts from followers. They publicized a great deal of information, but there was remarkably little on which to take action, beyond re-posting or following.



The Half in Ten campaign used Twitter to engage with partners, with a large number of their tweets consisting of mentions or retweets of partner content. Much of the tweets’ content related to research, statistics, or debate on programs. Numerous tweets promoted events and reported from events, using mentions and “live tweet” quotes from the dialogue. There were some calls to action, although they made up a very small percentage of the Twitter updates from Half in Ten.



To find Facebook accounts that specifically focus on poverty in the United States, a search was conducted on Facebook using the term “poverty.” Relevant public pages and groups were examined for geographical focus. Although a number of pages and groups focus on poverty, they mostly concentrate on international poverty. Table 5 displays Facebook pages and groups that focus on poverty in the United States. Facebook groups are user-created spaces that allow individuals a place to communicate about a shared interest; group membership can be selective or open to any user. Although publicly available posts from Facebook groups did not appear in the sentiment analysis sample, two active poverty-focused groups are included in it, as shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5: FACEBOOK PAGES AND GROUPS COVERING POVERTY SORTED BY AUDIENCE

Name	Type	Category*	Audience**
Half in Ten	Page	Organization, professional svcs.	3,444
Poverty USA	Page	Non-profit organization	3,438
Coalition on Human Needs	Page	Non-profit organization	2,454
National Center for Children in Poverty	Page		2,288
Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity	Page	Non-profit organization	1,626
Poverty Initiative	Page		1,421
It's The Poverty, Stupid	Page	Community	468
TalkPoverty	Page	Non-profit organization	450
Occupy Poverty	Open Group		443
Poverty Occupying America the 50%	Open Group		58

*User defined

**Measured in number of Likes for pages and number of members for groups

Updates to pages are typically done by the organization, while groups tend to be updated by a small number of users. Activity within both pages and groups predominantly consists of sharing external content including news stories, blog posts, and images. There was limited interaction by the audience on both pages and groups, with stories receiving a small number of likes and shares. Comments or discussions on posts were rare within both pages and groups. Calls to action consisted of donation pleas and requests for the audience to contact government officials.

All of pages and groups support were left leaning and supported government initiatives to alleviate poverty, such as raising the minimum wage and allowing for the continuation of unemployment insurance, in sharp contrast to the posts analyzed in the sentiment analysis that were religious or conservative leaning. Within the list of pages and groups, two were Christian organizations—Poverty Initiative and Poverty USA.

Poverty USA used their Facebook page to share information about what the religious community, particularly priests and bishops, were doing to promote social justice generally and to fight poverty more specifically. Content frequently related to the intersection of poverty and other social justice issues, such as Immigration and gun control. There were several calls to action, such as links to contact your representative on an issue.

 **Poverty USA** shared a link.
April 8, 2013

STILL TIME! Have you contacted your legislator yet? Join the bishops now in promoting less gun violence! <http://bit.ly/10vuLLF>

	The Senate is About to Vote on Legislation to Reduce Gun Violence! http://www.capwiz.com/catholicbishops/issues/alert...
	The Senate is About to Vote on Legislation to Reduce Gun Violence!

Like · Comment · Share 6 1

 **Poverty USA** shared a link.
December 17, 2012

FLASH! Bishops Blaire and Pates tell Congress: Protect poor in budget negotiations <http://bit.ly/SGO3ij> Take action now!: <http://bit.ly/SGO8SQ>

	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops http://www.usccb.org
	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Like · Comment · Share 35 6 20

Conclusion & Recommendations

This report paints two different pictures, one of the poverty-related narratives and themes that reach or engage the most people and another of the narratives and themes that Internet users invoke when debating domestic poverty in social media forums. While the stories, voices, and organizations with the greatest visibility promote thematic concepts and structural causes and solutions to poverty in the United States, the discourse generated by the wider public shows much more debate and the contentious tug-of-war between individual responsibility and systemic causes and solutions.

Key Findings

In conclusion, a summary of key findings demonstrates that:

- ▶ Political events such as elections or speeches, and statistics or findings from new research drove the discourse and received the most attention.
- ▶ Content that was most likely to trend or “go viral” was humorous or satirical in nature and tended to take a progressive stance on the causes of and solutions to poverty. Video and Twitter content effectively used satire and was shared more frequently, showing greater promise for “going viral.”
- ▶ Platforms and voices with the greatest reach and the highest engagement overwhelmingly painted a sympathetic picture of Americans living in poverty and framed the issue thematically by drawing attention to systemic causes of poverty in America, such as the lack of good jobs or the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with the cost of living. They also painted a thematic picture by presenting research and statistics that demonstrated the pervasiveness and impact of poverty in the U.S.
- ▶ Among the “high visibility” content, progressive-leaning themes and narratives outweighed conservative narratives, with more content focusing on preserving and expanding government programs and advocating for good jobs and fair wages. Personal responsibility emerged very infrequently in the content that reached the most audiences and was typically tied to conservative politicians. Republicans were painted, particularly during the election, as out of touch with the poor, at best, or hateful toward the poor, at worst. Republicans were less successful in painting Democrats as ineffectual, at least in the media that engaged the most people, although this theme does emerge in general public discourse.
- ▶ *The Huffington Post* engaged by far the most people through commenting, sharing, voting, and tweeting but tended to focus on politics or government. Other high-profile outlets that reached significant audiences, such as National Public Radio (NPR) and *The New York Times*, looked at the intersection of poverty and other social justice issues such as gender and criminal justice.
- ▶ Individuals who engaged the most people on Twitter also tended to take a progressive-leaning stance on causes and solutions to poverty. High-profile tweeters cited jobs, wages, and early education as solutions to poverty, although government programs received little attention (except from advocacy organizations). Many of these high-profile tweeters linked to additional content

such as articles or reports, but some expressed their own opinions, including the notion that a significant barrier for people living in poverty is overcoming the societal perception that they aren't capable of achievement. Jobs, education, and the criminal justice system received more attention by high-profile tweeters than the rest of the online public.

- ▶ Organizations (for example, news outlets, associations, advocacy groups and foundations) and individuals with the broadest reach lean progressive and speak primarily about causes of and solutions to poverty. In contrast, the discourse generated by the wider public (individual accounts irrespective of reach) is split between conservative and progressive views and rarely addressed solutions.
- ▶ One of the narratives reflected in the general public discourse was that government safety-net programs have failed or have actually made things worse for poor people. Almost every reference to poverty-alleviation policies focused on safety net programs, and there were few if any direct mentions of economic policies, such as deregulation, privatization, or corporate oversight, as contributing to poverty. This frame may be emerging, however, because there were indirect references to these concepts, particularly about the decline of quality jobs and livable wages, and readiness among many to blame “greedy” corporations.
- ▶ There is a persistent theme, even among those who are sympathetic to poor people, that the cycle of poverty is cultural and reflects the values and mentality of the poor. Frequently poverty is depicted as a family issue, and these frames put the problem beyond the influence of government or society. At worst, the discourse depicts poor people as incompetent, lazy, irresponsible, and parasitic. Many express the belief that poor people take advantage of the system at taxpayers' expense. These narratives assert that poor people are the reason for their own poverty, and they are the only ones who can get themselves out of it.
- ▶ Conservative voices are extremely cohesive. They have a shared vision of who poor people are, what causes poverty, and what, if anything, can be done to alleviate poverty in the United States. By contrast, anti-poverty and progressive discourse generally fails to communicate a common idea of who poor people are, the challenges they face, why they are poor, or what can be done about it.
- ▶ There is significant support for improved education, reproductive freedom, and government involvement with job creation and wages as solutions to poverty, even among some conservatives. Education, in particular, receives support across the ideological divide.
- ▶ There is a shared sense that the middle class is not very far away from poverty, potentially making it more of a universal concern.

Recommendations

- ▶ **Two-way communication:** The networked, relatively inexpensive, and ubiquitous nature of social media in the United States and many other countries is transforming the meaning of “mass communications,” which had previously been one-way, expensive, and highly exclusive. When planning for a social media strategy, prepare for a real-time, two-way communication.
- ▶ **Perceptions of poor people:** Given the ideological divide regarding the responsibility, morals, and agency of poor people, it is important to provide a fuller and more accurate picture of their lives, including from people who are themselves living in poverty. We recommend elevating the reality and voices of the millions of poor people who are working multiple jobs, struggling to find work, juggling family, health, and economic responsibilities, and others confronting systemic obstacles with dignity and agency.

- ▶ **Government programs:** Despite the research demonstrating that many programs such as Social Security and Medicaid/Medicare have alleviated poverty, the narrative that government programs are ineffective or harmful is a persistent one. Its proponents consistently make high-level attacks on “programs,” while anti-poverty voices are often “jargony” and “in the weeds” with regard to specific policies, which can be overwhelming to audiences. Advocates should prioritize a clear, often-repeated story about the success of the programs, including at the “big picture” level, while coherently conveying the impact of deregulation, tax policy, and other less-discussed policies.
- ▶ **New solutions:** At the state and local levels there is a relative paucity of successful discussion or debate about emerging approaches to the causes of poverty. Elevating concrete examples will build hope and public resolve while presenting ideas and information across regions.
- ▶ **Audiences:** Overarching social media strategy should engage the base of existing supporters, persuade important undecided constituencies, and minimize the influence of opponents. An important persuadable group are those sympathetic to the plight of poor people, but who attribute poverty largely to vague concepts outside of anyone’s control, such as “culture,” “mentality,” or “history.” These persuadables need a new frame that offers clear structural causes and pragmatic solutions, linked to shared values. Anti-poverty proponents should also ensure that existing supporters have immediate opportunities to take action, both online and through other activities. While we recommend against expending resources to try to persuade hard-core opponents, it remains important to counter their influence with persuadables through a proactive message that communicates our position, rather than try to dismantle the opposing narrative by repeating it.
- ▶ **Platforms:** Mainstream news sites, particularly *The Huffington Post*, are engaging in meaningful dialogue about poverty in the United States, are friendly to progressive stories and solutions concerning poverty, and are equipped with the online infrastructure to blast our messages out to the progressive base and persuadables. In addition, potential allies with significant followings on social media networks like Twitter can elevate messages in the discourse, and push them out to millions more people. Engaging less traditional allies as spokespeople, such as musicians, comedians, media personalities, and politicians, can boost visibility. Incorporating comedy or satire, moreover, can lead to content going viral. Twitter is also underutilized as a platform for engaging people to take action, and advocates should better balance content-sharing and distribution with actionable solutions. For Facebook pages and Twitter streams, advocates should aim for a greater diversity and better balance of post “types” such as action items, news stories, snapshots of statistics, infographics, videos, etc., and employ a greater variety of calls to action. Oxfam America, which hardly appeared in the sample content of this study because of its focus on international poverty, is an excellent example of an organization that makes use of balance and variety to maximize engagement with followers and fans.
- ▶ **Voices:** Although the most prominent tended to take a sympathetic stance on poor people in America, a number of “loud” voices promoted the harmful blame and “failed programs” frames. They don’t have as many followers and their content didn’t gain as much traction, but their message was more confident and unified. Further, the loudest voices on poverty, although sympathetic, avoided mention of government programs, and certainly didn’t tout their success (in some cases they sided with the opposition on the “failure” of welfare). Anti-poverty allies with the biggest megaphones should begin to come together around a common narrative on who poor people are in all of their diversity, and the causes and solutions of poverty in the United States. The voices of poor people themselves will be important to this effort.
- ▶ **Values:** The base and persuadables indicate that expanding opportunity and access to opportunity are constructive values in reference to poverty. The common good is also a useful value, although its most prominent articulation is currently limited (“You should be concerned

about poverty because it might be you someday”). Fairness, in the abstract, is less useful because it emerged in the discourse only in the context of what is “fair” to taxpayers who bear the brunt of funding poverty-alleviating government programs. Pragmatism and American ingenuity are important values largely missing from this discourse.

- ▶ **Calendar preparation and rapid response:** The peaks of social media activity over the period we studied (see Appendix D) show a predictable pattern: national election events, the release of census numbers, anniversaries of anti-poverty and civil rights events, and major think-tank reports reliably increase online attention to poverty. We recommend that anti-poverty communications chart these events well in advance, and prepare a multi-platform social media strategy that is proactive and builds on the activity of high-profile voices. The field should also be more intentional and collaborative about sharing and jointly promoting new research and analysis. These efforts should complement the readiness to respond quickly when relevant but unpredictable events occur.



The **Opportunity** Agenda

*Building the National Will
to Expand Opportunity in America*

The **Opportunity** Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda

568 Broadway

Suite 701

New York, NY 10012

Tel: 212.334.5977

Fax: 212.334.2656

www.opportunityagenda.org

The Opportunity Agenda is a project of Tides Center.