



What Americans Think about Poverty and How to Reduce It

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The 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty attracted little attention in 2015; and the 20th anniversary of welfare reform was barely noticed the following year. Although poverty tends to be overlooked by elected officials, policy experts, and the media, it remains a large and chronic social problem. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 43 million Americans are officially poor, and millions more live just above the poverty line. Poverty has a big impact on health care, education, criminal justice, and other social realms and policy domains.

Given the relative silence at the elite level, I worked with three undergraduate students to review a variety of U.S. national opinion polls concerning poverty. We wanted to know what ordinary Americans think about poverty and efforts to ameliorate it – and whether their views had changed much over the last two decades. Our research was recently published in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* and includes suggestions for better questions researchers should ask in the future.

Current Public Opinion

The American public is generally sympathetic to the poor and supportive of greater government efforts to fight poverty. On the standard feeling thermometer questions – where people are asked to indicate degrees of warmth about various groups – scores for the poor are unusually high. Americans say they feel more warmly toward the poor than toward liberals, conservatives, the Tea Party, big business, or unions. When it comes to explaining poverty, Americans are more likely to blame it on forces beyond people's control than on lack of effort. They recognize that many of the poor work but earn too little to escape poverty.

What should be done about poverty?

- Most Americans agree that government should “take care of people who can’t take care of themselves.” That responsibility includes guaranteeing every citizen “enough to eat and a place to sleep.”
- In 2016, over half of respondents to a Pew poll said that dealing with the problems of the poor should be a top priority for the President and Congress; an additional one-third said it should be an important priority. Poverty was a higher priority than climate change, tax reform, or criminal justice, but ranked somewhat lower than education or jobs.
- Most Americans think the country is spending too little on assistance to the poor. Only a small fraction, 10 to 12 percent, thinks too much is spent, while almost half believe that the poor lead hard lives in part because government benefits are inadequate.
- On the other hand, public support drops when questions refer to “welfare” or “people on welfare” – and the gap is especially large when *spending* is at issue. Few Americans think we should spend more on welfare.

An important additional point: Although our project was designed to describe public opinion more than explain it, we did see evidence that racial attitudes and welfare attitudes could be linked. Many whites feel that blacks on welfare could get along without it if they tried, and that blacks as a group are not as hard-working as whites.

Most Americans are frustrated with past efforts to reduce poverty. A 2016 Gallup survey, for example, found dissatisfaction among 81 percent of respondents with how the federal government handles poverty. Similar results were found when questions were worded more broadly – to encompass efforts by the entire nation and not just government.

What Has Changed and What Has Not

Over the last two decades, Americans seem to have become more aware of the working poor, and more willing to believe that those living in poverty are having a difficult time even with government assistance. Also, blacks are somewhat less likely to be viewed as lazy.

But for most poll questions that have been asked repeatedly, the answers have been fairly consistent. It still matters, a lot, whether questions refer to welfare or to poverty. In that sense, the historic 1996 reforms – with their caps on spending for public welfare assistance, greater work requirements, tougher sanctions, limited eligibility for legal immigrants, and time limits – do not appear to have changed the public’s mind very much. “Welfare” and “welfare recipients” still have negative connotations.

Implications for the Future

Overall, Americans continue to have mixed views about poverty, and policy makers can use polls to justify either more efforts by government to ameliorate poverty, or fewer efforts. Policymakers and citizens who want to do more will need to focus on the poor overall, not just welfare recipients. And it might also help to highlight success stories – where government efforts have helped people climb out of poverty – to counter the public’s pessimism.

As we reviewed the survey data, we were struck by the need for polling organizations to ask new and better questions. “Welfare” and “assistance to the poor” could refer to many things, and it would help to know much more about how the public feels about specific programs. In addition, asking questions about blacks and whites but no other important social groups seems outdated.

Finally, pollsters and researchers should try to learn much more about the public’s dissatisfaction with efforts to fight poverty. Do people consider all anti-poverty programs to be equally ineffective? Do they believe the national government has been less successful than state governments, charities, and churches in fighting poverty? Answers to these kinds of questions could help policy makers decide how best to help millions of poor Americans who remain vulnerable and need assistance. Americans sympathize, our data show, but remain conflicted about what can and should be done.

Read more in Christopher Howard, Amirio Freeman, April Wilson, and Eboni Brown, “The Polls – Trends: Poverty” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2017): 769-89.