

Media Portrayals of Poverty and Race in Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform America*

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DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

*Prepared for delivery at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, March 22-24, 2012, Portland, OR. I would like to thank Ben Strange for his valuable research assistance.

ABSTRACT

Prior work suggests that media coverage of poverty in the U.S. has long been racialized: the poor are depicted as more disproportionately black than actual poverty rates warrant, and this applies to an even larger extent to the unsympathetic poor. This in turn affects the level of public support for such antipoverty programs as welfare. The research on these issues is quite dated at this point and it ignores the portrayal of Hispanics, the largest minority in the U.S. This study tests whether media coverage of poverty has changed in the period from 1992-2010 (a period that includes welfare reform) and whether Hispanics are portrayed differently than African Americans. Results of a content analysis of photos accompanying news magazine stories about poverty show that media portrayals of the poor are still racialized and that explainable differences exist between how Hispanics and African Americans are pictured alongside stories about poverty.

Introduction

The “pictures in their heads” (Lippmann 1922) people use when developing opinions about politics, derive, more often than not, from indirect sources rather than personal observation and experience (cf., Mutz 1998). For most people, the primary sources of such indirect information are the news media. Thus, to understand people’s perceptions about the world, we must gain a picture of how the media cover it. This paper presents the results of a content analysis aimed at documenting media portrayals of the poor, with a particular focus on the racial composition of those pictured with news magazine stories about welfare. Its primary contributions are that it extends Gilens (1996; 1999) analysis on this subject to 2010 and that, unlike Gilens work, it analyzes coverage of the United States’ largest minority population, Hispanics.

People’s beliefs about the composition of the poor, both in general and in terms of subsections of the poor, may have great consequences for the public’s support for antipoverty programs. Gilens (1999) demonstrates, for example, that opposition to welfare is, to a large extent, explained by perceptions of welfare primarily benefitting African Americans, combined with stereotypes that African Americans lack a work ethic. The former misperception may be attributed to media coverage of poverty and welfare, which, as Gilens’ content analysis demonstrates, disproportionately depicts blacks accompanying poverty and welfare stories.

While Gilens’ analysis is convincing, it is, at this point, also quite dated, especially considering his data does not go further than 1992¹. Since then, important developments have occurred that may have changed the dynamics of public opinion and media coverage of poverty. Most important, perhaps, is the implementation of far-reaching welfare reform after

¹ Clawson & Trice (2000) extend Gilens’ content analysis to 1998, with generally similar findings. Entman & Rojecki (2000) also provide evidence of the racialized portrayal of poverty.

the 1996 signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA), which changed welfare from a federal entitlement program to a federally funded, state-run program with time-limits and mandatory job training. The time limits and job training may be crucial, because, as Gilens argues, opposition to welfare was rooted to a significant extent in perceptions that recipients were not deserving and were taking advantage of the system. These deservingness and work ethic related concerns are plausibly assuaged by the fact that post-reform recipients can only receive benefits temporarily and are forced to work or train for work.

What is more, racial attitudes may have profoundly changed over the last two decades. If it is the case, for example, that the public's stereotypes about African Americans' work ethic have improved, this may affect welfare attitudes even if the misconception that the majority of welfare recipients is black persists. If, however, stereotypes have changed little and the inaccurate depiction and misperceptions about the composition of welfare beneficiaries persisted, the pattern Gilens lays out will likely still apply.

Finally, while Gilens focused exclusively on the representation of blacks versus non-blacks in poverty stories, it may be instructive to compare coverage of blacks to that of other racial minorities. Coverage of Hispanics, in particular, may be usefully contrasted to that of African Americans. Hispanics are now the largest minority in the U.S. and, as is the case for African Americans, their number among the poor is disproportionately large. The question is, however, whether this translates into similar patterns of coverage of these two minority populations. As I will argue below, this is questionable because of profound differences in the relevant stereotypes about these two groups.

Reality and Perception of Race and Poverty

Two censuses have taken place since welfare reform passed. Interestingly, they were held during starkly contrasting economic times. In 2000 the economy was in the tenth year of economic expansion and, at 4%, unemployment was at its lowest rate since 1969 (Martel & Langdon: 3). The 2000 poverty rate was also relatively low at 11.3%. The economy was doing much worse in 2010. Although it was recovering from the “Great Recession” of 2007-2009, the recovery was slow and uncertain. GDP growth was lackluster and, important for the purposes of this study, unemployment continued to be high, ranging from a low of 9.4% in June and December to a high of 9.9% in April (Bureau of Labor Statistics). The poverty rate in this year was also considerable higher than in 2000: 15.1%. What is more, even in 2011 a majority of the public (55%) believed the country was still in a recession or depression (Gallup, April 20-23 2011).

These general statistics are relevant, but it is important to understand that different racial and ethnic groups are differentially affected by economic growth and recession. In 2000, the overall poverty rate was 11.3%. However, the ethnic and racial differences were substantive: 22.1% of blacks, 21.2 of Hispanics, 7.5% of non-Hispanic whites, and 10.8 of Asians/Pacific Islanders lived below the poverty line. In 2010, with an overall poverty rate of 15.1, the rate among African Americans was 27.4%, while it was 26.6% among Hispanics, 9.9% among non-Hispanic whites, and 12.1% among Asians/Pacific Islanders.

While African Americans, who made up 12.3% of the total population in 2000 and 12.6% in 2010, are clearly overrepresented among the poor, this disproportionality is exaggerated in public perception. Gilens, for example, cites a survey that asked “What percent of all poor people in this country would you say are black?” (Survey Research Center 1991). The median response was 50%, whereas the 1990 indicated the actual proportion was

29%. More recent data confirm that this was not a temporary or waning phenomenon: a 2001 NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government poll showed that 41% of respondents willing to guess wildly overestimated the percentage of poor people who are black.

These exaggerations are rooted in and simultaneously generative of stereotypes of blacks as lazy. The 2008 American National Election Studies data presented in Table 1 speak to this point.

Table 1: Perceptions of Racial/Ethnic Groups as Hardworking

Race/Ethnicity	% of sample who perceive race/ethnicity as hardworking
Blacks	37.6%
Hispanics	60.9%
Whites	58.6%
Asians	64.5%

Among the four groups asked about, blacks are perceived to be the least hard working. This is not a new phenomenon; the laziness stereotype has been a consistent part of whites’ beliefs about African Americans for a long time. During the 18th and 19th century, stereotypes of blacks assuaged slaveholders’ guilt and provided arguments justifying the “peculiar institution”: “Only by portraying blacks in the most negative light could the injustice of slavery be made palatable. In essence, slave owners needed a Sambo; they needed to believe that blacks were lazy, ignorant, happy-go-lucky, and childlike in order to justify slavery” (Gilens 1999, 155). The “Princeton Trio” of studies, conducted on a sample of Princeton students across three decades, indicate that “lazy” figured prominently among the different labels participants from the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s attached to African Americans (Katz & Braly 1933; Gilbert 1951; Karlin, Coffman, & Walters 1969). A more recent study by Devine and Elliot suggest that this was still the case in the mid-1990s (1995).

Interestingly, Hispanics, whose poverty rate is very similar to that of blacks, are perceived to be hard working by a much larger proportion of the sample (60.9%), outscoring all other groups but Asians. To the extent that this stereotype is shared by the news magazines' photo editors, this may create differences in how often and in what manner the Hispanic poor are portrayed as opposed to the black poor.

Media Portrayals of Poverty

According to Gilens (1996; 1999), the stereotype of African Americans as lacking a work ethic is crucial to understanding opposition to welfare. He contends that many white Americans perceive welfare as a program that chiefly benefits African Americans. This, because of the laziness stereotype, leads them to infer that it is a program bestowing benefits upon an undeserving population, which in turn leads them to oppose it. This, of course, raises the question of how whites come to believe welfare predominantly benefits blacks. Gilens argues media coverage of poverty and welfare is the answer.

Prior to the publication of Gilens' work, no systematic study of how the U.S. media cover poverty existed (Gilens 1996: 518). Gilens' own analysis indicates that black poverty was effectively ignored by the mainstream media until the mid-1960s. His content analysis of poverty coverage in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* from 1950-1992 shows that, starting in the mid-1960s, blacks were generally overrepresented (and whites underrepresented) among the poor pictured alongside poverty stories. Importantly, however, the proportion of blacks pictured with stories varies predictably: "[W]e find that positive coverage of poverty—coverage that focuses on either more sympathetic subgroups of the poor or periods in which the poor as a whole were viewed more sympathetically—was more

likely to include pictures of poor whites than was the negative coverage of poverty associated with less sympathetic groups and less sympathetic times” (Gilens 1999: 121).

Thus, in good economic times, when poverty is more readily attributed to lack of effort, blacks are dramatically overrepresented, whereas in bad economic times, when a lowering tide sinks many a ship, blacks are featured in much lower and whites in much higher proportions. Similarly, stories discussing the “underclass” and “urban problems” are accompanied by much higher proportions of blacks than stories on more sympathetic topics such as “children” and “employment programs” (*ibid.*: 128-129).

This matters because pictures can significantly affect public opinion (e.g., Graber 1990), even having “the power to trump auditory and text messages” (Avery & Peffley 2003, 135). There is a significant body of experimental studies documenting the sizeable effect on public opinion of including pictures of African Americans as opposed to whites or to no pictures at all. Iyengar & Kinder (1987), for example, find that unemployment stories picturing blacks reduce the extent to which participants consider unemployment a pressing issue, whereas Iyengar (1990; 1991) finds that picturing a black person triggers respondents to attribute unemployment to the individual rather than structural factors, prompting them to propose “trying harder” as the appropriate solution to the problem. When the same story is accompanied by a picture of a white person, societal factors are proposed as the problem. In the similarly racialized issue domain of crime, experiments indicate, picturing black faces with stories substantively increases the level of punishment participants support (e.g., Gilliam & Iyengar 2000)

Extending this to welfare, the pairing of black faces with unsympathetic stories simultaneously perpetuates the stereotypes of blacks as lazy and shiftless and, given the preexisting nature of these stereotypes, reinforces the unpopularity and unsympathetic status

of the topics blacks are pictured with. For example, because people believe that blacks are lazy, that welfare mostly benefits blacks, and thus that welfare is not worth supporting, new welfare stories picturing blacks reinforce all of these perceptions, sustaining a vicious cycle. Indeed, Avery & Peffley (2003, 146), in a post-reform experimental study, find that, “[g]enerally speaking, respondents who read a story with an accompanying photograph of a black (versus a white) woman and her child were decidedly more harsh in their evaluations of welfare recipients in general”.

One way this cycle may possibly be interrupted is by changes in perceptions of welfare policy and by a deracialization of media coverage of welfare. It is plausible that public perceptions of welfare may have changed because the very nature of welfare policy changed with the implementation of PRWOA. In particular, the job training component and the imposition of time limits may convince the public that welfare is not the refuge of lazy scoundrels shirking their responsibilities, but rather a temporary benefit geared towards steering people into a productive life.

The Persistence of Misinformation

This presumes, however, that a) citizens learn about these features of welfare reform and b) that this new information leads them to revise their firmly ensconced preconceptions about welfare and the people it benefits. The former may be unlikely because most citizens pay little attention to politics and cannot be trusted to be aware of policy detail (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996).

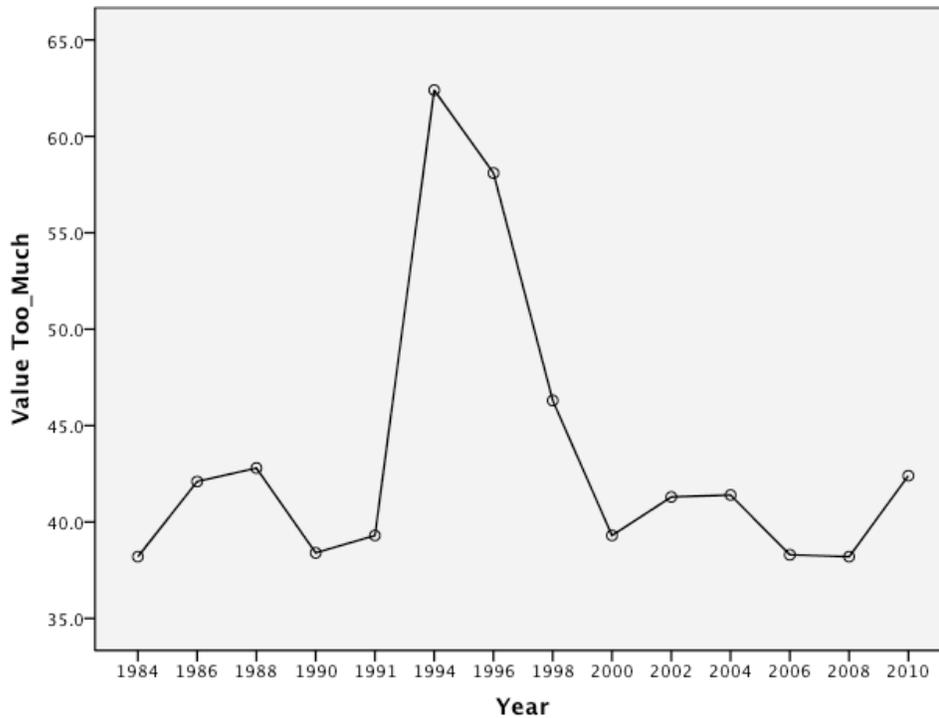
However, even if citizens were to have learned about the policy change, there is no guarantee that this information would dramatically affect their welfare attitudes and perceptions. It useful to turn to the literature on misinformation and its persistence here.

Misinformation, which pertains to situations in which people “firmly hold beliefs that happen to be wrong” (Kuklinski et al. 2000), has recently become an area of intense scholarly attention. At this point, it is clear that misinformation can persist even in the face of clear, factual correcting information, although questions remain as to under which circumstances and for whom exactly the resilience of misinformation is especially strong (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010). As I show below, in the case of misperceptions about the composition of the American poor, the portrayal of the poor that U.S. news magazines provide would not be of any help in correcting the public’s misperceptions of the poor anyway.

Support for Welfare, Pre- and Post-Reform

Figure 1 (below, based on 1984-2010 General Social Survey data) makes clear that the unpopularity of welfare was similar post-reform as it was in the pre-reform era Gilens’ data covered. The uptick in support for the notion that the federal government spent too much on welfare in the early to mid-1990s was of a temporary nature and support quickly reverted to its prior level post-reform. What is important here is that welfare is as unpopular now as it was in the 1980s. This indicates that welfare reform did not radically alter the level of support for welfare policy. This suggests that it is possible that the racial dynamics of welfare coverage and welfare opinion did not undergo significant change because of welfare reform.

Figure 1: Welfare Spending Opinion over Time



The fact that stereotypes are involved likely contributes to the dim prospects of speedy changes in beliefs and attitudes about welfare. Dating back to Lippmann’s (1922) assertion that “there is nothing so obdurate to education or criticism as the stereotype” (p. 98-99), there is an extensive body of evidence supporting the notion that stereotypes are remarkably stable, rigid, and unresponsive to countervailing evidence² (see also: Devine and Elliot 1995).

The nature of media coverage again is important here. Media coverage of welfare, in this case gauged by the racial composition of pictures accompanying welfare stories, changed dramatically post-reform, then we might expect public perceptions and support of the program to change. At the very least, a more accurate depiction of welfare recipients is the

² This is not to say stereotypes never change, but rather to point out that stereotype change only occurs under certain conditions and usually gradually.

sine qua non of changes in welfare beliefs. However, if the exaggeration of the proportion of African Americans pictured with poverty/welfare stories continued after reform, people may continue to infer that welfare mostly benefits the black poor and, given their stereotypes, continue to conclude that the policy benefits the undeserving. In that case, the vicious cycle remains unbroken. This paper tests for patterns in photo selection in the period running up to and after welfare reform.

Content Analysis: Data and Methods

The data collection approach for this analysis follows that of Gilens (1996; 1999). I first assembled a comprehensive list of every story about poverty and related matters that appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* between January 1, 1992 and December 31, 2010. This was accomplished through a keyword search on the EBSCOHost database, searching for the terms “poor”, “poverty”, “welfare”, and “relief”, limiting the search to the domestic context. The abstracts of the resulting articles were then scanned to ascertain that the articles did indeed discuss poverty in the U.S. context. Articles that did not were excluded from the analysis.

All articles on the list were then inspected for pictures including poor people (as opposed to, say, politicians, welfare workers, nurses or teachers, who all might also be pictured with such stories). In total, 987 poor people were pictured with the stories. Race could be determined for 832 of them (84.3%). Age was also coded for: when possible each individual pictured was identified as younger than 18, between 18 and 64, or older than 64.

Findings

General Findings

The three magazines combined published a total of 474 stories about poverty in the U.S. during the period of study (1992-2010). *Time* accounted for 122 of those, whereas *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* published 170 and 182 stories respectively (Table 2). For all three magazines, at least a plurality of people pictured with the poverty stories was African American, with *USNWR* having the lowest proportion at 48%. Overall, 52% of poor people pictured are black.

Table 2: African Americans among the Pictured Poor

	# of stories	# of people pictured	% African American
<i>Time</i>	122	263	55%
<i>Newsweek</i>	170	223	57%
<i>USNWR</i>	182	346	48%
Total	474	832	52%

The data presented in Table 3 show that the racial breakdown of the magazine poor is hugely discrepant with the breakdown of the actual poor. Both blacks and Hispanics are overrepresented by more than a factor of 2 as part of the U.S. poor, whereas non-blacks/non-Hispanics are dramatically underrepresented.

Table 3: Poor people pictured, by race (excl. undeterminable), 1992-2010

Race/Ethnicity	# of pictured poor	% of actual poor
Black	435 (52.3%)	23.1%
Hispanic	114 (13.7%)	28.7%
Non-black/Hispanic	283 (34.0%)	48.2%
Total	832 (100%)	100%

Welfare Coverage

Gilens attributes the inaccuracies in the depiction of the poor overall to the operation of subconscious stereotypes in the photo selection process, saying about news magazine photo editors: “[I]t may be that, in the everyday process of choosing news

photographs, the unexamined, subconscious impressions guiding their ideas of ‘what the poor should look like’ reflect a sense that blacks compose a majority of America’s poor” (1999, p. 148).

Interestingly, like Gilens found for the 1950-1992 period, the racial disparities in coverage are not consistent across all specific story subjects and across subgroups of the poor. One type of story that is especially interesting concerns welfare. An important factor to explaining the unpopularity of welfare, according to Gilens, is the discrepancy between actual racial breakdown of welfare recipients and the percentage of African Americans pictured with magazine stories on this program. Table 4 shows that, overall, the three news magazines dramatically overstate the proportion of blacks amongst welfare recipients. Even though the actual percentage of African Americans among welfare recipients is 38%, in the three news magazines, 55% of welfare recipients pictured are black.

Table 4: Pictured Poor in Welfare Stories (1992-2010)

Race/Ethnicity	Time	Newsweek	USNWR	Total
Black	45 (58.4%)	45 (78.9)	40 (41.2%)	130 (55.1%)
Hispanic	10 (13%)	3 (4.8%)	9 (9.3%)	22 (9.3%)
Nonblack/Hispanic	22 (28.6%)	14 (22.6%)	48 (49.5%)	84 (35.6%)

This overall percentage is brought down by the breakdown for *USNWR*, which approaches the actual percentage of black welfare recipients. *Time* and, especially, *Newsweek* photos dramatically misrepresent who receives welfare benefits.

It is striking that all three magazines significantly underrepresent the percentage of Hispanics amongst welfare recipients (magazine number: 9.3%, actual number: 21%). This is consistent, however, with Gilens’ argument that subconscious stereotypes guide photo selection. If the conventional wisdom is that welfare is a program for the lazy, then this is inconsistent with the existing cultural stereotype of Hispanics as having a strong work ethic (see Table 1, p. 5). Photo editors will thus be less likely to select pictures of Hispanics to go

with stories on welfare, resulting in a significant discrepancy between the real and depicted proportion of welfare recipients amongst Hispanics. The overall picture, then, is that both African Americans are shown as poor in exaggerated proportions, but for African Americans it is because of a weak work ethic and for Hispanics it is in spite of a strong one, explaining the different patterns for welfare photo selection.

Coverage of Sympathetic versus Unsympathetic Age Groups

Another way to gauge the racialization of poverty coverage is to look at the racial and ethnic breakdown of sympathetic versus unsympathetic subgroups of the poor. One criterion we could use is age: children and the elderly are generally considered sympathetic, whereas the working age poor elicit less sympathy. If racialization occurred, then, we would expect the elderly and very young poor to be whiter relative to the working age poor. What is more, prior research suggests that the elderly poor invoke more sympathy and goodwill than poor children, likely because helping poor children would involve steering resources toward their parents, whose work ethic is in question (Cook and Barrett 1992; Gilens 1996). The data indicate that the expected pattern does not hold for poor children, but it does hold for the elderly poor. Among whites and Asians (who together make up the “Other” category), the elderly “magazine poor” match their proportion among the actual poor quite closely, whereas among blacks, the elderly feature barely at all in the news magazines. The most sympathetic age category, then, is portrayed as almost exclusively white.

Table 5: Age Distribution of the American Poor and “Magazine Poor”

	Total	African American	Hispanic	Other
True Poor (2010)				
Under 18	35	41	46	26
18-64	57	53	50	63
Over 64	8	6	4	11
Magazine Poor				
Under 18	47	51	47	42
18-64	49	48	53	50
Over 64	4	1	-	8
Total Magazine Poor	798	399	114	285

Welfare Coverage in Good and Bad Times

Another way to assess whether poverty coverage is racialized is to compare patterns of representation across good and bad economic times. In good times, poverty may easily be attributed to lack of effort, whereas bad times may be presumed to hurt even those who have a strong work ethic. The expectation, then, would be that the overrepresentation of blacks among the “magazine poor” will be especially pronounced during good times, and that whites would feature more prominently during bad economic times. To test for this, I compare poverty coverage during two periods: 1998-2000 and 2008-2010. The former represents a time of economic growth, prosperity, and low unemployment. The latter is a period of negative or underwhelming economic growth and high unemployment.

Table 6: Poverty Coverage in Good and Bad Economic Times

	1998-2000 (Good)	2008-2010 (Bad)
Proportion Black	56.3%	34%
Proportion Non-Black/Non-Hispanic	32.8%	53.2%

The results are striking. During the economic boom period, a higher than average proportion of the pictured poor was black, and a lower than average percentage was white. The numbers are almost exactly reversed during the period of economic trouble, with whites

overrepresented to a dramatic extent and blacks fading to a much lower than average proportion.

Coverage Pre- and Post-Reform

It appears plausible, if not likely, that when policy changes, the public's attitudes toward and the media's subsequent coverage of that policy will change. It is already clear from data presented above that the public is equally negative about the level of welfare spending as it was prior to welfare reform. But what about media coverage? One possibility in terms of welfare coverage is that journalists, subconsciously, may have changed their photo selection process post-reform, prompted by the belief that welfare, given the newly imposed time limits and work requirements, no longer offered a refuge for those lacking work ethic. As a consequence, welfare may have been portrayed as a "whiter" policy in the post-reform era than it previously had been.

The data do not bear this out. During the 1992-1994 period, 61 out of the 127 poor people pictured by welfare stories were black, coming to 58.1%. From 1998-2010, 32 people were pictured by welfare stories. 19 of them were black. This amounts to 59.4%. There is no statistically significant difference between these percentages, which, in itself, is telling: the racial patterns in coverage were unaffected by the passing of the landmark welfare reform bill in 1996.

If we are to take Gilens argument about the importance of media portrayals to policy opinion seriously, this explains the lack of change in support for welfare. Even if one questions the extent to which the media are important, it is clear that the media are not offering citizens a corrective to their misperceptions about the racial composition of welfare recipients.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the contours and origins of public opinion on poverty and, specifically, welfare have changed little from what they were before over the last 20 years. Media portrayals of the poor still present them as disproportionately black. What is more, the data about welfare coverage, age patterns, and good versus bad economic times indicate that the proportion of African Americans is still especially high in stories about the unsympathetic poor. Furthermore, the poll data presented here indicates that perceptions of blacks' work ethic are still predominantly negative, that people still overestimate the proportion of blacks among the poor, and that welfare is as unpopular now as it was in the 1980s.

The findings about the depiction of the Hispanic poor offer an intriguing and suggestive counterpoint to those about African Americans. As is the case for African Americans, the proportion Hispanics make up of the poor is exaggerated in the pictures accompanying news magazine stories about poverty generally. However, whereas the proportion of blacks among welfare recipients is significantly exaggerated among the pictured poor, the proportion of Hispanics among them is lower than the actual number. This bolsters Gilens' claim that photo editors' stereotypes are crucial to understanding misrepresentations in media coverage of the poor. After all, the prevailing stereotypes about Hispanics and African Americans in terms of work ethic are a study in contrast: Hispanics are perceived as harder workers than whites, whereas blacks are perceived as lazier than all other racial groups asked about.

All in all, then, the fundamental changes in welfare policy ushered in by the passing of PRWOA have not done much, if anything, to change how the media portray the American poor. The public's perceptions of the poor and its attitudes toward welfare

spending, in turn, have not changed either. Given the deeply rooted stereotypes in play here, this should not be too much of a surprise, especially given recent findings suggesting how hard it is to convince people to abandon false beliefs even in the face of credible information. The media do not provide such information, so it is to be expected that inaccurate beliefs about and low levels of support for welfare persist.

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MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF POVERTY AND RACE

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