

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

DESCRIBING THE POOR: AN  
EXAMINATION OF NEWS MEDIA  
LANGUAGE ABOUT WELFARE REFORM  
AND RECIPIENTS FROM 1996 TO 2016

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This study examined the language used by four mainstream newspapers to represent welfare recipients between 1996 and 2016. Using a mixed-method analysis developed on qualitative and quantitative analysis and guided by framing and critical discourse theories, this study investigated the words used by news media writers to describe welfare recipients following welfare reform in 1996 in the United States. My findings show that within some of the news media examined, stereotypical characterizations and values associated with the poor—dependency, lack of responsibility, and self-sufficiency—were used decades after the birth of the “welfare queen” trope, that quotes from welfare recipients were underrepresented in stories, and general coverage of welfare public assistance decreased during this time period. This study builds upon research of how welfare recipients were described in news media in the twentieth century and offers important implications for how journalists cover the poor in the current era.

DESCRIBING THE POOR: AN EXAMINATION OF NEWS MEDIA LANGUAGE  
ABOUT WELFARE REFORM AND RECIPIENTS FROM 1996 TO 2016

by:

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## List of Abbreviations

ADC: Aid to Dependent Children

AFDC: Aid to Families with Dependent Children

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

TANF: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families

## Part 1: Introduction

In an article titled “Jobless on Welfare Unaffected by Cuts,” reporters Robert Kaiser and Pete Early of the *Washington Post* examined changes to national public-assistance policies. The reporters interviewed social workers in Prince George’s County, Md., and provided a glimpse into their experiences working with welfare recipients. Janine DePasquale, a social worker in Hyattsville, Md., described some of the recipients she worked with at the time:

She (DePasquale) said some clients have a “greedy, you-owe-it-to-me” attitude toward welfare that can be infuriating. Some of the clients evoke no sympathy at all from her. “But the louder they holler the more they’ll get. Everybody has one really horrible client on their caseload. Mine will get anything she wants if she just won’t give me a hard time.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, DePasquale described another welfare recipient she worked with, a 31-year-old married mother who lost her assistance after accepting a low-paying job. She went without healthcare as a result, but DePasquale described her as a success story for taking a risk and leaving assistance:

“I think most of the clients are just afraid, afraid to do it on their own,” DePasquale said. By ‘it’ she meant live life on their own. “The whole system is just a cycle that perpetuates their dependency. . . . A lot of them have very low self-esteem, very low.” She said she argues with clients that they should keep working not simply for money, but because work can be a ticket to self-esteem and eventual escape from welfare dependency. Those arguments often are fruitless, she said.<sup>2</sup>

Ian Shapira, also of the *Washington Post*, wrote the article “Preparing for a Life Off the Welfare Rolls” to explain how Washington, D.C., planned to reduce the number of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kaiser and Pete Early, “Jobless on Welfare Unaffected by Cuts; Nonworking Poor Unaffected by Reagan’s Welfare Policy,” *Washington Post*, December 19, 1981, ProQuest.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



people receiving welfare assistance in the District. The article started with a description of one welfare recipient named Navida: “Navida Joy knows she needs to liberate herself from the District's dole for good.”<sup>3</sup> Later on in the piece, the reporter described another welfare recipient named Diane who also lived in the District: “With no job, five children and a boyfriend who is an unemployed former drug dealer just back from prison, Diane Greenfield has grown accustomed to life on the welfare roll. For a total of seven years, Greenfield—a former temp at a downtown law firm who has struggled with pot and PCP addictions—has been receiving city welfare checks.”<sup>4</sup> A spokeswoman for the city’s Mayor-elect, Vincent C. Gray (D), added her view on changes to welfare in the city: “I would say this is a motivator and a way of breaking the cycle of dependency.”<sup>5</sup>

Both articles described welfare recipients in detail and used similar language. The first article included a story about a young mother who chose work over assistance and ultimately decided to go without healthcare for months, a decision that was considered noble by the social worker interviewed for the piece. That particular mother was used in contrast to other welfare recipients the Maryland social worker described as greedy and demanding, as if they were undeserving of the aid they received. The second article featured multiple examples of welfare recipients in D.C., one who was described as living in an unstable relationship with her partner, both of whom used drugs in the past. It painted a picture for readers of what a welfare recipient looked like. Another welfare recipient included in that article was characterized as needing to be “liberated,” saved from the grip that welfare had on her, implying that she herself did not have the

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Shapira, “Preparing for a Life off the Welfare Rolls,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 2010, ProQuest.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

willpower or drive to stop using or needing public assistance. Both stories made note of the dependency associated with welfare. One described it as a system that people needed to escape, and the other as a cycle that needed to be broken. Both descriptions of dependency implied that welfare made people reliant and perhaps not hardworking. But neither article mentioned any systemic issues that have historically forced people into poverty and limited their abilities to escape it.

While the portrayals of welfare recipients were similar in both articles, they were written nearly 30 years apart. “Jobless on Welfare Unaffected by Cuts” was published in 1981, and it looked at changes to the welfare cash-assistance program made by President Ronald Reagan. “Preparing for a Life Off the Welfare Rolls” was published in 2010 following the economic recession of 2008. The articles lead readers to believe welfare recipients are rapacious and indolent or unwilling to make a change in their lives. They included personal life choices made by welfare recipients—whom they lived with, how many children they had, their place of work, their marital status, and more. The reporters in these aforementioned articles included judgments about what life choices were favorable and who was and was not deserving of aid. This was due to the language used by the reporters and the people interviewed for the articles to describe welfare recipients. It was also due in part to the representation or lack thereof of the welfare recipients in each piece. Voices of those on public assistance are often excluded while voices of public officials, politicians, welfare administrators, and others in positions of power are included in media stories about poverty. This can be problematic because it can perpetuate, rather than challenge, the long-held stereotype that welfare recipients are Black mothers cheating the system.

The similarities found in the two articles necessitated further examination of how welfare recipients are represented in news media. This study, therefore, examines the language used to represent welfare recipients by four mainstream newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Washington Post*—between 1996 and 2016, following welfare legislation in the 1990s. The goal of the study was to learn how reporters, editorial writers, opinion writers, columnists, and others wrote about welfare recipients in the two plus decades after the 1996 welfare reform. Several studies have examined the depiction of welfare recipients and others living in poverty in news media from the 1920s to the early 2000s, but there is a dearth of scholarship analyzing coverage over the last two decades. I found that language used to describe welfare recipients between 1996 and 2016 was similar to the language used to describe the poor during the mid-twentieth century and before 1996 welfare reform legislation, and that the language used by the people quoted in news media stories about welfare recipients often placed value judgments on them. This study contributes to a growing body of research that examines how writers describe marginalized social groups such as the poor.

To better understand the language used at this time, I conducted a mixed-method examination developed upon qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. This study was guided by Erving Goffman and Robert Entman's framing analysis theory and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology. Frames organize and package text into meanings, which is then consumed and interpreted by readers. CDA looks at how power is exercised through language and views language as a social practice. Combined, these two theories offered useful roadmaps for how to approach a

language analysis to better understand how word choices and recurring themes in news media were used to describe welfare recipients between 1996 and 2016 and might have influenced public understanding of the poor.

Our interaction with media affects how we comprehend the people around us, and it can—for better or worse—shape how we perceive the lives of others. Language is a powerful tool, especially for those who consider themselves the “watchdogs” of society. Therefore, this examination of how we describe the poor in news media is needed as a way to recognize how we write and the influence words have, whether we are aware of it or not.

Prior to discussing the methodology, dataset, and findings of this study, it is important to introduce the history of welfare to better understand how Black Americans and mothers in particular became the face of welfare in the U.S. The “History of Welfare” section explains in more detail the history of and descriptions of the poor in relation to public-assistance programs. The literature reviewed provides examples of past scholarship that examined discourses and frameworks used in news media and other literature to describe America’s poor, as well as studies that examined news racism in media.

## Part 2: Literature Review

### *A Brief History of Welfare and the “Welfare Queen”*

The concept of the American welfare state emerged in the 1930s. A national system that included Social Security, unemployment insurance, and public-assistance policies was created to support those in need as a result of the Great Depression.<sup>6</sup> The Social Security Act of 1935, signed into law by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, granted financial aid to the elderly, dependent children, widowed mothers, and the unemployed, but about half of all workers in the U.S. at the time were excluded from benefits.<sup>7</sup> Agricultural and domestic workers, most of whom were Black, were not eligible for public assistance, and, according to professor Martin Gilens, Black Americans only made up 13.5 percent of public assistance recipients in 1936.<sup>8</sup>

Public-assistance programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC, initially known as Aid to Dependent Children or ADC, “disproportionately targeted African Americans,” argued political scientist Robert C. Lieberman.<sup>9</sup> They “were decentralized and parochial, [an placed] near-complete authority in the hands of

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<sup>6</sup> “The Social Security Act of 1935,” Social Security Administration, Legislative History, August 14, 1935, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.ssa.gov/history/35act.html>.

<sup>7</sup> “The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act,” Social Security Administration Research, Statistics, and Policy Analysis, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n4/v70n4p49.html>

<sup>8</sup> Martin Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media,” in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 104.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. Lieberman, “Race and the Limits of Solidarity: American Welfare State Development in Comparative Perspective,” in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 37.

local political elites” prior to the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> The original way AFDC was distributed was discriminatory because southern white political and economic elites held back money from Black Americans in need.<sup>11</sup> Increased federal-to-state grant-matching funds over the next several decades, however, encouraged many states to expand coverage to include more Black people for the first time.<sup>12</sup>

Several changes in the mid-twentieth century, including mass migration of Black Americans to northern cities, the civil rights movement, the riots of the 1960s, and increased welfare participation of Black families contributed to the changing understanding of poverty.<sup>13</sup> As Black Americans gained more rights and equal access, resentment grew, and welfare politics changed. As Black visibility increased so did the divide between “white from black, middle- and working-class Americans from the poor, and cities from suburbs, leaving African Americans increasingly isolated—politically, socially, economically, and geographically—from the main currents of the American political economy.”<sup>14</sup> As the number of public-assistance recipients increased in the 1960s and 1970s, the public image of the poor shifted from white to Black, and news coverage of the poor became “less sympathetic.”<sup>15</sup>

Unlike recipients of unemployment insurance and Social Security, those who received welfare cash assistance were judged for their lifestyle choices. Historian Premilla Nadasen’s research shows that as more Black women received welfare benefits in the 1960s, “politicians and policymakers instituted more punitive measures, including

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<sup>10</sup> Lieberman, “Race and the Limits of Solidarity, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black,” 105.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid,” 102.

<sup>14</sup> Lieberman, “Race and the Limits of Solidarity,” 23.

<sup>15</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black,” 101-102.

work requirements.”<sup>16</sup> In her research about welfare recipients in 1970s Nevada—many of whom were migrants from the south during the mid-twentieth century—historian Annelise Orleck found that some scholarship about Black Americans from the 1940s through the 1960s described Black mothers as manipulative, and domineering; women who “had a genius for fraud and no capacity for shame.”<sup>17</sup> “She seemed to pass on her moral disease to everyone she touched, ruining husbands, daughters, and son,” Orleck wrote about the perception of needy Black mothers.<sup>18</sup> States including Maryland, Virginia, California, Illinois, Louisiana, North Carolina and Mississippi all considered forced-sterilization legislation in the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Lawmakers also recommended criminalizing welfare recipients for giving birth to children out of wedlock.<sup>20</sup>

Poor Black mothers were considered responsible for the breakdown of Black families and the emasculation of Black fathers. They were considered “too aggressive and independent,” according to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist, the assistant secretary of labor under President Lyndon Johnson, and author of the influential 1965 study “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.”<sup>21</sup> The “Moynihan Report,” as it is more commonly known, put blame on Black mothers for their poverty and linked single-parent households to “matriarchal” families.<sup>22</sup> Politicians, Orleck argued, saw

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<sup>16</sup> Premilla Nadasen, “From Widow to ‘Welfare Queen’: Welfare and the Politics of Race,” *Black Women, Gender + Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 53.

<sup>17</sup> Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*, annotated edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

mothers on welfare not as “citizens seeking their rights ... but charlatans extorting state funds to which they were not entitled.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most enduring and widely known representation of Black citizens as undeserving, licentious burdens on the system is the pejorative “welfare queen” trope. The term was used in *Chicago Tribune* reporting in the 1970s and was popularized by then-candidate for president, Ronald Reagan.<sup>24</sup> Reagan used the moniker in his campaign speeches in 1976, specifically weaponizing the term to describe one woman, Linda Taylor, who abused public assistance, among other wrongdoings.<sup>25</sup> But Reagan rarely expanded upon the other crimes she committed. He used Taylor in his argument against government assistance, and in doing so tied all welfare recipients, especially Black women in need, to a stereotype of people who abused the system. He also rarely stated Taylor’s race. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Reagan “didn’t have to.”<sup>26</sup> Even though most of the country’s welfare recipients were white, by this point “welfare was portrayed in media reports for decades as a black entitlement.”<sup>27</sup>

Neoliberalism—the notion that markets should solve problems, not the government—ascended along with Ronald Reagan and Neo-conservatism, and stereotypical depictions of welfare recipients were used in Neoliberal-political rhetoric. Senator Russell Long, for example, referred to welfare recipients in 1970 as “brood

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<sup>23</sup> Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> J. Kohler-Hausmann, “‘The Crime of Survival’: Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance, and the Original ‘Welfare Queen,’” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 2 (December 1, 2007): 334.

<sup>25</sup> Josh Levin, *The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 95-100.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Borrelli, “Reagan Used Her, the Country Hated Her. Decades Later, the Welfare Queen of Chicago Refuses to Go Away,” *chicagotribune.com*, accessed December 5, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



mares” and said that if they could “find the time to march in the streets” they could “find the time to do some useful work.”<sup>28</sup> More than twenty years later, similar language was used by Representative John Mica in 1996 who held up a sign that read “Don’t Feed the Alligators,” implying that government aid “disrupted the natural order” by giving cash to those in need.<sup>29</sup> In this case, the alligators were welfare recipients. While Neoliberalism aimed to eliminate dependency on the federal government, a form of paternalistic governance simultaneously worked to impose strict ideals of morality on the poor.<sup>30</sup> Concerning welfare reform in 1996, Senator Jesse Helms said that in addition to reform restoring the “American work ethic,” “the bill takes a step in the right direction in helping reduce the rising [child] illegitimacy rates” and gave states the ability to deny welfare recipients benefits “who already have children living on the public dole.”<sup>31</sup>

The belief of the welfare recipient as a queen—a woman entitled to certain treatment or benefits without having to work—ultimately “discredited poor women's voices and insinuated that their claims of material hardship were disingenuous,” argued historian Julilly Kohler-Hausmann.<sup>32</sup> The criticisms of Black mothers living in poverty by people in positions of power often excluded any acknowledgement of the myriad disadvantages experienced by Black Americans, many that trapped them in poverty. Instead, the image of a “queen” that people in power placed onto poor Black women and the message that they “are angry, pathologically dependent on welfare...and are

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<sup>28</sup> Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, p 119.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F. Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2-4.

<sup>31</sup> Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, 103.

<sup>32</sup> Kohler-Hausmann, “The Crime of Survival,” 335.

incapable of adhering to mainstream norms regarding morality and self reliance,” became ingrained in public understanding of poverty in the U.S.<sup>33</sup>

The welfare system in the U.S. looks very different today than in the 1960s and 1970s. The enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996—led by a conservative Congress and a Democratic president, Bill Clinton—enforced a massive assistance overhaul, the “end of welfare as we know it.”<sup>34</sup> The PRWORA eliminated the cash-assistance program AFDC and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This new assistance required recipients to find work within two years of receiving aid and put a lifelong cap of five years on benefits.<sup>35</sup> Among other things, this federal block grant was placed in the hands of the states and excluded certain groups, including immigrants and teenage mothers, from receiving benefits. States were given the ability to even further reduce the lifelong cap for recipients. Arizona, for example, limited lifelong benefits to 12 months in 2016, and became the state with the strictest welfare laws in the nation.<sup>36</sup>

While TANF was considered a drastic change to past welfare policy, political scientist and sociologist Frances Fox Piven found similarities between TANF and the

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<sup>33</sup> Liliane Cambraia Windsor, Eloise Dunlap, and Andrew Golub, “Challenging Controlling Images, Oppression, Poverty and Other Structural Constraints: Survival Strategies among African American Women in Distressed Households” 15, no. 3 (2011): 290–306, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-010-9151-0>.

<sup>34</sup> “Bill Clinton in 1992 Ad: ‘A Plan to End Welfare as We Know It,’” August 30, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/bill-clinton-in-1992-ad-a-plan-to-end-welfare-as-we-know-it/2016/08/30/9e6350f8-6ee0-11e6-993f-73c693a89820\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/bill-clinton-in-1992-ad-a-plan-to-end-welfare-as-we-know-it/2016/08/30/9e6350f8-6ee0-11e6-993f-73c693a89820_video.html).

<sup>35</sup> Alma Carten, “How Racism Has Shaped Welfare Policy in America since 1935,” AP NEWS, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://apnews.com/fbd5d3c83e3243e9b03e46d7cb842eaa>.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Jo Pitzl, “AZ Poverty Aid Cut to 1 Year; Strictest in U.S.,” *The Republic*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2016/07/01/arizona-limits-poverty-aid-1-year-strictest-us/86499262/>.

country's earliest welfare measures prior to the 1960s. TANF policy, she argued, attempted to change welfare, as we knew it, "by withholding information about benefits, by requiring numerous trips to ascertain eligibility, by subjecting potential applicants to legal and illegal strategies of diversion, or by simply rejecting applicants."<sup>37</sup> Like earlier public assistance that was controlled by local authorities and restricted people of color, TANF made welfare assistance less accessible to those in need.<sup>38</sup>

While policy experts and politicians were jubilant about the decline in welfare-roll numbers as a result of the TANF time cap, more families started to use food stamps, later known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Figure 1 shows the increase in people using SNAP compared to TANF following reform. In 1990, for example, about 20 million people used food stamps and about 11.6 million people, adult and children combined, used AFDC cash assistance. Twenty years later, more than 40 million people used SNAP while only about 4.4 million people, adults and children combined, were enrolled in TANF.

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<sup>37</sup> Frances Fox Piven, "Why Welfare Is Racist," in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 326.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 326.

## Figure 1: AFDC, TANF, and SNAP totals 1960-2019

The number of welfare recipients decreased as a result of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Americans using food assistance has increased, however, especially in the 2000s following the recession. Welfare assistance remained low and continued to decline despite the recession. Note that food stamp data for 1960 and 1997-99 children TANF totals are not available.

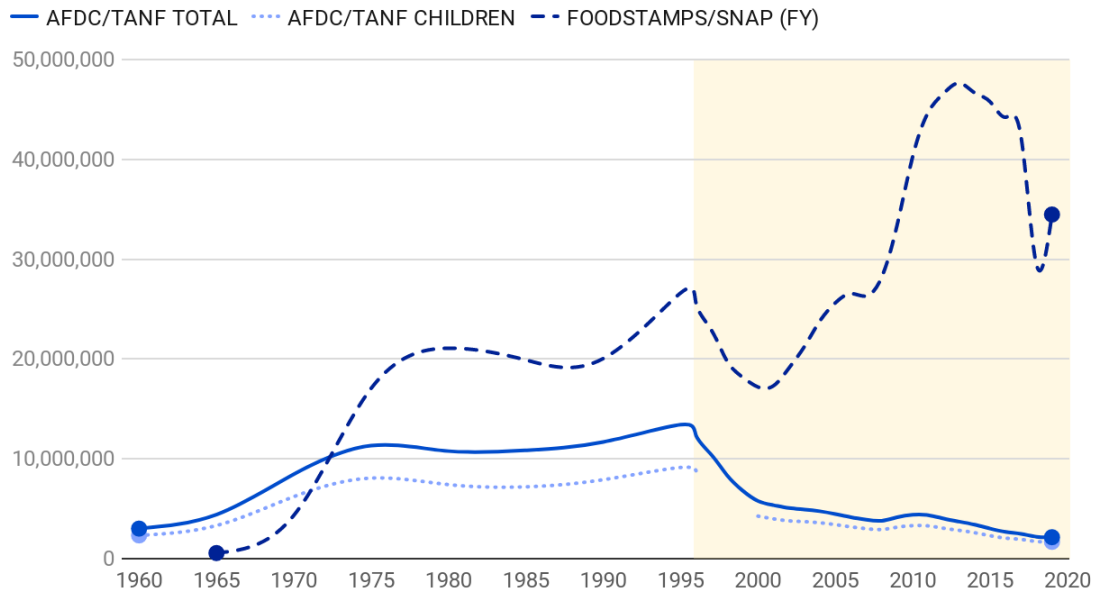


Chart: Colleen Curran • Source: HHS, USDA, NIH • Created with Datawrapper

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As families were forced to leave welfare, millions became disconnected from the safety net completely. For some disconnected from the system, welfare was no longer viewed as a viable option as a result of the changes in the 1990s.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> “AFDC Caseload Data 1960–1995,” Office of Family Assistance, ACF, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/tanf-and-afdc-historical-case-data-pre-2012>; “TANF Caseload Data 1996–2015,” Office of Family Assistance | ACF, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/tanf-caseload-data-1996-2012>; “A Short History of SNAP | USDA-FNS,” A Short History of SNAP, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1961>; Julie A. Caswell et al., *History, Background, and Goals of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy* (National Academies Press (US), 2013), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK206907/>.

<sup>40</sup> Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, Reprint edition (Mariner Books, 2016), 33.

### Scholarship about Welfare

Scholarship reviewed for this study examined how stereotyped language premised on race, gender, and class affected various forms of media coverage of the poor in the U.S. between 1929 and into the early 2000s. I reviewed a combination of historical, sociological, political science, and media studies for this research. Some analyzed the relationship between race and welfare in the U.S. Some looked at journalistic practice and news judgment. Others provided a link between media and public opinion. The studies reviewed did not all analyze the same types of media, nor did they employ the same methodologies, but they all concluded that media—newspapers, television, magazines, and images—influenced our understanding of and feelings about the poor.

Sociologist Herbert Gans's seminal book *Deciding What's News* was premised upon the observation of four magazine and television newsrooms for ten years to understand how news was made. His study of CBS, NBC, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, was conducted in the 1970s. His evaluation of newsmakers found that while journalists sought to keep their personal values out of their newsmaking through objective reporting practices, personal biases still found their way into news unconsciously, "largely through the use of connotative, often pejorative words and phrases," according to Gans.<sup>41</sup> He found what he described as "enduring values" that existed in media language, and argued that they were built into news judgment.<sup>42</sup> In relation to newsmaking and poverty, Gans wrote, "It is now accepted that the government must help the poor, but only the deserving

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<sup>41</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, 2 edition (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 183, 199.

<sup>42</sup> Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 182.

poor, for ‘welfare cheaters’ are a continuous menace and are more newsworthy than people, other than the very rich who cheat on their taxes.”<sup>43</sup> He found that welfare agencies were covered in news with “more scrutiny” as compared to other government agencies. He described this enduring value as “Responsible Capitalism.” He also found that newsmakers wrote favorably about self-sufficient men and women and those who “overcame poverty and bureaucracy.”<sup>44</sup> This enduring value was called “Individualism” and contrasted with the notion of government dependency.

While Gans looked at the practice of newsmaking, Martin Gilens examined portrayals of the poor in media prior to the PRWORA. He used content analysis and image analysis of media reports to understand how the poor were visually represented in news magazines and explained why Americans hated welfare. His findings showed that news media misrepresented welfare recipients as mostly African American, that white Americans considered welfare to be a government program specifically for Blacks, that those receiving aid from the government were considered undeserving, and that public discourse suggested that Blacks lacked a good work ethic.<sup>45</sup> Gilens found that out of the 560 news magazine images that he analyzed of those living in poverty, more than 60 percent were photos of Black Americans. But to accurately reflect the racial makeup of the poor in the early 1990s, that number should have only been about 29 percent.<sup>46</sup> Public survey data found that Americans exaggerated the number of Black people receiving

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<sup>43</sup> Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999), 97-100.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Gilens, “Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1996): 536.

aid.<sup>47</sup> He argued that this perpetuated the negative racial stereotype of Black Americans and increased white Americans' opposition to welfare.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, his research showed that the public was sympathetic to children and the elderly living in poverty, but that adults were thought to be capable of work and perhaps even worthy of blame for their economic predicament.<sup>49</sup> He argued that racialized pictures used in media influenced public perspectives about welfare recipients, and that even when white people interacted with poor people who were not Black, it did little to change their understanding of the poor. Furthermore, Gilens wrote, "At least with regard to the racial composition of the poor, public perceptions appear to be shaped by the images offered up by the mass media."<sup>50</sup>

Like Gilens, the researchers Heather E. Bullock, Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy R. Williams assessed images of the poor in print media and television. Their research looked at media in the few years after the PRWORA. Bullock, Wyche, and Williams examined more than 400 newspaper articles over a three-month period in 1999 and performed a content analysis of the articles. They found that the articles failed to explain the reasons for and problems associated with living in poverty, but often described the reform as a success.<sup>51</sup> They conducted a framing analysis and found that while most of the articles focused on reducing welfare "dependency," they did little to explain the barriers that often prevented people from attaining gainful employment.<sup>52</sup> Their discourse

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<sup>47</sup> Gilens, "Race and Poverty in America," 516, 537.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 517.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 522.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 531.

<sup>51</sup> Heather E. Bullock, Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy R. Williams, "Media Images of the Poor," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 2 (2001): 241.

<sup>52</sup> Bullock, Wyche, Williams, "Media Images of the Poor," 239.

analysis showed a change from more overt, stereotypical rhetoric to a more neutral tone in news articles.<sup>53</sup> This deviated from stories in the pre-Clinton-reform era of 1996. The stories seemed to reflect the political rhetoric of welfare reform as a success in removing people from the dole, but the stories failed to look critically at how the reform affected those that previously received help.

Joya Misra, Stephanie Moller, and Marina Karides studied how depictions of dependency in media changed over time. They examined the discourse and framing of 252 magazine articles from the Wall Street crash of 1929 to welfare reform in 1996, the longest time period examined out of the studies included here. The team found that language about dependency changed over time, from the need for public assistance being considered acceptable to later being stigmatized, specifically as more Black Americans joined welfare rolls in the mid-twentieth century. The framing and understanding of dependency made welfare no longer a social issue but an individual one.<sup>54</sup> According to their research, the public considered welfare a cause of dependency in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> They learned that while concern about men on welfare decreased over time, there was increased negative discourse about women receiving public assistance.<sup>56</sup> In their framing analysis research, they found that more than one half of the articles that they determined used a specific dependency frame described welfare recipients as lazy or government cheats and referred specifically to their race as African Americans or

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<sup>53</sup> Bullock, Wyche, Williams, "Media Images of the Poor," 239.

<sup>54</sup> Joya Misra, Stephanie Moller, and Marina Karides, "Envisioning Dependency: Changing Media Depictions of Welfare in the 20th Century," *Social Problems* 50, no. 4 (November 2003): 485.

<sup>55</sup> Misra, Moller, and Karides, "Envisioning Dependency," 491.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 492.



minorities.<sup>57</sup> The researchers argued that the framing of dependency and the discourse used in media from 1929 to 1996 influenced the 1996 federal and state policies associated with welfare reform, a change from dependency to forced “independence.”<sup>58</sup> Like the previous studies about image and print examinations, Misra, Moller, and Karides’s long-term study of frames and discourse revealed the common theme of dependency throughout the discussion of poverty, and found a noticeable shift in discourse and public attitude toward need when associated with race.

Unlike Misra, Moller, and Karides, Ange-Marie Hancock Alfaro performed a qualitative and quantitative analysis over a short period of time in 1995 and 1996. She examined five national newspapers as well as congressional records, including floor debates, amendments, remarks, and reports to better understand the language used to describe welfare recipients. Her research about the public identity of welfare recipients is largely influential for the qualitative analysis for this study. Hancock Alfaro argued that a person’s public identity was shaped not solely by the individual, but by “others’ perception, interpretation, and manipulation—particularly for those citizens who lack political equality,” and, similar to what Misra, Moller, and Karide found, this influenced welfare policy-making in the 1990s.<sup>59</sup> She conducted interviews and examined discourse of politicians, academics, and the media about welfare recipients and located the use of racially, gendered, and class-coded language about poor Black women.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Misra, Moller, and Karides, “Envisioning Dependency,” 494.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 484-485.

<sup>59</sup> Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), 4-5.

<sup>60</sup> Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, 21.

Hancock Alfaro's study looked specifically at the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New York Times*. "The development of a single underlying concept, "Public Identity," was the primary goal of this project," she wrote.<sup>61</sup> She determined that there were at least 14 different "dimensions" of the public identity of the welfare recipient in 1996, including: draining national resources, excessive fertility, unemployment, laziness, cross-generational dependency, single-parent family structure, drug use, crime, teen motherhood, remaining on welfare for a long period, a culture of poverty, fraud, abuse of the system, and residence in the inner-city.<sup>62</sup> Hancock Alfaro argued that the language that reinforced the public identity of those in poverty "delegitimized the political claims of marginal groups," which ultimately left many in need without aid, which has defeated the goal of ending poverty in the U.S.<sup>63</sup> This study was an in-depth look at how media, social scientists, politicians and other academics failed to question the language they used to understand and write about those living in poverty and how that language influenced policy-making going forward. Hancock Alfaro's research provides a useful foundation to build an examination of news media language about poverty following the 1996 welfare legislation.

Catherine Luther, Deseriee Kennedy, and Terri Combs-Orme analyzed U.S. television-network stories from 1993 to 2000. They found that welfare recipients were

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<sup>61</sup> Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, 168.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 24, 27.

typically portrayed as Black, female, and “responsible for her welfare status.”<sup>64</sup> Their research suggested that news stories reinforced political rhetoric that at the time was in favor of reducing the amount of people on welfare.<sup>65</sup> They argued that “while sustaining the image of welfare as essentially a ‘women’s issue,’ images of the welfare recipient changed from ‘overtly white widow to lazy African American breeder and then to the ‘welfare queen,’” and that the media played a “crucial role in promulgating this image.”<sup>66</sup> This broadcast examination concludes findings similar to Gilens, Bullock, Fraser Wyche and Williams, Misra, Moller, and Karides, and Hancock Alfaro concerning racialized images and language as well as frameworks built by public attitudes about the poor and their dependency on the government.

In addition to their image study, they conducted a qualitative analysis of a random sample of news articles to examine the language used about welfare recipients in the post-reform era. They found that the language and imagery showed welfare recipients as “black women with several children.”<sup>67</sup> Like other studies about the post reform years, Luther, Kennedy, and Combs-Orme’s examination of the media’s portrayal of the poor shows a discourse of responsibility and self-sufficiency. News coverage around 1996 regularly described welfare recipients as future workers. This team’s research showed

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<sup>64</sup> Catherine Luther, Deseriee Kennedy, and Terri Combs-Orme, “Intertwining of Poverty, Gender, and Race: A Critical Analysis of Welfare News Coverage from 1993-2000,” n.d., 10.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Luther, Kennedy and Combs-Orme, “Intertwining of Poverty, Gender, and Race,” 24.

that news reflected “power relations” and that whites made up the majority of the mainstream news audience.<sup>68</sup>

The studies about news media—print, images, and broadcast—all discuss public attitudes and understandings of the poor. Gans’s examination of newsrooms provides insight into how public knowledge might be influenced by the process of newsmaking, and Gilen’s proved how images can shape public attitudes of the poor. Political scientists Joshua J. Dyck and Laura S. Hussey add to this discussion by examining public opinion following the PRWORA of 1996. Their study found that the public generally agreed with reform and considered it a success, but very little changed about white peoples’ opinions about Black people and welfare. They argued that the welfare system was viewed as broken and in need of repair in the 1980s and early 1990s. Therefore, much of the post-reform media coverage was “positive in tone, highlighting declining welfare rolls and former welfare recipients’ success in new jobs.”<sup>69</sup> Even though salience of welfare coverage and the racial stereotyping decreased compared to pre-Clinton reform years, their study “points to the durability of stereotypes, not just about blacks but also about welfare recipients, in which race has become embedded.”<sup>70</sup>

Newsrooms may no longer use “welfare queen” when writing about welfare recipients. But based on the aforementioned studies, the ways in which the poor are described or appear in media might affect public understanding of poverty, especially the poverty experienced by Black Americans. What makes this even more problematic is the

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<sup>68</sup> Luther, Kennedy and Combs-Orme, “Intertwining of Poverty, Gender, and Race,” 18.

<sup>69</sup> Joshua J. Dyck and Laura S. Hussey, “The End of Welfare as We Know It? Durable Attitudes in a Changing Information Environment,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (January 1, 2008): 591.

<sup>70</sup> Dyck and Hussey, “The End of Welfare as We Know It?,” 591, 603.

idea of new racism. In a study that examined how the U.S. media system perpetuated racism, Marci Bounds Littlefield argued that diversity in various forms of media make it look as though “minorities have obtained a piece of the American dream” due to their more equal or regular representation.<sup>71</sup> But she explained that this new racism, a more subtle or covert form of racism, was grounded in colorblindness.<sup>72</sup> Colorblind racism allows societies to “dilute the real issues and needs of” Black Americans.<sup>73</sup> It believes that the color of someone’s skin does not influence their experience with institutions like the media, healthcare, police and more, nor does skin color affect relationships within communities.<sup>74</sup> Unlike overt racism—blatant racial discrimination and intolerance practiced publicly and supported by institutions including government—colorblind racism denies the existence of racism. This denial is dangerous because it assumes that racism no longer exists.<sup>75</sup>

Other researchers have located signs of new racism in newspapers, television, and more based on the type of discourse used in reporting. Peter Teo, for example, critically analyzed newspaper articles from two papers for roughly six months in 1995. He found racist discourse woven within the textual choices of two Australian newspapers that referred to a Vietnamese gang that was repeatedly described in racist terms and linked to

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<sup>71</sup> Marci Bounds Littlefield, “The Media as a System of Racialization: Exploring Images of African American Women and the New Racism,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 5 (January 2008): 676.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 676.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Helen A. Neville, Miguel E. Gallardo, and Derald Wing Sue, eds., “Introduction: Has the United States Really Moved beyond Race?,” in *The Myth of Racial Color Blindness: Manifestations, Dynamics, and Impact*. (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2016), 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1037/14754-001>, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Neville, Gallardo, and Wing Sue, eds., “Has the United States Really Moved beyond Race, 6.

violence. While the news is supposed to give readers the ability to make their own decisions based on facts made available through reporting, Teo suggested analyzing the linguistic structures used in reporting to consider the social context journalists incorporate in their stories.<sup>76</sup> He argued that the consumption of “regular discourse can change our perceptions and attitudes regarding people, places and events and therefore becomes a potentially powerful site for the dominance of the minds.”<sup>77</sup> Srividya Ramasubramanian studied the process of stereotypes in media becoming common knowledge that consumers then identified with certain stereotyped groups. Ramasubramanian found, for example, that a local news segment about a Black man suspected of a crime “might automatically activate stereotypes of aggression and troublesomeness.”<sup>78</sup>

Words carry weight. When words are coded in racist, classist, and sexist ways and are used to describe a particular group of people but not recognized as harmful, they can perpetuate an incorrect understanding of marginalized social groups. The aforementioned studies show that the way the poor were described and portrayed in media and by other institutions maintained a long-held stereotype that Black Americans were dependent on the government. Together, these studies offer insight into past discussions of poverty and public assistance in the media, the influence of news media on public attitudes toward the

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Teo, “Racism in the News: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reporting in Two Australian Newspapers,” *Discourse & Society* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 7–49, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Srividya Ramasubramanian, “Media-Based Strategies to Reduce Racial Stereotypes Activated by News Stories,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (June 2007): 249–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900708400204>.

poor, and the stereotypical and colorblind language used in news media and by others in power to describe the poor.

## Part 3: Methodology

News media stories are important texts to study because news is a recording of history that aims to create a shared understanding of what is real and what has happened. Editorials and opinions ideally give voice to vantage points on important social issues like poverty and guide citizens in their thinking of different issues at a particular time. What journalists and writers say about the poor affects public understanding. Therefore, a look at the language used in news media articles, editorials, and other pieces can help us recognize whether stereotypes in news media exist, if there is bias in reporting, and how the media shapes public attitudes toward the poor. This study confirmed that stereotypes continued in news media between 1996 and 2016 as past characterizations of the poor emerged in contemporary coverage of welfare recipients following welfare reform legislation.

I conducted a mixed-method analysis based on elements of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Goffman and Entman's framing analysis to analyze news media. CDA is an approach to understanding the role of language in society and the power relations that are established and reinforced by language.<sup>79</sup> The words we use in written and spoken forms are based on the norms and traditions of our communities, and some word choices convey certain attitudes toward a particular topic.<sup>80</sup> Fairclough's theory was particularly useful for this study to learn how the poor were described in news

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<sup>79</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2 edition (London: Routledge, 2010), 7-8.

<sup>80</sup> Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 65.



media between 1996 and 2016. An examination of news media language to describe the poor helped explain the influence and power of news media over consumers.

The CDA model has three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and social practice.<sup>81</sup> The text dimension guided my examination of the specific words that were used to describe recipients of public assistance. It was also useful in an analysis of the words used to describe moving welfare recipients on and off of assistance. I examined words and sentences to recognize patterns in text and the relationship between the word choices and the lack of agency of the poor in the text.

Framing theory was especially useful to understand how contemporary news media organized stories about the poor. A frame influences people based on how it presents a particular subject.<sup>82</sup> “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described,” Entman argued.<sup>83</sup> As a result, frames can make certain words or themes more salient and perhaps more “meaningful or memorable to audiences.”<sup>84</sup> Framing of the poor in media as “dependent” might have influenced public understanding of the poor. Moreover, framing of welfare recipients as Black in the 1960s and 1970s through the use of images and specific word choices might have influenced public understanding of those who received public assistance. Framing theory was also

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<sup>81</sup> Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 10-12.

<sup>82</sup> Erving Goffman and Bennett Berger, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, later reprint edition (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

useful for identifying whose voices were included and whose were excluded in the pieces examined about welfare recipients. I found that only part of the full reality in the discussion of welfare assistance was present in the news media selection because of the dearth of welfare-recipient voices.

In addition to news media shaping stories about the poor using a frame of dependency, stories were also framed by the political and economic climates of the time. Some pieces following the 1996 reform were specific to the legislative changes to welfare; these articles described reform as a success and championed welfare-to-work stories. In contrast, some pieces around the time of the 2008 recession discussed public assistance in terms of the economy and questioned the strength of the social safety net in times of economic hardship.

Two studies in particular guided my approach to this research. Misra, Moller and Karides's examination of welfare discourse and the representation of poverty in the media from 1929 to 1996 found dependency as a dominant frame associated with the poor. They argued that media language played a role in "signaling important shifts" in how the poor were portrayed—through racialized and gendered language and images.<sup>85</sup> They found that media depictions of dependency changed in the mid-twentieth century based on how the poor were characterized. I adopted a similar approach to understanding the framing of stories about the poor in the selection I examined to see how the word "dependency" was used in association with poverty coverage. I also applied this approach to the phrases "personal responsibility" and "self-sufficiency" because they were the most commonly recurring themes used to help shape the frame of the "dependent" poor

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<sup>85</sup> Misra, Moller, and Karides, "Envisioning Dependency," 483.

throughout the news media selection. Hancock Alfaro's examination of 149 newspapers between 1995 and 1996 about welfare reform guided my qualitative analysis of the words used to describe welfare recipients and their movement on and off welfare following the PRWORA in 1996.

Using these theories and studies as a foundation, I looked for frames of dependency by searching for the words "dependency," "self-sufficiency," and "personal responsibility." I also examined the people quoted in the selection and the type of piece to better understand the framing. Commentaries, for example, offered an opinion about a particular topic or person while articles tended to offer a more neutral version of that same topic. I searched for moral judgments placed on the poor in the discourse used by writers as well as the people quoted. I looked for discourse that described welfare recipients and found that most news media discussed able-bodied mothers and workers or groups of poor people on the whole, not children or the elderly.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: Did the amount of news coverage, editorials, and other news media about welfare recipients increase or decrease between 1996 and 2016?
- RQ 2: Is the term "welfare queen" used in news coverage, editorials, and other news media about welfare and poverty between 1996 and 2016?
- RQ 3: What frames and discourses are employed in news coverage, editorials, and other news media between 1996 and 2016 to describe welfare recipients?

I examined the following four newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Baltimore Sun* for news media stories about welfare reform and recipients. I examined stories printed in newspapers or their online versions,

not audio stories or videos. I chose these newspapers specifically because I wanted to analyze articles and other news media that would have been widely read by a national and local audience. *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* are among the top ten papers in circulation, and the *Baltimore Sun* is a large local paper that includes coverage of people living in the capital region of Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia.

Within these publications, I examined 143 hard news articles, 34 editorials, and 57 alternative media selections I categorized as “Other.” The “Other” category includes a mix of 36 commentaries and opinion pieces, 17 columns, two reader responses, one review, and one blog post. My early research involved analysis of strictly news articles and editorials, but I decided to include an “Other” section because I wanted my overall examination to look at roughly an even number of pieces per newspaper. *The New York Times* by far had more available news media pieces to choose from each year than either the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Baltimore Sun*. But rather than examine news media based on the amount of news generated by paper, I looked at a combination of articles, editorials, and other pieces generated by each paper at a particular time. This produced a mix of news media to examine from the four papers. Including this variety in the selection allowed for a deeper examination of what the readers of these papers had access to at this particular time regarding media language about public assistance. Altogether, this selection of news media offered an insight into how journalists, writers, and the experts they quoted viewed welfare and welfare recipients, and how public understanding and sentiment concerning welfare at that time might have been influenced as a result.

To find each article, editorial, or other media piece, I used the ProQuest database. I used the keywords “welfare” and “public assistance” to narrow down the results to include pieces about welfare and government assistance. I did include selections from a “welfare”-only keyword search when I found the results to be too limited. I analyzed coverage of welfare recipients during pivotal “beats” between 1996 and 2016. The beats chosen were important social or economic moments that I hoped generated more coverage of poverty and welfare. The beats included: 1996, welfare-reform legislation; 1999, World Trade Organization (WTO) protests; 2005-2006, Hurricane Katrina and the tenth anniversary of welfare-reform legislation; 2007-2008, the election of Barack Obama, increased social media use, and the worst economic recession since 1929; 2009-2010, the aftermath to the recession; 2011, Occupy Wall Street; and 2015-2016, the election of Donald Trump and the twentieth anniversary of welfare-reform legislation. Figure 2 shows the makeup of the results generated by each beat.

## Figure 2: Results By Beat

More than 60% of the materials analyzed were news articles. As I examined news media by beat over time, the number of articles generally decreased while the number of opinion pieces, commentaries, and columns increased. These are categorized here as "Other."

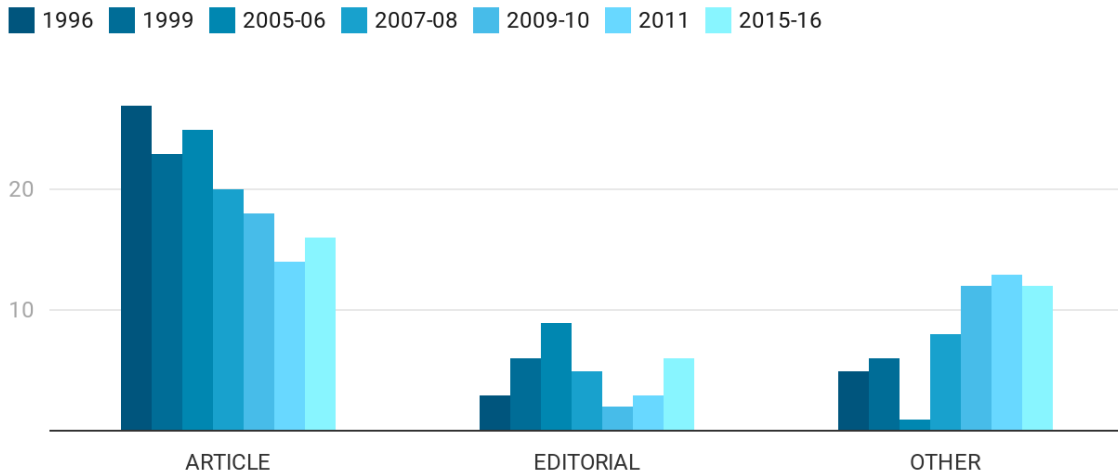


Chart: Colleen Curran • Created with Datawrapper

I used various date ranges per beat based on the particular moment. The 1999 WTO protest data range, for example, is from October 1, 1999 to December 31, 1999 because the protest fell between those dates. The dates used for the 2015–2016 beat includes the day Donald Trump announced he was running for president and the day he was elected. The difference in the size of the date ranges increased the need to occasionally conduct a broad “welfare”-only keyword search. I searched “welfare” and “public assistance” as well as “welfare” alone to yield more results for the 1996, 1999, and 2015–2016 beats. The date ranges of the other beats are as follows: 1996, January 1, 1996–December 31, 1996; 2005–2006, August 1, 2005–Aug 31, 2006; 2007–2008, January 1, 2007–December 31 2008; 2009–2010, January 1, 2009–December 31, 2010; 2011–2012, July 1, 2011–July 31, 2012. The beats offered a more manageable time frame from which to analyze twenty years of newspaper media. While the selection is limited

and perhaps involves an uneven representation per year, the selections offer a snapshot of the mix of media language used between 1996 and 2016 and provide a foundation for future research.

I selected a mix of about seven to nine articles, editorials, and other news media per news organization per beat to examine. I chose the selected pieces by reading those that were immediately generated at the beginning of the ProQuest list. If an article was about an animal, a child, or corporate welfare, I did not include it in this examination. If an article was about welfare assistance, I read through it. I examined how welfare recipients in the pieces were described, and I searched for discourse that would indicate themes or values in the reporting or writing. I collected the search result totals from ProQuest for each year between 1996 and 2016 using the terms “welfare” and “public assistance” to see if coverage increased, decreased or remained the same. In addition to the qualitative analysis, I also conducted a quantitative analysis of the news media selection to determine the number of news media pieces that included quotes from actual welfare recipients at the time.

I divided my findings into five sections. The first section explains if news media coverage of poverty increased, decreased, or remained the same between 1996 and 2016. The next three sections are grouped as follows: the individual, the action, and the values. I looked at what words were used to describe individual welfare recipients and determined if they were neutral or stereotypical. I tracked the discourses of movement used to explain how people went from being welfare recipients to not being welfare recipients. And by using past research of the characterization of poverty in the U.S., I looked for frames of dependency, responsibility, and self-sufficiency to see if any past

descriptions of poverty existed in recent stories. The last section of my findings looks at how the voices of welfare recipients were included in a small number of the news media articles, editorials, and other pieces selected for this examination.



## Part 4: Findings

The heart of this study looks at the language used to describe welfare recipients in various forms of news media. I identified that stereotypical characterizations of and common themes associated with the poor were still being used decades after the birth of the “welfare queen” trope. Generally, what I found was that while most of the media examined used neutral language—language that was not overtly racist or gendered—some of the pieces still used stereotypical discourses about welfare recipients and frameworks built around certain values like independence, self-sufficiency, and responsibility. Moreover, direct quotes from welfare recipients were often lacking or missing completely.

### *How News Media Coverage of Welfare Changed Over Time*

Coverage of poverty, specific to welfare, decreased in the four newspapers examined between 1996 and 2016. Figure 3 shows a decrease in newspaper stories by year based on the keyword search “welfare” and “public assistance” in the ProQuest database and a small rise in news media stories about the poor after 2009 following the economic recession, but not to the same levels in the late 1990s. Future research should compare the coverage of welfare to the coverage of poverty separate of government assistance to further examine the language used to describe marginalized social groups.

### Figure 3: Newspaper Search Results By Year

ProQuest search for the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Baltimore Sun, and the Wall Street Journal between 1996 and 2016 show a general decrease in newspaper media results using the keywords "welfare" and "public assistance." The Washington Post searches changed in 2013 to include blogs, podcasts, and websites, which might account for the sudden jump. Note that these are the results of a general search. Duplicates were not accounted for.

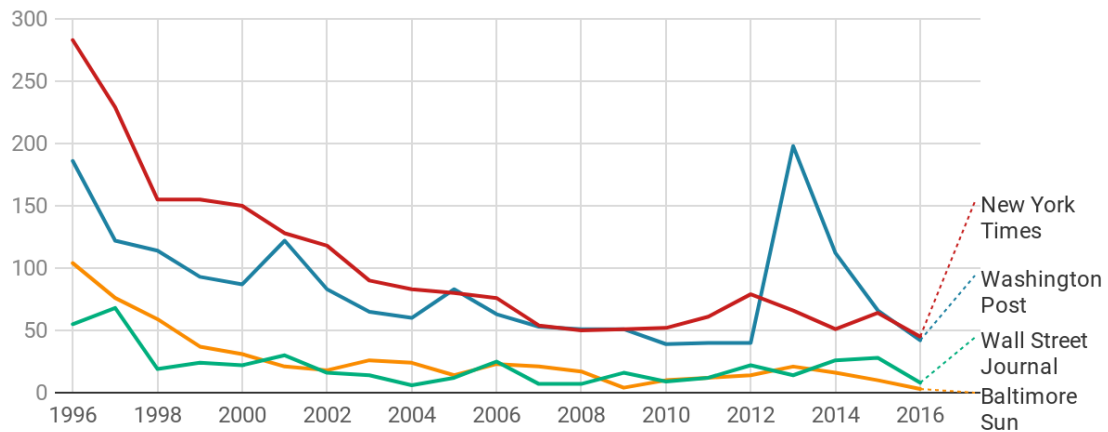


Chart: Colleen Curran • Source: ProQuest • Created with Datawrapper

The decrease in coverage of welfare in this selection of news media is important to recognize. The number of welfare recipients decreased dramatically following the PRWORA, which placed a lifetime cap on public assistance, but the struggles of many former welfare recipients did not disappear as a result of this legislation. As stories about welfare diminished, fewer stories were available to the public, at least from these specific papers. Less coverage of a particular topic can make that topic less salient, and therefore less meaningful. While welfare roll numbers may have decreased, poverty still continued to be a problem in the U.S. following reform, and less discussion about the topic might have influenced public opinion about the existence of poverty.

While talk of welfare decreased, it also changed. In the late 1990s in early 2000s, there were welfare-to-work success stories written about mothers no longer receiving assistance. Comparatively, news media examples about welfare reform in the context of

the recession were more critical of how the safety net functioned during economic depressions. There were also other news media examples in the early and mid 2000s that were critical of the success of the 1996 reform because it did not eliminate poverty and in fact completely disconnected millions in need from public assistance.

*"A Single Mother of 5 Wants to 'Become Somebody'" (New York Times, 2008): How the News Media Described Individual Welfare Recipients*

The news media described welfare recipients in various ways between 1996 and 2016. "Welfare recipients" was a common way reporters and writers described people who were in need of or who received government assistance. This description can be found in several articles in every beat examined. I qualified "welfare recipients" as neutral language because it did not profile a person by race, age, gender, and marital status, the number of children they had or where they lived. To describe someone as a "welfare recipient," the reader did not know if that person was a man, woman, father, or mother. It eliminated the language that is often linked with stereotypes.

While reporters and writers almost never included explicitly racist or sexist language, coded, and stereotypical discourse was often used to point to racist, sexist, or classist descriptors related to recipients. Mothers who received welfare assistance, for example, were called "welfare mothers," "impoverished single mothers," "single, often never-married mothers," "poor mothers," and the "nation's impoverished mothers."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Alan Finder, "Welfare Clients Outnumber Jobs They Might Fill," *New York Times*, August 25, 1996, ProQuest.; Peter T. Kilborn, "Shrinking Safety Net Cradles Hearts and Hopes of Children," *New York Times*, November 30, 1996, ProQuest.; Kathleen Parker, "Taking Family Decay in Stride," *Baltimore Sun*, November 12, 1999,

Describing a recipient of public assistance as a “welfare mother” leads a reader to associate welfare with motherhood. While many are mothers, not all are. The description of recipients as mothers, with or without an explicit mention of race, can be linked back to public attitudes about Black, unwed mothers on the system.

Other descriptors like “entrenched welfare recipients,” “generations of welfare-dependent Americans,” and the “new face of welfare” appeared in this news media to describe recipients as groups in pejorative terms.<sup>87</sup> In addition to being labeled by gender or in the context of a group, welfare recipients were also described by class and by family unit. Table 1 provides additional examples of other discourses that were used to characterize recipients.

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ProQuest.; Mireya Navarro, “With a Push Toward Work, Florida Gets a Jump on Welfare Overhaul,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1996, ProQuest.; Robert J. Samuelson, “A Reform That Worked; Lessons From Welfare,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 2006, ProQuest.; Erik Eckholm, “A Welfare Law Milestone Finds Many Left Behind,” *New York Times (Online)*, August 22, 2006, ProQuest.; The Editorial Board, “California Deposes Its ‘Welfare Queen,’” *New York Times*, July 24, 2016, ProQuest.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Duggan, “Alarm as D.C. Trims Welfare Payments,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2016, ProQuest.; Robert Pear, “Welfare Law of ’96 Recalls Political Rifts,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2016, ProQuest.; Amy Goldstein, “Welfare Rolls See First Climb in Years; Job Losses Bring Applicants From Middle Class, Test New Focus on Finding Work,” *Washington Post*, December 17, 2008, ProQuest.

## Table 1: Discourse Used to Describe Welfare Recipients

This is a small sample taken from news media between 1996 and 2016.

Mothers	Worker	Family	Other
welfare mother	unskilled welfare recipients	welfare families	welfare's beneficiaries
low-wage earning women	able-bodied welfare recipients	welfare-receiving families	the welfare poor
poor single mothers	low-income parents	impoverished families with children	poverty-prone
disadvantaged women	low-income people	families living in poverty	people receiving a benefit

Table: Colleen Curran • Source: New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Baltimore Sun  
• Created with Datawrapper

While articles, editorials, and other news media provided several instances of how reporters and writers described the poor, headlines also played an important role as they immediately introduced readers to the subject of the story. In an article by Dana Milbank in the *Wall Street Journal* about welfare recipients employed at a hotel chain, the title appeared in the database as “Real Work: Hiring Welfare People, Hotel Chain Finds, Is Tough but Rewarding—Marriott Nurtures Employees Who Can Be Unreliable, Though Training Is a Help—Social Benefits Are Important.”<sup>88</sup> We see “welfare people” in this headline, which is an unusual way of describing recipients. They are also characterized

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<sup>88</sup> Dana Milbank, “Real Work: Hiring Welfare People, Hotel Chain Finds, Is Tough but Rewarding—Marriott Nurtures Employees Who Can Be Unreliable, Though Training Is a Help—Social Benefits Are Important,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 1996, ProQuest.

here as being unreliable. The article's headline conforms to a preconceived notion about potential hires at the hotel without knowing their individual circumstances.

Angelica Medaglia wrote a column in 2008 for the *New York Times* that detailed the struggle of a woman traveling to and from work who was raising five young children all while living with changing housing circumstances. The piece was titled "A Single Mother of 5 Wants to 'Become Somebody.'"<sup>89</sup> The writing included quotes throughout directly from Cynthia Lora, the woman featured in the column. It briefly chronicled her life, the birth of her children, and the difficulties of living in poverty. The column ended with a quote from Lora: "I want to go to school and become somebody. I want to finish what I didn't get to do." While Medaglia used neutral language throughout, the headline of the column linked back to stereotypical descriptions of women in need. While it did not use the words "welfare queen," we know from the headline that this was not just a column about a woman or a mother, but a single mother with several children.

The "welfare queen" trope was rarely used in the pieces examined. When the moniker was used, it was usually a way to explain how politicians weaponized that particular characterization in the past. Three headlines in particular did however either allude to or use the "welfare queen" trope in this selection of news media: "Donald Trump, the Welfare King," "The Real Welfare Queens are Our Legislators, Not Food-Stamp Recipients," and "California Deposes Its 'Welfare Queen.'" "Donald Trump, the Welfare King" was an editorial by Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post*. It was critical of Trump and other wealthy Americans for how much they paid in taxes:

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<sup>89</sup> Angelica Medaglia, "A Single Mother of 5 Wants to 'Become Somebody,'" *New York Times*, January 5, 2008, ProQuest.

A generation after Ronald Reagan denounced the "welfare queen," the Grand Old Party is evidently on the verge of nominating its first welfare king. Now, just one presidential cycle later [referring to the 2008 election], Republicans have settled on a presumptive nominee who is himself among the 47 percent of non-taxpayers. Trump has been refusing to release his tax returns, and now we have a pretty good idea why: He has been feeding at the public trough.<sup>90</sup>

While the idea behind using the “welfare queen” trope here was to call out Trump’s lack of tax transparency, Milbank failed to make a distinction early on about who was deserving of government aid and who was not. Milbank called Trump a “welfare king,” implying that this was bad, but he did not say that actual welfare recipients were people in need of help. Further down, he finally made clear his stance on welfare recipients when he wrote, “There is no shame in being on public assistance. But the corporate welfare Trump receives is nothing to be proud of.”<sup>91</sup>

Similar to the previous example, “The Real Welfare Queens are Our Legislators, Not Food-Stamp Recipients,” an editorial by Catherine Rampell in the *Washington Post*, made a comparison between U.S. legislators and those in need of public assistance:

There's a certain population in this country that expects unlimited government handouts despite its piggish unwillingness to work. Don't tell me this is about their child-care responsibilities, or lack of access to transportation or education. Nonsense. These people simply don't want to work. Ladies and gentlemen, meet the new welfare queens: your democratically elected U.S. legislators, the laziest, most do-nothing generation of federal politicians in decades.<sup>92</sup>

This editorial was included specifically because of how the welfare-queen trope is used here. While it is clear that Rampell was showing her disappointment with elected representatives, she did so by comparing the legislatures to stereotypes of the “welfare

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<sup>90</sup> Dana Milbank, “Donald Trump, the Welfare King: Trump Has Been Feeding at the Public Trough,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 2016, ProQuest.

<sup>91</sup> Milbank, “Donald Trump, the Welfare King.”

<sup>92</sup> Catherine Rampell, “The Real Welfare Queens Are Our Legislators, Not Food-Stamp Recipients,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2016, ProQuest.

queen.” Notice that she said, “meet the new welfare queens.” She did not dispel the past stereotype, but built from it. Rampell did not explicitly explain the history of the welfare-queen trope and its association with Black, female mothers in the U.S. Instead, the reader sees this as critical of our government for its indolence, but through the dangerous language of a past stereotype that brings to the surface an old racist and sexist myth.

*The New York Times* editorial board examined the imminent end of California’s family-cap law imposed by TANF in “California Deposes Its ‘Welfare Queen.’” The editorial explained, “The family cap laws are traceable in part to the ‘welfare queen’ rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and other politicians; according to the Pew Stateline journal, such laws are still in place in 15 states.”<sup>93</sup> The editorial board explained the history of the welfare queen and pointed out that the cap law was based in the unproven suspicion that Black mothers abused the government safety net by having more children. It also included a comparison to an east-coast state to show the differences in welfare politics at the time. “The New Jersey Legislature voted to repeal the family cap last month,” the editorial continued. “But Gov. Chris Christie vetoed the measure, saying that non-welfare mothers ‘do not automatically receive higher incomes following the birth of a child.’” While the editorial used neutral language to explain the stereotyping of Black mothers as welfare cheats, the headline “California Deposes Its ‘Welfare Queen’” was confusing. The headline did not provide any hint that the story was about the end of family caps. In fact, it reads as though welfare recipients were losing benefits in the state of California. The “welfare queen” phrase is used here to hook the reader. It has its own currency that can be used as necessary to grab the reader’s attention. While this and other pieces

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<sup>93</sup> The Editorial Board, “California Deposes Its ‘Welfare Queen.’”



attempt to critique the welfare-queen stereotype, the writers may have unwittingly given new life to the tired trope.

*“The Welfare Reform Model: Maryland’s Success in Moving People off Public Assistance Provides an Example for all Policy Areas” (Baltimore Sun, 2008): How Reporters and Writers Moved Recipients on and off Welfare*

In the articles, editorials, and other news media examined from 1996 to 2016, reporters, writers, and the people they quoted in their stories used myriad ways to describe how welfare recipients went from using welfare assistance to not using it. As more welfare recipients met the five-year time limit imposed by TANF, they no longer received cash-assistance benefits, and the news media tried to explain that movement using language riddled with certain meanings.

Peter T. Kilborn wrote an article in 1996 for the *New York Times* about the sudden changes to welfare for the states and explained the hardships local entities would face when dealing with block grants for the first time. Kilborn described welfare recipients as being “shed from the welfare rolls.”<sup>94</sup> A 1999 political column by Iver Peterson of the *New York Times* was critical of the PRWORA, but also used language that questioned the work ethic of welfare recipients: “But that still leaves the harder question of what to do with former welfare recipients who have exhausted their eligibility and have either not been able or willing to pull themselves and their children into the working world.”<sup>95</sup> In 2006, Erik Eckholm wrote an article for the *New York Times* about the tenth anniversary

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<sup>94</sup> Peter T. Kilborn, “With Welfare Overhaul Now Law, States Grapple With the Consequences,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1996, ProQuest.

<sup>95</sup> Iver Peterson, “Welfare Reform Is a Success, So Voters Are Led to Believe,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1999, ProQuest.

of the PRWORA, and was critical of the reform, but he also used words to imply that welfare recipients needed to be pulled away from government help:

As political leaders give two cheers on Tuesday for the 10th anniversary of the welfare reform law that helped draw many single mothers from dependency into the work force, though often leaving them still in poverty, social workers and researchers are raising concerns about families that have not made the transition and often lead extraordinarily precarious lives.<sup>96</sup>

Three years later, Eckholm wrote an article that cash welfare assistance prior to 1996 was “aimed at pushing single mothers into jobs”—not helping them, but pushing.<sup>97</sup> David Wessel wrote a 2006 article for the *Wall Street Journal* that explained how many politicians, mostly Republican, linked government programs to dependency. Wessel wrote the following about how public assistance changed since 1996 and the values—like discouraging unmarried and teen pregnancies, and encouraging work—promoted by those in office:

So the pendulum has swung toward using tax credits, vouchers, rules and penalties to prod individuals to make choices that steer them away from lives of poverty, by getting and staying married, for instance, or taking even low-paid jobs to stay off welfare.... All reflect a continuing struggle to find an effective combination of carrots and sticks to help the poverty-prone avoid the abyss of privation and reliance on government benefits.<sup>98</sup>

The language used to describe those living in poverty here was similar to that of words used when herding cattle.

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<sup>96</sup> Erik Eckholm, “A Welfare Law Milestone Finds Many Left Behind,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2006, ProQuest.

<sup>97</sup> Erik Eckholm, “Safety Net Is Fraying for the Very Poor,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2009, ProQuest.

<sup>98</sup> David Wessel, “Poverty: The New Search for Solutions; Changing Attack: In Poverty Tactics, An Old Debate: Who Is at Fault?: Today, the Pendulum Swings Away From Government To Small-Scale Projects; The Price of ‘Dependency,’” *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2006, ProQuest.

Amy Goldstein wrote in 2008: “For the first time since welfare was redefined a dozen years ago, weaning millions of poor Americans from monthly government checks, the deteriorating economy is causing a surge in welfare rolls in a growing number of states.”<sup>99</sup> The article later described people new to public assistance as a result of the economic recession as “the new face of welfare” which “includes people who have tumbled from the middle class—and higher—after losing jobs, savings and self-reliance.”<sup>100</sup> In this example, welfare recipients were described as needing to be weaned off the system while those new to assistance as a result of the 2008 economic crisis were seen as more deserving as they “tumbled” into the safety net; they did not choose to be there. Moreover, they were considered self-sufficient, unlike previous welfare users who had to be forced from the program. It is not clear whether Goldstein wrote this with the intention to make a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. But the reader might have interpreted the language that way when they read this article that appeared on the front page of the *Washington Post*.

James Dorn was critical of the government and public-assistance recipients in a 2011 *Baltimore Sun* editorial. He detailed the reasons for high poverty rates in the US:

For individuals who wait to have children, get married and stay married, obtain more education, and stay out of jail, poverty rates diminish greatly. With many dysfunctional families, a culture of crime, and public schools that are frequently ineffective and sometimes dangerous, the cards are stacked against poor people trying to escape poverty in Baltimore. Government policies can influence one's choices and the level of responsibility one takes. The growth of the welfare state has eroded personal responsibility and made the poor more dependent.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Amy Goldstein, “Welfare Rolls See First Climb in Years.”

<sup>100</sup> Goldstein, “Welfare Rolls See First Climb in Years.”

<sup>101</sup> James A. Dorn, “Poor Choices: Baltimore’s High Poverty Rate Reflects Government Policies, Individual Actions,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 2011, ProQuest.

Dorn wrote that people were trying to “escape” poverty. This might have made readers think that forces out of the control of the poor might have created their poverty, and that finding their way out of poverty, especially without help, was difficult. But he also praised those that started families later in life and earned more advanced education without ever discussing the numerous established problems that affect minority families every day in the U.S. Dorn put blame on a particular group of people without being critical of the whole system. He then created a nexus between Baltimore and crime, which invoked racist undertones. Moreover, Dorn insisted that the safety net, which had been cut dramatically as a result of 1996 legislation, was too big and that it “eroded personal responsibility,” ultimately making those living in poverty “dependent.” While Dorn’s choice in describing those in poverty as wanting to “escape” poverty gave them some agency, the rest of the editorial placed blame on those that received public assistance while making several references to lifestyles considered more appropriate, all while using subtle stereotypes throughout.

Table 2 includes additional examples of the words used in the news media examined to describe the movement of those who were living in poverty and how news media writers moved them on and off of welfare public assistance between 1996 and 2016. Reporters and writers pushed, pulled, forced, kicked, and weaned welfare recipients on and off welfare assistance. Their language was associated with specific values that were used in past media.

## Table 2: Examples of News Media Language

This table includes examples of how reporters and writers described the ways in which welfare recipients left public assistance following 1996. They were often "forced," "pushed," "pulled," "moved," "dropped," "kicked" or "weaned" off.

Newspaper	Language Used
Washington Post (article)	The measure...would limit welfare benefits to five years or less, force welfare recipients to work...
Washington Post (other: opinion)	...what is happening to families that have been dropped from the rolls as a result of the widely applauded 'welfare reform' bill.
New York Times (article)	...time limits are supposed to push the needy down the path to self-reliance.
Baltimore Sun (editorial)	...transforming single mothers who'd spent decades on welfare into working women, and blunting the possibility that their children might become adult recipients.
Baltimore Sun (editorial)	Some were kicked off welfare and ended up in homeless shelters or on the streets.
Washington Post (article)	...changes are vital if the government is serious about lifting able-bodied adults out of poverty and into work.
Washington Post (article)	...weaning millions of poor Americans from monthly government checks...
Washington Post (article)	Her life illustrates the hurdles the city faces in pushing thousands of people off its welfare rolls.
Washington Post (editorial)	...goal of moving recipients into jobs as opposed to permitting long-term dependency.
Wall Street Journal (other: commentary)	A clear expectation of having to work is the most effective way to move recipients of public assistance into employment.

Table: Colleen Curran • Source: New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Baltimore Sun  
• Created with Datawrapper

*“What Money Can Buy: Help with Achieving a Self-Sufficient Life” (New York Times, 2008): How Certain Values Were Framed in News Media*

Able-bodied adults were the primary target of the articles, editorials, and other pieces examined between 1996 and 2016. In some examples, reporters and writers provided context for why some individuals needed government assistance, including a range of mental-health issues, family troubles, difficulties maintaining expensive childcare, problems associated with unreliable public transit, and more. Others, however, linked welfare use and poverty to the themes of independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility—values of a market ideology and Neoliberalism, which became all pervasive in how people thought about public assistance. These values were prevalent throughout the news media literature examined and revealed how some articles, editorials, and other pieces framed welfare reform as a success and welfare use as problematic.

News media examples included quotes from politicians that made self-sufficiency seem like a goal for the poor. Self-sufficiency was seen as a standard that should be met without government help. Self-sufficiency sat in contrast to government dependency, a concept commonly used throughout these news media examples to characterize the old welfare system before 1996 as a program that encouraged people to expect a government handout. But news media after 1996 classified people who used TANF as dependent as well. Personal responsibility in news media was connected to the choices made by the poor. When writers and the experts they quoted used “personal responsibility,” they were often making a moral judgment about how welfare recipients lived their lives—that

included their marital status and the number of children they had, but also their work ethic and drive to leave assistance. Welfare recipients' life choices could lead to more dependency, according to the frames used by the reporters and writers. But their choices could also put them on the path to self-sufficiency. Despite the change over time to welfare policy and the decline in the number of welfare recipients as a result, the terms "dependency," "self-sufficiency," and "personal responsibility" continued to have the same meanings and were used in similar ways throughout the time period examined here.

In 1999, Kathleen Parker wrote an editorial called "Taking Family Decay in Stride" published in the *Baltimore Sun* that castigated a young mother. It began with an unforgiving description of the mother who was also a welfare recipient and was pregnant at the time:

Grab your hankies. It's time for another heart-warming tale of multiple births to an unmarried, welfare mom and ol' what's-his-name. The story goes like this: Yolanda Harris of Newport News, Va., is pregnant with twins! Again! At 22, Ms. Harris is the mother of five children—soon to be seven. She's on welfare, though is attending a job-training program to learn data entry and word processing. She is not married, but hopes someday to wed Mr. Wells. She's not ready just yet, she says, because . . . "I don't want to end up divorced."<sup>102</sup>

Parker listed the name of each of Ms. Harris's children, their ages and their biological father. She made it clear that another person fathered the children Ms. Harris was carrying, and she expressed several times that the mother of seven was a recipient of welfare:

Heaven forbid someone should declare this behavior unacceptable, ridiculous, absurd, inexcusable, intolerable, condemnable. Did someone say stupid? We've become so dopey in our determination never to judge another—certainly never an unmarried welfare mother who, even after five babies, hasn't figured out that unprotected sex leads to hungry mouths—that we can't even think straight.... The

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<sup>102</sup> Kathleen Parker, "Taking Family Decay in Stride," *Baltimore Sun*, November 12, 1999, ProQuest.

children are probably adorable, scampering around in their blue and pink pajamas. May they all grow up to be literate, successful partners in intact families. More likely they'll play lead roles in the next act of this lousy drama of irresponsibility, dependency and family decay.<sup>103</sup>

While not every article, editorial or other news media piece was as opinionated and riddled with stereotypes as this example, many of the pieces examined used similar language that contrasted the use of welfare assistance with independence, personal responsibility and self-sufficiency.

A 1996 commentary in the *Wall Street Journal* by Will Marshall outlined how the American public felt about welfare assistance prior to 1996 in contrast to the program's supporters, according to him:

They view the current welfare system as flawed beyond repair because it fails to promote the right values: work, marriage, parental responsibility. Whereas professional advocates portray welfare as a benign 'safety net' for the poor, the public rightly sees it as a trap that smothers initiative, instills passivity and dependence and isolates the poor in a public subsistence economy rather than offering them real opportunities to become productive and self-sufficient.<sup>104</sup>

Marshall discussed responsibility, in this case the personal choices made by adult welfare recipients with children. He also said that the safety net generated dependency and thwarted self-sufficiency. Victoria Benning used similar language in a 1996 article in the *Washington Post* to describe the changes to welfare offices in Virginia as a result of the new welfare law:

Forget the nameplate on their doors, which for many people symbolizes a system of handouts and dependency. From now on, the agencies are telling companies, think of us as your local employment office. The shift in attitude and approach—from signing

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<sup>103</sup> Parker, "Taking Family Decay in Stride."

<sup>104</sup> Will Marshall, "Mr. Clinton Keeps His Welfare Promise," *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1996, ProQuest.



recipients up for monthly checks to finding them jobs to make them self-sufficient—has been forced by the state's program to overhaul its welfare system.<sup>105</sup>

A *Baltimore Sun* editorial by James Dorn was published fifteen years after the aforementioned examples but used similar discourse to describe welfare and its recipients. Dorn expressed his concern with government programs for the poor in 2011: “[P]olicies can influence one's choices and the level of responsibility one takes. The growth of the welfare state has eroded personal responsibility and made the poor more dependent.”<sup>106</sup> One year later, Mark Kantrowitz wrote a commentary in the *Wall Street Journal* about policies that helped those in need in the lower- and middle-class and considered the PRWORA an achievement. “The great success of welfare reform in 1996 showed that limitless, meritless handouts for the poor created unnecessary dependency and fueled social dysfunction,” he wrote.<sup>107</sup> Despite the news media type and time period difference, all of these examples used the values or themes of independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility to reprimand the poor and oppose government policies put in place to protect those in need.

The people quoted in the news media selection examined also contributed to the language the readers consumed at this particular time. Politicians were regularly interviewed for stories about welfare and poverty. They mentioned the values of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility and regularly made a connection between welfare and dependency. Peter T Kilborn wrote a *New York Times* article in 1996 that included

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<sup>105</sup> Victoria Benning, “In Virginia, a Shift From Dependency to Self-Sufficiency,” *Washington Post*, March 28, 1996, ProQuest.

<sup>106</sup> Dorn, “Poor Choices.”

<sup>107</sup> Mark Kantrowitz and Greg Forster, “Big Issues (A Special Report) --- Should More College Financial Aid Be Based on Need, Not Merit?,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2012, ProQuest.

the voice of Representative E. Clay Shaw Jr., a Florida Republican who sponsored the welfare reform bill in the mid-1990s. Kilborn wrote about a welfare recipient named Karen: “Karen Goff, a mother of five, is struggling, so far without success, to move her family from dependence to self-sufficiency.”<sup>108</sup> Kilborn made the contrast here between dependency and self-sufficiency and mentioned how many children Goff had, not a necessary detail, but included possibly due to implicit bias. Shaw was then integrated into the piece with the following quote: “Unfortunately, the children are very often just the victims of poverty. Unfortunately, a few more children will suffer for the conduct of their parents.”<sup>109</sup> From Shaw Jr.’s perspective, children were “victims” of poverty while adults were not. Shaw Jr. placed a moral judgment on the choices and behaviors of those who lived in poverty, and Kilborn included the quote in the piece.

Nina Bernstein quoted former Mayor of New York City Rudolph Giuliani in a *New York Times* article about the city’s welfare recipients in 1999. Giuliani said, “Today marks the milestone of replacing the culture of dependency in New York City with the culture of work and employment.”<sup>110</sup> The culture of dependency Giuliani was referring to was the same that Shaw Jr. mentioned. The language each politician used showed judgment toward those who needed help. There was, again, an assumption that adults who received aid lacked a drive to work and instead were naturally reliant on the government.

Conservatives were not the only voices included in news media between 1996 and 2016 that were critical of welfare. Joe Lieberman, a former Democratic senator from

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<sup>108</sup> Kilborn, “Shrinking Safety Net Cradles Hearts and Hopes of Children.”

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Nina Bernstein, “Giuliani Proclaims Success on Pledge to Curb Welfare,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1999, ProQuest.

Connecticut, wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times* in 1996 prior to the passing of the PRWORA:

Millions of children and their families are mired in poverty, thanks in large measure to government programs that do little to help or to encourage them to find work. Welfare makes it feasible for a man to father a child without worrying about being a parent. It makes it possible for a young woman (too often a teen-age girl) to have a child, move away from home, get an apartment and survive—without working. It makes it easier for millions of families to get by, but virtually impossible for them to get ahead.<sup>111</sup>

Lieberman continued by throwing his support behind the 1996 reform legislation, saying that the bill “provides hope for poor Americans, and for taxpayers who want a Government that spends their money wisely and better reflects American values of work, family and responsibility.” He called this effort “the right direction” and urged then-President Clinton to sign it.<sup>112</sup> Lieberman used the same language as the previously mentioned conservatives. He explicitly said that this reform—legislation that would for the first time in social assistance history, put a lifetime cap on assistance, despite a person’s need—embodied American values including work and family as well as responsibility. He placed a moral judgment on the welfare recipients—the people, not just past policy.

Hillary Clinton used similar language to describe the poor in her 2003 autobiography, *Living History*. Robert Pear wrote about Clinton’s book for the *New York Times* while she was running for president in 2016. In her book, Clinton wrote that AFDC “helped to create generations of welfare-dependent Americans.” Pear said that proponents of the 1996 legislation “say the strict limits will create a new impetus for

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<sup>111</sup> Joseph I. Lieberman, “Welfare as We Know It,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1996, ProQuest.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

welfare recipients to find jobs and will reduce their reliance on public benefits.”<sup>113</sup> The article also explained the language used by then President Bill Clinton, who said reform “would replace a never-ending cycle of welfare” with “the dignity, the power and the ethic of work.”<sup>114</sup> Both Clintons echoed their Republican colleagues. They used discourse that described welfare recipients not as people in need, but people who were dependent and lacked personal responsibility.

The voices of politicians carried weight in these articles. They were the people in power who not only determined who had access to welfare and other forms of government assistance, but they knowingly or unknowingly continued to shape the discourse about the poor due to their word choices that linked poverty and dependency while praising self-sufficiency and personal responsibility.

Values like independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency continued to shape discourse about the poor following the 2008 economic recession as more people needed immediate cash assistance. Many Americans filed for help for the first time ever. But unlike the poor who were affected by the 1996 change in welfare policy and who were commonly described as dependent and not responsible, these new, formerly middle-class, first-time welfare recipients were considered the “new poor” and described differently. Amy Goldstein’s 2008 *Washington Post* article provided an example of an upper-middle-class couple named Roberto and Camille:

Roberto, who asked that the couple's last name not be disclosed because only one of his 10 siblings knows of their circumstances, made his first million in the commodities market when he was 25. By the time the family arrived in Cape Coral, he had \$4.5 million in about 50 commodities accounts. The assets kept swelling, to \$7.2 million. But her last house sale was in December 2006, and

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<sup>113</sup> Pear, “Welfare Law of ’96 Recalls Political Rifts.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

they've had no salary for more than 1 1/2 years. Their commodities accounts collapsed. "Every single bit of my savings is gone," Roberto said. When he talked about applying for welfare, she didn't want to hear it. "I don't want the benefits," she said, "even though I need it."<sup>115</sup>

Unlike the language used to describe past welfare recipients, the new poor were not labeled here as indolent or unreliable. Roberto and Camille refused to include their last names in this article due to their embarrassment about having to use public assistance, while other news media examples included the first and last names and more details about other welfare recipients. Camille was even quoted in the article placing moral judgment on those who used welfare assistance by saying that she did not want to participate even though she and her husband truly needed the help. We learn that the couple did end up applying for assistance at the end of the article: "So when he came home a few days before Thanksgiving, she stayed away from the kitchen when he got out his computer. He filled out the welfare application online, his laptop perched on their gleaming granite counter."<sup>116</sup>

This couple is not the typical welfare recipients we have been trained to think of when we read about government assistance, and they were not described that way here either. We learned about their successes and less about their struggles. We did not read about their past run-ins with the law and their marital or dating history, but about their high-paying jobs and their ability to move to Fort Myers, Florida, to be closer to the water. And when we learned that they had children, we did not hear about their children having to suffer as a result of their parents' life choices. We never saw the words

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<sup>115</sup> Amy Goldstein, "Welfare Rolls See First Climb in Years."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

“dependency,” “self-sufficiency,” or “personal responsibility” used to describe this couple.

Following the recession, the *New York Times* published a column series called “The Safety Net.” One of the columns by Jason DeParle was about public assistance, specific to the rebranding of food stamps from a welfare handout to a nutritional aid (SNAP) during George W Bush’s presidency. While not specifically about welfare cash assistance, this column provides perspectives from voices of the new poor about the character of the old poor:

Like many new beneficiaries here, Mr. Dawson argues that people often abuse the program and is quick to say he is different. While some people “choose not to get married, just so they can apply for benefits,” he is a married, churchgoing man who works and owns his home. While “some people put piles of steaks in their carts,” he will not use the government's money for luxuries like coffee or soda. “To me, that's just morally wrong,” he said.<sup>117</sup>

Mr. Dawson—a new SNAP beneficiary—placed moral judgment on others in need. He compared himself to others who used food stamps by calling them lazy. He provided descriptions of them abusing the system by assuming that they avoided marriage and work. Notice the reference here made by Mr. Dawson about the poor using assistance to purchase steaks. This connects back to when then-governor of California Ronald Reagan referred to Black men as “strapping young bucks” purchasing steaks with food stamps in the mid-1970s.<sup>118</sup> Despite using public assistance himself, he described himself and his family as more responsible and self-sufficient than others in need.

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<sup>117</sup> Jason DeParle and Robert Gebeloff, “Food Stamp Use Soars Across U.S., and Stigma Fades,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2009, ProQuest.

<sup>118</sup> Paul Krugman, “Innocent Mistakes,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2007, <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/10/innocent-mistakes/>.

A woman whose views on the poor started to change as a result of the recession was also interviewed for this column. “Having assumed that poor people clamored for aid, she was surprised to find that some needed convincing to apply,” DeParle wrote.<sup>119</sup> “I come here and I see people who are knowledgeable, normal, well-spoken, well-dressed,” she said. “These are people I could be having lunch with.”<sup>120</sup> The way she described the people she encountered, with such surprise that they seemed “normal” to her, showed that she was making perhaps an unknown assumption that the poor were supposed to be licentious, young and unstable mothers. She did not use stereotypical words, but created a contrast here between the new poor and other poor Americans. The column continued with a brief narrative of a family new to government assistance:

Franny and Shawn Wardlow, whose house in nearby Oregonia conjures middle-American stability rather than the struggle to meet basic needs. Their three daughters have heads of neat blond hair, pink bedroom curtains and a turtle bought in better times on vacation in Daytona Beach, Fla. One wrote a fourth-grade story about her parents that concluded, ‘They lived happily ever after.’<sup>121</sup>

The description of this family might as well say “white.” We do not see the same value judgments placed on this family as we did in other examples of welfare recipients. Again, we learn from this example that, without having to use explicitly stereotypical language riddled with racist, classist, or sexist stereotypes, we misrepresent people living in poverty as Black, young, often mothers with little work ethic living in entrenched dependency, while those new to welfare assistance are “normal” middle-class, formerly working adults whose use of assistance is only temporary.

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<sup>119</sup> DeParle and Gebeloff, “Food Stamp Use Soars Across U.S.”

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

*How the Voices of Welfare Recipients were Included in News Media:*

What is missing most from the news media examples examined were the voices of actual welfare recipients. We heard from pundits and politicians, non-profit leaders and social workers, but rarely did we see quotes or full stories directly from those who were living in poverty at the time. Figure 4 shows that of the 234 articles, editorials, and other pieces examined between 1996 and 2016, 156 did not quote welfare recipients; two thirds of all the articles, editorials, and other pieces examined excluded quotes from people who used welfare public assistance at the time. Without their voices, we miss an important perspective from those who were actually experiencing poverty and the effects of policy changes without having the same influence and reach as the media or politicians.



### Figure 4: Welfare Recipients Quoted in Stories

Out of the 234 news media sources examined, more than 60% did not include a quote from a welfare recipient. "Other" voices includes people quoted who had used or needed some form of public assistance, but not specific to welfare cash assistance.

■ NO WELFARE RECIPIENT VOICES ■ WELFARE RECIPIENT VOICES ■ OTHER

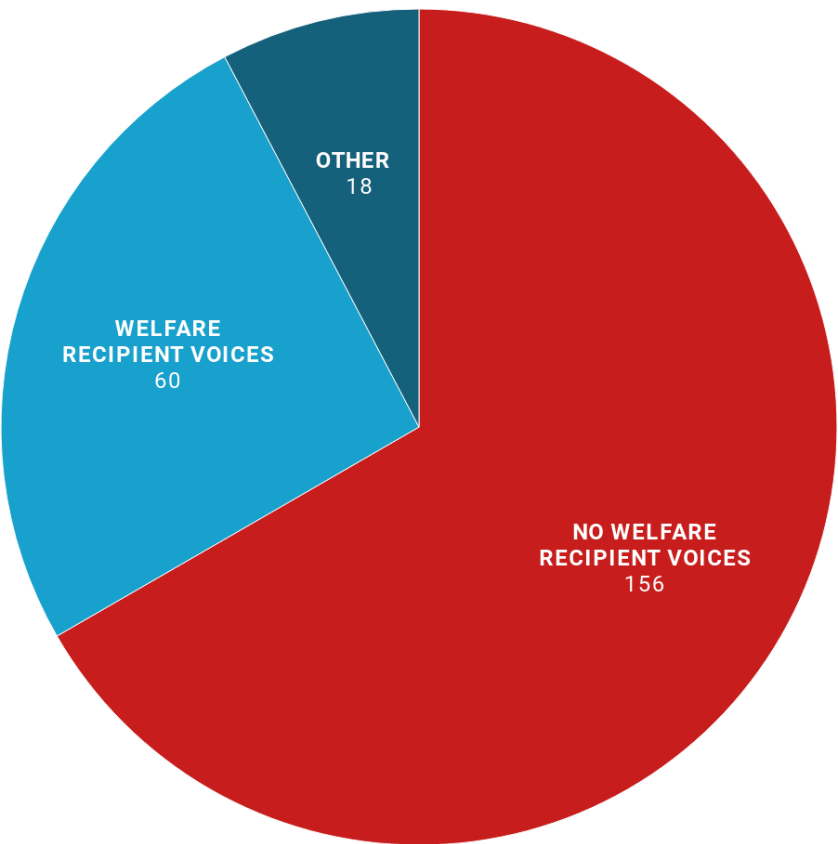


Chart: Colleen Curran • Created with Datawrapper

When welfare recipients were included in the news media examined, they were often quoted in the very beginning to hook the reader and at the end to wrap up the stories. The welfare recipients were described in the lead followed by a quote to contextualize their experiences to the reader. They then did not appear again in the stories until close to the bottom. Other times, welfare recipients were not introduced until the middle of a piece, and were only given one or two lines in an article. Media stories with

this structure fill the body with voices of “experts” rather than those who lived in poverty.

Some articles that included quotes from welfare recipients still placed value judgements on them and described them in stereotypical ways. Reporter Jason DeParle wrote in a 1999 *New York Times* article about how the time limit changes for welfare assistance was affecting recipients in Wisconsin. “In theory,” he wrote, “time limits are supposed to push the needy down the path to self-reliance. In practice, most poor people are too tangled in the chaos of daily life to give them much thought.”<sup>122</sup> He described one welfare recipient named Robin Edwards as a “38-year-old mother of six who works as a janitor at a Milwaukee parochial school in exchange for a monthly welfare check of \$673. A painfully shy woman who stares at the ground when she talks, she reads at the third-grade level and is unclear about such basics as what year her deadline expires. ‘I’m really not too sure,’ she said. In fact, her time expired this month.”<sup>123</sup> DeParle then explained more about Edwards’s case from the point of view of her social workers:

At Y-W Works, a private agency in Milwaukee that handles her case, social workers redoubled a two-year effort to help Ms. Edwards find a regular wage-paying job. Sabrina Lee returned to Ms. Edwards's problems with child care. Pepita Johnson gave weekly lessons on talking to employers. Mark Miller lined up interviews at a hospital and a grocery. The challenges before them were considerable. In the past 10 years, Ms. Edwards had held just one private job, for a few weeks. Among the skills she is trying to acquire are the rudiments of workplace grooming. "They tell me, 'Don't go in there with body odor on you,' " she said.<sup>124</sup>

DeParle included the voice of Ms. Edwards, but she is described as incompetent for not knowing when her welfare assistance would expire. The onus was put on Ms. Edwards, rather than the system that was like a labyrinth to navigate. But he also mentioned her

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<sup>122</sup> Jason DeParle, “As benefits Expire, the Experts Worry,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1999, ProQuest.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

lack of literacy abilities and even that she had to be reminded of her hygiene, which was unnecessary information for the reader. Sari Horwitz wrote an article about the slow transition of welfare-to-work in Washington, D.C. She included the voice of a welfare recipient, but we first heard from an expert who was critical of mothers in the program as well as the city agencies for failing to inform welfare recipients about deadlines:

Peter Edelman, a Georgetown University law professor and former chairman of the Welfare to Work transition team for Mayor Anthony A. Williams, said D.C. welfare recipients—who primarily are single mothers—“seem not to be taking [the deadline] all that seriously. It's clear that people are not coming in response to being told they have to participate,” Edelman said. “In other parts of the country, women are understanding they have to do something or something really awful is going to happen. You don't just say, 'Well, too bad, when the time comes, they'll find out.’”<sup>125</sup>

Ms. Wilson, a welfare recipient who was about to lose her benefits despite not having employment to support herself, then explained her experience. “I've been getting the runaround for months,” Wilson was quoted as saying in the article. “I'm trying to get my life together. I'm going through drug treatment, but I'm scared this time is going to count against me. I am really afraid.”<sup>126</sup> While the language used in the reporting was neutral, we did not hear from a welfare recipient about their experience with the policy change in D.C. until the third page of the five-page article.

But some—roughly 30 of the news media examples examined—gave welfare recipients a more prominent voice. These articles let the poor speak for themselves without overshadowing their quotes with the viewpoints of politicians. The following article by Jason DeParle from 2012 included several voices of welfare recipients who were dealing with the changed time cap imposed on them by the state of Arizona:

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<sup>125</sup> Sari Horwitz, “Employment After Welfare Lags in D.C.; Late Start Hindering City’s Reform Efforts,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 1999, ProQuest.

<sup>126</sup> Horwitz, “Employment After Welfare Lags in D.C.”

Researchers found that most families that escaped poverty remained ‘near poor.’ Then the reduced time limit left Ms. Shelby with neither welfare nor work. She still gets about \$250 a month in food stamps for herself and her 3-year-old son, Dejon. She counts herself fortunate, she said, because a male friend lets her stay in a spare room, with no expectations of sex. Still, after feeding her roommate and her child, she said, “there are plenty of days I don’t eat.”<sup>127</sup>

Others, former welfare recipients like Ms. Shelby, explained what they endured after struggling to keep a job while raising their children and losing their welfare assistance:

One woman said she sold her child’s Social Security number so a relative could collect a tax credit worth \$3,000. “I tried to sell blood, but they told me I was anemic,” she said. Several women acknowledged that they had resorted to shoplifting, including one who took orders for brand-name clothes and sold them for half-price. Asked how she got cash, one woman said flatly, “We rob wetbacks”—illegal immigrants, who tend to carry cash and avoid the police. At least nine times, she said, she has flirted with men and led them toward her home, where accomplices robbed them. “I felt bad afterwards,” she said. But she added, “There were times when we didn’t have nothing to eat.”<sup>128</sup>

Chico Harlan published a feature article in 2015 that traced the day for one mother applying for jobs in the Atlanta area. It followed her every movement, from waking up in a shelter with her daughter and dropping her off at a temporary daycare provider to her journey into the city:

She squinted, with a light sigh, at the public-transit curlicue she was about to make through Atlanta: Sixty-nine stops on a bus; a nine-minute train ride; an additional 49 stops on a bus; a quarter-mile walk. “Off to the races,” Scott, 28, said as she boarded the No. 55 bus, and this was a day much like the others, when the cost of destitution was a job hunt in which even the simplest task—placing an application—required four hours, round-trip, on a bus.<sup>129</sup>

This feature article devoted more than 3,500 words to Ms. Scott’s experience in finding a job while living in poverty. It showed the length at which one mother who received

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<sup>127</sup> Jason DeParle, “Welfare Limits Left Poor Adrift as Recession Hit,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2012, ProQuest.

<sup>128</sup> DeParle, “Welfare Limits Left Poor Adrift as Recession Hit.”

<sup>129</sup> Chico Harlan, “A Long Way to Payday,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2015, ProQuest.

public assistance had to go to find work in a changing and gentrified area. An expert was quoted halfway through the story once, but the majority of the piece focused on Ms. Scott and the difficulties she had finding work in a city as more and more of America's poor were pushed to the suburbs. The piece featured a welfare recipient without using demeaning or stereotypical language.

The lack of coverage of welfare recipients in this selection may have affected the public understanding of the poor. When their voices were included, while rare, they provided a more whole picture of what it meant to be poor in America at this time. They included the complexities of how poverty affected their mental and physical health, their living situations, and their family lives. They also provided more nuanced reasons for why some people were living in poverty, which challenged many of the stereotypes that assumed poverty was a result of laziness or a product of an entrenched culture of dependence. Together, these findings show that stereotyping of welfare recipients continued to occur between 1996 and 2016 and that "the dependent poor" remained a visual for readers as a result of the language used by writers and the people interviewed. Future coverage should include a more diverse group of people interviewed to add different perspectives concerning the topic of poverty.

## Part 5: Discussion

Whether the use of clichéd language to describe the poor in these pieces was on purpose, a product of implicit bias, or the assumption that journalists' objectivity accounted for stereotyping, is outside the scope of this specific study. But the fact that stereotypical language still made its way into news media within the last few decades means that it might have influenced public opinion and understanding of those living in poverty at the time. Moreover, it forces us to ask how news media is created, what objectivity means in newsmaking, and what the influence of stereotyping is, not only on the public but on those who produce the media we consume.

### *On Newsmaking and Journalistic Practice*

Journalists claim objectivity in news reporting, but they might not always account for their implicit biases in their writing. Building upon Gans's study of newsrooms, journalist Issac J. Bailey explained that implicit bias affects how journalists write about the people they interview. Gans found that journalists were usually middle class and that objective writing could often be linked to a reporter's personal experiences, which can inform their perspective and word choice when creating stories for the public. Decades later, Bailey argued that "the bias blind spots in our thinking are largely the result of how the brain processes the flood of information it constantly receives. Live in an environment long enough and such associations can lead to automatic, misleading

responses.”<sup>130</sup> Stereotypes lead to negative and wrong understandings of groups different from us, and Bailey says that it is important for newsmakers to correct for implicit bias because it can “be a way to account for gaps in our knowledge and perspective that might be undermining our work in ways of which we are unaware.”<sup>131</sup> Sociologist Gaye Tuchman argued that news “claims the right to interpret everyday occurrences to citizens and other professionals alike.”<sup>132</sup> Newsmakers, therefore, have a lot of power in determining what and who is considered newsworthy. Newsmakers create our social reality and have the power to shape public understanding of a topic they deem important.<sup>133</sup>

Take the following reader response that was published in the *Baltimore Sun* in 2010. A man named Dave wrote his thoughts about the poor regarding the 2010 census, which, in his opinion, was a wasteful project that spent too much effort trying to account for those living in poverty. He wrote sarcastically, “My take: We simply must increase taking from the productive and giving it to the lazy and indolent to continue the welfare state and give rise to yet more generations on the dole.”<sup>134</sup> News consumers have been trained by what they read and hear to think that welfare recipients live by different rules and maintain unfavorable social values. The people I read about in this examination, many of whom were women, were continuously described as unmarried mothers with many children who did not work or who had trouble maintaining employment, according

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<sup>130</sup> Issac Bailey, “How Implicit Bias Works in Journalism,” Nieman Reports, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://niemanreports.org/articles/how-implicit-bias-works-in-journalism/>.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, Later Printing edition (New York: Free Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 208.

<sup>134</sup> Anonymous, “Readers Respond,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 20, 2010, ProQuest.

to the writers. I was reminded by the experts and politicians quoted in the examples that people who lived in poverty and needed assistance were “dependent,” and that placing judgment about their life choices without taking into consideration the historical ramifications that might have made them poor in the first place was considered normal. Moreover, like Gilens’s research of the sympathetic and non-sympathetic visualizations of poor, the language used when writing about the new poor was different than the discourse about the old poor.

Moreover, while gendered or racial language is not always racist or misogynist, the context in which a person is described certainly matters. Take one of the articles written by Jason DeParle of the *New York Times* in the findings section about quotes from welfare recipients. He included unnecessary descriptions of a welfare recipient in the article about her public assistance time limits. We learn as readers that the welfare recipient, Robin Edwards, was a “mother of six” who had a “third grade reading level,” and also apparently had hygiene problems per her social workers. The article focused not on the fact that the system had failed her, but rather on Edwards’s reading ability and her lack of personal care.

Another way to write about people living in poverty without making a racist or sexist claim is to use neutral describing terms like “welfare recipient.” As mentioned before in the findings section, “welfare recipients” eliminates details about someone’s personal life that might influence how readers understand their experiences. Choosing to describe a woman who needs welfare assistance as a “welfare mom” without giving her agency in the piece through quotes might make a reader think that she had children on



purpose to receive public benefits based on past rhetoric pushed by politicians throughout the twentieth century.

Missing opportunities to scan for bias and learn from the words we use to describe particular groups of people and individuals is dangerous. Tuchman used an example of the media using “draft evaders” rather than “draft resisters” to describe people that protested the Vietnam War. In a more contemporary example, Bailey looked to a *New York Times* article that chronicled the life of Michael Brown, a young Black man who was killed by police in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014. The article’s author described Brown as “no angel” because he had past run-ins with law enforcement. Many readers criticized the word choice because it connected Brown to the stereotype of Black men as criminals. Bailey noted that the criminalization of Black men and boys is rarely used to describe white men and boys who commit crimes. Similarly, the over-sexualized language used to describe Black women and Black girls is rarely used when journalists write about white women and girls.

This is an opportunity for reporters and other news media writers to question how they write about poor Americans. Would we describe mothers who do not receive welfare benefits as “non-welfare mothers?” Or would we include a woman’s marital status every time we spoke or wrote about her? Similarly, “welfare people” implied that there were certain people that fell into this category. Rather than “welfare people,” reporters and writers could say “people in need of public assistance,” “people using welfare,” or “people in need.” Similar to the way we approach how we write about people living with disabilities today, reporters and writers should consider putting the person first followed by a description. Thinking critically about how we describe the poor can teach writers to

be mindful and intentional about the words they use and the influence they have.

Intentional and unintentional stereotyping will continue to happen otherwise.

### *On the Power of Government Documents*

House Republicans' 2017 budget proposal argued that work was a source of income and "self-sufficiency," but that it "also has been demonstrated as a valuable source of self-worth and dignity for individuals."<sup>135</sup> It continued by suggesting that making it more difficult for poor people to get health care "could help reduce their rates of depression."<sup>136</sup> The review of news media in its coverage of poverty specific to welfare reform and recipients shows that government documents may have been influential in the language choices of reporters between 1996 and 2016. By deferring to politicians and government reports for stories, this could have influenced news media coverage of poverty, welfare, and welfare recipients. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains a list of reports and other documents about welfare programs over time. Below is a list of the titles of only a few of the reports that are all available online to the public:

- Aligning Federal Performance Indicators Across Programs Promoting Self-Sufficiency: Key Considerations for Policymakers (7/2/19)<sup>137</sup>
- Indicators of Welfare Dependence: Annual Report to Congress (7/17/14)<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Rampell, "The Real Welfare Queens Are Our Legislators."

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> "Aligning Federal Performance Indicators Across Programs Promoting Self-Sufficiency: Key Considerations For Policymakers," ASPE, last modified July 2, 2019, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/aligning-federal-performance-indicators-across-programs-promoting-self-sufficiency-key-considerations-policymakers>.

- TANF “Leavers”, Applicants, and Caseload Studies (5/17/04)<sup>139</sup>
- Profile of Families Cycling on and off Welfare (4/1/04)<sup>140</sup>
- Moving People From Welfare to Work. Lessons from the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (7/1/02)<sup>141</sup>
- Welfare Mothers as Potential Employees: A Statistics Profile Based on National Survey Data (2/25/1991)<sup>142</sup>

These examples include a description of a mother as a welfare recipient, the actions of moving people on and off assistance, moral judgments about families “cycling” back on the rolls, and their dependency on government assistance, as well as the value of self-sufficiency as a goal for poverty-related policymaking. “The great irony of the U.S. press system is that it generally performs well—presenting competing views and vigorous debate—when government is already weighing competing initiatives in its various legal, legislative, or executive settings,” wrote W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston in their analysis of American press during the Iraq War.

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<sup>138</sup> “Indicators of Welfare Dependence: Annual Report to Congress,” ASPE, last modified November 23, 2015, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/indicators-welfare-dependence-annual-report-congress>.

<sup>139</sup> “TANF ‘Leavers’, Applicants, and Caseload Studies,” ASPE, last modified May 22, 2017, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/tanf-leavers-applicants-and-caseload-studies>.

<sup>140</sup> “Profile of Families Cycling on and off Welfare,” ASPE, last modified November 23, 2015, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/profile-families-cycling-and-welfare>.

<sup>141</sup> “Selected Publications From This Evaluation,” ASPE, last modified November 10, 2016, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/moving-people-welfare-work-lessons-national-evaluation-welfare-work-strategies/selected-publications-evaluation>.

<sup>142</sup> “Welfare Mothers as Potential Employees: A Statistics Profile Based on National Survey Data,” ASPE, last modified December 9, 2015, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/welfare-mothers-potential-employees-statistics-profile-based-national-survey-data>.

“Unfortunately, quite a different press often shows up when policy decisions of dubious wisdom go unchallenged within government arenas.”<sup>143</sup>

Deferring to “experts” can lead to problematic and stereotypical depictions of subjects in stories. It can also eliminate the voices of people important in understanding an entire story. In the case of poverty research, very few welfare recipients were interviewed in the news media selection examined about welfare between 1996 and 2016. When people were interviewed, they were often used as a hook in the lead or as a way to end a piece, but rarely included throughout an entire piece. Rarely were the voices of welfare recipients used to effectively tell their personal stories about living in poverty and their relationship with those in power who determined if they were fit for public assistance.

### *On the Impact of Language on Public Opinion*

*The Los Angeles Times* conducted a poll in 1985 about attitudes toward the poor. In conjunction with the American Enterprise Institute, they conducted a similar survey in 2016. More than 1,200 people participated in the survey, including 235 who lived below the federal poverty line at the time.<sup>144</sup> The survey found that “Blue-collar whites were much more likely than nonwhites to view the poor as a class set apart from the rest of society—trapped in poverty as a more or less permanent condition. Minority Americans, particularly blacks, tended to say that, ‘for most poor people, poverty is a temporary

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<sup>143</sup> W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina*, Reprint edition (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>144</sup> David Lauter, “Poll Shows Split on Views about Poor,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 15, 2016, ProQuest.

condition.”<sup>145</sup> Public attitudes toward the poor were split along racial lines. The report continued, “A majority of whites see government anti-poverty efforts contributing to poverty's permanence, saying that benefit programs ‘make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor.’ African-Americans disagreed, saying that the government help mostly allows poor people to ‘stand on their own two feet and get started again.’”<sup>146</sup>

Similar to Dyck and Hussey’s study on public attitudes about welfare in the late 1990s, we see white Americans associating poverty with dependency, and that government assistance was recognized as a handout rather than a hand-up in 2016, decades after the PRWORA. Half of the public questioned for this survey associated the poor with the discourse used by politicians, experts, and media in their discussions of poverty. Language and framing can inadvertently shape how news consumers understand their realities and the people around them. The words used can reinforce certain racist and sexist stereotypes about the poor and perpetuate the strength of colorblind racism in news media and in public opinions.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

## Part 6: Limitations and Ideas for Future Research

There is a clear trend that articles, editorials, and other news media between 1996 and 2016 used stereotypical language and perpetuated a narrative that began in the mid-twentieth century about the poor in the U.S. Therefore, this topic deserves continued examination. While the selection of news media pieces was diverse for this particular study, there were several limitations. Expanding the date ranges to include every year between 1996 and 2016, not just specific beats relating to important historical and economic moments, would add more samples to examine for the study. Including more newspapers—more local in particular—would expand the scope of how newsmakers wrote about welfare recipients at that particular time. This particular study was also limited by the design of the methodology. Future news media examination that follows a similar plan could create a selection of news media that is proportionate to the amount of news generated per year by a particular newspaper rather than trying to provide an even sample per newspaper.

This study could benefit from a more digital news media approach. As technology advanced and the Internet became more commonly used, different media options became available. Digital news in the form of blogs and digital publications became an increasingly important way that people understood social issues, and they offer a range of vantage points. A digital news section labeled “Blogs, Podcasts, and Websites” appears in the ProQuest database search depending on the year. *The New York Times* offers this digital search option for every year between 1996 and 2016, while the *Wall Street Journal* only has this digital option starting in 2010 and the *Washington Post* in 2013.

*The Baltimore Sun*'s data does not include this digital search option. This shows a change in the types of available news media as a result of the burgeoned use of new and popular technologies in the twenty-first century. This deserves to be examined in the future to see how different digital media options in addition to articles and editorials influenced public understanding of the poor and the language used to do so.

Another possible way to add to this examination is to conduct a quantitative analysis that examines the sections of the newspapers in which each piece was published. For example, some of the pieces from this examination were front-page stories, but others were placed in the Metro section. Moreover, conducting a quantitative analysis in addition to a qualitative analysis of the specific words used to describe welfare recipients—similar to Hancock Alfaro's research—could be useful to determine more specific discourse used by politicians, government reports, and media writers.

Not included in this research, but of potential benefit to this study, is an analysis of the photos that were published with each article examined. The ProQuest database is valuable for textual and framing analysis, but it does not always include the photos that were printed in news articles with each story or published online. Past research like Gilens's image analysis of how the poor were visually represented could help reveal whether stories continued to use pictures of minorities more than whites when discussing poverty. While most of the text analyzed was not explicitly racist, viewing what photos were used with each news media example could help us learn if there were more photos of Black people than white people printed in stories about poverty.

This research might also benefit from a group of researchers working together. One of the points that Tuchman, Gans, and more argue is that people in charge of

constructing the narrative might have implicit bias that they do not check before they write. Newsmakers, politicians, academics, and researchers are all capable of perpetuating a stereotype. Having a team work together to collectively examine news media might allow for other perspectives when analyzing various discourses.

Future studies relating to the language used by news media about welfare recipients and others living in poverty might consider the broader impact of media coverage on social policies. Researchers might ask if less coverage of a particular topic like poverty influenced public assistance policies at the local, state, or federal level. Or the inverse: if changes to government policies influenced the amount and types of news media coverage of a particular topic like welfare assistance.

This project examines the language of writers and reporters, but including a separate examination of the language used by the politicians and experts quoted in each piece could also strengthen this analysis. When a reporter or writer includes a quote from a politician about a particular subject, it does not necessarily mean that he or she advocates or supports what is said. The decision to include or exclude certain voices in articles is, however, a choice made by writers and reporters. Performing a distinct examination of the same news media pieces selected for this project to see how reporters and writers wrote about welfare recipients in comparison to the words used by the experts quoted in each piece would provide more evidence about the biases held by writers compared to the people they interviewed. While the language of a reporter might be less loud than that of a quote from a politician, the inclusion a quote from a politician and exclusion of a quote from a welfare recipient in a story about welfare might tell readers



that one person is important while another is not. So while the language is important, the structure and framing of the piece is also significant.

Another way to expand upon this research is an examination of which paper provided better, less stereotypical coverage. A researcher could also look at coverage of poverty for stories about welfare around very specific moments in history to analyze how a topic was covered then. For example, a researcher could examine articles written by the *Baltimore Sun* around the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore and compare this to another time the *Sun* reported about welfare to see if there were any differences in reporting quality. Another way to approach this information is to follow only a handful of writers to see if the way they wrote about welfare assistance and recipients changed over time as many reporters work specific beats.

This study examined news media ending in 2016, on the day that Donald Trump was elected president. Since then, the discussion of poverty continues in the U.S. In December 2019, the president planned to reduce the number of SNAP beneficiaries by nearly 700,000 as a result of a work requirement change. “Government can be a powerful force for good, but government dependency has never been the American dream,” said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue in a press release.<sup>147</sup> “We need to encourage people by giving them a helping hand but not allowing it to become an indefinitely giving hand.”<sup>148</sup> Dependency, the consistent theme associated with the discussion of poverty, appears in this government press release decades after the PRWORA.

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<sup>147</sup> “USDA Restores Original Intent of SNAP: A Second Chance, Not A Way of Life,” December 4, 2019, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2019/12/04/usda-restores-original-intent-snap-second-chance-not-way-life>.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

As the discussion of dependency by the government continues, the question of whether or not the social safety net is secure enough is currently a national issue as the world experiences a global pandemic that is pushing us closer to an economic recession and is sickening and taking the lives of thousands.<sup>149</sup> In March 2020, the U.S. government enacted a \$2 trillion stimulus package—the largest in history—to counter the economic blow resulting from the safety measures put in place to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This bipartisan measure includes various amounts of cash assistance to Americans. But public services, including food stamps and other forms of public assistance, make up the sector that will receive the smallest amount of relief cash, while about \$500 billion will go to private companies affected by the virus.<sup>150</sup> It is worth examining news media coverage of recipients of public assistance as result of this pandemic in the future. Will news media offer a sympathetic lens to those experiencing poverty? Will the voices of people using public assistance be included more due to the regular visibility of their hardships? Will the rhetoric surrounding the poor change as more people experience economic and healthcare difficulties? Will public attitudes about welfare recipients and the social safety net change as a result of this corporate and individual bailout?

Moreover, it will be useful to examine news media during the pandemic to see how Black Americans are written about at this time. Black Americans are experiencing a

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<sup>149</sup> Jason DeParle, “The Safety Net Got a Quick Patch. What Happens After the Coronavirus?,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/us/politics/coronavirus-us-benefits.html>.

<sup>150</sup> John Harney, “Here’s What’s in the \$2 Trillion Virus Stimulus Package,” *Bloomberg*, March 27, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/on-small-business/heres-whats-in-the-2-trillion-virus-stimulus-package/2020/03/26/9a6bdd9a-6f21-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/on-small-business/heres-whats-in-the-2-trillion-virus-stimulus-package/2020/03/26/9a6bdd9a-6f21-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html).

high rate of infections and deaths in certain cities as a result of this pandemic.<sup>151</sup> They have experienced consistent inequities in housing, healthcare, education, employment, and more. Moreover, they make up a large portion of essential employees—the people who are still expected to work during this pandemic. Many Black families do not have the luxury of working from home during this crisis, which continues to put them at high risk of contracting the virus.<sup>152</sup> As more Black Americans become infected in the U.S., there will be “an overabundance of attention placed on the diagnosis and repair of supposedly damaged African-Americans,” writes *New Yorker* columnist Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor.<sup>153</sup> Taylor argues that certain assumptions about race will be linked to poverty without a critical look at past policies as a result of this crisis. “When working-class black neighborhoods have high rates of substandard housing and poor maintenance, and black communities suffer from poor diets and widespread obesity, these characteristics are conflated with race. Racializing poverty helps to distract from the systemic factors at the foundation of both racial and economic inequality.”<sup>154</sup> Writers and reporters risk linking Black Americans and poverty through the use of stereotypical language, which perpetuates an inaccurate portrayal of the poor. The way news media, politicians, and experts talk about Black Americans during this crisis is worth

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<sup>151</sup> Reis Thebault, Andrew Ba Tran, and Vanessa Williams, “The Coronavirus Is Infecting and Killing Black Americans at an Alarming High Rate,” *Washington Post*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/>.

<sup>152</sup> John Eligon et al., “Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “The Black Plague,” *The New Yorker*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-black-plague>.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

examination because of the influence the language might have in shaping public understanding of the effects of historically racist policies on those living in poverty.

## Part 7: Conclusion

The language used in news media to describe the poor between 1996 and 2016 shows that while not overtly racist, the descriptions of welfare recipients were often stereotypical and showed signs of colorblind racism. The words used also link women and motherhood to poverty. Moreover, the attitudes from many of the people interviewed in the pieces were negative toward welfare as a social program. Why do stereotypes of the poor continue to endure in news media? Perhaps because stereotypes in their simplest definition provide an easy way to generalize and make sense of the people around us. They allow us to ignore the needs of the poor because we become comfortable with the words used to describe them by our elected officials and from the knowledgeable experts who study them.

Separating these negative attitudes from public understanding of welfare and welfare recipients is difficult but necessary. We need to recognize, rather than ignore, the complexities of our realities, which stereotypical language distorts. More neutral language used in stories about welfare recipients might change public interpretation of poverty. News media writers should also consciously include more voices of poor Americans rather than relying on politicians and the language of government documents, which tend to perpetuate the frame of dependency and discourses that impose moral judgments on those in need. Reading a quote from a welfare recipient makes their experience tangible. Without hearing the experiences of the poor and without critical thinking, institutions like the news media will continue to reinforce problematic representations of the poor, which in turn will continue to affect the realities of those who are truly in need.

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