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Laurie MacLeod  
*Arizona State University*

Darrel Montero  
*Arizona State University*

Alan Speer  
*Arizona State University*

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# America's Changing Attitudes Toward Welfare and Welfare Recipients, 1938–1995

LAURIE MACLEOD, DARREL MONTERO, AND ALAN SPEER

Arizona State University  
School of Social Work

*This paper examines American national public opinion on welfare, welfare recipients, and the government's role in welfare programs. The data were gathered from published public opinion polls of national samples of adults taken between 1938 and 1995. The findings indicate that public opinion has remained relatively stable over this 57-year period, with the majority of Americans believing that the government has a responsibility to help those in need. At the same time, the majority of those polled believed that the government spends too much on welfare. The findings also show that the public is in favor of reducing income differences between the rich and the poor. During this period, poll data indicate that a growing percentage of Americans believe that laziness and lack of motivation to work are the main causes of poverty. The data indicate that approximately half of all Americans believe that welfare recipients could get along without their welfare benefits. These findings are discussed in light of current political attitudes toward social welfare and recent change and proposed changes in welfare programs.*

Welfare, the general label for government-funded public assistance, is one of the most controversial issues in the United States today. The term "welfare" was first used shortly after 1900 to replace the phrase "charity and correction" (Leiby, 1978). Americans are not, and never have been, in agreement as to how the government should provide assistance to the poor (Berkowitz & McQuaid, 1988; Levitan & Shapiro, 1987; Murray, 1984). According to Groskind (1994), welfare ideology is based on people's beliefs about the causes of poverty, political attitudes toward the government's role in society, and racial attitudes.

Prior to the Great Depression, the American social welfare system was based largely upon the English Poor Laws (Karger & Stoesz, 1994) which were based on the belief that caring for the needy was the responsibility of local communities. However, if there were parents, grandparents, children, or grandchildren who could provide for the family in need, then the community was not considered responsible (Leiby, 1978). People in 19th-century England were expected to take care of themselves and their families, just as they are expected to do today.

Leiby (1978) observes that the Protestant work ethic underlies most attitudes on welfare, past and present:

A fundamental notion underlying the poor law, the "work ethic," which held that people ought to support themselves insofar as they were able, that they ought not to live in idleness by begging from those who did work, and that there were degrees of responsibility between complete self-sufficiency and complete dependency: dependents ought to help themselves as much as they could, even if it were only a little. (p. 40)

The work ethic that Leiby describes is deeply embedded in the American culture today. This, in turn, has had a profound effect on the American public's attitudes toward welfare recipients.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, signaling the beginning of the Great Depression, aid to the poor came primarily from private social service organizations (Karger & Stoesz, 1994). At the time, federal and state governments did next to nothing to help the millions of Americans struggling to meet the most basic of human needs: food, clothing and shelter. In fact, few government programs existed to assist the poor. The lack of governmental support was not surprising in light of President Hoover's belief that federal relief was illegal and a violation of states' rights. Similarly, state governments were doing next to nothing to help the needy.

When Roosevelt became President in 1933 he immediately began to implement public assistance programs. Roosevelt's first priority was to alleviate suffering and provide food, shelter, and clothing to the hundreds of thousands of families and individuals in need. This resulted in the establishment of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. What followed was a series of pro-

grams and projects such as the National Recovery Act, the Public Works Administration, the Federal Housing Administration, and most notably, the Social Security Act of 1935 (Katz, 1986). These various programs, established as a result of the Great Depression, have led to what some refer to as the modern welfare state. More important, the Depression affected the American public's views toward both the poor and the government's responsibility to provide for those in need. According to Leiby (1978), the Depression created a public mindset that help should be available to all on the basis of need, not just for a selected group of individuals with particular needs, such as widows and children.

Since the 1930s, much attention has been directed toward public assistance programs and those who receive assistance (Axinn & Levin, 1992; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1996). The American public's attitudes toward the government's role in welfare programs and welfare recipients are examined through national public opinion poll data (Gallup Poll, 1996).

## METHOD

The findings of this paper are based upon published public opinion polls from the American Institute of Public Opinion, the Roper Organization, the *Harris Poll*, the Columbia Broadcasting System, *The New York Times*, the National Opinion Research Center, the General Social Surveys, the National Broadcasting Corporation, *The Wall Street Journal*, the Associated Press, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the Harvard School of Public Health, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

These organizations use similar sampling techniques. For example, the standard Gallup sample consisted of 1,000 face-to-face and telephone interviews. The sample design for face-to-face surveys is a replicated area-probability sample that selects subjects based on demographics from the block level in urban areas and segments of townships in rural areas. After stratifying the nation geographically and by size of the community, according to information derived from the most recent census, more than 350 different sampling locations are selected on a mathematically random basis from within cities, towns, and counties that have, in turn, been selected on a mathematically random basis. A more

detailed discussion of this sampling procedure is found in Gallup (1996).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Attitudes Toward Government Responsibility for the Poor*

During the Great Depression, the American public turned to the government to help provide jobs and relieve economic hardship (Erskine, 1975). The earliest polling data on whether the government has a responsibility to provide for those in need dates back to 1938. At that time, 68% of those polled believed that it was the government's responsibility to support needy people who were out of work (see Table 1). This percentage remained relatively stable between 1938 and 1973. Most Americans have been in favor of helping the less fortunate.

In the 1964 Gallup Poll the question wording changed from "paying the living expenses of needy people who are out of work" to "doing away with poverty in this country" (Gallup Poll, 1996). Despite this difference in wording, there was no major change in public attitudes between 1938 and 1964. However, the change in the wording of the question may reflect the political concerns of the time. According to Montero (1978), the meaning of the questions is essentially the same; however, the focus in the 1960s was on racial minorities who seldom shared in the nation's prosperity.

The largest change in opinion occurred between 1973 and 1983. In 1973 almost 70% of Americans believed that the government has a responsibility to provide for those in need and in 1983, this figure rose to an all-time high of 83% (Shapiro, Patterson, Russell, & Young, 1987). The reasons for this change are unclear; however, Shapiro et al. (1987) speculate that the public reacted against the Reagan administration's cuts in social welfare programs and, especially, the spending reductions. Between 1987 and 1995, public support for welfare programs shifted downward. In 1987, 71% of those polled agreed that the government has a responsibility to take care of those in need; however, in 1995, this figure decreased to 61%. This trend may be the result of several factors. The public's increasing resentment and disdain for the poor today may be one factor affecting the downward shift in

Table 1

*Attitudes Toward Government Responsibility to Provide for Those in Need, 1938–1995. (Numbers are in percentages)*

Year <sup>a</sup>	Yes (Favor)	No (Oppose)
1938	68	28
1940	65	28
1946	72	19
1947	73	19
1948	73	19
1964	72	20
1973	68	27
1983	83	11
1987	71	24
1988	74	23
1990	67	29
1992	69	28
1993	62	35
1994	57	41
1994	65	29
1995	63	30
1995	61	30

<sup>a</sup>Data reported twice in 1 year indicate that the question was asked twice in the same year.

<sup>b</sup>The question asks, "Do you agree or disagree: It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves?" Over the years, slight variations occurred in the wording of the question. Exact question format is available from the author.

public support for welfare. The current shift seems to be toward less government involvement in all aspects of American life.

In sum, the poll data between 1938 and 1983 show a steady increase in the number of Americans who believe that it is the government's responsibility to provide for the needy, with the one exception being in 1973 when the figure dropped down to 68% (Shapiro et al., 1987). Between 1987 and 1995, the percentage of those who agreed that the government has a responsibility to provide for the poor shifted slightly downward (see Table 1).

*Attitudes Toward Government Spending on Welfare*

Between 1964 and 1995, Americans were asked if they thought the government was spending "too much," "too little" or "about the right amount" on welfare (see Table 2).

A notable finding occurred in 1964 when 20% of Americans responded that the government spends too much on welfare. The 1960s was a time of great change in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, as was the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Between 1964 and 1971, the percentage of Americans who believed the government spends too much on welfare increased from 20% to 53%; since 1971, this figure has never dropped below 38% of those polled.

In sum, we find that with only one exception (1964), a majority of those polled reported that the government spends too much on welfare. Moreover, this figure often exceeds 50%. These trends have remained steady across different polling organizations: Roper, National Opinion Research Center and General Social Surveys (NORC-GSS), and NBC/*Wall Street Journal*.

*Attitudes Toward Government Redistribution of Income, 1973 to 1994*

When we address the question of public support for government redistribution of income, we find remarkable consistency (see Table 3). This is the case whether we focus on number of "1" responses, which indicate strongest support for income redistribution, or we combine scores 1 through 3, which would include more moderate support for income redistribution. With the exception of 1973, when we look at the public's strongest support for income redistribution (score "1") from 1978 to 1994, we find a very narrow range, from a low of 14% in 1994 to a high of 23% in 1986. Likewise, the combined scores (1-3) yield a similar consistency, i.e., from a low of 39% in 1994 to a high of 51% in 1990. In sum, our findings for Table 3 reveal that a near majority of Americans favor some form of income redistribution.

*Public Attitudes Toward Welfare Recipients*

Between 1976 and 1994, survey respondents were asked about their attitudes toward welfare recipients (see Table 4). The question posed to the American public was: "In your opinion, do you think that most people who receive money from welfare could get

Table 2

*Attitudes Toward Government Spending on Welfare, 1964–1995.  
(Numbers are in percentages)*

<i>Year<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Too Little</i>	<i>About Right</i>	<i>Too Much</i>	<i>Don't Know/ Not Sure</i>
1964	18	33	20	29
1971	18	19	53	11
1973	20	24	51	4
1973	18	24	48	9
1974	22	32	42	4
1974	19	23	49	9
1975	23	29	43	5
1975	17	22	53	9
1976	13	22	60	4
1976	13	21	59	7
1977	12	23	60	5
1977	15	20	58	7
1978	13	25	58	4
1978	13	20	60	6
1979	13	25	57	5
1980	13	26	57	4
1980	16	21	58	6
1981	20	23	52	5
1982	20	28	48	4
1986	22	34	40	4
1987	21	31	44	4
1988	23	32	42	3
1989	23	30	42	6
1990	22	35	38	5
1991	22	35	38	5
1993	16	25	54	5
1993	14	24	55	7
1994	13	24	60	4
1995	9	18	66	7

<sup>a</sup>Data reported twice in 1 year indicate that the question was asked twice in the same year.

<sup>b</sup>The question asks, "Do you think the government is currently spending too little, about the right amount, or too much on people on welfare? Over the years, slight variations occurred in the wording of the question.



Table 3

*Attitudes Toward Government Redistribution of Income, 1973–1994.  
(Numbers are in percentages)*

Year <sup>a</sup>	Government Should Redistribute				Government Should Not Redistribute			Don't Know
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1973	36	12	10	11	6	7	15	3
1978	18	8	19	22	11	8	11	2
1980	17	9	16	20	12	7	16	3
1983	20	11	16	17	11	8	14	2
1984	21	12	15	17	13	8	12	2
1986	23	9	17	21	11	6	12	1
1987	19	9	17	21	13	6	14	1
1988	20	10	18	20	12	8	11	2
1989	18	13	19	20	11	7	10	2
1990	21	12	18	21	9	6	10	3
1991	20	12	17	20	12	7	9	3
1993	17	12	19	18	12	8	12	2
1994	14	9	16	21	15	8	15	1

<sup>a</sup>Data reported twice in 1 year indicate that the question was asked twice in the same year.

<sup>b</sup>The question asks, "Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor."

along without it if they tried, or do you think most of them really need this help?" The question remained consistent over this time period and was asked by various polling agencies (CBS, *The New York Times*, NBC, Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, Kaiser, & Harvard).

When we examine this general question regarding the public's attitude toward welfare recipients, setting aside 1992 data, we find that, in general, a majority of Americans report that welfare recipients can "get along" without public assistance. Conversely,

Table 4

*Attitudes Toward Welfare Recipients, 1976–1994. (Numbers are in percentages)*

Year <sup>a</sup>	Get Along Without	Really Need Help	Half and Half	Don't Know
1976	52	38	—	10
1976	51	36	—	13
1977	54	31	—	14
1980	51	39	—	10
1981	55	32	—	15
1986	40	35	20	4
1992	29	50	16	4
1994	48	35	13	4
1994	46	44	—	10

<sup>a</sup>Data reported twice in 1 year indicate that the question was asked twice in the same year.

<sup>b</sup>The question asks, "In your opinion, do you think that most people who receive money from welfare could get along without it if they tried, or do you think most of them really need this help?"

approximately 1 in 3 Americans reported that welfare recipients "really need" public assistance. Again, these findings reflect a substantial diversity in public opinions regarding attitudes toward welfare recipients.

#### *Attitudes Toward the Causes of Poverty*

The question of who is to blame for poverty was specifically addressed in a survey given between 1982 and 1995 (see Table 5). The question asks: "In your opinion, what is more often to blame if people are poor—lack of effort on their own part or circumstances beyond their control?" The possible responses are: lack of effort, circumstances, or both.

An average of 43% of Americans reported "lack of one's own effort" as the cause of poverty. Whereas, 41% of Americans reported that poverty is due to circumstances beyond one's own control. Overall, Table 5 reveals that Americans are almost equally divided on the issue of the causes of poverty.

Table 5

*Attitudes Toward the Causes of Poverty. (Numbers are in percentages)*

Year <sup>a</sup>	Lack of Effort	Circumstances	Both	Don't Know
1982	37	39	17	7
1984	33	34	31	2
1988	40	37	17	6
1989	38	42	17	3
1990	35	45	17	3
1990	30	48	20	2
1992	27	52	18	3
1993	48	33	17	2
1994	44	34	18	4
1995	60	30	7	3

<sup>a</sup>Data reported twice in 1 year indicate that the question was asked twice in the same year.

<sup>b</sup>The question asks, "In your opinion, which is more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on his or her own part or circumstances beyond his or her control?"

In sum, when we examine national poll data on the American public's attitudes toward welfare and welfare recipients, some striking trends emerge. National public opinion generally supports helping individuals who are in genuine need. Between 1938 and 1995, over half of those polled believe that the government has a responsibility to provide for those in need. Although the majority of the public is in favor of helping the poor, most Americans are willing to help only those who are perceived to be deserving of such support. Moreover, most Americans today think the government is spending too much on welfare. Even so, our findings reveal that a near majority of Americans favor some sort of income redistribution. Interestingly, the percentage of Americans who believe welfare recipients could get along without help has remained relatively stable between 1976 and 1994. In recent years, the American public increasingly believes that lack of effort on the part of the poor is to blame for their poverty. Overall, we note that Americans support the notion of helping the truly needy, with a caveat that a growing percentage

of Americans believe that welfare recipients are to blame for their poverty.

The most salient finding is the remarkable consistency of Americans' attitudes over a 7-decade period. This is particularly notable when we are examining these questions using different sampling procedures, polling agencies, and over as many as 7 diverse decades. Despite the widespread media reports of welfare abuse and fraud, the public supports the notion of governmental support of America's poor.

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Laurie MacLeod and Alan Speer are graduate students and Darrel Montero is Associate Professor of Social Work at Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Darrel Montero, School of Social Work, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287.