



Perceptions about
POVERTY &
HOMELESSNESS

Excerpted From the full report

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY II: AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POVERTY

This section forms part of a larger report exploring public opinion on poverty and related issues. To access the full report and learn more, please go to: [OPPORTUNITYAGENDA.ORG/POVERTY_TO_OPPORTUNITY](https://opportunityagenda.org/poverty_to_opportunity)



Section 2 KEY FINDINGS

- 2.1 The vast majority of Americans believe poverty is a serious issue, and there is growing public concern about homelessness**
- 2.2 Many Americans embrace a structural explanation for poverty**
- 2.3 Perceptions of the cause of poverty among low-income women provide insights into the unique structural barriers faced by many women**

2.1

THE VAST MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVE POVERTY IS A SERIOUS ISSUE AND THERE IS GROWING PUBLIC CONCERN ABOUT HOMELESSNESS



Welfare? What Welfare?

Though Americans broadly support programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, most oppose “welfare” as a concept. This dichotomy may reflect a misunderstanding of how programs to protect basic living standards are administered today--in the two decades since “welfare reform” and the introduction of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families--the closest thing the U.S. has to a pure federal cash assistance program), the number of people receiving actual cash has plummeted. Today, **roughly a quarter of TANF dollars spent** are spent on basic assistance, with the remainder going to job training, child care, and even programs that combat teen pregnancy.

In 2014, our analysis of data from 2012, 2013, and 2014 revealed that the majority of Americans viewed poverty as a serious problem that should be prioritized by the federal government.²⁹ Polls conducted in 2015 show that poverty continues to be seen as an important issue. In a May 2015 survey of 1,253 adults, respondents were asked how important they think a number of social issues are in the United States today. The vast majority of Americans (74 percent) agreed that poverty is an “extremely/very important” issue,³⁰ up from 69 percent in May 2012.³¹

An area not previously explored is public perceptions of homelessness. In recent years, researchers and policy advocates have pointed to the pressing need to better under-

stand public attitudes towards homeless people disaggregated from overall perceptions of poverty. Data from 2011, 2013, and 2016 suggest that the public’s concern about homelessness is on the rise. For more than a decade, Gallup has been asking survey respondents how much they personally worry about hunger and homelessness. In 2003, 37 percent of respondents said a great deal, 33 percent said a fair amount, and 30 percent said a little or not at all.³² In 2011, 41 percent said a great deal, 34 percent said a fair amount, and 26 percent said a little or not at all. As of March 2016, nearly 5 in 10 (47 percent) of surveyed Americans say they think about hunger and homelessness a great deal, while only 17 percent say a little or not at all.³³

In addition, in a November 2015 poll, nearly 9 in 10 (89 percent) of those surveyed agreed that homelessness in the United States is a “very serious” or

“somewhat serious” problem. Sixty-three percent agree that the government spends “too little” on helping homeless people find housing.³⁴

2.2

MANY AMERICANS EMBRACE A STRUCTURAL EXPLANATION FOR POVERTY

In *A Window of Opportunity*, our examination of data spanning 40 years revealed that in periods of relative economic stability, Americans are more evenly split in their opinions about the causes of poverty (with notions of personal responsibility gaining ground), but in times of economic downturn, structural explanations gain traction.³⁵ Despite this longitudinal trend, data also suggest that Americans in general are beginning to embrace structural explanations for poverty, even in times of relative economic stability.

In recent years, Americans’ satisfaction with the economy and their overall quality of life has improved. In a January 2015 Gallup Poll, 60 percent of people surveyed expressed that they are “very/somewhat satisfied” with the state of the economy—up 6 points compared to January 2014.³⁶ Despite these improvements, a large portion of Americans continue to embrace a more structural explanation for poverty. For instance, in a survey conducted in May 2015, when asked if poverty is caused by “society’s inequality” or a “lack of individual effort,” nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) agreed that poverty is caused by society’s inequality, while 42 percent agreed with the lack of individual effort statement.³⁷ When posed a similar question in 2014, 50 percent of respondents chose “conditions in society,” while 14 percent chose “their own behavior.”³⁸

2.3

PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSE OF POVERTY AMONG LOW-INCOME WOMEN PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO THE UNIQUE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS FACED BY MANY WOMEN

In recent years, experimental research has provided some insights into attitudes and perspectives of those living at the intersection of socioeconomic and gender inequality. In a 2014 paper, social and behavioral scientists Kristen Mickelson and Emily Hazett surveyed low-income mothers residing

in the Midwest in an effort to examine how women living in poverty perceive the causes of their own poverty.

Participants were presented with a survey which contained 37 possible reasons for their own poverty or low-income status, within five subgroups:

- 1 structural (e.g., “failure of society to provide good schools/education,” “insufficient support from government in times of need”).
- 2 individualistic (e.g., “no desire to make effort to improve self,” “not enough education”).
- 3 fatalistic (e.g., “God’s will,” “nothing I can do to change my situation”).
- 4 romantic relationships (e.g., “divorce/separation/widow,” “domestic violence”).
- 5 children (e.g., “having children too young,” “having too many children that I cannot support”).³⁹



Raising a Family on an Uncertain Schedule

Service industry employers increasingly use dynamic scheduling software to decide how many employees are needed for any given shift. While, on first blush, this may sound like a smart use of technology, it has a profoundly negative impact on people working in low-wage jobs. Inconsistent work schedules make it nearly impossible to predict income month-to-month, much less to plan around kids’ school schedules or a partner or family member’s work schedule. Add in long commutes resulting from chronic underinvestment in public transportation and the high cost of child care, and it becomes clear that parenting while living in poverty is a high-wire act.

When the women were asked to rate the extent to which each of these reasons contributed to their current status, (5) having children and (4) romantic relationships were the most endorsed reasons. As noted by Mickelson and Hazett, while both child-bearing and relationships may appear to be individualistic explanations of poverty, what these causes point to is the unique structural barriers faced by women. Women remain the primary caregivers of children, are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, and are more likely to experience economic consequences by ending a relationship and/or having children.⁴⁰



PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.

⚡1 TALKING POINTS

⚡1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

Craft a shared narrative and uplift each other's voices and concerns.

Anti-poverty voices are relatively prominent in the public discourse, but they are diffuse, lacking a coherent narrative that can persuade undecided audiences or counter the disciplined narrative of their most frequent opponents.

We recommend that while anti-poverty leaders and groups maintain their individual perspectives and priorities, they also craft a shared narrative in which they:

- Emphasize the values of equal opportunity and community.
- Highlight systemic causes.
- Describe a path from poverty to economic participation.
- Promote effective solutions and successes.
- Invoke a positive role for government.

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

Document and explain unequal obstacles

Researchers have amply documented the disparate obstacles that contribute to higher poverty rates among communities of color, women, immigrants, and other demographic groups. Yet there is still a dearth of reporting on those dynamics—and for that reason, among others, many audiences are

skeptical that such obstacles still exist. Moreover, research and experience show unchallenged subconscious stereotypes will infect attitudes about poverty generally and erode support for positive solutions. Our communications need to both explore and explain this evidence, as well as tell the human stories behind it. A focus on unequal obstacles—not only unequal outcomes or disparities—is an important part of that formula.

⚡ 1.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

Include perspective of overlooked communities

Current data is lagging behind the reality of the racial and ethnic makeup of America, and public opinion polling needs to focus more on the opinions of Asian Americans, Native Americans, biracial/multiracial Americans, and other communities of color. Future research should oversample these frequently overlooked communities, in addition to disaggregating data by national origin and other characteristics.

⚡ 1.3 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT

Anat Shenker-Osorio, Lake Research Partners, “Towards a Good Jobs Agenda: Economic Justice Messaging Research,”

<http://www.communitychange.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/report-CCC-Full-Research-Report-FRev-0724151.pdf>



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- 2 College of Mount Saint Vincent, "Social Issues in the United States: Poverty, May 26, 2015, <https://mount-saintvincent.edu/social-issues-in-the-united-states-poverty/> (accessed 10 Feb. 2016).
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- 4 Gallup Poll, 2003, (accessed from IROPER 12 Aug. 2016).
- 5 Gallup Poll, 2011, 2016, (accessed from IROPER 12 Aug. 2016).
- 6 YouGov Poll, 2015, <https://today.yougov.com/news/2015/11/23/wealthiest-americans-toughest-homeless/>, (accessed 12 Aug. 2016).
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- 10 The Opportunity Agenda & Langer Research Associates, "The Opportunity Survey Topline," 2014, http://opportunity-survey.opportunityagenda.org/userfiles/Opportunity_Survey_Appendix_B.pdf
- 11 Kristen Mickelson and Emily Hazett, "Why me?": Low-Income Women's Poverty Attributions, Mental Health, and Social Class Perceptions," Springer, 2014.
- 12 Ibid.

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