



Perceptions of People
LIVING IN POVERTY
and
RACIAL ATTITUDES

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 4 KEY FINDINGS

- 4.1 Perceptions of how difficult it is to live in poverty remain divided**
- 4.2 Americans are dissatisfied with the state of race relations but more open to structural barriers presented by racial discrimination**

4.1

PERCEPTIONS OF HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO LIVE IN POVERTY REMAIN DIVIDED

The public's perception of how difficult it is to live in poverty is divided. In a 2015 poll administered by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, respondents were asked if "poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return" or if "poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently." Americans were nearly evenly split, with 42 percent agreeing with the "easy" statement, and 48 percent agreeing with the "hard lives" statement.⁶⁵ This compares to a 45 percent (easy lives) and 44 percent (hard lives) divide when the same question was posed in 2013.⁶⁶

Black Americans and people with household incomes under \$40,000 are significantly less likely than other groups to blame poverty on the poor work ethic of those living in poverty. In the same survey, when asked the reason they think people tend to be poor, because "good jobs aren't available" or "poor work ethic," the majority (62 percent) of black Americans favored the lack of good jobs explanation, with only 21 percent saying people are poor due to having a poor work ethic. White and Latino opinions are more aligned.



The High Cost of Living in Poverty

Ironically, people living in poverty pay more for just about everything. From high-fee money orders for the nearly 10% of Americans with no bank account, to prepaid cell phone plans for users with poor credit, to expensive and low-quality produce at convenience stores in food deserts, many of the products and services marketed to people living in poverty carry unavoidable costs that individuals on surer financial footing are not subjected to.

In response to the same question, 45 percent of white people and 48 percent of Latino people prefer the "lack of good jobs" explanation, a 14- and 17-point difference from black Americans. When asked which comes closer to their own views about people who are unemployed, "most are trying hard to find jobs but can't" or "most could find jobs if they wanted to," 7 in 10 black Americans say that most unemployed Americans are trying hard to find jobs. About half of Latino Americans (51 percent) and white Americans (48 percent) agree.

4.2

AMERICANS ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THE STATE OF RACE RELATIONS BUT MORE OPEN TO STRUCTURAL BARRIERS PRESENTED BY RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

The persistent divide in public perception of how difficult it is to live in poverty is influenced in large part by the racialized nature of thinking about poverty in America, particularly negative stereotypes concerning black Americans. The role that conscious and subconscious racial attitudes play in shaping public attitudes towards poverty has been explored extensively in social science research.⁶⁷ As noted in *A Window of Opportunity*, stereotypes about the work ethic of black Americans have skewed assumptions about the percentage of black Americans living in poverty and has greatly affected support for particular anti-poverty policies.⁶⁸ For example, individuals with more negative racial attitudes (e.g., who believe black Americans tend to be lazy) have been shown to be more likely to oppose welfare spending and are also more likely to attribute inequality facing black Americans to individual failings.⁶⁹ Attitudes towards race and racial inequality are therefore essential to understanding the public's overall perception of poverty and support for anti-poverty policies.

Survey data from 2014, 2015, and 2016 indicate that several important attitudinal shifts have taken place among the public in terms of how people view race relations and racial inequality. American's overall satisfaction with race relations in the United States has declined dramatically in recent years. In January 2014, 55 percent of surveyed Americans stated that they were "very/somewhat" satisfied with the state of race relations, a figure that declined to 30 percent as of January 2015.⁷⁰ This large change is no doubt in part due to the Black Lives Matter movement and widespread media coverage of high-profile police shootings involving black Americans, which have pushed racial inequality into the forefront of national discourse. However, this sharp downturn in satisfaction with race relations is accompanied by an interesting rise in awareness concerning racial inequality between white and black Americans.

Between 2009 and 2016, Pew Research Center presented survey respondents with two statements: “our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites” or “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with rights.”⁷¹ In 2009, 47 percent of respondents were in agreement that enough changes have already been made, while 43 percent agreed that more changes are needed to give black Americans equal rights to white Americans.⁷² By 2014, not much movement had been made: 49 percent of those surveyed were in agreement that enough changes have been made and 46 percent agreed that more changes are needed.⁷³ From 2014 to 2015 there was a significant shift in opinion, with the percentage of people in agreement that enough changes have been made declining from 49 percent in 2014 to 32 percent in 2015, while those in agreement that more changes are needed increased from 46 percent in 2014 to 59 percent in 2015.⁷⁴ As of May 2016, 61 percent of people surveyed express the belief that the United States needs to continue making changes to give black people equal rights with white people, while only 30 percent are in agreement that the United States has already made the changes needed to give black Americans equal status.⁷⁵

There has also been some movement in people’s perceptions about the causes of inequality faced by black Americans. In 2014, our analysis of survey data revealed that most Americans reject the structural barrier of racial discrimination “as the main reason why many black people can’t get ahead these days.” In a 2012 survey, only 23 percent of people agreed that racial discrimination was the main reason, while 61 percent agreed that “blacks who can’t get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.”⁷⁶ As of 2016, 45 percent Americans agree that racial discrimination is a “major reason why black people in our country may have a harder time getting ahead than whites” while 32 percent agree it is a minor reason.⁷⁷ Only 20 percent believe racial discrimination is not a reason at all. There are marked differences between racial and ethnic groups: 70 percent of black Americans believe racial discrimination is a major reason why black people have a harder time getting ahead, compared to 36 percent of white people, and 58 percent of Latino people.⁷⁸



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

Talking about Race and Poverty

Americans strongly believe that opportunity should not be hindered by race, gender, ethnicity, or other aspects of who we are. However, much of the public is skeptical of the existence of racial discrimination in particular, and negative racial stereotypes about people living in poverty persist among many Americans.

We need to acknowledge and confront these deep-seated stereotypes. To do that, our messaging on poverty needs to take into account that race matters in at least four crucial ways:

- Stereotypes and bias warp perceptions of poor people.
- Stereotypes and bias can undermine support for solutions.
- Views and beliefs about poverty differ significantly across demographic groups.
- People's conscious values on racial equity are generally more positive than their subconscious stereotypes.

Taken together, these trends call for talking about race explicitly and strategically, through the lens of shared values. Keep these guidelines in mind when talking about barriers that hamper opportunity for diverse populations and promoting solutions:

- Show that it's about all of us. Remind audiences that racial equity is not just about people of color; achieving racial equity upholds our values and benefits our entire society. For example, lax federal regulators allowed predatory subprime lenders to target communities of color, only to see that practice spread across communities, putting our entire economy at risk.
- Over-document the barriers to equal opportunity—especially racial bias. Don't lead with evidence of unequal outcomes alone, which can sometimes reinforce stereotypes and blame. Amply document how people of color frequently face stiff and unequal barriers to opportunity. For example:

- **Don't** Don't begin by discussing the income gap between white and black Americans.
- **Do** lead by talking about how studies have found that employment agencies frequently preferred less qualified white applicants to more qualified black Americans.
- Acknowledge the progress we've made. This helps to persuade skeptical audiences to lower their defenses and have a reasoned discussion rooted in reality rather than rhetoric.
- Present data on racial disparities through a contribution model instead of just a deficit model. When we present evidence of unequal outcomes, we should make every effort to show how closing those gaps will benefit society as a whole. The fact that the Latino college graduation rate is a fraction of the white rate also means that closing the ethnic graduation gap would result in many more college graduates each year to help America compete and prosper in a global economy—it's the smart thing to do as well as the right thing to do.
- Be thematic instead of episodic. Select stories that demonstrate institutional or systemic causes and solutions over stories that highlight largely focus on individual choices.
- Use opportunity as a bridge, not a bypass. Opening conversations with the ideal of opportunity helps to emphasize society's role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations there does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from the value of opportunity to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling that value for all.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT

⚡ 1.2

Center for Social Inclusion, "Talk About Race Right: A tool to help advocates talk effectively about race in policy fights": <http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/files/2010/03/CSI-Talking-Effectively-About-Race-and-Policy-in-an-Obama-Era.pdf>

Center for Social Inclusion and Western Strategies, "Talking About Race: A Summary of Findings," 2012.

Frameworks Institute: Narrative Lesson in the Presentation of Race Policies: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_race/illogic_literalness.pdf

Frameworks Institute: Talking About Disparities Toolkit: <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/race/resources/pdf/disparitiesmessagetemplate.pdf>



WORK CITED

- 1 Ibid.
- 2 Pew Center for People & the Press, conducted by SRBI, October 2015, (accessed from Roper IPoll database 10 Feb. 2016).
- 3 “A Window of Opportunity,” op cit., p.19.
- 4 See, for example: Clawson, Rosalee A., and Trice Rakuya. “Poverty As We Know It: Media Portrayals of the Poor,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2000): pp 53–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3078840>; Winter, Nicholas JG, “Dangerous Frames: How Ideas About Race and Gender Shape Public Opinion,” University of Chicago Press, 2008; Hunt, Matthew O., “Race/ethnicity and beliefs about wealth and poverty,” *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 3, 2004, pp 827–853.
- 5 “A Window of Opportunity,” op cit., p. 10.
- 6 Ibid., p 2.
- 7 Gallup, “U.S. Mood on Economy Up, Race Relations Sharply Down,” January 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/193832/americans-satisfaction-drops-sharply.aspx>, (accessed 1 Sept. 2016).
- 8 Pew Research Center, “2016 Racial Attitudes in America III Final Topline,” June 2016 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>, p. 10, (accessed 1 Sept. 2016).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 “A Window of Opportunity,” op cit., p. 17.
- 14 Pew Research Center, “2016 Racial Attitudes in America III Final Topline,” June 2016 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>, p. 20, (accessed 1 Sept. 2016).
- 15 Ibid.

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