Crossroads: How Race, Class, and Gender Affect Views of Poverty

Heather Webb
hrwebb@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects

Part of the Behavioral Economics Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Repository Citation
https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/273

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
Crossroads:
How Race, Class, and Gender Affect Views of Poverty

Heather Webb

HONORS PROJECT
Submitted to the University Honors Program at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with
UNIVERSITY HONORS

2 May 2016

Harland W. Jones III, Advisor
Katharine Kontak, Advisor
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................................. 4

**What is Poverty?** ............................................................................................................................ 5  
  History of Poverty in the United States .......................................................................................... 5  
  Causes of Poverty ............................................................................................................................ 7  
  Poverty Measures ............................................................................................................................ 10  
  Statistics for Poverty ...................................................................................................................... 12

**How do People View Poverty?** ....................................................................................................... 14  
  Race and Class ............................................................................................................................... 19  
  Race and Gender ............................................................................................................................ 19  
  Class and Gender ........................................................................................................................... 20

**How do we Deal with Poverty?** ..................................................................................................... 20  
  Overview of Social Policy and Social Policy-Making .................................................................. 20  
  History of Social Policy in the United States .............................................................................. 24  
  Types of Social Welfare ................................................................................................................ 27  
  Statistics for Social Welfare Spending ......................................................................................... 29

**What do People Think of these Solutions?** .................................................................................. 33  
  Race and Class ............................................................................................................................... 36  
  Race and Gender ............................................................................................................................ 37  
  Class and Gender ........................................................................................................................... 37

**Conclusion** ..................................................................................................................................... 38

**Bibliography** ................................................................................................................................... 40
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Causes of Poverty………………………………………………………………………………8
Figure 2: Number in Poverty and Poverty Rates (1959-2014)………………………………………..12
Figure 3: NBC Poll: Cause of Poverty (1995 to 2014)…………………………………………………14
Figure 4: NBC Poll: Cause of Poverty by Gender (1995 to 2014)…………………………………….18
Figure 5: Federal and State Welfare Spending by Type of Aid (2008)…………………………………30
Figure 6: Federal Spending on Selected Means-Tested Programs (2012)…………………………...30
Figure 7: Projected Federal Spending through 2023………………………………………………….31
Figure 8: Federal Spending on Various Categories of Means-Tested Programs (1972-2010)….31
Figure 9: Key Factors in Spend Projections……………………………………………………………33

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: People in Poverty by Selected Characteristics (2014)……………………………………….13
Table 2: Public Opinion on Root Causes of Poverty by Class (1989)………………………………..17
Table 3: Programs by Chamber/Agency…………………………………………………………………21
Table 4: Policies Addressing Poverty since 1900…………………………………………………………26-27
Table 5: Public Opinions on Government Spending by Race (2005)…………………………………35
INTRODUCTION

The Great Recession seven years ago highlighted stark inequalities in the United States. It also stirred discussions about poverty. Many found it difficult to reconcile the existence of poverty in one of the richest countries in the world. David Ellwood described the problem of poverty as the following:

“They [Americans] find it difficult to reconcile ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed Americans with the image of America as the land of the plenty. They sense that our economy doesn’t always provide for everyone who is willing to participate and that accidents of birth and nature leaves some people in a weak position…Other attitudes, such as belief in importance of work, family, or self-reliance also color our thinking; and they don’t always lead so clearly to charitable feelings” (15).

These “other attitudes,” as well as desire for a sense of community, are what Ellwood deems core American values. His research has shown that most, if not all, Americans subscribe to these values. Values are important to the discussion of poverty because they have a direct bearing on how poverty is dealt with. For example, the core values mirror a commitment to both Democracy and Capitalism; however, opinion polls have shown ambivalence between supporting components of Capitalism and components of Democracy (Hasenfeld, 1030). In other words, while Americans dislike poverty in a “land of the plenty,” beliefs in self-reliance and the importance of work conflict with the desire to help.

In addition to these core values, each individual has unique values that are influenced by personal experiences and interests. These experiences and interests are further influenced by personal identifiers such as race, class, and gender. It can be assumed that personal identification with these groups leads to different experiences and membership to multiple groups will likely vary that experience even more. The question is: how do these personal experiences with race,
class, and gender affect the way we view poverty and the policies implemented to amend it? This research is dedicated to determining what differences in opinion about poverty and welfare spending exists by analyzing each group in isolation as well as at its intersections.

WHAT IS POVERTY?

History of Poverty in the United States

Poverty is a prolonged part of history that continues to plague most societies today. Overall, poverty has significantly decreased in the last 200 years; however, primarily based on economic fluctuations, poverty has increased and decreased throughout that time. Data from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries highlight this trend. Poverty rates rose during the Great Depression and decreased following World War II which was marked by astounding economic growth. While data is vague for the nineteenth century and prior, economic strength was weak and society was highly susceptible to outbreaks of war and health epidemics; subsequently, high rates of poverty were sustained. And while data is not readily available, some records indicate that the same trend between the economy and poverty existed then as it does now.

Studies of poverty in earlier centuries (15th through 18th) showed a great deal of poverty with estimates as high as 50% of the population (Eldersveld, 16). Poverty also greatly fluctuated depending on economic conditions, epidemics, and war. Nonetheless, poverty was always seen as an issue. In the earliest days assistance to the poor came from churches, charities, and wealthy individuals. Gradually local governments would assume more responsibility as they became more organized and in 1683, New York passed legislation directing local officials to “make provisions for the maintenance and support of the poor” through food and other necessities (Eldersveld, 67). As the number of poor increased, however, so did the tax burden and other strategies were developed to deal with poverty. These included “binding-out,” in which
impoverished children were placed in well-to-do homes, “warning out,” in which residential requirements prevented poor from moving into cities, and workhouses, which employed the poor to manufacture products (Eldersveld, 68). By 1775, all of these efforts failed and only tax support remained.

There were significant changes in the nineteenth century that had a profound impact on poverty, most notable of which were immigration and industrialization. Immigration contributed to significant population growth, an unstable workforce, and, consequently, an increase in poverty. This increase in poverty then caused local and charitable expenditures to increase and almshouses (workhouses for the elderly and disabled) to become overcrowded (Eldersveld, 71). A modern-day trend also appeared in with the increase in immigration; segregation of the poor from the non-poor. In Boston, starting around 1790, it was noted that widows, blacks and the unemployed (those for whom poverty was most prevalent) were concentrated in two outlying districts (Eldersveld, 70). Industrialization also played a role in modern-day poverty. The rise of “big business” led to an emphasis on free market ideology and culminated in debates about the role of government in poor relief. While the federal government passed Veterans Benefits in 1836 to help veterans and their families, they primarily remained ambivalent toward poverty (Eldersveld, 75). As a result, local governments, churches, and charities remained in integral part of poor relief. Industrialization also led to the notion of deserving and undeserving poor, in which there was a stronger obligation to designate aid to those who “deserved” it. In conjunction with this notion, the association of poverty with “idleness, alcohol, petty crime, inability to hold a job when given one, squandering of resources” and “use of drugs” took root (Eldersveld, 72).

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries saw an expansion in the federal government’s role. In the fifty years or so prior to the Great Depression, negative opinions about the poor increased and the chance of meaningful federal government assistance was lost to other, higher
priorities. However, when 15 million responsible and industrious Americans fell into poverty, these opinions shifted again (Schiller, 7). In 1935, the federal government took its first real stance against poverty with the passage of the longest-lasting and most important part of the New Deal, the Social Security Act of 1935 (Eldersveld, 23). Since then, the federal government’s role has expanded even more so. In 1963, the President’s Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) set a $3000 per year poverty line based on food requirements for a family of four (Schiller, 25). It was later edited by Mollie Orshansky, an economist for the Social Security Administration (SSA), who adjusted for family size to include 124 family types (Schiller, 27). In 1969, Orshansky’s $3,156 threshold was adopted as the U.S. poverty line and has remained unchanged, with the exception of changes in prices, since (Deaton, 181). This was a profound step by the federal government to quantify, study, and take action against poverty.

Between 1820 and 1992, world poverty decreased from 84% to 24% (Deaton, 167). Poverty also decreased in the United States, especially following World War II and until 1973. From 1973 to 1981, however, there was a large increase in poverty as the economy stagnated (Eldersveld, 5). Smaller fluctuations in poverty were then seen from 1981 until the Great Recession in 2008, in which poverty increased more noticeably. What is most compelling about the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is that from the years of 1973 to 2010, income per person grew more than 60% but made almost no impact on poverty (Deaton, 180). This is unique in that the trend between the economy and poverty seem not to be as strong as it was in the past. However, the conflict regarding the government’s role and the “culture of poverty” stigmatizing those in poverty from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continue.

Causes of Poverty

The causes of poverty are somewhat uncertain, and controversial at best. Nonetheless, three major theories have emerged; Flawed Character, Restricted Opportunity, and Big Brother
Flawed Character sees the cause of poverty as moral or character defects within an individual, such as promiscuity and laziness. Restricted Opportunity, on the other hand, focuses on external factors as the cause of poverty including lack of jobs and discrimination. Big Brother contests government causes poverty by creating incentives to remain poor. Another theory claims the structure of our free market creates poverty (also known as the modern market). The Flawed Character theory is an *individualistic* approach to poverty in which poverty is within an individual’s control while Restricted Opportunity, Big Brother, and the modern market are *structural* (externally caused) approaches.

The first theory, Flawed Character, states that the cause of poverty is the “natural result of individual defects in aspiration and ability” (Schiller, 3). This theory makes three assumptions: 1) human capital is rewarded in the market, 2) rational choice, and 3) the existence of pervasive opportunities (Schiller, 3-4). The first assumption implies that people who make the necessary investment in skills and knowledge (human capital) will be better off. In other words, “the higher the investment in human capital, the lower the risk of poverty” (Adeola, 59).

However, it has not been demonstrated that the market treats investments in human capital the same. Rational choice assumes that people know all of their options and the Flawed Character theory assumes, consequently, that if people make the wrong choices then poverty occurs (Schiller, 4). Finally, the existence

![Theories of Poverty](image_url)
of pervasive opportunities implies that everybody has a chance to rise out of poverty and those who do not take the chance remain in poverty. However, pervasive and equal opportunities do not exist.

This notion of equal opportunities is at the heart of another theory called Restricted Opportunity Theory. This theory states that, “the poor are poor because they do not have adequate access to good schools, jobs, and income” (Schiller, 4). In other words, poverty occurs because of factors that are outside of an individual’s control. Restricted Opportunity emphasizes the economy and discrimination as playing a prominent role in determining who is poor and why. History indicates that poverty tends to follow the economy wherein a lag in the economy produces fewer jobs and more poverty. Discrimination denies certain groups opportunities to acquire the necessary human capital to make economic advancements. For example, the lack of funding for certain school districts based on the population’s race or class leads to less opportunity for children in that school district later in life. In both cases, this theory implies that only the “provision of improved opportunities” would reduce poverty (Schiller, 4). However, it is highly unlikely this accounts for all the poverty in the United States.

The Big Brother theory emphasizes the government’s role in creating poverty. One argument contests that the government “destroy[s] incentives for stable families and economic self-sufficiency” through high taxes, welfare benefits, and racial quotas (Schiller, 5). For example, people may choose not to work if the benefits they receive from welfare exceed any earnings they can make from a job. Indeed, research has shown that “when you give people money, food, or housing, you reduce the pressure on them to work” (Ellwood, 19). On a different note, federal regulations can inadvertently contribute to poverty. The most relevant of these regulations is minimum wage. As the minimum wage increases, firms employ less to make up for the added costs. Consequently, people lose their jobs and risk falling into poverty.
Some contend that poverty is caused by the free market that exists in the United States. While free market principles look to distribute income based on economic efficiencies, current economic, social and political trends corrupt this principle. The “modern” market has been characterized by a changing economy, globalization, de-industrialization, and outsourcing which has led to low wages, lack of jobs, and unstable working conditions (Adeola, 60). These are all indicative of poverty. At the same time, this market has contributed to a “wealth gap” that has been growing since the late 1970s. The “average income of families in the top five percent was 11 times the average income of families in the bottom 20 percent in 1966,’ and by 2010, the ratio had risen to twenty-one times (Deaton, 189). Similarly, the wealthy have the capital (monetary and human) and the network to access better jobs, contribute to political campaigns, and the like. This delegates those without wealth (capital) to the lower classes and keeps them there. Nonetheless, this modern market and other structural factors are not the sole cause of poverty; instead, it seems to be a combination of structural and individual factors.

**Poverty Measures**

The measurement of poverty is difficult, and is debated almost as much as the causes of poverty. Two ways to measure poverty include an absolute measure and a relative measure. The former focuses on a monetary and material limit for poverty while the latter focuses on how our incomes compare to others to formulate who is poor or not. Poverty can be easily understated using the absolute approach because of its subjectivity; however, the relative approach relays no information on the state of poverty because it focuses on what one has in comparison of another and not necessarily the state of that person’s life. The United States measures poverty through an absolute approach which will be discussed shortly.

The absolute approach to poverty looks at the minimum bundle of goods and services necessary for the physical well-being of a family (Schiller, 14). Those who do not meet this
minimum are considered poor. This theory hinges on what people see as absolutely necessary based on the array of goods and services available and the prevailing living standards of the society (Schiller, 15). Of course, what is absolutely necessary is subjective. For example, electricity is more common today than it was in the 1910s, and families without electricity would most likely be considered poor whereas a family in 1910 would not.

Another approach, the relative approach, is less subjective than the absolute approach. It states: “a person is poor when his or her income is significantly less than the average income of the population” (Schiller, 15). This definition eliminates the need to define, in absolute monetary and material terms, what poverty is and instead shifts the focus to inequality. This focus on inequality presents a problem for this approach to poverty; as long as inequality exists, those with the lowest distribution of income will continue to be classified as poor. For example, if the lowest fifth is considered poor and inequality persists, there will always be a 20% poverty rate.

The poverty rate in the United States is an absolute measure of poverty. As stated earlier, Mollie Orshansky developed a so-called “poverty threshold,” more commonly known as the poverty line. In 1963 (adopted in 1969), she declared a poverty line of $3,156 by determining the minimum food subsistence for a family of four – 2 adults and 2 children – and multiplying that number by 3, representative of spending a third of the family’s budget on food (Deaton, 181). As of 2012, the poverty line was $23,283 (Deaton, 182). Apart from the subjectivity of what goods are absolutely necessary, the United States poverty line omits tax-based subsidies such as Food Stamps and therefore, does not show a decrease in measured poverty but positively affects actual poverty (Deaton, 184). Also, the poverty threshold has remained unchanged since 1963, with the exception of adjustments for inflation. The inconsistency in measuring poverty contributes to a continued struggle with how to deal with it.
Statistics for Poverty in the United States

While no consensus exists for what causes poverty or how to measure it, poverty is recognized as a problem in the United States. According to Francis Adeola, the United States, as compared to other Western industrialized nations, has the highest per capita income but also the highest income inequality and poverty (53). The Census Bureau highlights this problem with poverty by providing statistics such as those provided in Figure 2 and Table 1. Figure 1 shows the fluctuation of poverty rates from 1959 to 2014 with recessions indicated in grey. As indicated earlier, poverty typically rises as the economy worsens and falls as the economy improves. In 1959 (the first year for which this study uses data), 22% or roughly 39 million people were in poverty. The lowest rate occurred in 1973, at 11% or roughly 23 million people. Currently, 46.7 million people are in poverty, or 14.8%, which is 2.5 percentage points higher than during the Great Recession (Deaton, 180).

Figure 2
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Denavas-Walt, Page 20
Table 1 shows poverty rates for categories such as race and gender in the year 2014. The table includes the total number of persons in that groups’ population, the total number within that group below the poverty line, and the percentage of that group below the poverty line. The highest incidences of poverty by percentage are highlighted in orange. As can be seen, blacks have the highest rate of poverty among the other races at 26.2%. However, more whites live in poverty than blacks (31,089 compared to 10,755). This can sometimes complicate the discussion on poverty even more. Family structure and education have a large impact on poverty with “no high school diploma” and “female headed households” having a high rate of poverty as well; 28.9% and 30.6%, respectively. The following discussion will analyze how these group memberships can have an influence on their perceptions about poverty.

### People in Poverty by Selected Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Total (in millions)</th>
<th>Below Poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number (in millions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>315,804</td>
<td>46,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>244,253</td>
<td>31,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>41,112</td>
<td>10,755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>17,790</td>
<td>2,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>55,504</td>
<td>13,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>154,639</td>
<td>20,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>161,164</td>
<td>25,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>73,556</td>
<td>15,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 64</td>
<td>196,254</td>
<td>26,527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 and older</td>
<td>45,994</td>
<td>4,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No high school diploma</td>
<td>24,582</td>
<td>7,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school, no college</td>
<td>62,575</td>
<td>8,898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college, no degree</td>
<td>56,031</td>
<td>5,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>68,945</td>
<td>3,449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>60,015</td>
<td>3,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Head</td>
<td>15,553</td>
<td>4,764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Head</td>
<td>6,162</td>
<td>969</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Denavas-Walt, U.S. Census Bureau, Pages 21 and 24*
HOW DO PEOPLE VIEW POVERTY?

The recent recession has brought poverty back into the spotlight for the American public. However, each person’s experience with poverty is different and each unique experience with poverty leads to the adoption of different “social ideologies that best explain and are most congruent with [these] life experiences” (Hasenfeld, 1031). These experiences are unique because of race, class, and gender, which have significant, yet varying, impacts on how poverty is viewed. For example, higher rates of poverty amongst African Americans means they may have a less negative impression of the poor because of their personal experiences with poverty. Discrimination is especially potent in shaping African Americans’ views of poverty; those having more frequent experiences with discrimination are more likely to attribute poverty to structural or external factors (Carter, 435).

According to an NBC Poll (Figure 3), opinions have changed significantly in the past twenty years. Those who attributed poverty to individual factors (“people not doing enough”) fell from 60% in 1995 to 44% in 2014. On the other hand, those attributing poverty to structural factors (“circumstances beyond people’s control”) rose from 30% in 1995 to 46% in 2014. Overall, this indicates that the population is not as polarized on their positions about the causes of poverty as they once

Figure 3
Source: Wessler (NBC)
were. Many are starting to acknowledge how individual and structural factors contribute to poverty instead of simply one or the other. However, these opinions are most likely a reflection of the economy at those times and is not necessarily indicative of future trends in opinions. In the 1990s, the American economy was expanding because of the technology boom. An expanding economy would be characterized by an increase in jobs and wealth. In 1995, 60% of those polled said the poor weren’t doing enough because of the increased amount of opportunities to alleviate their poverty. In 2014, this figure dropped, while those attributing poverty to circumstances beyond people’s control rose. This can be explained by the Great Recession, which happened five years earlier. Similar to the Great Depression, the Great Recession witnessed high unemployment. As more and more otherwise responsible people became unemployed because of a lagging economy, more people attributed poverty to it. Therefore, the NBC poll indicates that opinions about the causes of poverty have changed through time but are subject to the economy.

While the following views of poverty are general and may not necessarily represent every member of these groups, studies have found patterns among them. In general, African Americans are more structural in their views on poverty than whites. This means they attribute poverty to external factors such as discrimination, inadequate schools, and low-paying jobs. (A majority of blacks (60.7%) believe discrimination is a major factor; however, that number has been decreasing (Carter, 435)). Conversely, whites believe in more individual factors (laziness, lack of work ethic, etc.) as an explanation for poverty. Overall, race has the greatest effect on how one views poverty. Around a quarter (26.2%) of all blacks live in poverty. Despite not being a majority, the segregation of black populations and the concentration of poverty within means more blacks have experiences with poverty than whites. This experience is important because research has found that “without experiential knowledge of poverty, it [is] impossible to fully comprehend the struggles of the poor…” (Reutter, 300). Therefore, blacks’ experiences with
poverty will shape their opinions of it. Discrimination from the past and present is also important. This discrimination has hindered blacks form advancing in society and these experiences with discrimination make structural causes of poverty more feasible.

Class is also highly predictive of attitudes toward poverty. The non-poor, including both middle and upper classes, are more likely to subscribe to individual factors while the poor are more likely to subscribe to structural factors. Table 2 provides a list of individual and structural factors affecting poverty and the associated percentage of respondents who attribute poverty to them by class. As illustrated by the dark blue text boxes, a higher percentage of high-income respondents (50%) said “people are not doing enough” as a major contributor to poverty. On the other hand, a higher percentage of the poor attribute poverty to circumstances beyond their control (57%). The largest differences in opinion relate to low wages and shortage of jobs. There is a 35 percentage point gap between poor (62%) and high-income (27%) respondents who said shortage of jobs was a major contributor to poverty. This is a good example of how personal experience can color one’s views about poverty. The poor have more experiences with job shortage than high-income because of various reasons. Interestingly, some factors show little variance across respondents. The welfare system as a cause of poverty was considered a major contributor by both the poor and high-income at 46% and 47%, respectively. However, the similar response may be for different reasons. The poor may blame the welfare system for not doing enough to alleviate poverty while high-income persons blame the welfare system for creating incentives to remain poor (Big Brother). Class has the second highest effect on how one views poverty for many of the same reasons. Experience and discrimination are relevant to the poor; however, discrimination is more relevant to race because race is more easily identifiable and has, historically, been a major part in shaping our society. Subsequently, race has a greatest effect on how one views poverty than class.
Gender, while having some impact, is not as good a determinant of attitudes toward poverty as race and class. Research has shown that women are only slightly more supportive of structural factors as an explanation for poverty than men. However, the difference between men and women has changed over time. In 1995, 31% of women said poverty was caused by circumstances beyond people’s control versus 29% of men. In 2014, these percentages increased for both men and women to 39% and 52%, respectively. Again, this poll was conducted five years later.
years after the Great Recession. This may account for the increase in both genders’ support of such an idea. However, the gap between men and women also increased. It is difficult to determine what caused this departure, but differences could occur from the racial and economic backgrounds of the respondents. For example, African American women may be more supportive of structural factors than white women because of their membership to the African American community. If more African American women were polled in 2014 than in 1995, this could explain the divergence between men and women’s opinions about poverty.

The preceding scenario is an example of intersectionality. “An intersectional perspective examines ‘the relationships and interactions between multiple axes of identity and multiple dimensions of social organization-at the same time’” (Dill, 56). In other words, intersectionality studies intersections between identities of race, class, and gender. These intersections create a unique set of opinions and behaviors, including those toward poverty, which have an immediate impact on social policy decisions. The intersections between race, class, and gender highlight different experiences with poverty. How a poor white woman experiences poverty may be different than how a poor African American woman experiences poverty. These different experiences may warrant different remedies. Furthermore, “political action and sound policies and programs are…virtually impossible when successful divide and conquer strategies are applied to both the poor themselves and to how other citizens view them” (Dill, 66). Therefore, in order to have the most effective policies in place, studying these intersections are important.
The intersections between race and class, race and gender, and gender and class are discussed in the following paragraphs.

RACE AND CLASS

As previously mentioned, race, followed by class, has the greatest effect on how one views poverty. So, how does the intersection between race and class effect these views? According to Shelton and Greene (2012), there exists a difference between whites and blacks as well as higher and lower class blacks’ perception of poverty, illustrating that the intersection between race and class has a varying effect compared to race or class. For example, research shows middle income whites are more likely than middle income blacks to be individualistic in their explanation of poverty (Shelton, 1492). This corresponds to the general patterns discussed earlier. The pattern becomes less cohesive, however, when focusing on the difference in attitudes between lower and upper class blacks.

Blacks in the highest income bracket are less likely than low income blacks to see the problem of poverty as a result of “attitudes and inequalities in larger society” (Shelton, 1498). However, blacks in both income groups are more likely than whites in both income groups to assert that blacks and whites do not have the same opportunities. In other words, higher income blacks are more individualistic than lower income blacks but less so than whites. This intersection illustrates how race has a dominating effect but is hampered by income. Shelton attributes this to “intragroup conflict” in which the introduction to mainstream America and membership to a minority group create conflicting experiences and ideologies (1495).

RACE AND GENDER

Not much research exists on the intersection between race and gender and how it effects views on poverty. This is most likely because studies have shown that gender has, in general, had
a smaller effect on these views. However, according to Dill and Zambrana, “Popular views of who is deserving and who is not follow societal prejudices and stereotypes” (52). Historically and currently, blacks and women have faced prejudices and stereotypes that paint them as somehow undeserving or less capable. In concurrence with other studies that race has the most dominant effect, it can be inferred that black men and women favor more structural factors as an explanation for poverty than white men and women. White women may also be more structural in orientation than white men.

CLASS AND GENDER

Similar to the intersection between race and gender, no studies exist specifically analyzing how the intersection between class and gender affect views on poverty. However, class, much like race, has a dominant effect on these views. So it can be inferred that higher class men and women favor structural explanations of poverty whereas the lower and working classes favor individualistic explanations. These might hold true because poverty is more relevant to the lower classes. The non-poor lack the experiences to give them insight into why certain people are poor. For both intersections with gender, however, further empirical studies will be necessary to confirm or refute these claims.

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH POVERTY?

Overview of Federal Social Policy-Making

Policies meant to enhance the welfare of citizens are known as social policies and include food, healthcare, education, and other assistance to meet the needs of various groups such as children, the elderly and disabled, and single mothers (Midgley, 4). State, local, and non-government agencies take part in social policy making, but, because debates general revolve around the federal government this discussion will highlight federal social policy making.
Despite being mostly a legislative function, each branch of government has a role in policy making. The executive branch can veto bills and appoint agency heads who carry out the policies. The judicial branch has ultimate authority on whether policies are constitutional or not and can repeal those which are not. The legislative branch makes the laws and oversees certain programs through a series of federal entities. A condensed list is provided below:

**Programs by Chamber/Agency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chamber/Agency</th>
<th>Committee Name</th>
<th>Program(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Agriculture, Nutrition, &amp; Forestry</td>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>Health, Education, Labor and Pensions: Subcommittee on Children and Families</td>
<td>Head Start, Family Medical Leave Act, and Child Care &amp; Development Block Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>Agriculture: Subcommittee of Nutrition</td>
<td>SNAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>Education and Workforce: Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education</td>
<td>Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, Child Care and Development Block Grant, Head Start and Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>Education and Workforce: Subcommittee on Workforce Protections</td>
<td>Worker’s compensation, Family Medical Leave Act, occupational safety and health, and civil rights in employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)</td>
<td></td>
<td>TANF, Medicare, and Medicaid,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Veterans’ Employment and Training Services, worker’s compensation, OSHA, and unemployment insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3  
Source: USA.gov, senate.gov, house.gov  
NOTE: Some programs may overlap  
Comprehensive list available at each of these websites
These committees work with the Congressional Budget Office who provide analyses of proposed legislation with regards to costs and other economic issues. Social policy making at the federal level is complicated and can lead to delays on legislation and contradicting policies.

Legislation passed by these committees is carried out through four vehicles: budgetary allocations, fiscal welfare, statutory regulation, and social services. The first two focus on funding while the latter focuses more on legislation. Budgetary allocations involve designating certain funds for each of the various government programs. Fiscal welfare uses the tax system by creating incentives and disincentives for certain behavior, such as a tax credit for employers who are more diverse (Midgley, 11). Statutory regulation is the enacting of laws that impose mandates, such as a minimum wage or affirmative action, on firms and other institutions (Midgley, 10). Finally, social services, the principle means through which the federal government administers social welfare, operates government programs within the fields of health, education, housing and family.

When discussing social policy, it is important to note the three main ways in which the federal government determines need. Income targeting aims to reduce poverty by targeting assistance to those who are poor. This method is often costly because it takes time and effort to identify those who are poor. It may also isolate recipients who are then stigmatized. Universal benefits are provided to all and are less costly to administer, but are not effective at redistributing income. The third method, an intermediate option, is called indicator targeting and uses an indicator instead of income to administer assistance. For example, families with children have a higher rate of poverty. The presence of children would then be used to determine need (Midgley, 40). This is also less costly than income targeting but it is less efficient in reaching the intended targets.
According to scholars social policy decisions follow two principles: economic efficiency and equity. Economic efficiency is composed of macro-efficiency, micro-efficiency, and incentive efficiency. Macro-efficiency is concerned with the effect of overall spending on the economy while micro-efficiency considers relative merits of one social program compared to another (Midgley, 39). Incentive efficiency considers potential adverse effects of social welfare policy on individual behavior (Midgley, 39). Equity, on the other hand, focuses on how income is redistributed and how similarly situated people are treated. Some believe the government should never intervene; others believe the government should intervene only if they can minimize the adverse effects these policies may have on the economy and individuals and allocate funds to have the greatest positive effect.

While the government controls social policy making, it can be influenced by external factors. The economy, politics, and personal identifiers such as race, gender, and class all have an influence on social policies. As noted in the “History of Poverty,” as the economy contracts, poverty increases and so does the need for social policy. Furthermore, attitudes toward poverty soften and expectations of government assistance increase. Politics are also important, and highly effective, in social policy making. In general, Republicans and conservatives prefer limited social programs, Democrats and liberals prefer greater intervention, and Libertarians prefer a hands-off approach (Midgley, 24). Social policy tends to follow these preferences when one party has control of the legislature. Finally, class, race and gender affect social policies. Most notable is the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for minorities and the Equal Pay Act of 1963 for women. These social policies were driven by people who, because of these identifiers, were treated differently and were negatively affected by it. More will be discussed on this topic later.
History of Social Policy in the United States

The history of welfare can be divided into three epochs according to Rose and Milton Friedman: laissez-faire in the nineteenth century, the rise of a welfare state in the twentieth century, and a resurgence of the free market in the late-twentieth century and the early twenty-first century (Midgley, 169-70). The laissez-faire, or hands-off, approach was briefly discussed in “History of Poverty” and does not warrant further discussions. The primary focus of this discussion will be on the progression of social policies and policy making throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Prior to the Great Depression, social policy making was not a federal concern. The local governments administered outdoor relief but the scope of social policies we have today did not entirely exist. Nonetheless, between the years of 1890 and 1920 many social reforms took place, mostly at the state level, focusing on women and children’s issues (Eldersveld, 185). In 1933, at the peak of the Great Depression, 25% of the population was unemployed. This caused a great shift in public opinion about poverty and the government’s role in alleviating it. The New Deal marked the first real attempt by the federal government to intervene in social welfare policies. In 1934, President Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA) which provided immediate relief for the unemployed poor by employing them in public works projects. By 1936, it had employed 3 million people (Eldersveld, 136). Another program called the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) provided $3 billion in direct aid in the course of two years (Eldersveld, 136). The longest lasting contribution from the New Deal, however, was the Social Security Act of 1935. This program provided benefits to the elderly, disabled, and families with children of deceased workers by linking it to past earnings (Ellwood, 27). Employment benefits, including unemployment insurance and workmen’s compensation, was also established. Means-tested benefits were introduced shortly thereafter as well as a temporary
program that was meant to end once Social Security was phased in and expanded (Ellwood, 30). By the conclusion of World War II most of the programs of the New Deal had been eliminated. And throughout the 1950s, social welfare reform waned with a single piece of related legislation, the “GI” Bill (granting veterans employment, housing, health and education), being passed in 1944 (Eldersveld, 136).

The rise of the welfare state continued; however, its focus changed dramatically throughout the 1960s. Johnson’s Administration (famously known for its “War on Poverty”) began focusing on policies that sought to remove the barriers that prevented people from advancing (Ellwood, 34). In 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act created programs like the Job Corps and Head Start; in the same year, the Civil Rights Act was passed (Midgley, 157). These programs strived to eliminate discrimination in employment and education which had become especially noticeable as the economy underwent exponential growth. A year later, Medicaid and Medicare were also introduced. By the late 1960s, the government’s role in welfare became even more involved as the government’s goal became guaranteeing that everyone achieve a minimum standard of living. In 1969, a Gallup poll asking what the public thought of this goal reported that less than a third supported it (Ellwood, 37). This opposition made policy-making difficult and, consequently, only modest reforms were enacted thereafter.

The final epoch Friedman noted was the “resurgence of the free market.” A string of conservative presidents drove social policy away from entitlements and toward temporary state-managed, work-oriented benefits. Reagan, the first president of this epoch, began with the 1981 Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act (OBRA) which targeted New Deal era policies. By 1983, 408,000 families had been terminated from welfare, with another 299,000 with reduced benefits (Midgley, 171). Clinton also showed signs of conservatism with his signing of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. PRWORA replaced Aid to
Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) and ended a 60-year federal entitlement and turned primary responsibility back to the states (Schiller, 198). The most recent legislation has aimed to improve the lives of the poor and working poor by increasing minimum wage, introducing national health care (Affordable Care Act), and improving underserved schools, to name a few.

The following is a condensed timeline of policies addressing poverty since 1900:

**Policies Addressing Poverty since 1900**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900-1917</td>
<td>Numerous enactments for the well-being of children including juvenile courts, parks and playgrounds and compulsory school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1911 | Illinois becomes first state to provide public relief for families; also called mother’s or widow’s pension (included in all but 8 states by 1926)  
First effective state legislation regarding worker’s compensation enacted (included 42 of 48 states by 1923) |
| 1915 | Massachusetts adopts amendment allowing state to construct low cost housing |
| 1923 | Montana and Nevada becomes first states to enact old age pensions |
| 1932 | Wisconsin becomes first state to pass unemployment insurance |
| 1935 | New Deal creates Works Progress Administration to employ both skilled and unskilled labor,  
Agricultural Adjustment Act to subsidize land for farmers, and its longest lasting contribution, the Social Security Act, which created a two-tiered systems of entitlements |
| 1938 | Fair Standards Labor Act established minimum wage, overtime pay, and other work laws at the Federal level |
| 1961 | Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) administered to states |
| 1963 | Equal Pay Act guaranteed equal pay for women |
| 1964 | Food Stamps adopted and later expanded in 1974  
Civil Rights Act adopted to eliminate discrimination from the New Deal reforms |
| 1965 | Medicaid and Medicare is adopted |
| 1969 | Orshansky’s poverty line of $3,156 is adopted and continues to be used today (adjusted for inflation) |
| 1972 | Supplemental Security Income (SSI) adopted (effective in 1974) |
Social Security Amendment of 1972 indexed social security benefits to inflation and Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs)

1974 Housing and Community Development Act (Section 8) issues vouchers to low-income renters and pays subsidies to landlords

1975 Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is adopted
Title XX of Social Security Act of 1975 reinforced revenue sharing between state and federal governments

1990 Americans with Disabilities Act passed giving equal opportunity to people with disabilities

1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) adopted under Clinton (replaced AFDC)

2002 No Child Left Behind Act passed

2010 Affordable Care Act reforms Medicaid

2016 Every Student Succeeds Act is passed giving grants to school catering to low-income students (replaced No Child Left Behind Act of 2002)

Table 4
Source: Midgley, Pages 123-128, 142, 150
Eldersveld, Pages 137-138
"Every Student Succeeds…"

Types of Social Welfare

Social welfare is quite expansive and there are many policies and services that are outside the scope of this paper. Since poverty is the main focus of this research, means-tested welfare will be discussed. Means-tested welfare “consists of government programs that provide assistance deliberately and exclusively to poor and lower-income people” (Bradley, 1). The most common areas for means-tested welfare lie in five categories: child and family welfare, health care, employment, education, and housing. As of 1996, at least 80 different means-tested programs existed (Schiller, 179). Again, because the scope of such laws is so large, current and well-known legislation will be discussed in brief.

Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) is a welfare policy directed at children and families who are in poverty. This policy provides cash assistance and other supportive services to
families in poverty with over 50 different programs (Midgley, 343). It has a five-year lifetime eligibility cap, a time limit of two consecutive years and work requirements of at least 30 hours per week that its predecessors did not have (Schiller, 199). TANF is administered by the states, who receive block grants from the federal government (pre-determined amount of money). This block grant structure does not guarantee sufficient funding should caseloads rise above this specified allocation of funds (Midgley, 339). In addition, states have the authority to institute more restrictive policies.

Medicaid and Medicare dominate healthcare policy. Medicaid is a social-welfare program that provides medical services to low-income persons. Medicare, on the other hand, provides medical services exclusively to the elderly. The federal government oversees both of these program, but each state establishes eligibility standards, type and duration of service, and rate of payment for service (Midgley, 385). Services can also vary greatly between states. Medicaid is especially important to the poverty discussion because it targets low-income persons. It has been expanding since its introduction in 1965. The latest expansion involved the passing of the Affordable Care Act in 2010. The goal of this act was to expand coverage, control healthcare costs and improve the healthcare delivery system.

Employment policies generally address factors of supply and demand for workers; in other words, these policies address the treatment, wages, and benefits of workers (Midgely, 485). Training, placement and tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), allow the government to manage the supply of workers while public job creation, job training programs, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act allow the government to manage the demand for workers. Furthermore, the government has passed laws on working conditions and wage and benefit protection. These policies help those with lower-income and restricted opportunities the ability to find and keep better employment.
Similar to employment policies, education policies focus on equal opportunity. Major reform came in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2016. This act upholds “critical protections for America’s disadvantaged and high-need students” and “maintains an expectation…to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools” (“Every Student Succeeds…”). As a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, it offers grants to districts serving low-income students as well as state education agencies to improve the overall quality of education.

Housing is an important and underfunded part of social welfare. Two major components of low-income housing include the Section 8 program of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 and the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) IV in 1992. Section 8 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 issues housing vouchers to low-income renters; their landlords receive subsidies from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to make up the difference between fair market rent and what the tenant can afford (Midgely, 408). HOPE replaces the traditional public housing project with mixed-income housing and provides housing vouchers to rent in the private market (Midgely, 408). Tax credits have also enabled low-income renters to find housing.

Statistics in Social Welfare Spending

There are ten means-tested categories of spend including health care, cash aid, food aid, housing, education, child development, social services, community development, and job training (As shown in Figure 5). As of 2008, combined federal and state spending totaled $714 billion (Bradley, 1). Of the $714 billion, $522 billion (73%) was federal and $192 billion (27%) was state (Bradley, 1). The largest category of spend for both state and federal was health care (52.1%). In 2012, federal health care totaled $272 billion, a majority of which was Medicaid
Cash aid, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, Social Security Income, and TANF, was the second largest at 21.5% (Bradley, 16). In 2012, total cash aid by the federal government was $148 billion. This included $54 billion to EITC, $50 billion to SSI, and $17 billion to TANF (Figure 6). Finally, the remaining eight categories which hosts programs like Food Stamps and housing, accounted for 26.4%. In 2012, these programs totaled $168 billion. Of which, $80 billion went to SNAP, $36 billion went to housing, and $24 billion went to Pell Grants (Figure 6).

Figure 5 (Right)
Source: Bradley, The Heritage Foundation, Page 7

Figure 6 (Below)
Source: “Growth in Means-Tested Programs” Congressional Budget Office, Page26
Because welfare is broken into a multitude of programs administered through various federal, state, and local entities, total cost and changes in cost are difficult to determine. Therefore, estimates presented in the preceding paragraph, while credible, may not accurately represent total spending for each and every entity. Nonetheless, spending has noticeably increased throughout the past thirty to sixty years. In 1972, total federal spending was $55 billion. By 2012, spending had increased to $588 billion. According to Figure 8, this increase in spending was largely driven by healthcare, although cash aid and nutrition, housing, and education has grown as well. The

In the past 40 years, spending on the government’s major means-tested programs and tax credits grew more than tenfold (excluding the effects of inflation).

Over the next decade, spending on those programs will continue to rise under current law, CBO projects, driven mainly by growth in health care programs.

(Billions of 2012 dollars)

Figure 7 (Above)
Source: “The Budget and Economic Outlook” Congressional Budget Office, Abstract

Figure 8
Source: “Growth in Means-Tested Programs” Congressional Budget Office, Page 25

Federal Spending on Various Categories of Means-Tested Programs and Tax Credits, 1972 to 2012
Congressional Budget Office projects health care will increase to $624 billion by 2023, of which $467 billion will be dedicated to Medicaid (‘Growth in Means-Tested Programs, 20). This is most likely because of an increasing elderly population. The CBO also projects that total spending will be $877 billion by 2023.

While these figures seem to suggest that the United States is spending an extraordinary amount on assistance, it should be noted that these figures are highly dependent on several factors. These factors include real GDP growth, the unemployment rate, inflation and interest rates, and population growth. As indicated by Figure 9, GDP growth is expected to slow down slightly and stabilize. Slower real GDP growth equates to less taxable income for the government and more borrowing. If interest rates on the borrowed amount is high, this means the government will pay more for these programs than they otherwise would have. The CBO projected if interest rates were one percentage point higher each year through 2025, this would cost the government an additional $198 billion (“The Budget and Economic Outlook,” 132). The unemployment rate has a slight impact on government spending, specifically on worker’s compensation. As the unemployment rate drops, as it did in the 1990s, worker’s compensation is less costly because less of it is being administered. Inflation also has an impact, albeit larger. Many programs are indexed to inflation, such as SSI, or the costs associated with it are susceptible to inflation, such as Medicaid. If inflation were one percentage point higher for each year of the CBO’s baseline period, costs would be 6 to 7% greater (“The Budget and Economic Outlook,” 135). Another key factor in spend projections is population growth. Between the years of 1972 and 2011, the population grew by 49% (“Growth in Means-Tested Programs”, 7). This population growth led to more participants and higher spending. It is often the case that people do not understand the underlying factors of government spending and develop their opinions based on face values.
WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK OF THESE SOLUTIONS?

The preceding discussion provided a somewhat condensed background on social policy making. It highlighted a complicated history and an even more complicated roster of programs; all of which contribute to discussions on poverty. Interestingly, a majority of Americans support the Social Security program, which provides benefits without a condition of income, despite being 1.5 times "Which view of poverty we embrace has a direct bearing on policies we pursue."

-Schiller, 6
larger than all other welfare programs combined (Schiller, 178). Means-tested welfare, however, is significantly more susceptible to changes in attitude and, subsequently, support. Again, since poverty and means-tested welfare are relevant to each other, views presented will be based on means-tested welfare. In any case, history has shown that which view of poverty we embrace has a “direct bearing on policies we pursue” and whether or not we support them (Schiller, 6). For example, the Great Depression caused more people to view poverty structurally and social welfare reform followed suit. The recent recession is showing similar affects (Refer to Figure 3 and discussion on page 15). The purpose of this discussion, however, is to determine who holds what views and why.

So, it has been established that attitudes toward poverty reflect attitudes toward welfare. In general, those holding structural views are more supportive whereas those holding individualistic views are less supportive. However, as discussed in “How Do People View Poverty,” general patterns occur depending on an individual’s race, class and gender. For example, whites and the non-poor are more individualistic in their orientation toward poverty and are also less supportive of welfare. Conversely, blacks and the poor are more structural and more supportive of welfare. Intersections between race, class, and gender, however, are more complicated. While race and class have dominating effects, views are slightly altered depending on its intersection with gender. The following paragraph will discuss each of these patterns as well as intersections between them.

According to Table 5, a majority of all respondents believe the government is spending too little on assisting the poor. The greatest majority of respondents who agreed with this statement, however, were black, with 85.8%. 60% of whites also agreed with this statement. Whites, however, constitute the largest percentage of respondents who say the government spends either the right amount or too much (27.1% and 12.9%, respectively). Welfare is often
racialized and is amplified when poverty is seen as individually caused. For example, if whites have negative stereotypes toward African Americans, this effectively reduces their support for government spending on welfare (Wilson, 177). On the other hand, those who view poverty as structural are more likely to believe too little is spent. Both this discussion and Table 4 highlight the notion that, in general, though not a majority of, whites favor individual over structural causes of poverty and are thus, less supportive of welfare spending.

### Public Opinion of Government Spending by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Little</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Right</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Much</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5  
*Source: Adeola, Page 62 (2004)*

Class differences have a similar, albeit somewhat more pronounced, impact on views of welfare as on views of poverty. Eldersveld even claims, “The difference in anti-poverty attitudes varies by income level in all countries, but the differential is largest in the United States” (32). In general, those with higher incomes favor less government spending on welfare, whereas those with the lowest incomes favor more welfare spending. Americans’ commitment to individualism may explain this difference in preferences. Individualism is rooted in the concept of self-interest, which assumes that individuals will do what is best for them. Those who benefit from their social status (in this case, high income) are less likely to support government intervention because it provides little or no benefit to them (means-tested welfare benefits low income). While individualism is not universal and is sometimes counteracted by a desire for a sense of
community, research shows that this desire “did not mitigate the welfare biases that are common for the different social strata” (Swank, 67).

Gender is less predictive than race and class for attitudes toward welfare and welfare spending. Similar to their views on poverty, women are slightly less likely to complain about welfare spending than men (Swank, 56). This is most likely the result of 1) the percentage of women benefitting from welfare spending and 2) traditional views of women. Women made up 16.1% of those in poverty in 2014, slightly more than men (13.4%) (Refer to Table 1 on page 14). Consequently, a larger amount of women benefit from the welfare system and may favor it more than men. Supporters of welfare also seem less committed to traditional gender roles. For example, men and women were more punitive toward welfare when they believed the woman’s place was in the home (Swank, 57). Those who considered traditional roles as unfair were more supportive of welfare because it partially works to eliminate unfair practices in hiring, child care, and the like. However, the impact of these reasons were not significant and contribute to women supporting welfare only slightly more than men.

RACE AND CLASS

Similar to analyzing attitudes toward poverty, analysis of welfare attitudes would be incomplete without looking at its intersections. As has been noted, blacks are more supportive than whites of government intervention. However, the intersection between race and class distorts these attitudes. For example, those in the black middle class are more supportive of public housing than the White middle class, but are less supportive of this and other, similar programs than the working class, both black and white (Swank, 53). In other words, higher class status makes people less supportive of welfare programs but membership to a minority group increases that support. This most likely results from the conflicting personal experiences of being a member of the African American community and being detached from the larger population in
poverty. Unlike poverty, however, class seems to be more effective at determining attitudes toward welfare spending than race.

**RACE AND GENDER**

In general, women of all races and classes thought the government should be spending more on welfare (Swank, 56). However, gender did not have a significant impact on attitudes toward welfare spending. Race was a more dominant factor in determining level of support. A study conducted in 1996 showed that black women were “somewhat more agreeable to welfare spending” (Swank, 56). This stems from 1) the percentage of black versus white women receiving benefits and 2) discrimination. A larger percentage of black women receive welfare benefits than white women. As such, they view welfare more favorably. Perhaps the driving force in differences between gendered and racial views of welfare spending, however, is discrimination. Black women tend to face more discrimination, embedding the view that poverty is the product of that and welfare spending is necessary to create equality. So, while gender has a small impact, race is more persuasive in determining one’s views on welfare.

**CLASS AND GENDER**

Because class has a dominant effect, class status, versus gender identification, will ultimately determine how supportive one is of welfare. For example, higher income peoples, both male and female, will be less supportive of welfare spending. According to Swank, “11% of females from families with incomes over $50,000 wanted to expand welfare spending while 52% of women from families with incomes under $15,000 supported such actions” (52-53). The influence of self-interest posited earlier is most likely an explanation for this. The lower class and women face a disadvantage in society. Therefore, both of these groups will view welfare more favorably as a means to create equality. However, while being male is advantageous in this
society, it is not as dependent on welfare because both males and females can be poor. Therefore, class has a greater effect on welfare attitudes but is nonetheless compounded by gender identification.

CONCLUSION

Poverty in the United States and worldwide has decreased significantly in the past 200. Yet, poverty remains a problem in the United States. Though recognized as a problem in the United States, especially owing to its paradox with affluence, the causes of poverty and how to deal with poverty are a source of great ambivalence. The causes of poverty are especially important in the discussion about poverty because what one believes causes poverty has a direct impact on how one views poverty and welfare. These causes are usually divided between being individually caused or caused by external (structural) forces such as discrimination. In 2014, those attributing poverty to structural factors rose from 30% in 1995 to 46% while those attributing poverty to individual factors fell from 60% to 44%. As highlighted by this poll, views about poverty change based on economic fluctuations. In the 1990s, the economy was strong whereas, in 2014, the economy was still weak from the Great Recession. However, views predicated on race, class, and gender follow patterns that rarely change.

According to Hasenfeld, “People adopt social ideologies that best explain and are most congruent with life experiences” (1031). In general, blacks, the poor, and women are more likely to attribute poverty to structural factors than whites, the non-poor, and men because these groups are more likely to experience or have experiences with poverty. The highest incidences of poverty in 2014 was for blacks (26.2%) and female-headed households (30.6%). The intersections between race, class, and gender, however, distorts these patterns somewhat. For example, non-poor blacks are less likely to attribute poverty to structural factors than poor blacks but more so than whites. Research indicates that race is a dominant factor in intersectional
Webb 39

analysis. Not only did blacks have more frequent experiences with poverty, Carter claims, “those having more frequent experiences with discrimination are more likely to attribute poverty to structural or external factors” (435). So, discrimination is a driving factor in determining who views poverty as structural or not.

Support for welfare programs follow many of the same patterns as that for poverty, most likely because “which view of poverty we embrace has a direct bearing on policies we pursue” (Schiller, 6). In general, blacks, the poor, and women favor more spending on welfare (women only slightly more than men) because these groups believe the main causes of poverty are structural. If poverty is caused by forces outside of one’s control it is more acceptable to increase welfare spending to alleviate their condition. Conversely, whites, the non-poor, and men favor less spending because these groups tend to view poverty as the result of individual flaws. Similar to views on poverty, the intersections between race, class, and gender also create varying attitudes. For example, black women and low-income women were somewhat more supportive of welfare spending than white women and higher-income women. Unlike views on poverty, however, class has a dominant effect because of self-interest, which assumes that individuals will do what is best for them. Those who do not benefit from the welfare system are less likely to support it.

As demonstrated by this research, differences in opinions about the poor and the welfare system do exist on the basis of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, intersections between these identities create a different set of opinions. So, why is this important? Poverty in the United States is paradoxical and competing ideologies, especially those that elicit a lot of emotions, can hinder progress in alleviating it. Recognizing differences in how one views poverty and the solutions to poverty might provide a more productive discussion on poverty and lead to longer-lasting solutions.
Bibliography


“Growth in Means-Tested Programs and Tax Credit for Low-Income Households.”

*Congressional Budget Office*. February 2013.


Reutter, L.I, M.J. Stewart, G. Veenstra, R. Lowe, D. Raphael, and E. Makwarimba. “‘Who Do They Think We Are, Anyway?: Perceptions of and Responses to Poverty Stigma.”


<www.house.gov/committees/>.

<www.senate.gov/committees/committees_home.htm>.
