

## The Dimensions of Poverty: Public Perceptions of the Deserving Poor

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How the public perceives the poor, and circumstances under which the poor deserve public assistance, are not adequately understood by social researchers and policy makers. In this paper, public perceptions of the poor will be examined in order to better understand what constitutes the "deserving" poor in the mind of the public. Using the 1986 General Social Survey, and the supplemental factorial survey component included in that year, responses to a number of vignettes portraying hypothetical families are examined in order to better understand levels of public support for the poor, and whom the public perceives as the "deserving poor." © 1993 Academic Press, Inc.

Popular perceptions of the poor and the extent and circumstances under which the poor deserve assistance are not adequately understood by social researchers and policy makers. Various surveys have shown mixed and inconclusive results concerning public perceptions of the poor (cf. Schiltz, 1970; Smith, 1987). In addition, selective readings of the results from these surveys allow both advocates and opponents of increased social spending to support their relative positions. Political rhetoric from across the spectrum suggests, however, that the majority of the American public support government assistance programs, but only for those who deserve such assistance.

Such survey results, coupled with the political rhetoric, do not clarify under what circumstances do certain people deserve welfare assistance. What characteristics confronting an ostensibly poor family, whether situational or volitional, are seen as dire enough to deserve public assistance? Do some families, by virtue of some characteristics, deserve more assistance than others? Finally, is there some public agreement as to what constitutes "deservedness"?

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### PUBLIC OPINION, WELFARE, AND THE DESERVING POOR

Public opinion surveys on social welfare programs are not new phenomena. Indeed, systematic polling of public attitudes toward social service programs has been chronicled since the Great Depression and the New Deal era (Schiltz, 1970). Of primary importance in these studies, however, were poverty and income issues facing the elderly and issues involved in the creation of the Social Security and Medicaid programs.<sup>1</sup> Only a few studies in this country have been primarily devoted to analyzing public opinion with regard to support for the nonelderly poor (cf. Cook, 1979; Love, 1986; Pereira, 1986). Moreover, the results from the inquiries undertaken to assess public perceptions and acceptance of social welfare programs are mixed.

On the one hand, we find that the public is strongly in favor of support for the elderly and "assistance" to the poor. On the other hand, we find little support for wealth redistribution policies, and a strong public distaste for "welfare" (Smith, 1987). In addition, while the overall levels of public support for social programs to help the elderly and the poor have remained stable over the past decades (Shapiro, Patterson, Russell, and Young, 1987a), legislative support for assistance programs has been less stable. (Cook, Barrett, Popkin, Constantino, and Kaufman, 1988).

### PROGRAM PREFERENCE AND SPENDING LEVELS

In his review of survey items assessing public opinion on government expenditures for welfare, Schiltz (1970) shows that a majority of the population supported increased spending on government assistance programs, or at least maintaining the current spending levels. Strangely, support for decreasing welfare expenditures in these surveys was highest in the late Depression years (around 39%) and decreased to a minimum

<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true with regard to Schiltz's (1970) monograph, which is an in-depth examination of the Social Security issues from the depression through 1970. In his report, Schiltz concentrates on the public's perceptions and acceptance of a variety of Social Security based issues, and only returns to nonelderly public assistance programs for comparative purposes. For our purposes, the discussion will focus on previous work looking at public opinion on issues facing the nonelderly poor population. Additional studies on attitudes toward public assistance programs for the elderly, see Cook et al., 1988, and Bonnet-Brunnich, 1984, among others.

of 23% in the post WWII years. In addition, Schiltz states that little change was seen in the demographic and social composition of the supporters of such programs (Schiltz, 1970, p. 152).

Later studies show less consistent support for welfare spending, and often contradictory responses to specific spending items. In a review of items between 1971 and 1986, Shapiro, Patterson, Russell, and Young (1987b) found that when respondents were asked about the levels of government spending specifically for welfare, a sizeable proportion of respondents believed too much was being spent, while only one-fifth of the responders believed too little was being spent. For 24 different surveys<sup>2</sup> conducted between 1971 and 1986, the single largest response category was found for the "too much spending" option.

We must exercise caution when interpreting public sentiments found through these items. In his 1987 article examining the effect of question-wording on perceptions of welfare spending, Smith (1987) concluded that question-phrasing appeared to strongly affect responses. Smith found that, on average, items assessing support for "assistance to the poor" or similar statements averaged over 39 percentage points higher than items asking about welfare. "'Welfare' consistently produces much more negative evaluations than 'the poor'." (Smith, 1987, p. 76). Similarly, Schiltz (1970) argued that despite the strong support seen for welfare programs, "the public has at the same time displayed a consistent willingness to impugn dishonesty to welfare recipients" (Schiltz, 1970, p. 155).

Such public suspicion about the honesty and integrity of welfare recipients has been observed throughout the history of welfare program implementation. In one 1964 survey, taken at the start of the War on Poverty, 67 percent of respondents stated that they believed some or most of the recipients are "on relief for dishonest reasons." (Schiltz, 1970). Similar survey items showed that between the 1930s and late 1960s increasing numbers of respondents believed that persons on relief "could find work if they tried" (Schiltz, 1970, p. 156). Kluegel and Smith (1986) also found that a majority of the respondents in their 1980 survey believed that "most people getting welfare are not honest about their need" (Kluegel and Smith, 1986, p. 153).

Mixed findings concerning public perceptions of welfare recipients are reported in 1976 and 1977 surveys conducted by Harris Associates (Shapiro et al., 1987a). In these surveys, respondents were asked a series of questions addressing their perceptions of welfare recipients. When asked to respond to the statement that "It's not right to let people who need welfare

<sup>2</sup> These surveys are in fact phases of on-going surveys, the Annual GSS and Roper series. The questions asked "are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on Welfare," and were included in a battery of items addressing government spending on various programs.

to go hungry," 94% of those responding agreed; when asked to respond to the statement that "Too many women whose husbands have left them with several children have no choice but to go on welfare," three-quarters of the respondents agreed. However, these same respondents also overwhelmingly believed that "too many people on welfare could be working" (89% for 1976 and 92 percent for 1977), and vast majorities in both years (86% and 89%, respectively) believed that "Too many people on welfare cheat . . ." Similarly, 51% of respondents to a New York Times/CBS poll in 1980, and 40% in a rerun of that survey in 1986, believed that "most people who receive money from welfare could get along without it if they tried" (Shapiro et al., 1987a, p. 124). Cook et al. (1988), however, found much less support for the belief that welfare recipients cheated, at least with regard to the most well-known programs. When asked whether they believed AFDC recipients were cheating the program, less than 4% of the respondents believed "almost all" cheated, and slightly more than 30% believed "more than half" or almost all cheated.

Two conclusions about how the public's attitudes toward welfare are measured can be drawn from the literature. First, it appears that a large proportion of the public has supported most public assistance programs over the past 50 years. Second, variations in how these items have been measured, and inconsistencies in the level of support and in the programs supported do not allow us to make broad conclusions or recommendations as to what to do with these findings.

Three primary concerns about these conclusions are addressed in this paper. First, we examine data from a nationally representative sample survey of American households, addressing perceptions of the poor. As was pointed out, very little has been done on a national scope to examine the public's perceptions of welfare programs and recipients. Most of the items discussed above are single items, or items from short batteries of items, appended to national surveys taken over the past 50 or more years. On a national scale, nothing can be found prior to 1986 which systematically examines the issues of welfare entitlements, spending priorities, or beliefs about inequality and welfare recipients. Two studies, Kluegel and Smith (1986) and Cook et al. (1988), as well as the 1986 GSS supplement (analyzed here), represent the most comprehensive national studies available released over the past decade.

Of course some local studies have been undertaken. The most notable for our purposes are Hasenfeld and Rafferty's Detroit study (1989), the 1984 study of New York residents' attitudes about welfare by Pereira and Rossi (Pereira, 1986), and Cook's (1979) and Love's (1986) studies of Chicago. Considering the impact of welfare on the legislative debate, it would seem that much more research is warranted.

Second, this study attempts to deal with the inconsistency in the responses found in these items. Specifically, the items discussed above suf-

ferred from one primary deficiency—minor wording changes in items drastically affected the levels of support shown for welfare programs and perceptions of the worthiness of welfare recipients. As Smith (1987) has demonstrated, changing the wording from “welfare” to “assistance to the poor” completely reversed the proportion of those who believed too much (or too little) money was being spent by the government.

The item-wording issue is an example of the problems that arise when respondents are presented with global questions, or asked about issues and policies about which they may have no information or specific details. Without information on the program in question, or, for example, the circumstances facing the unemployed persons, these items are only considered as stereotypical representations, which may or may not represent real situations. Concern with this problem was specifically noted by Schiltz (1970) when he discussed items addressing attitudes toward National Health Care measures and found respondents who knew nothing about the program still held specific opinions about those initiatives.

Finally, this study examines how such relative consensus (that poor people deserve assistance) is affected by various conditions faced by poor people—conditions otherwise left ambiguous by the global items discussed in the previous review.<sup>3</sup> Despite the levels of relative consensus found in the previously employed items concerning perceptions of welfare recipients, exactly how these perceptions are determined is less well known. In general the public believes the poor need help. Yet under what structural and familial circumstances do particular families deserve assistance? Hasenfeld and Rafferty (1989) suggest, perceptions of the welfare state and its beneficiaries are shaped by two antithetical ideologies: (1) A strong belief in the economic individualism or the “work ethic”; and (2) the emergence of the belief in social rights and collective responsibility (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989, p. 1029). Ambivalence in how the public responds to these two diverse positions, coupled with problems of measuring public opinion toward welfare programs in general, stimulates this study.

Given these general questions, this paper poses two central research foci, or hypotheses as to how the public’s perceptions of poor families can be modeled.

(1) First, previous research has shown that a large proportion of the population endorses social rights and social equality (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989, p. 1029). Through this perspective it is believed that respondents will see poor families as depicted in the GSS vignettes as deserving of a minimally acceptable standard of living with a reasonable income, regardless of the situational factors facing these families.

(2) Second, the level of support, or generosity, given the poor families

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of measuring consensus, see Rossi and Berk, “Varieties of normative consensus,” *American Sociological Review*, 1985, 50, 333–347.

described in the vignettes will be influenced by the specific structural and volitional conditions facing the vignette characters. Despite the resilience of the social rights perspective, however, we believe that the public does discriminate among the situational characteristics of these families. That is, although the public does support the idea that the poor have a right to assistance, respondents also believe that a degree of economic individualism is relevant when distributing economic justice (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989, p. 1029). Those vignette families who are experiencing troubles and yet are actively working to alleviate such difficulties will be seen as in need of more support than those who are not. As such, they will be "rewarded" for this effort with a higher level of economic support. All families "deserve" support, but some are more deserving than others, depending on the extent to which an honest effort is being made.

In an effort to deal with the ambiguities and complexities of survey items discussed above a relatively recent advancement in research methods, the factorial survey, is employed to examine public perceptions of the poor. Of particular interest will be an examination of those characteristics of poor families which are perceived by the public as indicators of the deservedness of persons to receive public assistance.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *The General Social Survey and Factorial Survey Vignette Supplement*

Data analyzed in this study were obtained from the 1986 General Social Survey, and the accompanying yearly supplement examining perceptions of the "deserving poor" (Davis and Smith, 1986). The General Social Survey (GSS) is a national probability sample survey conducted each year<sup>4</sup> by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. In the 1986 survey, both a special battery of questions addressing the respondents' attitudes toward persons on welfare and the effect welfare has on recipients, and a supplemental factorial survey section (as well as conventional survey items), were employed to address perceptions concerning what characterizes those persons who are deserving of welfare assistance. The entire survey is quite extensive, and the 1986 vignette supplement was only a part of the entire project.

### *The Factorial Survey Approach*

In our everyday conversations with colleagues and friends, arguments are seldom made outside of some narrative context. If, for example, a colleague asks us whether or not we will support a particular political or

<sup>4</sup> The GSS has been conducted each year since 1972, with the exception of 1979 and 1981. For most years, supplemental sections of the survey are added in order to focus on particular methodological or substantive issues. For example, the 1985 GSS included a "network analysis" supplement.

social program we often respond with an equivocal “it depends”—“it depends on how brutal the crime,” or “it depends on requirements for program participation.” Even the most ardent supporters of various programs invoke the “it depends” when pressed with real-world applications of their position (e.g., the propriety of capital punishment for murder when the crime is committed by a mentally retarded individual, or the conditions under which nonmarried males are deserving of public assistance).

It is precisely this concern with the situation—the effect of social context on attitudes toward welfare entitlements and the poor—that recommends the use of the factorial survey approach. The Factorial Survey technique was developed by Peter H. Rossi in the early 1970s. The Factorial Survey approach has been used in numerous studies to assess the judgment process on issues ranging from conceptions of mental illness (Thurman, Lam, and Rossi, 1988) to definitions of sexual harassment (Rossi and Weber-Burdin, 1983), issues of crime deterrence (Anderson, Harris, and Miller, 1983), attitudes toward abortion (Sitaraman, 1990), the propriety and desirability of various social interactions (Rossi and Will, 1985), and neighborhood status evaluations (St. John and Bates, 1990).<sup>5</sup>

The Factorial Survey approach is “a melding of randomized experiments and sample surveys applied to the general problem of uncovering the underlying regularity of judgments of complex social objects” (Rossi and Will, 1985, p. 3). These complex social objects, or “vignettes,” are short descriptions of situations, which are constructed from lists of various personal and situational attributes and behaviors. In the case of this study, these lists represent various characteristics of typical welfare families. These attributes and behaviors are randomly selected from lists and are arranged into individual scenarios.

Each vignette consists of broadly defined attributes, called dimensions, covering such characteristics (for purposes of this study of welfare recipients) as number of children, marital status, work status of the vignette family head, and income. Each dimension consists of various categories or “levels.” For example, a typical level for the dimension “number of children” would be “this family has two children.” Levels within each dimension are randomly selected and combined with selected levels from other dimensions.<sup>6</sup> By randomly combining these dimensions and levels,

<sup>5</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the Factorial Survey technique, see *Measuring Social Judgments: The Factorial Survey Approach*, Peter H. Rossi and Steven L. Nock, Eds., Sage, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Actual selection and construction of the factorial survey vignettes is carried out using a computer, and the specially designed VIGWRITE software. Information on VIGWRITE can be obtained from the Social And Demographic Research Institute, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA (Attn. D. Weber).



we are able to maintain orthogonality, or independence, among the components, and thus analyze the unique importance of each characteristic.

In the 1986 GSS, each respondent was given 7 vignettes, with each vignette being composed of an independent, random selection of one level from each of the 10 vignette dimensions: number and age of children, mother's marital status, situation of the children's father, mother's education, mother's employment status, father's marital status (if he is out of the home), the family's financial prospects, familial support, family household income, and family savings. These dimensions, and levels within each, are presented in Table 1. Each dimension consists of a varying number of attribute levels, ranging from two levels for family savings, to nine levels for the dimension representing the number and age of the vignette families' children. In all, random combination of these dimensions and levels allows for over one million distinct vignettes.<sup>7</sup>

The factorial survey approach offers several advantages over the contemporary survey item design. First, given the concern expressed about the variations in responses resulting from question wording (cf. Schiltz, 1970; Shapiro and Young, 1986; Shapiro et al., 1987a, 1987b; Smith, 1987), the factorial survey technique allows for the examination of subtle variations in scenario wording. With this technique one can examine, for example, the extent to which explicitly stating the number of children or how a recipient's difficulty in landing a job can affect generosity toward the vignette families.

Similarly, with the factorial survey approach, one is able to examine how particular characteristics included in a scenario affect a respondent's reaction to that situation, while controlling for extraneous influences. For example, we can examine the extent to which the number of children in a poor household affect levels of generosity shown toward that family, while statistically controlling for whether or not the children's father is present in the household. Likewise, we can examine the extent to which other characteristics, such as work history or personal disabilities, play important roles in determining generosity. By design, the factorial survey allows us to manipulate these, and other combinations of characteristics and assess their independent effects on generosity.

Finally, the factorial survey design allows for a more systematic understanding of these complex social situations without having to oversimplify the situation. That is, with the factorial survey we can examine decision-making processes concerning welfare program support without

<sup>7</sup> Although the factorial survey allows for each dimension and level to be completely orthogonal, combinations which defy "common sense" have been restricted in the selection criterion. These restrictions include: (a) parents who were full-time workers were allowed only if the family income was greater than \$50 per week; and (b) if mother and father were married, no separate status for father was given.

TABLE 1  
GSS Factorial Survey Vignettes: Dimensions and Levels

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Dimension 1: Number of children
Level 1: one 6-month-old child
Level 2: one 4-year-old child
Level 3: one 8-year-old child
Level 4: two children, the youngest is 6 months old
Level 5: two children, the youngest is 4 years old
Level 6: two children, the youngest is 8 years old
Level 7: four children, the youngest is 6 months old
Level 8: four children, the youngest is 4 years old
Level 9: four children, the youngest is 8 years old
Dimension 2: Marital status
Level 1: the parents are married.
Level 2: the mother is divorced.
Level 3: the mother never married.
Dimension 3: Situation of the child's father
Level 1: is employed full time.
Level 2: is unemployed but looking for work.
Level 3: is unemployed and not looking for work.
Level 4: is currently in prison.
Level 5: is permanently disabled.
Dimension 4: Child's mother's education
Level 1: a grade school education and is
Level 2: some high school education and is
Level 3: a high school education and is
Level 4: some college education and is
Level 5: has a college degree and is
Dimension 5: Mother's employment status
Level 1: working full-time.
Level 2: working part-time.
Level 3: looking for work.
Level 4: unemployed and not looking for work.
Level 5: unemployed and not looking because she can't find affordable day care.
Level 6: unemployed/not looking because she has no means of transportation.
Level 7: unemployed/not looking because available jobs only pay the minimum wage.
Level 8: blank text
Dimension 6: Marital status of the father
Level 1: the father has remarried and
Level 2: blank text
Dimension 7: Financial prospects
Level 1: financial difficulties only for the next 6 months.
Level 2: financial difficulties for a couple of years.
Level 3: financial difficulties continually in the future.
Dimension 8: Do her parents help?
Level 1: help out financially.
Level 2: cannot help out financially.
Level 3: could help out financially but she won't ask.
Level 4: could help out financially but they refuse.

TABLE 1—*Continued*


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Dimension 9: Savings
Level 1: has no savings. (75%)
Level 2: has \$1000 in savings. (25%)
Dimension 10: Total family income
Level 1: \$50 per week.
Level 2: \$100 per week.
Level 3: \$200 per week.
Level 4: \$300 per week.

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having to resort to using simplistic items or omitting potentially important, yet untested, characteristics. For example, in the examination of previous research a number of surveys were found which asked about the government's responsibility to help the unemployed. Overall, most Americans believed the government was responsible for such help (Schiltz, 1970). One problem with these items is that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to estimate how perceptions would be affected if the respondents were told of the current efforts of the unemployed to help themselves by actively looking for work. Would the public support increased unemployment benefits if the recipient refused to look for a job? The factorial survey approach allows for the modeling of the impact these details have on respondent attitudes with more complex scenarios than found in traditional survey item designs.

Once the vignette is constructed from these dimensions and levels and is presented to respondents, they are asked to respond to the scenario. In the case of the vignettes in the 1986 GSS, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of weekly income how much this family deserved. In Table 2, a sample vignette and the accompanying rating scale are presented. The rating scale for the GSS vignettes consisted of \$50 increments, ranging from \$0 to \$600. The current income of the family portrayed in the vignette is identified on the rating scale. Also, each scale identified the average U.S. family income. The average U.S. family income in 1986 was approximately \$400 per week. Respondents were asked to indicate "What should this family's weekly income be? Include both the money already received from sources other than the government, and any public assistance support you think this family should get."

## FINDINGS

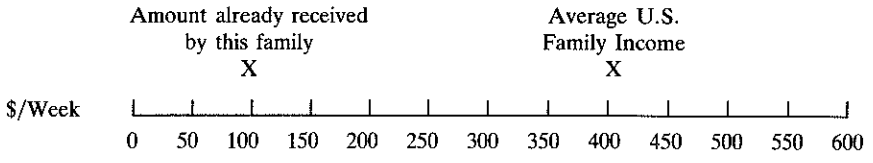
### *The Levels of Generosity*

Table 3 presents the distribution of the weekly income award given to the vignette family. The GSS vignettes asked what the vignette family should have for a weekly income, not only what amount of public support should be given. Note, it is stated in the instructions for the vignettes

TABLE 2  
Sample Vignette and Rating Scale

This family has four children, the youngest is 6 months old, living with their mother. The mother is divorced. The mother has a college degree and is unemployed and not looking for work because she has no ready means of transportation. The father has remarried and is permanently disabled. The family is likely to face financial difficulties for a couple of years. Her parents cannot help out financially. The family has \$1000 in savings. All in all, the family's total income from sources other than the government is \$100 per week.

What should this family's weekly income be? Include both the money already available from sources other than the government, and any public assistance support you think this family should get.



that increases in weekly income could "lead to changes in the taxes we pay."

As can be seen in Table 3, the average weekly award to the vignette families was over \$255, with almost 50% of the responses falling between the \$200 and \$300 weekly income level. Only 2% of the GSS vignettes received a \$0 weekly income rating. In addition, only 2.3% of the vignettes

TABLE 3  
Vignette Scale Responses

GSS vignette rating distribution		
Weekly income award	%	CUM
0	2.1	2.1
50	3.0	5.1
100	8.3	13.4
150	6.3	19.7
200	20.0	39.7
250	10.9	50.6
300	28.5	79.1
350	7.6	86.7
400	9.0	95.7
450	2.0	97.7
500	1.5	99.2
550	.3	99.4
600	.6	100.0
Mean, 255.86	Median, 250.00	Vignettes rated, 9537

TABLE 4  
Net Benefit For Vignette Awards

Vignette total benefits ("current income" subtracted from award amount)		
Net benefits	%	CUM %
-300	1.1	1.1
-250	.3	1.3
-200	1.1	2.5
-150	.7	3.2
-100	1.6	4.8
-50	1.5	6.3
0	37.3	43.6
50	11.8	55.3
100	16.7	72.0
150	9.1	81.2
200	9.0	90.1
250	3.8	93.9
300	3.3	97.2
350	1.5	98.7
400	.7	99.5
450	.3	99.7
500	.2	99.9
550	.1	100.0
Mean, 74.87	Median, 50.00	Vignettes rated, 9537

were considered to be deserving of a weekly income over \$450. Over 14% of the responses awarded \$400 or more to the vignette families. In all, respondents indicated that for most families the weekly income should remain at or above a general floor of approximately \$200.

Further understanding of the distribution of responses can be found by examining Table 4. One question which is asked is the extent to which the amount awarded to the families is related to the amount of income the vignette family currently receives. In this table, the "net benefits" figure is calculated by taking the vignette family's weekly income and subtracting this value from the income award given by respondents in the vignette rating. Overall, in more than one-third of all vignettes (37.3%), the respondents' proposed income did not differ from the current income level presented in the vignettes. In only 6.3% of the scenarios, the vignettes elicited a rating which would decrease the weekly family income. In a working paper examining this same finding, Ponza, Duncan, Corcoran, and Groskind (1988) concluded that one-third of these negative awards resulted from misunderstandings on the part of the respondent, and thus did not necessarily represent punitive ratings (Ponza et al., 1988, p. 5f).

In over 55% of the vignettes, however, respondents increased the

amount of income awarded. In almost 45% of the vignette scenarios, this increase was \$100 or more over and above the income already received by the vignette family. Overall, the mean proposed vignette income increased by \$74.87. Given the vignette family's income, therefore, respondents awarded an average of almost \$75 per week above what the vignette family already received.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Dimensions of Generosity*

This examination of levels of generosity toward the poor, while important for general understanding of the levels of public assistance support, does not allow us to separate the conditions under which generosity increases or decreases. Basic distributions within such scales can best be understood by examining the separate effects of the various components, or dimensions, of the scenario and the change in generosity through various degrees, or levels, of these dimensions. The factorial survey design, by randomizing the inclusion of various levels and dimensions, allows us to examine these effects more closely.

For each of the studies examined here, multiple regression analysis was used regressing the individual vignette ratings against each level of each dimension. For each of the quantitative dimensions (e.g., the number of children or youngest child's age) the dimension was recoded to represent the precise value. For categorical, or qualitative dimensions, a dummy variable was created for each level of the dimension, with one level being omitted so as to serve as a reference point for the analysis. For example, work status dimensions with four levels would be represented by three dummy variables (e.g., one each for unemployed-looking, unemployed-not looking, and never worked), with the fourth level (e.g., currently employed) being omitted for reference purposes.

<sup>8</sup> One important point here is that when the total benefit levels are examined for the income already received by the vignette family, "punitive" reaction is restricted primarily to only those earning \$200 or more in current income. Indeed, only 1 percent of the vignettes depicting families at the lowest end of the income level (\$50 per week) showed negative total benefits, with only 2% of families with \$100 in weekly income being so rated. For families at this low end of the income levels, however, over 60% of the vignettes would have been awarded enough to have brought the family above the \$200 threshold discussed above. The distribution of those receiving "negative total benefits" which would bring the vignette family's income below the \$200, or a \$150, threshold is shown below.

Threshold level	Vignette family income			
	\$50	\$100	\$200	\$300
% Below \$200 threshold	40.7	34.8	6.7	8.4
% Below \$150 threshold	25.9	23.3	4.8	6.6
Total vignettes rated	1320	2632	2786	2799

*Family Characteristics and Generosity*

The GSS study vignettes, contain both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. In addition, for this analysis the dimension for number and age of children was transformed into two separate variables, one each for the age and number of children. The education of the mother, the family savings, and the weekly family income were all used as continuous variables. Dummy variables were created for each of the levels for the remaining dimensions; mother's and father's marital status, father's employment situation, mother's employment status, future financial prospects, and the parental help dimensions. In Table 5 the results of the regression for the GSS vignette dimensions and levels on the amount awarded are presented. An important note to keep in mind is that the design of the GSS vignette rating, by virtue of asking what the "family's weekly income should be," allows one to interpret the regression coefficients as direct increases or decreases in the dollar amount of the award rating. Also note that the findings in Table 5 represent the results of regression analysis on the vignette ratings. Thus the overall  $N$  represents number of vignettes, not respondents.

As can be seen in Table 5, the employment characteristics of both of the parents proved to have strong effects on the overall income award given by GSS respondents. Of particular importance is the dimension addressing the current situation of the father. For those families where the father was disabled, and thus unable to provide substantial support for the family, the average income award was more than \$26 higher than for those families where the father worked ( $p < .001$ ). For vignettes where the father was unemployed, yet looking for work, the average income award increased by more than \$12 over families with an employed father ( $p < .001$ ). Unemployed fathers who were not looking were penalized \$7.13 per week ( $p < .05$ ), and families where the father was in prison were given slightly higher weekly income awards ( $p < .10$ ).

When examining the effect of the mother's education and employment status, respondents appear somewhat punitive. For the mothers, each year of education only increases the income award by a modest \$.71 ( $p < .05$ ). The average increase in the weekly income award for mothers who were unemployed but looking was only slightly more than \$6 more than that allotted to working mothers, and less than one half the \$12.17 increase for unemployed but looking for work fathers. For those vignettes where the mother was selective about her employment, high sanctions were imposed. Vignettes where the mother was unemployed and not looking for work received \$9.19 less than employed mothers ( $p < .05$ ), while those who could not work because of a lack of transportation received \$10.34 less than mothers who worked full-time ( $p < .01$ ). For mothers who were unemployed because the only work available paid

TABLE 5  
Vignette Rating Regression: Primary Dimensions and Levels

Vignette dimensions and levels	<i>B</i>
Characteristics of Children (Continuous)	
Age of children	.18
Number of children	12.26***
Mothers marital status (married omitted)	
Mother divorced	-1.20
Mother never married	-3.18
Situation of father (employed omitted)	
Father disabled	26.01***
Father unemployed, not looking	-7.13*
Father in prison	6.04 <sup>#</sup>
Father unemployed, looking	12.17***
Mothers education (continuous)	
Child's mother's education	.71*
Mothers employment (working full-time omitted)	
Mother works part-time	.77
Mother looking for work	6.07 <sup>#</sup>
Mother unemployed, no child care	.25
Mother unemployed, not looking	-9.19*
Mother unemployed, no transport	-10.34**
Unemployed, only minimum wage jobs	-20.52***
Fathers marital status (blank omitted)	
Father remarried	-.42
Financial prospects (difficult next 6 months omitted)	
Problems for next few years	4.81*
Problems continually in future	2.83
Parental help (parents help omitted)	
Parents cannot help	-.83
Parents could, but won't help	.52
Parents would, she won't ask	-4.70 <sup>#</sup>
Family savings and income (continuous)	
Family's savings	-.004 <sup>#</sup>
Family's income	.38***
Constant	149.39***
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.145
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.143
<i>N</i> (total vignettes evaluated)	9537

<sup>#</sup>  $p < .10$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



minimum wage, the average income award was reduced over \$20 per week compared to full-time workers ( $p < .001$ ).

The two remaining family characteristics, the number of children in the vignette family, and that family's cash flow, also had strong effects on the overall income awards. The age of the youngest child, however, had virtually no effect on the overall award. For each additional child in the vignette family, the income award increased \$12.26 per week ( $p < .001$ ). For each dollar of savings the vignette family had on hand, the average weekly income award was reduced by almost \$.004 ( $p < .10$ ). In the GSS vignettes, family savings was either \$0 (75% of the cases) or \$1000 (25%). If the vignette indicated \$1000 of family savings, then the average weekly income award was reduced by \$3.77 compared to families with no savings. In contrast to the effect of family savings, for each dollar of family weekly income the average weekly income award given to the vignettes was increased by \$.38 ( $p < .001$ ), an increase, adjusted for the income amounts available to vignette families, of at least \$19 per week (for families already receiving \$50 in the vignette scenario).

Finally, two dimensions, the marital status of both the mother and father had no significant effect on the amount of income awarded by respondents. That is, divorced or never married mothers received virtually the same weekly income award as families where the mother was married to the child(ren)'s father (the omitted category). Two other dimensions, the vignette family's future financial prospects and the extent of the vignette characters parental help, had only minimal effect. Those families facing financial problems for "the next few years" received slightly less than \$5 per week in income award than the comparison group facing only short-term hardship ( $p < .10$ ). Those families where the parents were willing to help financially, but the vignette character would not ask, were slightly penalized, receiving an average of \$4.70 less per week in income awards than those whose extended family helped out ( $p < .10$ ).

The overall effect of the dimensions and levels used in the GSS study allows us to model the income awards given to the vignettes. Several dimensions stand out as especially important in determining the amount of income awarded to the vignette family. In particular, personal-attribute dimensions dealing with the employment status of the vignette family mother and father appear to be of primary importance in determining the family's weekly income, as do structural dimensions including the number of children in the family, current income, and father's disability status. In the GSS vignette results, we are able to explain slightly over 14% of the variance in the amount of income awarded to the families by including only vignette characteristics in the equation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Anderson et al. (1983) indicate that responses to factorial survey vignettes are sensitive to individual differences within the sample, and that "it is quite usual for models to have

## DISCUSSION

Throughout this discussion the income levels given to the vignette families were characterized as awards and as levels of "generosity." Note, that by design the vignette awards more closely represented governmental provided Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) awards than any other assistance (e.g., General Assistance). Thus some of the findings, such as the increased awards given for each additional child in the family, were expected. The factorial design in this study was used specifically to examine the variations in generosity shown for families experiencing somewhat different circumstances. The factorial design allows us to examine the underlying influences in respondent generosity, and thus to uncover the extent to which there is some degree of normative consensus as to what makes one (or one's family) deserving of increased public support.

### *Overall Trends*

Throughout the analysis presented here, two prominent findings appeared. The most prominent finding is that there appears to be a monetary barrier, or floor, below which a vast majority of the American public believes no one should be allowed to fall. In general, there is evidence in these findings that the general public (as represented by the GSS) shares some degree of consensus that their fellow Americans should not be allowed to drop too far below an economic safety net. Over 80% of the respondents averaged awards of \$200 or more per week to the vignette families, regardless of the presented circumstances. Only 5 percent of the vignette families were awarded less than \$100 per week in award.

Note also that, when compared to AFDC distributions across the U.S., this floor represents over twice the average payments that are actually provided by the government to persons deemed eligible for assistance. Indeed, for a majority of the regions in the U.S., the average income awarded to the vignette families was over three times the AFDC awards given to recipients in the state with the lowest AFDC support levels in that region (Will, 1992). Of course AFDC is not the only program available to poor families. It is, however, the primary source of monetary benefits. Even coupled with Food Stamps, payments to AFDC families do not reach the official poverty line in any state (Shapiro and Greenstein, 1988.)

Thus, the American public perceives that poor families with children, in almost all circumstances, are deserving of support and that the level

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$R^2$  in the neighborhood of .15-.20" (p. 244). Since respondents evaluate multiple vignettes, a significant proportion of the variance can be accounted for by respondent's individual tendencies. Indeed, although not useful for overall modeling of the vignettes, preliminary analysis indicated that by including the average vignette income award for each respondent as a variable in the overall regression equation increased the  $R^2$  to well over .50.

of support needed and approved is twice the amount currently provided by government programs. Although extraneous situational and dispositional conditions do affect these levels of generosity, the negative impact of these conditions is overshadowed when taken in light of even the lower levels of generosity exhibited by respondents.

The second prominent finding, is that respondents do discriminate among factors and conditions faced by the poor in determining the levels of support these families deserve. As discussed differences in question wording or the context under which questions are asked strongly affects how questions were perceived. As we expected, the context under which the vignette family is presented impacts upon generosity. Overall, these differences appeared to be delineated along the lines of "personal" (volitional) and "extrapersonal" (structural or outside the control of the vignette family's control) concerns on the part of the vignette family.

Three "extrapersonal" vignette characteristics appeared to elicit the highest levels of generosity. For these characteristics, the respondents appeared to be addressing issues facing the family that could not be easily remedied regardless of personal intent. First, the number of children present in the family strongly influenced generosity levels. For those families with more than one child, the weekly income awards given by respondents increased over \$12 per child, accumulating to almost \$50 per week increase for those families with 4 children. Other extrapersonal vignette scenarios which elicited large increases in generosity were those in which the father of the children was disabled. For those families, respondents increase the weekly award more than \$25 over similar families where the father was employed.

In addition to the number of children and the father's physical condition, respondents also showed increased levels of generosity for those vignette characters who were unemployed, yet actively looking for gainful employment. Respondents showed understanding, if not compassion, for the general problems of unemployment. If the mother worked part-time, or could not work because of child care needs, respondents also showed increased levels of generosity, although those increases were not statistically significant. Of particular interest here is that the level of support for families where the mother was employed full-time is substantial.

In those scenarios where the vignette characters showed less than admirable personal intent, or personal concerns were at issue, respondents reacted in punitive fashion. In the vignette scenarios where the characters were not actively looking for employment, respondents displayed punitive reactions decreasing the weekly awards substantially. This is particularly evident for those scenarios where the vignette family mother was picky about where to work (e.g., jobs that only paid minimum wage).

It is important to note, however, that one important volitional characteristic which was *not* significant in determining overall levels of gen-

erosity was marital status. Although the focus is frequently on female-headed households and the extent to which such families are seen as less deserving by policy makers (Sidel, 1987), this appears to be an issue of little importance to the general public.

Thus, it appears that the vignette characteristics which elicited the highest levels of generosity are those in which the problems facing the family appear to be beyond the immediate control of the individual family—large family composition, unemployment, and physical disabilities. In addition, respondents indicate much more support for those persons who, despite the hardship, are still actively working to help themselves get out of these difficulties. As long as the vignette families are trying to help themselves, respondents appear much more sympathetic, and are much more willing to help out as well.

### CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Overall, this study dealt with three primary objectives. First, we were concerned with gaining a better understanding of Americans' perceptions of the needs of the poor. Whereas earlier studies were limited in their ability to examine the effect of circumstantial or situational differences in opinion formation, the factorial survey technique allowed for a further understanding of these issues. Global items concerning support for the poor do offer some understanding of general levels of support. Yet this understanding is of limited use in understanding public sentiment. Increased specificity, as afforded by the factorial survey, is needed in order to more fully understand the limits and conditions of support for the poor. The results of the regression analysis strongly supports the position that this specificity is available through the implementation of the factorial survey approach.

Second, the results of this study show that the American public strongly supports public assistance when faced with certain circumstances depicting those in need. To be sure, the vast majority of the American public discriminates among circumstances in awarding such assistance. Willingness to support is still prevalent, however, even for those persons whose claim to public support may not be completely legitimate. The results indicate that a significant amount of consensus exists when examining the overall levels of support for the poor, although the conditions under which the support is given may vary. Those who try to improve their lot in life and still fall short are shown much higher levels of generosity than those who appear not to try. Even this latter group is seen as deserving to some extent.

Finally, we believe this study shows that social scientists can measure public opinion on these issues in ways that may be profitable for public policy makers. This is not to say that the analysis presented here is the definitive statement on lay support of public assistance programs. Indeed,

subsequent analysis promises to provide insight into variations among various social and demographic groups within American society, and how they perceive the needs of the deserving poor. From this analysis it is clear that the assumed public opposition toward welfare programs for the poor has little support when public opinion is more systematically examined.

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