



Fighting Poverty in America

A STUDY OF AMERICAN PUBLIC ATTITUDES

December 8, 1994

Conducted by the
Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes

in consultation with the
Americans Talk Issues Foundation

Principal Investigator
Steven Kull

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CSPA staff members Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Michael Perry, and Kate Allen designed the questionnaire, conducted focus groups and open-ended interviews, analyzed the findings and wrote the report.

Alan Kay, of the Americans Talk Issues Foundation, acted as a consultant in the design and analysis of the questionnaire.

Communications Center Inc. (CCI) carried out the telephone interviewing for the questionnaire and performed statistical analyses.

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Data about polls by other organizations were accessed through the Public Opinion Library (POLL) database of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut.

The Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes (CSPA) is an independent nonprofit organization of social science researchers devoted to increasing understanding of public and elite attitudes shaping contemporary public policy. Using innovative research methods, CSPA seeks not only to examine overt policy opinions or positions, but to reveal the underlying values, assumptions, and feelings that sustain such opinions. A major activity of CSPA is its Program on International Policy Attitudes which it carries out in conjunction with the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland.

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF POLICY ATTITUDES

11 Dupont Circle, NW • Suite 610 • Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: 202/232-7500 Fax: 202/232-1159

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In light of the recent midterm elections, many Americans are wondering whether the electoral shift signifies a loss of support for government efforts to fight poverty, many of which began in the 1960s War on Poverty. A study of American public attitudes on fighting poverty was conducted by the Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes in consultation with the Americans Talk Issues Foundation. It included:

- a nationwide poll of 900 randomly chosen Americans conducted October 13-16 (margin of error plus or minus 3.5% - 4.0%)
- a comprehensive analysis of polls conducted by other organizations
- two focus groups with a demographically-balanced sample of Americans
- in-depth interviews with 23 Americans from across the country.

In traditional political terms the findings of the study are paradoxical. On one hand, among the American public there is a widespread and strongly felt frustration with government performance which extends to government poverty programs. At the same time, this does not signify a mandate to eliminate or even cut back such programs: Most Americans continue to embrace the values that have prompted such programs and do not want to reduce spending on them, a consensus that cuts across ideological demographic and political lines. Rather, such frustration leads Americans to want to see poverty programs conducted more effectively, especially to see the poor more effectively integrated into the work force.

More precisely the study found:

1. The American public strongly supports the effort to fight poverty. They think poverty is getting worse, and they are concerned about it. An overwhelming majority believes that society is morally obliged to try to eliminate poverty and that such efforts are a good economic investment. Support for fighting poverty does not appear to be any weaker than it was during the 1960s War on Poverty and may be stronger.
2. The majority has a very negative attitude toward the government's performance in poverty programs. This attitude seems to rest largely on the mistaken belief that wasteful bureaucracy and fraud are so rampant in government programs that only 31% of poverty program funds are ultimately used to help the poor. This negative attitude also extends to the War on Poverty which is incorrectly viewed as having failed to reduce poverty.

3. Despite negative impressions about government performance, the majority wants to maintain or increase spending on poverty programs overall and strongly favors increasing spending on some specific programs and some poor populations. Despite the negative view of the War on Poverty, programs that grew out of it are some of the most popular candidates for spending increases.

4. The public overwhelmingly supports programs that emphasize moving poor people into productive work. Welfare elicits strong negative feelings and there is much support for setting time limits. However, there is virtually no support for simply eliminating welfare and little support for cutting spending on it. Rather, there is very strong support for job training and large-scale jobs programs, not only for current welfare recipients but for all able-bodied Americans willing to work.

5. The majority is ready to give more support to the working poor through raising the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation, while a plurality is ready to give more benefits to the working poor.

6. In contrast to the low levels of confidence in government to fight poverty, the public has a high level of confidence in volunteer organizations, churches, charities and organizations of poor people working in their community. A majority also wants business to play a larger role in fighting poverty.

7. The majority feels that wealthy Americans should pay more in taxes for poverty programs. This view is driven more by a desire to reduce the number of Americans living in poverty than it is to reduce the gap between the rich and poor.

8. The majority has numerous misperceptions about the poor and about poverty programs. Some of these misperceptions correlate with negative attitudes about efforts to reduce poverty.

9. The public as a whole perceives the public (i.e. the public perceives itself) as more resistant to spending money on the poor than is actually the case

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 1994 midterm elections, the mood of the American public is once again the topic of much discussion. A central question is how the American public feels about government efforts to address the problem of poverty. Many wonder whether the Republican sweep of Congress signifies a mandate to dramatically cut back on government poverty programs.

The idea that the American public has lost its willingness to support poverty programs has been in the air for some time. According to this view, during the mid-1960s, as Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty was gearing up, Americans were highly motivated to help the poor. The economy was growing well, and memories of the youthful idealism associated with the recently-assassinated John F. Kennedy were very alive among the American people. But since then, it is argued, with the slowing of economic growth and the persistence of poverty, Americans have grown cynical, more focussed on their individual affairs and their resolve to fight poverty has waned. The poverty programs that originated in the 1960s War on Poverty have grown unpopular.

But is this conventional wisdom really correct? In anticipation of the airing of the PBS series "The War on Poverty," the series producer, Blackside, Inc., commissioned the Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes (CSPA) in consultation with the Americans Talk Issues Foundation, to carry out a study of American attitudes on the fight against poverty. Thirty years after the War on Poverty was initiated, Blackside sought to learn if the public's commitment to fighting poverty persists or if there has been a sea-change in American attitudes.

To this end, CSPA undertook a study that included:

- a nationwide poll of a random sample of 900 Americans conducted October 13-16 (margin of error plus or minus 3.5-4.0%)
- a comprehensive analysis of polling data on poverty issues from the 1960s through the present
- two focus groups with representative samples of Americans held in Baltimore, Maryland and Richmond, Virginia
- open-ended interviews with 23 Americans from across the country.

Here are some of the key findings of the study:

1. The American public strongly supports the effort to fight poverty. They think poverty is getting worse, and they are concerned about it. An overwhelming majority believes that society is morally obliged to try to eliminate poverty and that such efforts are a good economic investment. Support for fighting poverty does not appear to be any weaker than it was during the 1960s War on Poverty and may be stronger.

Contrary to the widespread perception that Americans have lost much of their concern about the poor, it appears that an overwhelming majority of Americans are resolved to fight poverty. Eighty-six percent said they are "somewhat" or "very concerned" about poverty in the United States, with 49% saying they are "very concerned". Only 3% said they are not at all concerned. Likewise, an August 1992 Gallup poll found that 82% said they were dissatisfied with "the success of the nation in taking care of its poor and needy."

This concern appears to be fueled by a perception that poverty in the United States is getting worse. Sixty-four percent believe that poverty is getting worse while only 7% think it is decreasing. In interviews and focus groups, respondents spoke, worriedly, of the growing number of homeless people they encounter.

However, the concern about poverty is not limited to the more vivid cases such as the homeless. In fact, the public defines poverty more liberally than the federal government. When told that the federal poverty line is an annual income of \$14,763 for a family of four, 58% thought the federal poverty line should be set higher, and only 7% thought it should be set lower. Asked what the federal poverty line should be for a family of four, the mean level was \$17,856-- 21% higher than the present level.

Consistent with the expressed concern about poverty in the US, a strong majority is highly committed to the effort to alleviate poverty. This commitment is derived from several bases:

"Society has a moral obligation to try to alleviate the poverty in our midst."

-- 84% agree

Moral Considerations: Eighty-four percent agreed (48% strongly) that "society has a moral obligation to try to alleviate poverty." Only 14% disagreed. Sixty-eight percent agreed (23% strongly) that "efforts to reduce poverty help create more equal opportunities and offset some of the unfairness in the American economy."

"Trying to reduce poverty is a good economic investment."

-- 92% agree

Economic Interests: An overwhelming 92% agreed (59% strongly) that "trying to reduce poverty is a good economic investment" because "in the long run" trying to reduce poverty "saves money by reducing the costs of social services and, by putting people to work, it results in a more productive economy." This means that efforts to reduce poverty are not seen as simply a zero-sum game of trying to redistribute resources. Rather, such

efforts benefit the economy as a whole and thus are rational from a self-interested perspective as well as a moral one. A Baltimore woman made this point when she said, "You can't afford not to spend more on poverty programs."

"You can't afford not to spend more on poverty programs."

A Baltimore woman

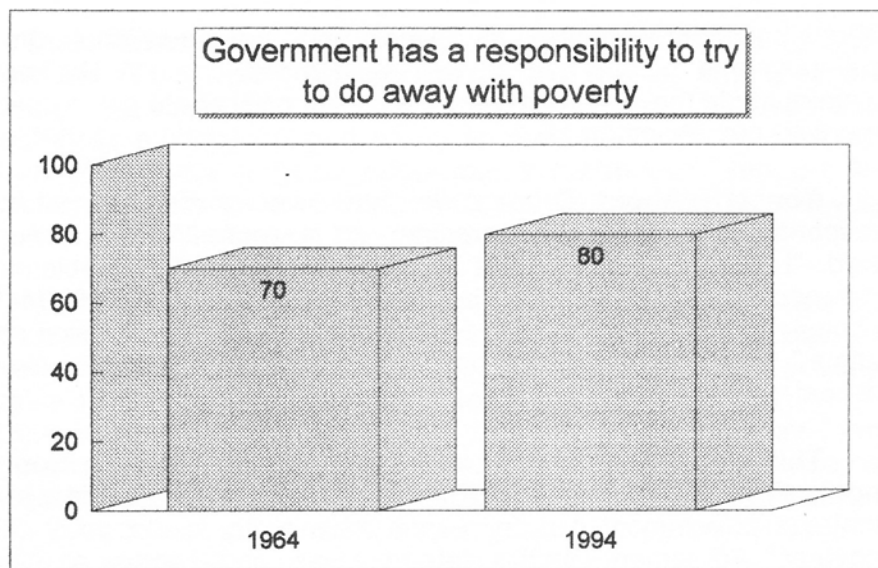
Concern About Crime: In interviews and focus groups, respondents linked poverty to crime. As a woman from Richmond said, "I think poverty is what is causing a lot of the problems... violence is a result of being in poverty." When polled, 73% (44% strongly) agreed that reducing poverty will "reduce racial tension and crime." In a May 1994 Gallup poll, 73% viewed poverty as a cause of school violence.

This motivation to try to address poverty is heavily, though not entirely, directed toward the government. Eighty percent said that the government has "a responsibility to try to do away with poverty." Agreement with this statement was spread across all major demographic groups. Though Republican support was a bit lower (67%), a majority still agreed. Even among white males, the demographic group that made the strongest shift in the 1994 election, 75% agreed that the government has a responsibility to eliminate poverty. When asked, "how high a priority should it be for the government to try to reduce the number living in poverty?" 51% said that it should be a high priority, 31% said a secondary priority and only 13% said it should be a low priority.

There is also confidence that the government can do something about poverty. Seventy-nine percent disagreed (49% strongly) with the statement that "poverty is the result of the culture that poor people are stuck in, and there is nothing that the government can do to change that." Only 19% agreed. A Richmond man explaining his answer to this question agreed that "culture is a problem" and that the government "may not be able to do everything," but, he said, "they can do something."

Public support for fighting poverty is not lower than it was during the 1960s War on Poverty. The CSPA findings contradict a widespread assumption that during the War on Poverty, an anti-poverty effort between 1964 and 1972 that introduced many of the poverty programs still in existence today, Americans felt that the government had a responsibility to address the problem of poverty but that this attitude has slackened in the intervening decades. The above-mentioned question, in which 80% said the government does "have a responsibility to try to do away with poverty in this country," was also run by the Gallup Organization in October 1964 when the War on Poverty was being instituted. At that time, 70% said the government has such a responsibility. Thus, it appears that levels of support, if anything, are higher than they were in the 1960s.

Another question in the CSPA poll that repeated one run in the 1960s asked whether the federal government should "guarantee a job to every American who wants to work, even if it means creating



a lot of public jobs like during the Depression." In 1969 when this question was asked by the Opinion Research Corporation, 64% said they would favor such a plan. In the current CSPA poll, the result was almost exactly the same at 65%.

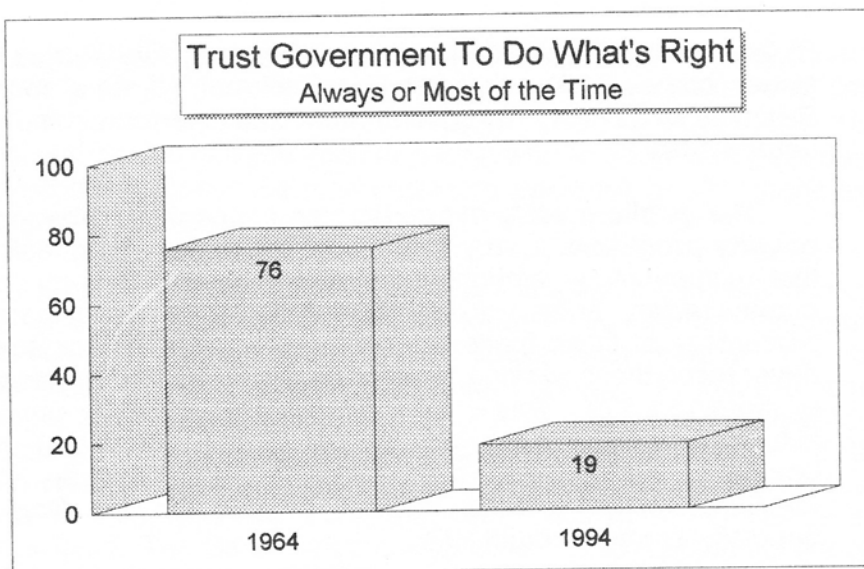
The current reluctance to spend money on welfare is also nothing new. In 1964, in another Opinion Research Corporation poll, 55% wanted to spend less on welfare, and only 25% wanted to spend more. In the current CSPA poll, 21% wanted to spend less, 29% wanted to spend more, and 47% wanted to spend the same as now for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

The reason that, in the collective memory, it may seem that support for poverty programs was higher in the 1960s is that during that period, Americans were vividly going through a process of establishing the idea that the government has a responsibility to try to deal with poverty. As we shall see, in the intervening decades, Americans have felt some frustration in the effectiveness of such governmental efforts. But the attitude that the government has a primary responsibility to fight poverty has remained solidly in place.

*"Government programs to alleviate poverty inevitably become mired in abuse, fraud, and mismanagement."
-- 75% agree*

2. The majority has a very negative attitude toward the government's performance in poverty programs. This attitude seems to rest largely on the mistaken belief that waste, fraud and abuse are so rampant in government programs that only 31% of poverty program funds are ultimately used to help the poor. This negative attitude also extends to the War on Poverty which is incorrectly viewed as having failed to reduce poverty.

Although Americans feel that the government has a high level of responsibility for addressing poverty, they have a very low



level of confidence in its efforts. Seventy-five percent agreed (48% strongly) that:

Government programs to alleviate poverty inevitably become mired in abuse, fraud and mismanagement. Ultimately, they do not help poor people and waste taxpayers money.

Only 38% said they have some or a lot of confidence in "the ability of the federal government to deal effectively with poverty," with 28% saying they have "no confidence." State governments and local governments don't fare much better—for both, 44% said they have some or a lot of confidence. (As we shall see, this lack of confidence does not extend to nongovernmental institutions attempting to deal with poverty.)

This attitude does not seem to be limited to poverty programs but seems to be part of a general lack of confidence in government. In a July 1994 Times/Mirror poll, 66% embraced the statement (54% strongly) that "government is almost always wasteful and inefficient." A June 1994 Times/Mirror poll found that 69% agreed that "when something is run by the government, it is usually inefficient and wasteful."

This lack of confidence, though, seems to be something relatively new. In 1964, when the War on Poverty was getting started, 76% expressed confidence that the government can be trusted to do what's right always or most of the time, according to a University of Michigan survey. In an August 1994 poll by Yankelovich Partners, the number expressing such confidence had plummeted to 19%

In interviews and focus groups, this negativity toward the government was intense, bordering on vitriolic. "All government is bad, bad, bad," said a man from Kalamazoo, Michigan. A

"All government is bad, bad, bad."

A man from Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Richmond man lamented, "For the last fifty years, we learned to build bigger bureaucracies that are less efficient." And a man from Baltimore exclaimed, "The government wastes so much money it is unbelievable!"

The public greatly overestimates excessive bureaucracy in poverty programs. A very strong and widely expressed feeling was that extraordinary amounts of money are eaten up by the bureaucracies. In the poll, we asked respondents to estimate "what percentage of these funds are spent to run the bureaucracies and never reach those seeking benefits?" The average estimate was an extraordinary 53%. This is *several times more* than the amount that actually goes into the administration of government poverty programs. Administrative costs for poverty programs vary from 6% for Supplemental Security Income, to 18% for Job Corps, and generally average around 12%.

We then asked how much of this amount that goes to bureaucracies "is probably unnecessary and wasted." The average estimate was 44%. Interestingly, this means that the public seems to think that the remaining 56% devoted to bureaucracy, or 30% of the total amount spent on poverty programs, is an acceptable amount to spend on administration—more than twice what is actually spent.

"I've seen too many people in the grocery store with food stamps that buy things they shouldn't be buying and drive cars nicer than the one I am driving."

A man from Mechanicsville,
Virginia

The majority believes there is widespread fraud in poverty programs. This is a major source of negative attitudes about such programs. The interviews and focus groups were replete with stories of recipients of public assistance who were perceived as not genuinely needing aid and were presumably cheating the system. "I've seen too many people in the grocery store with food stamps that buy things they shouldn't be buying and drive cars nicer than the one I am driving," said a man from Mechanicsville, Virginia. Based on reports, it appears that when someone uses food stamps, others in the grocery line are closely scrutinizing their purchases for signs of luxury.

Sometimes the criterion for a legitimate recipient was quite severe. "I just think there are a lot of people who get along better than what the government gives them credit for," said a man from Kalamazoo, Michigan. "The people on my street, maybe you would call them poor, but I wouldn't... none of them are skinny or starving to death." But in most stories, recipients perceived as undeserving showed more extreme signs of wealth.

A number of polls have found similar attitudes toward welfare recipients. An April 1994 CNN/USA Today poll found that 68% agreed that "most people who receive welfare payments ... are taking advantage of the system." A similar question in a May 1994 Time/CNN poll found that 52% assumed that most welfare recipients were taking advantage.

In the CSPA poll, we asked people to estimate actual fraud in poverty programs overall. When asked, "Of the amount that does not go to bureaucracies and does go to services for the poor, what percent do you imagine goes to people who lie about their needs and cheat the system?" the mean estimate was 35%, or 16% of the total spending on poverty programs.

According to informed sources, this is a major overestimation. It is, of course, difficult to estimate fraud in government programs. Nevertheless, most experts we spoke with believe that the percentage of poverty program funds that goes to fraud is in the single digit dimension. There have also been some studies that support this perspective. The Quality Control Division of the Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services found that only 1.4% of AFDC claims are fraudulent. The General Accounting Office (GAO) carried out a study of Medicaid claims in the 1980s and found that 3-5% were fraudulent. According to the House Committee on Ways and Means, an estimated 4% of food stamps went to overpayments based on client-related error, some of which may have been intentional. The highest estimate of possible fraud was in a 1992 GAO report which estimated that 21% of HUD subsidized households reported earning a lower income than their tax returns showed they earned. However, the methods used in this study are controversial and, as noted in the report, the actual level of fraud may well be half the amount estimated.

Putting together the various estimates of survey respondents of how much government spending is whittled away by bureaucracy, waste, and fraud, it is not surprising that Americans have such negative feelings about government poverty programs. Given that the average respondent estimates 53% of the poverty program funds are absorbed by the bureaucracies and 35% of the remaining 47% goes to fraud, this means that *the average respondent assumes that only 31% of the funds that go into poverty programs ultimately serves the poor.*

Despite this grim view, there was little support for governmental efforts to try harder to police cheating. When asked whether they would like to see more or less "administrative oversight to make sure that there is less cheating" only 33% favored more of such oversight. A plurality of respondents (41%) said that they would actually prefer less administrative oversight, while 22% would prefer the same

	Perceived	Actual
Administrative costs	53%	Approximately 12%
Fraud	16%	Less than 10%
Benefits to poor	31%	78% or More

amount as now. This suggests that Americans are very pessimistic about the government's ability to control fraud and abuse in its programs.

Respondents were also asked, if Congress were to pass a law that limits administrative costs to 20% of the funds for such programs, whether they would then favor spending more, less, or the same as now. Thirty-five percent said they would want to spend more, 19% less, and 42% to keep spending the same. These numbers are only slightly higher when respondents were asked elsewhere in the questionnaire whether they now favor spending more or less on poverty programs overall. Presumably this is because respondents assume that if administrative costs were cut there would be more money available for actual services. As a Baltimore man explained, "I'd say that if the money goes direct without any waste, I'd spend less on poverty programs...I wouldn't need to [spend more] if they would do the right thing and the revenue was used properly."

The negative attitudes about government poverty programs extend back to the War on Poverty, the progenitor of many current government poverty programs. Naturally, not all respondents remember the War on Poverty since many of them were not yet born at that time, but 57% of the total sample said they did remember it. [Awareness went up with age, with 27% of those 18 to 25 and 70% of those over 65 aware of the War on Poverty. Awareness also went up with increasing education, with 67% of college graduates being aware. Interestingly, though, those who did not finish high school were more aware (50%) than those who did (39%)].

Of these who remembered the War on Poverty, 55% said they had negative feelings about it (23% very negative), while 38% said they had positive feelings (10% very positive).

Respondents were then asked in an open-ended question why they had those feelings. Among those who expressed negative feelings, the most common answer, cited by 45%, was that the War on Poverty had failed to reduce poverty. Another 4% complained that the War on Poverty did not go far enough in the effort to reduce poverty. Thus for many, negative attitudes about the War on Poverty were not based on a rejection of the purposes and intentions of the War on Poverty. This further corroborates the view that *negative attitudes about government poverty programs are primarily derived from frustration with government performance in the service of certain values, not a rejection of those values.*

Apparently the view that the War on Poverty failed to reduce poverty is widely held though it is incorrect. In another question, only 26% said they thought the War on Poverty had cut poverty. Forty-four percent said that it had no effect, while 25% percent said that it had actually increased poverty, with 13% saying that it had increased poverty "a lot." In fact between 1964 and 1973, the

number of Americans living under the poverty line decreased from 36 million to 23 million according to Census Bureau statistics.

In the open-ended question the second most common reason given for negative feelings about the War on Poverty, cited by 22%, was that it "put lots of people on welfare and made them dependent." This was also the explanation respondents gave in the focus groups and interviews for how the War on Poverty actually made poverty worse. As one Richmond man said:

I think the [War on Poverty] is what got people to the point where they were keeping them [poor]. For instance, when the system initiated food stamps, they initiated paying for children to have babies and subsidize them. It put in their minds, 'Let's stay this way.'

Another man from Richmond said:

What you are doing is creating dependency when you keep giving someone something versus teaching them to do it themselves.

The third most common reason given for negative feelings about the War on Poverty, cited by 14%, was that it created a big government bureaucracy. This was the point of a third Richmond man who said:

You start out with all of these good intentions--the programs--and what happens is you end up paying for bureaucracy and you don't solve the problem.

"You start out with all these good intentions. . .and. . . you end up paying for bureaucracy, and you don't solve the problem."

Yet a substantial minority, 38% of those polled, had positive feelings toward the War on Poverty. When asked why they had these positive feelings in an open-ended question, 29% said because they believed, correctly, that the War on Poverty did help reduce poverty. One Baltimore man who participated in the focus group explained:

It did help lift people, it seemed. If you applied, you didn't get a lot of money, but the training you got was very valuable that if you kept pursuing it, it paid off for you later on.

A man from Richmond, Virginia

Other focus group participants spoke from personal experience. A Baltimore man shared this story:

I remember being a younger kid and a lot of older kids were getting jobs in the summer. I know it was a big thing that they all looked forward to, and it seemed to help motivate their self-esteem and the fact that they could count on the program.

And a Baltimore woman added:

At the time, it was desperately needed. My father worked in a war plant in the forties and did not serve in the army or navy. Through

the War on Poverty, certain benefits accrued and my parents were able to save and get into the first home we ever had.

3. Despite negative impressions about government performance, the majority wants to maintain or increase spending on poverty programs overall and strongly favors increasing spending on some specific programs and some poor populations. Despite the negative view of the War on Poverty, programs that grew out of it are some of the most popular candidates for spending increases.

Even though Americans view government poverty programs as so wasteful, only a small minority wants to reduce spending on them. When respondents were asked about spending on poverty programs overall, only 21% said they wanted to cut spending, with just 9% wanting to cut a lot. A plurality of 46% wanted to keep spending the same, while 32% wanted to increase. Thus, a majority of 78% wanted to either keep spending the same or increase it. This majority appeared in every demographic group. Republican support was slightly lower at 68%, while white males were 73%.

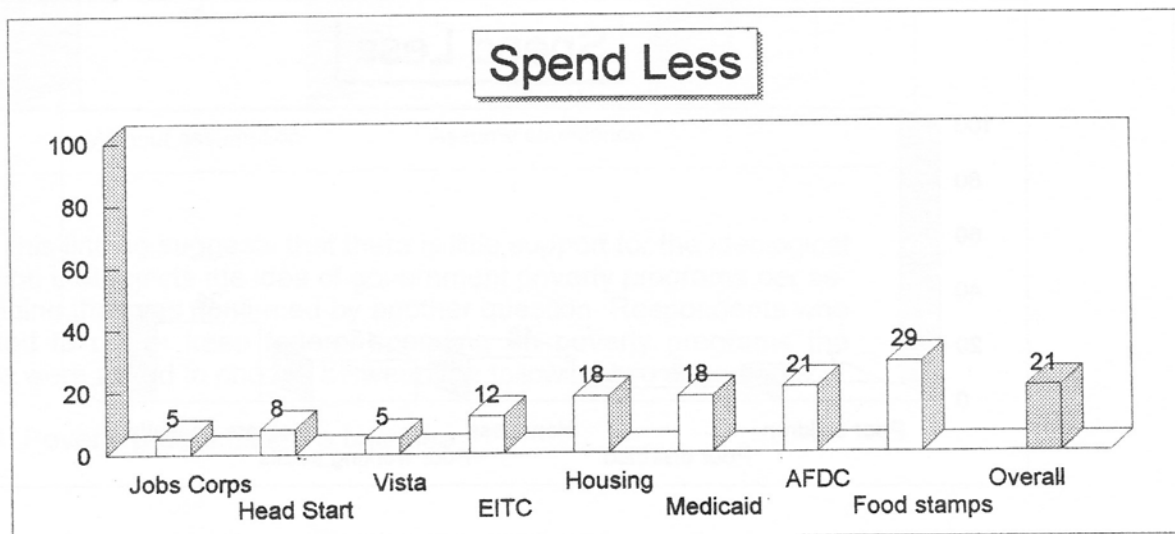
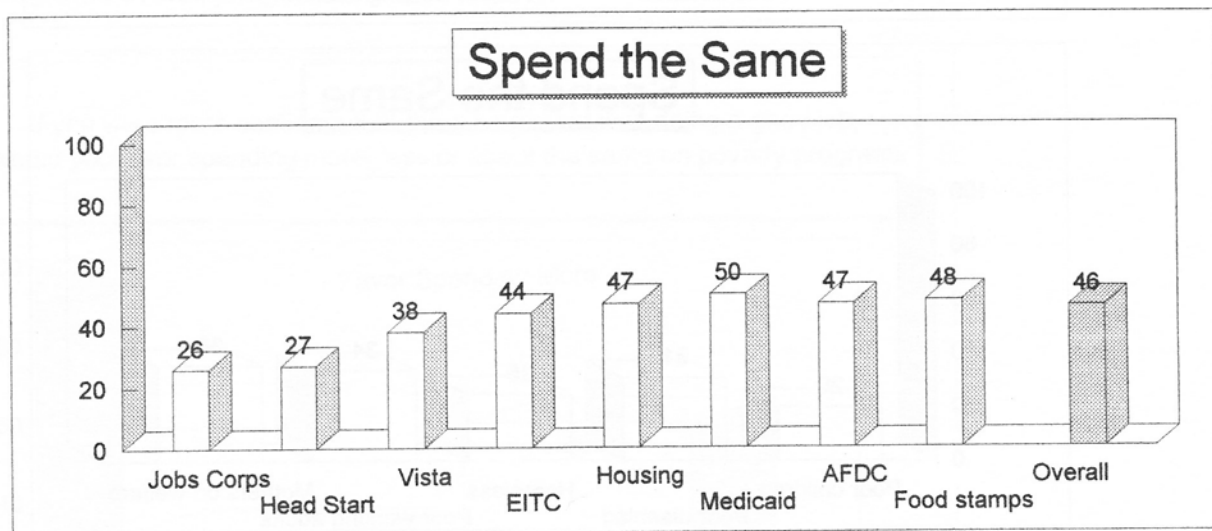
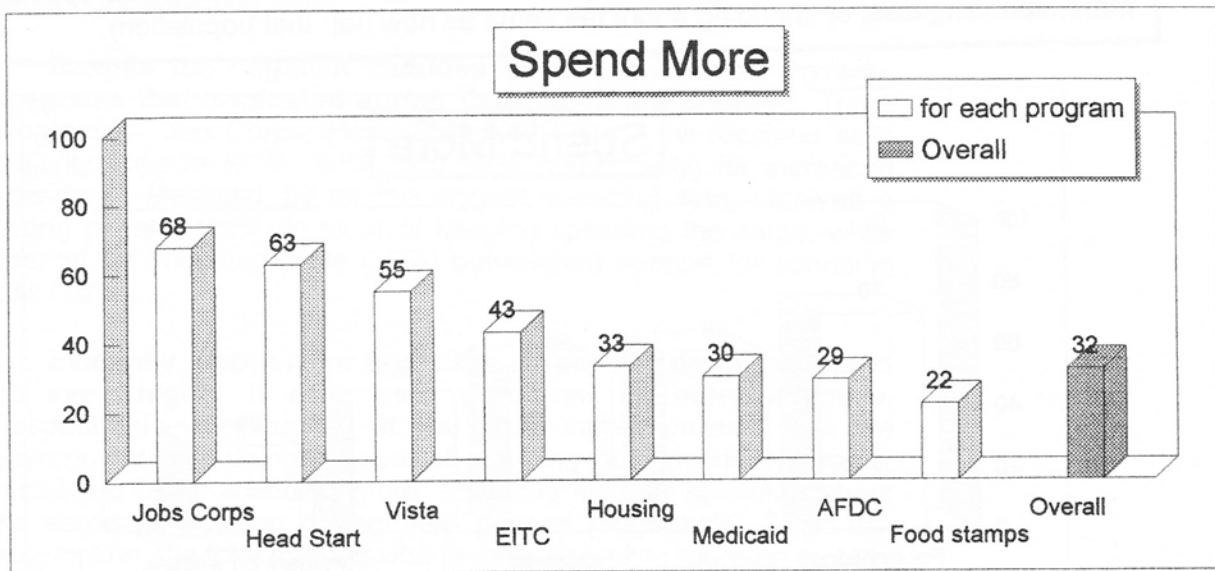
Similarly, a May 1994 Time/CNN poll asked about spending on "assistance to the poor" and found only 23% saying that the government is spending "too much." A plurality of 47% said the government is spending "too little," and 19% said it was spending the "right amount."

Support for spending was sustained even when respondents thought in terms of the consequences to their own taxes. Respondents were informed how much the average taxpayer spends on poverty programs overall, \$355, and reminded that their own taxes could be higher or lower depending on their income. To urge respondents to think in terms of the consequences to their own taxes, when asked about their attitudes on present spending levels respondents were told to assume that "any change in spending would also affect your taxes." Nonetheless, as mentioned, only 21% said they wanted to cut spending, while a plurality of 46% wanted to keep spending the same, and 32% wanted to increase it.

Respondents were also asked about spending on specific programs. In each case respondents were told how much the average taxpayer pays in taxes for such programs. Nonetheless, support for spending more outweighed support for cutting spending on five out of the six poverty programs considered. Support for spending more ranged from 22% for food stamps to 68% for Job Corps, while support for cutting spending ranged from 5% for Job Corps to 29% for food stamps.

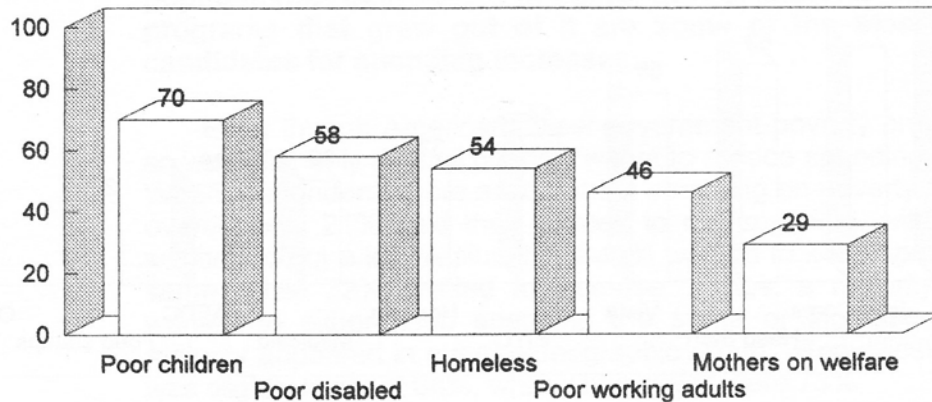
Respondents were also asked to consider spending on specific poor populations. For four out of the five poor populations

Assuming that any change in spending would also affect your taxes, I would like to know if you would favor increasing spending, cutting spending or keeping total spending about the same as now (on the following programs).

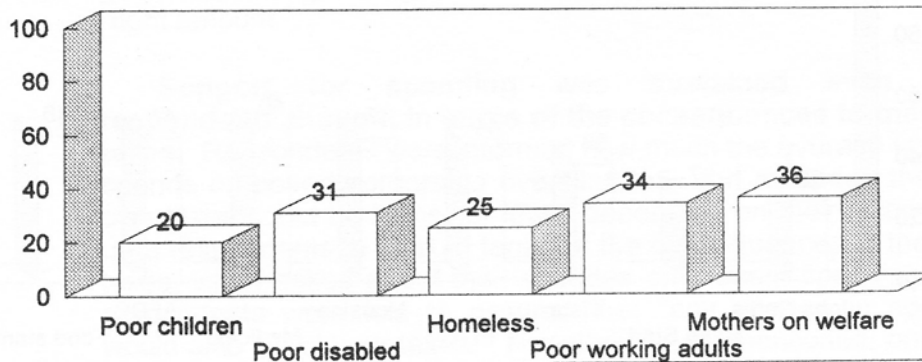


I am going to ask about certain populations that receive aid from government poverty programs. I would like to know if you think the federal government should be spending more, spending less, or spending about the same as now (for that population).

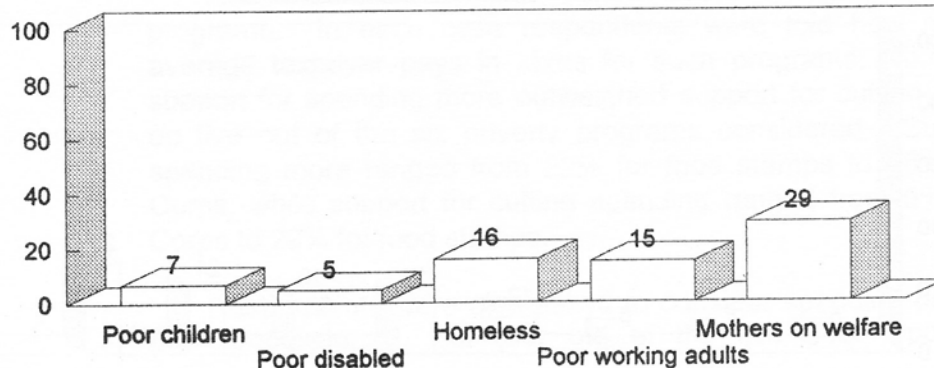
Spend More



Spend the Same



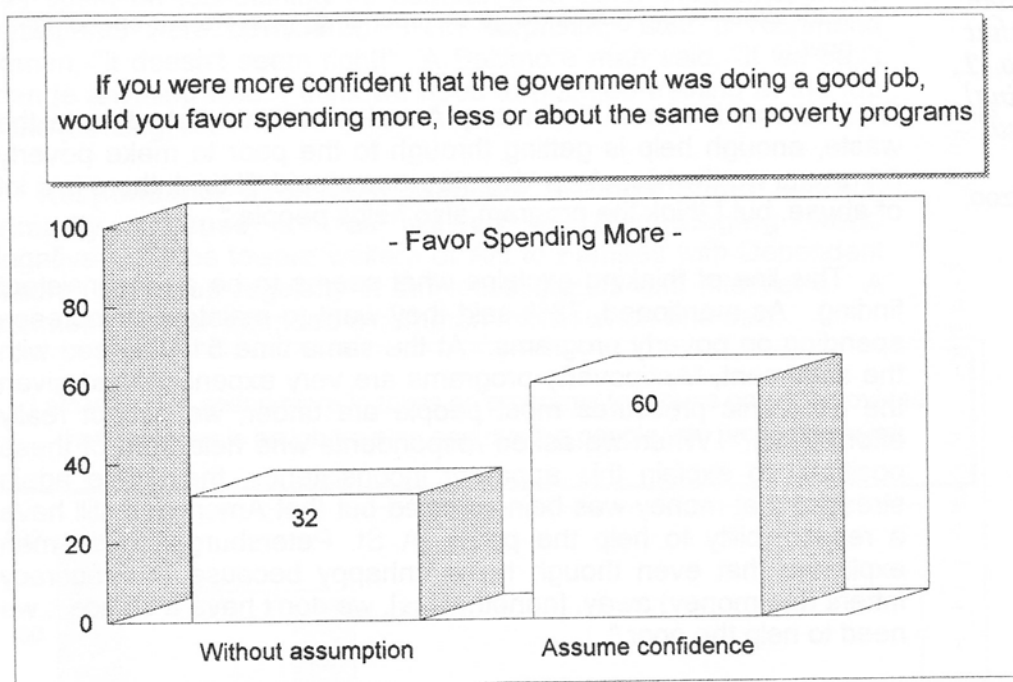
Spend Less



considered, a plurality or a majority favored spending more. In only one case, mothers on welfare, the plurality favored spending the same as now, and support for spending less was the same as support for spending more.

Despite the negative attitudes about the War on Poverty, programs that originated during that period are popular. Three programs -- Job Corps, Head Start and Vista -- all received solid majority support (68%, 63%, and 55% respectively) for increased spending. Medicaid, by far the biggest spending item, received a strong plurality (50%) in favor of keeping spending the same, while support for spending more (30%) outweighed support for spending less (18%).

Evidently, support for spending on poverty programs could go even higher if they were perceived as more effective. Respondents were asked, "If you were more confident that the government was doing a good job carrying out poverty programs, would you favor spending more, spending less, or spending about the same as now on government poverty programs?" With this assumption, the total number who favored spending more on poverty programs overall jumped from 32% to 60%.



This finding suggests that there is little support for the ideological position that rejects the idea of government poverty programs per se--a finding that was confirmed by another question. Respondents who wanted to cut or keep federal spending on poverty programs the same were asked to choose between the following two statements:

1. Poverty programs are a bad idea

2. Poverty programs are a good idea, but the government does a bad job of carrying them out.

Only 9% chose the first option, 84% the second.

Even if the government performs poorly on poverty programs, many Americans feel that it still has an obligation to try to help the poor. As an interview respondent from San Jose explained:

[Government] does a bad job carrying out [poverty programs] sometimes, but I think we have to do it. There are certain people who definitely need help. I think we are obligated to help these people.

Another interview respondent, this time a Kalamazoo, Michigan man, revealed how he wrestled with the conflict between his frustration with the effectiveness of government programs and an apparent sense of obligation.

"I would favor spending more if it would make a difference, but it wouldn't. So, in that case, I favor spending less. But that wouldn't work either. so, I guess we go on [spending] what we are spending now."

I would favor spending more if it would make a difference, but it wouldn't. So, in that case, I favor spending less. But that wouldn't work either. So, I guess we go on [spending] what we are spending now.

A man from Kalamazoo, Michigan

On balance, it seems that many Americans think that, despite the waste, enough help is getting through to the poor to make poverty programs worthwhile. As a Virginia woman said, "I think there is a lot of abuse, but I think the program also helps people."

This line of thinking explains what seems to be an inconsistent finding. As mentioned, 78% said they want to maintain or increase spending on poverty programs. At the same time 51% agreed with the statement, "Antipoverty programs are very expensive and given the economic pressures most people are under, we cannot really afford them." When we asked respondents who held both of these positions to explain this apparent inconsistency, they once again stressed that money was being wasted but that Americans still have a responsibility to help the poor. A St. Petersburg, Florida man explained that even though he is unhappy because "bureaucracy fritters (the money) away, [nonetheless], we don't have a choice... we need to help the poor."

4. The public overwhelmingly supports programs that emphasize moving poor people into productive work. Welfare elicits strong negative feelings and there is much support for setting time limits. However, there is virtually no support for simply eliminating welfare and little support for cutting spending on it. Rather, there is very strong support for job training and large-scale jobs programs, not only for current welfare recipients but for all able-bodied Americans willing to work.

Consistent with the American work ethic, a strong majority of Americans consistently support programs that involve job training and helping poor people acquire jobs. They are also ready to spend tax money in support of this value. A resounding 83% agreed with the following statement:

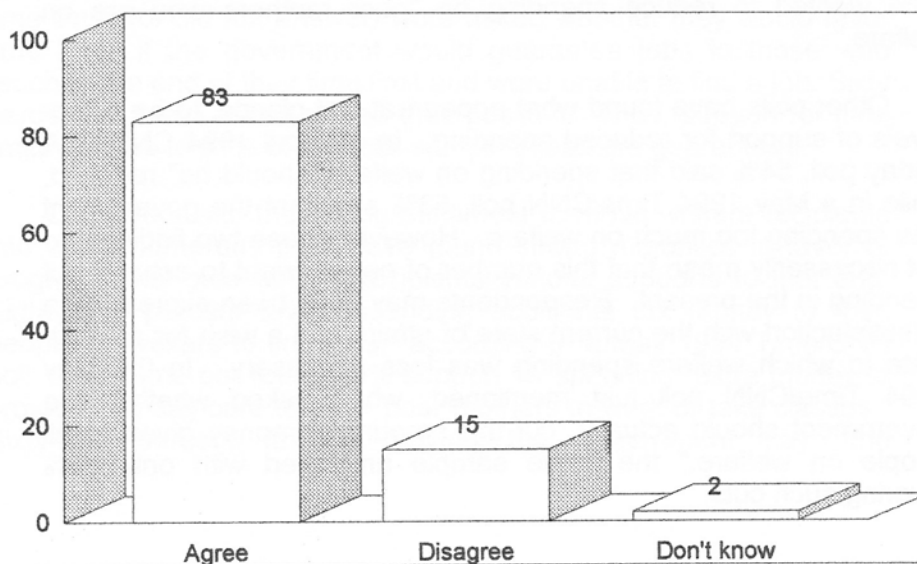
I am willing to spend more in taxes on programs to reduce poverty provided that the focus is on job training and moving people into productive work.

In the questions on spending, the program that received the highest level of support was the job training program, Job Corps--68% wanted to increase spending, and only 5% wanted to cut it. A January 1994 CBS/New York Times poll also found 61% support for increasing spending on job training, with only 10% wanting to decrease it.

This strong support for job training came through strongly in the focus groups as well. To most participants, the value of job training for the poor was apparent: "I mean, people need to learn how to do a job so that they can go out and get a job," explained a Baltimore woman. When participants were informed how much federal money was spent on job training as compared to other programs, many participants were bewildered. "I'm surprised," said a Richmond woman, "It doesn't seem right!" A Baltimore man said, "If we can't change anything else, I think we need to put...job training at the top of the [funding] list."

Respondents expressed negative feelings about welfare, primarily because it was viewed as discouraging work. Negative attitudes toward welfare or Aid to Families with Dependent Children came up regularly in the focus groups and interviews. A Richmond woman sounded a common refrain when she said:

I am willing to spend more in taxes on programs to reduce poverty provided that the focus is on job training and moving people into productive work



"You hear this all the time - that they have a job but they can make more money on welfare so they quit their jobs. Wouldn't you? I would."

-- A woman from Richmond, Virginia

We make it better off for a person not to work. And you hear this all the time--that they have a job but they can make more on welfare so they quit their jobs. Wouldn't you? I would.

Other polls have found negative attitudes about welfare for this same reason. A May 1994 Time/CNN poll found that 84% think that "the current welfare system" discourages poor people from efforts to "find work." Seventy-one percent embraced the statement that "The welfare system does more harm than good because it encourages the breakup of the family and discourages the work ethic," according to a January 1994 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll.

The concern that poverty programs can discourage work also appeared in the CSPA poll. One of the key reasons given for negative attitudes about the War on Poverty is that it put many people on welfare and made them dependent. Also, 68% agreed with the argument that:

Programs to reduce poverty, while well-intentioned, make people dependent. They take away people's initiative, degrade them and ultimately end up making the problem of poverty worse.

This argument garnered agreement from majorities in all demographic groups, including 66% of Democrats.

Only a very small minority, though, want to eliminate welfare. In the CSPA poll, only 10% said they want to eliminate welfare. Support for eliminating welfare was only slightly higher among Republicans (14%) and white males (15%). Other polls found even lower levels of support. A May 1994 Time/CNN poll found 7% support for eliminating welfare and 91% opposition. A November 1993 US News and World Report poll found 8% in favor, and an April 1994 CNN/USA Today poll found 10% support for ending government spending on welfare.

Even support for cutting spending on welfare is quite low. In the CSPA poll, only 21% wanted to cut spending on AFDC, while only 29% wanted to reduce spending on "poor mothers who are on welfare."

Other polls have found what appear, at first glance, to be higher levels of support for reduced spending. In an April 1994 CNN/USA Today poll, 54% said that spending on welfare "should be" reduced, while in a May 1994 Time/CNN poll, 53% said that the government was spending too much on welfare. However, these two findings do not necessarily mean that this number of people want to actually cut spending in the present. Respondents may have been expressing a dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and a wish for a future state in which welfare spending was less necessary. In the May 1994 Time/CNN poll just mentioned, when asked whether the government should actually "cut the amount of money given to all people on welfare," the same sample answered with only 25% favoring such cuts.

"Programs to reduce poverty, while well-intentioned, make people dependent."
-- 68% agree

The majority does support time limits on welfare, but as part of a program that helps welfare recipients find jobs. In the CSPA poll, when respondents were asked to consider various options for welfare, 67% favored having a two-year time limit on welfare, 18% favored the present system with no time limit, while 10% favored eliminating welfare entirely. Similarly, a November 1993 poll by Peter Hart found 65% support for a two-year time limit, and a July 1994 Times/Mirror poll found 76% support. However, a November 1993 US News and World Report poll found that only 22% favored the proposal when it specified that the plan would "not allow people to get back on welfare ever."

Respondents were then asked, if time limits are instated, whether it should be the government's responsibility to make sure jobs are available for welfare recipients whose time limits have run out and who have been unable to find a job on their own. They were told that this might be a community service job or a subsidized job with a private company. Seventy percent said the government should take such a responsibility.

Other polls also show consensus around the idea of coupling time limits with assurances of a job. A November 1993 Peter Hart poll found overwhelming support for giving recipients who had reached the end of their limit a public service job, as compared to just 12% who said that they would favor simply ending benefits. Eighty-eight percent agreed that "it's not fair to cut off benefits without guaranteeing a job." In an April 1994 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, 59% preferred a welfare reform proposal that required recipients "to take a job whenever one became available, but no one would lose benefits without being offered a job," while 36% favored cutting off benefits after two years "whether or not there were jobs available." A November 1993 US News and World Report poll found 88% support for either giving former welfare recipients a community service position or a guaranteed job, as opposed to 7% who said benefits should simply be ended.

*"It's not fair to cut off
benefits without guarantee-
ing a job."
-- 88% agree*

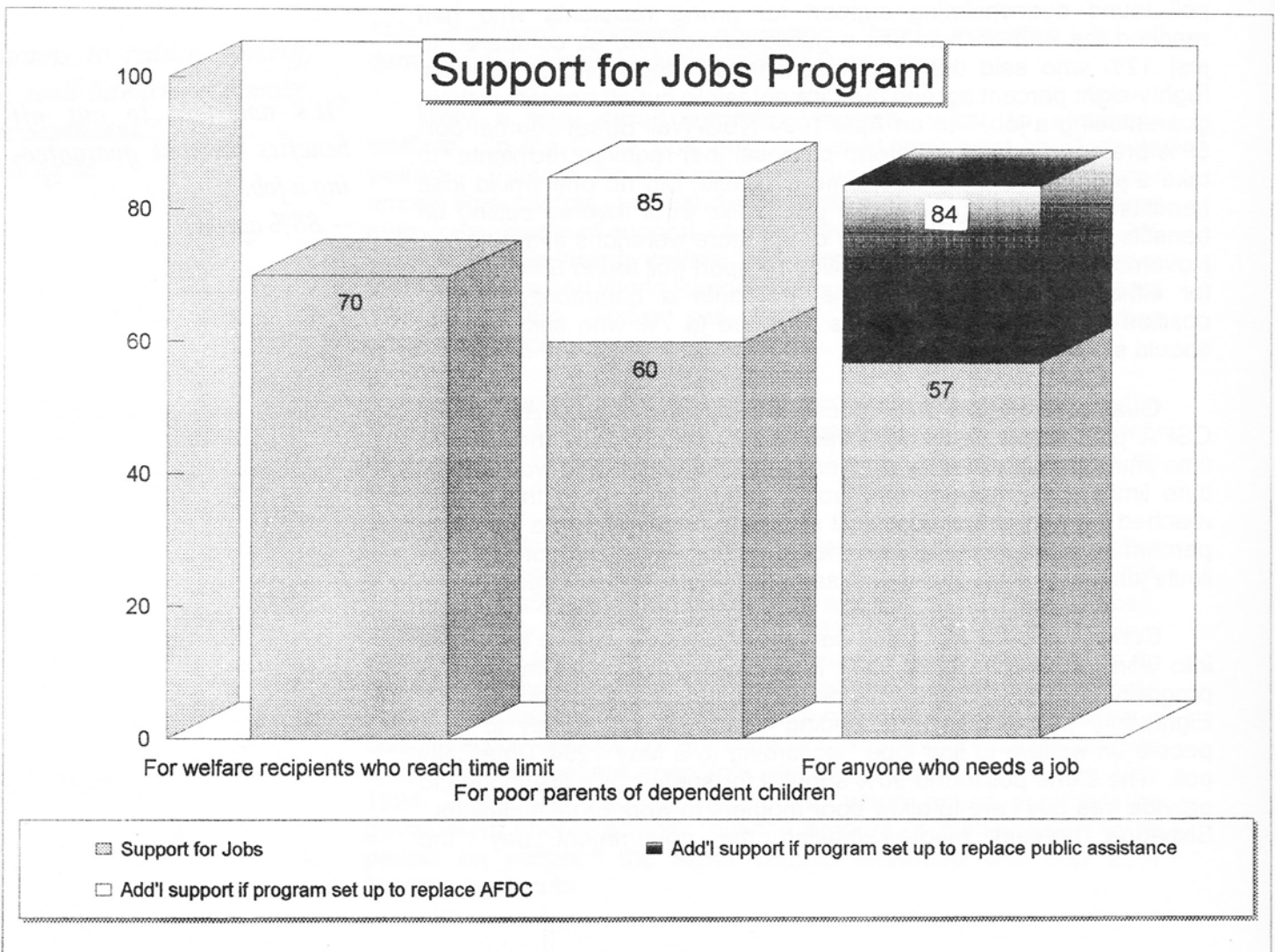
Guaranteeing jobs also increases support for time limits. In the CSPA poll, respondents who had previously opposed the idea of time limits (or did not answer) were asked whether they would favor time limits if the government would guarantee jobs to those who reached the end of their time limit and were unable to find a job. Sixty percent of those asked shifted their position. Thus, support for time limits jumped to 81% of the total sample if jobs are guaranteed.

Consistent with the strong sentiment to move welfare recipients into work, numerous polls have found strong majorities in favor of programs that give welfare recipients various supports to that end. Eighty-four percent favor "spending additional tax money to train people on welfare to find jobs," according to a May 1994 Time/CNN poll. The same poll found 90% support for spending "extra money to provide free day care to allow poor mothers to work or take classes." Sixty-one percent favored having the government pay "the

costs of commuting to a job or job training classes," according to an April 1994 CNN/USA Today poll.

Polls that have pressed respondents to consider the economic costs of such welfare reform programs have still found positive results. An April 1994 Los Angeles Times poll described a comprehensive welfare reform proposal that included job training, guaranteed jobs, and subsidized child care and explained that such a plan "could end up costing over 50 billion dollars in a ten year period." Nonetheless, 69% of the total sample thought that such a proposal would be "worth the price." A May 1994 poll by Princeton Survey Research Associates found that 56% were willing "to pay higher taxes to provide job training and public service jobs to help people get off welfare."

Apparently, this support rests, at least in part, on the view, discussed previously, that such programs can be a good economic investment in the long term. A November 1993 US News and World Report poll found that 56% thought that reforming welfare would cost the government more in the "short term," while 57% thought that in the "long term" it would cost the government less.



Such attitudes were also expressed in the follow-up interviews. A Michigan man explained that he would support a jobs program as an alternative to welfare because it would ultimately create "a more productive economy." He also accepted that such an effort might take time and short term costs to bring results: "I'm not interested in a quick-fix. I'd pay more so that we could accomplish something for the country."

"I'm not interested in a quick-fix. I'd pay more [for a jobs program] so that we could accomplish something for the country."

A Michigan man

Even large-scale jobs programs receive strong support. To find out more about how far the support for government efforts to promote employment might go, the CSPA poll asked two different questions about expanded government jobs programs, one for each half of the sample. One dealt with the prospect of making jobs available to all poor parents with dependent children:

Some people argue that to reduce the number of people on welfare and to make sure children are adequately cared for, the government should make sure jobs are available to all poor fathers and mothers with dependent children when the parents want a job but cannot find one. Others argue that such an idea would cost too much money.

Despite the reminder that such a program may cost additional money, 60% said they favored the idea.

Those who said that they opposed the idea of such a program (or did not answer) were then asked whether they would favor or oppose the idea "if such a jobs program for poor fathers and mothers was set up as a way to replace...AFDC?" Sixty-three percent of this group said they then would favor such a program, raising the total support to an overwhelming 85%. Presumably many of those who originally supported the program assumed that the program would reduce the number of people on welfare. But a certain number, 15% of the total sample, needed to hear it stated explicitly that the program would actually be a means to "replace" welfare.

The other half of the sample heard a very ambitious proposal to make jobs available to all adults who need them:

Some people argue that if the government offers jobs to former welfare recipients, the government should make sure jobs are available to anyone who needs a job, because this would be better than having people be unemployed or on welfare. Others argue that this would cost too much money.

A slightly smaller majority, 57%, favored this proposal. When, in a follow-up question, the program was presented as a way to "replace public assistance programs for able-bodied adults, such as welfare and food stamps," support jumped to an overwhelming 84%.

Elsewhere in the poll a similar question was asked:

Some people have proposed that the federal government guarantee a job to every American who wants to work, even if it means creating a lot of public jobs, like during the Depression. Would you favor or oppose such a job guarantee plan?

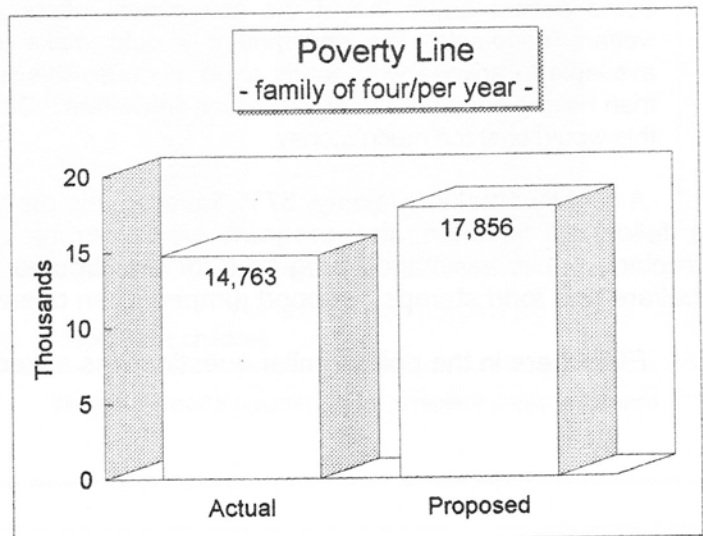
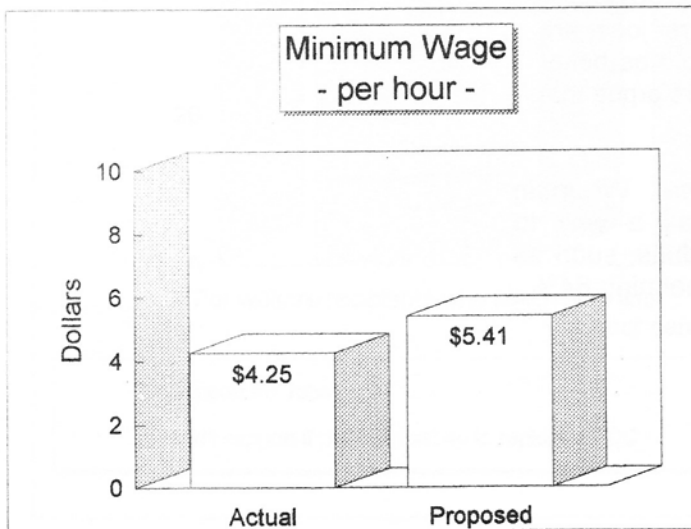
Sixty-five percent said they would favor such a plan, 41% strongly. Even among Republicans, such a job guarantee plan received significant support (50%).

Other polls have also found very strong support for a large-scale jobs program. Eighty-seven percent favored (57% strongly) having "the government provide public service jobs to poor people who want work but cannot find a job," according to a November 1993 Peter Hart poll. A May 1994 Time/CNN poll found 74% favoring "replac[ing] welfare with a system of guaranteed jobs."

5. The majority is ready to give more support to the working poor through raising the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation, while a plurality is ready to give more benefits to the working poor.

Consistent with their emphasis on the value of work, many Americans are willing to give more support to the working poor than they currently receive. An October 1994 poll conducted by CNN found that 59% are dissatisfied "with the opportunity for a poor person in this country to get ahead by working hard" and 74% said they thought "the actions by the federal government in the last twenty years have made this situation worse."

In the CSPA poll, 73% said that the minimum wage is too low, while only 2% said it is too high. Respondents were then asked what they thought the minimum wage should be and to make sure they really considered the potential consequences of an increase, they were reminded that "any increase would likely result in a slight increase in the costs of goods and services." Nonetheless, the mean amount set was \$5.41 per hour -- approximately 27% above the present level of \$4.25 per hour. Respondents were also asked whether the minimum wage should be indexed to inflation (which is presently not the case.) An overwhelming 76% said that it should.



A smaller number of Americans, but still a solid plurality, favors increasing benefits to the working poor. Forty-six percent favored spending more government funds to help the working poor, with only 15% favoring spending less. Forty-three percent favored spending more for the Earned Income Tax Credit, with 12% favoring spending less.

To give respondents a realistic picture of the economic situation of the working poor, including the extent of current benefits, respondents were presented with a hypothetical scenario of a young woman named Margaret. This scenario was varied: in half the cases she was described as earning the minimum wage, while in the other half she was described as earning slightly more than the minimum wage--\$6.00 per hour. The sample was also split to vary her race between black and white, resulting in four different versions. Margaret was then described as receiving most of the benefits she could receive from federal sources given her income, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (which through a refund would actually increase her income), food stamps, and Medicaid for her children.

Below is how Margaret was portrayed. The half sample that heard Margaret's income as \$4.25 per hour, had her corresponding benefits described as the first item of each of the following parentheses. The other half that heard Margaret's income as \$6.00 per hour, had her corresponding benefits described as the second item in the following parentheses. Rent for the \$6.00-an-hour Margaret was set slightly higher than for the \$4.25-an-hour Margaret.

Now I am going to ask you to think about a hypothetical person. Let's call this person Margaret. Margaret is a (black/white) 29-year-old woman with two children. Her husband left her about six months ago and cannot be found. She works full time in a small store where she makes (the minimum wage of \$4.25 per hour/\$6.00 per hour). Her children get medical coverage through Medicaid, but she does not. Together with the Earned Income Tax Credit she has an average monthly income of (\$865 per month/\$1,119 per month). She gets (\$289/\$197) in food stamps and she pays (\$336/382) month rent. This means that with the value of her food stamps she has (\$872/\$933) left to pay for food, full-time child care, her health insurance and the rest of the expenses for her and her children.

After hearing the scenario, respondents were asked whether they regarded Margaret as poor. When Margaret was described as receiving \$4.25 per hour, an overwhelming 79% saw Margaret as poor, while at \$6.00 per hour, 65% saw her as poor.

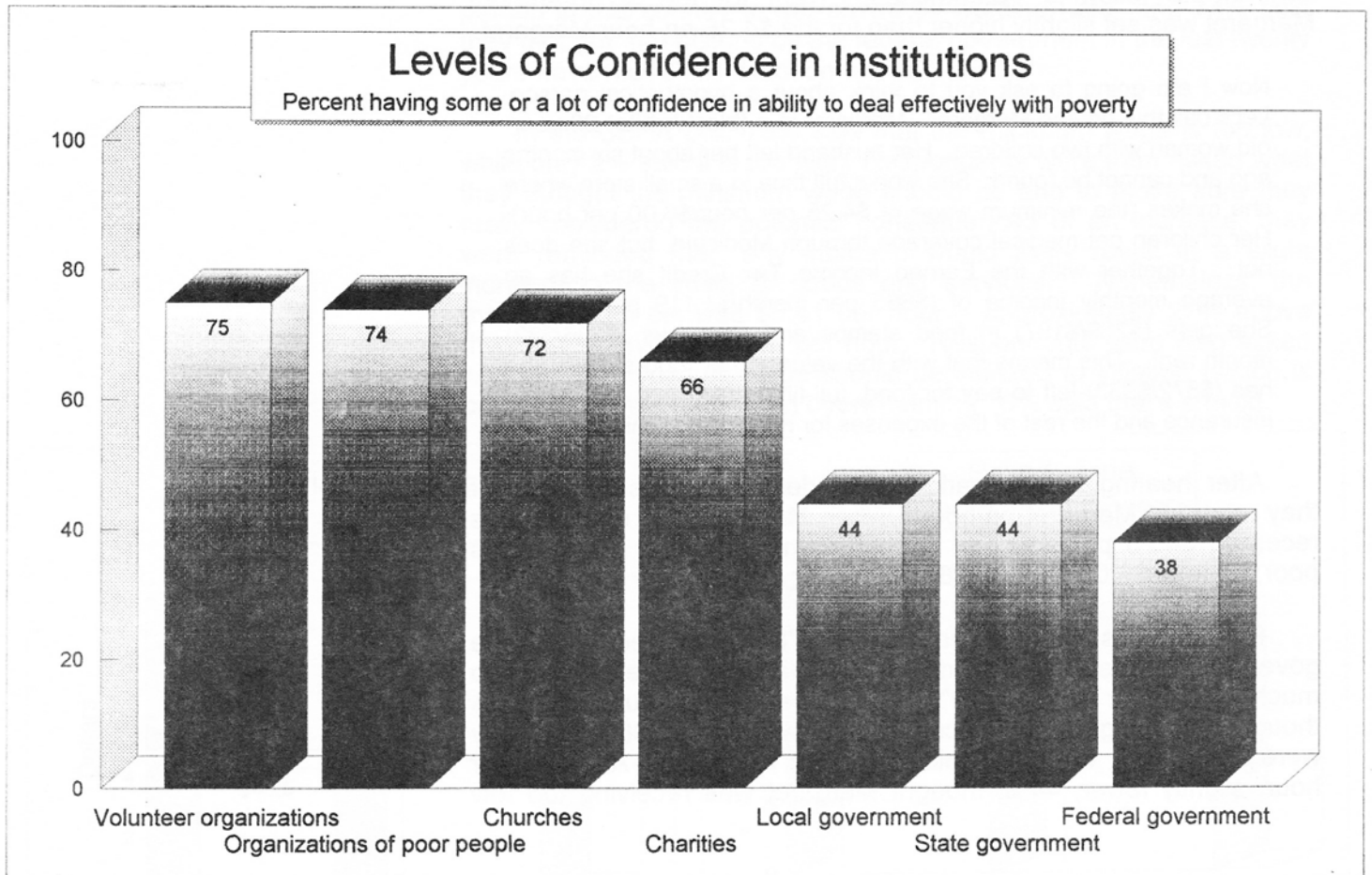
Respondents were then asked, "Do you feel that the government benefits that someone like Margaret is getting are too much, too little or about right?" At \$4.25 per hour, a plurality of 49% thought that Margaret was receiving too few benefits; 38% said they were about right, while 9% said they were too much. At \$6.00 per hour, slightly fewer, 44%, thought Margaret was receiving too few

benefits, while the number who thought the benefits she was receiving was about right went up a bit, also to 44%. The number saying she was receiving too many benefits stayed constant at 9%.

Looking at the difference in responses to Margaret described as white as compared to Margaret described as black, there were no significant differences in the perception of Margaret as poor or as deserving benefits.

6. In contrast to the low levels of confidence in government to fight poverty, the public has a high level of confidence in volunteer organizations, churches, charities and organizations of poor people working in their community. A majority also wants business to play a larger role in fighting poverty.

When asked which institutions or groups they felt confident could be effective on poverty, survey respondents placed government at the bottom of their lists. Only 38% of respondents had some or a lot of confidence that federal government can be effective in dealing with poverty. State and local governments were only slightly higher -- for each, 44% of respondents said they had some or a lot of confidence.



On the other hand, all nongovernmental institutions asked about received high marks. People have the most confidence in volunteer organizations -- 75% of respondents said they had some or a lot of confidence in volunteer organizations to deal effectively with poverty. Confidence levels are also high for organizations of poor people working in their community (74%), churches (72%), and charities (66%).

Participants in the focus groups and interviews stressed that their confidence in nongovernmental institutions was higher because they sensed a higher quality of moral commitment. For example a St. Petersburg, Florida, man told why he has faith in the ability of volunteer organizations to fight poverty: "If someone volunteers -- if their level of consciousness has risen so high that they want to help - then they are more motivated to help poor people." In his view, "There is more incentive with volunteer organizations" to actively help the poor.

Nongovernmental institutions are also seen to be more in touch with the needs of people. For example, a Richmond woman asserted that "[Control] needs to be more in the hands of people that live in society instead of those that sit around a desk for a job." A Baltimore man believes that organizations that are in the community, and "made up of people from that community,... have more compassion about the people they are dealing with."

These attitudes also seem to flow from a feeling that the responsibility for poverty does not only rest in the government but extends to society as a whole. Eighty-five percent polled agreed that "Society has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty." This number was a bit higher than the 80% who agreed that "The government has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty."

Consistent with this sense of the responsibility of the larger society, the majority wants business to play a more central role in fighting poverty. When asked to choose between two statements, 64% agreed that "businesses have a moral responsibility to give something back to the community by making efforts to help the poor," while 30% took the position that "businesses should not be expected to take on the job of trying to help the poor."

This feeling that business needs to play a larger role in fighting poverty was a strong theme in the focus groups and interviews. "Business has the money," explained a man from Mechanicsville, Virginia, "We just need to get them in the act -- they are absolutely non-players today."

Several focus group members also mentioned the need for businesses and government to work closely together to fight poverty. "I think we've learned in the last ten or fifteen years that funneling government money back into the community in public-private partnerships works," asserted a Richmond man. He has faith that

*"Business has the money
...We just need to get them
in the act -- they are
absolutely non-players to-
day."*

A man from Mechanicsville,
Virginia

such partnerships can be effective in fighting poverty because "the people who are going to be affected by [the programs] will be involved in [running] them." And for many, having the government subsidize jobs in the private sector was preferable to government-created jobs. Businesses were also seen as a good source of on-the-job training.

A plurality (48%) also favored having the government pay private companies to run anti-poverty programs whenever possible. Such an approach would mark a sharp departure from the current system and would place government in the role of providing the financial resources needed for poverty programs, and then stepping out of the way.

Finally, another way that business can play a greater role in addressing poverty is by providing wages that raise people out of poverty. As mentioned above, 73% of the poll respondents felt the minimum wage is too low and the average respondent felt that it should be raised 27%.

7. The majority feels that wealthy Americans should pay more in taxes for poverty programs. This view is driven more by a desire to reduce the number of Americans living in poverty than it is to reduce the gap between the rich and poor.

"Incomes way over the average ought to pay more in taxes (for poverty programs)."

A man from Mechanicsville, Virginia

Asked to choose between two statements, 58% of respondents agreed that "Wealthy Americans are clearly benefiting from the American economy and should pay more in taxes to help fund programs for the poor." Only 34% agreed that "wealthy Americans are already paying higher taxes" and should not be required to pay more. As a man from Mechanicsville, Virginia, said, "Incomes way over the average ought to pay more in taxes" for poverty programs.

A May 1994 Time/CNN poll found similar levels of support for wealthier Americans paying more for poverty programs. Fifty-seven percent of respondents favored "reducing tax benefits that go to some better-off Americans, such as limiting the tax deduction on home mortgages to the interest on the first \$300,000 of any mortgage," in order to pay for welfare reform.

This attitude, though, seems to be driven more by a desire to pull up those in poverty than by a class-based desire to reduce the gap between rich and poor. In the CSPA poll, a question about government priorities was asked in two different ways. Half the sample was told that the US Census Bureau found the number of Americans living under the poverty line is increasing and now stands at 15.1%. The other half was told that the US Census Bureau found that the top earning 20% of the population now earns 13 times more than the bottom 20%. They were then asked how high a priority it should be for the government to reduce the number living in poverty or to narrow the gap between rich and poor. Fifty-one percent said that it should be a high priority to reduce poverty while 34% said that

it should be a high priority to narrow the gap. Only 13% said that reducing poverty should be a low priority, while 30% said so about narrowing the gap.

This does not mean that the desire to narrow the gap between rich and poor is not significant. A worried Baltimore man talked about the widening gap he sees in his own city "between people who have a lot of money and who can do a lot of things, and people who don't have as much and have to make ends meet." But this feeling may also be somewhat offset by the American Dream--that hard work should be able to achieve high levels of success and financial rewards. The simple determination to lift up those in poverty is less equivocal.

8. The majority has numerous misperceptions about the poor and about poverty programs. Some of these misperceptions correlate with negative attitudes about efforts to reduce poverty.

To find out more about how the public perceives the extent and nature of poverty in the US, respondents were asked a number of factual questions. These revealed a number of key misperceptions.

Poverty in the US compared to other industrialized countries. When asked their impression of poverty in the US "as compared to other industrialized countries such as the Western European countries or Japan," 34% said poverty in the US is about the same as in other industrialized countries, and 21% said "poverty is worse in most other industrialized countries." Only 40% had the correct perception that poverty is worse in the US than in Western Europe and Japan.

Racial distribution and urbanization of the poor. The public has a mistaken image of the poor as mostly black and Hispanic city-dwellers. Eighty-one percent of the sample believed that "most poor people live in cities"; only 13% thought that most poor lived outside cities. In reality, according to the US Census Bureau, only 40% of Americans living below the poverty line live in urban environments.

Similarly, the public seems to greatly underestimate the number of poor who are white and overestimates the percentage of blacks and Hispanics among the poor. Respondents were divided into thirds; one third was asked to estimate what percentage of poor people in America are black, one third to estimate what percentage are white, and one third to estimate what percentage are Hispanic.

Respondents estimated the poor population to be 27% white (though it is really 67% white); 37% black (though it is really 29% black); and 26% Hispanic (though it is really 18% Hispanic).

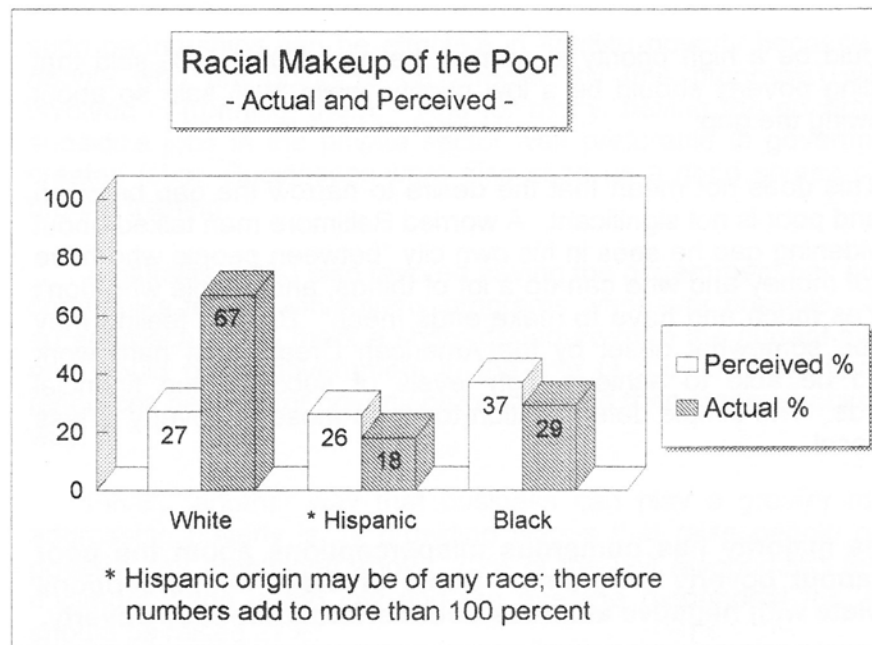
With the exception of those who did not finish high school, more educated respondents were just as prone to underestimate the white

It should be a high priority to reduce poverty.

-- 51% agree

It should be a high priority to narrow the gap between rich and poor.

--34% agree



percentage of the poor as were less educated respondents. In the overall sample, 55% greatly underestimated the percentage of whites as 30% or less of the poor. From high school graduates to those with advanced degrees, the range for this belief was a narrow 55-61%. However, those respondents who had not finished high school were less apt to have this extreme misperception--only 32% believed that whites make up 30% or less of the poor.

AFDC payments to single mothers. Respondents were asked, "Approximately how much do you imagine an average family with a single mother and two children on AFDC receives each month?" When respondents' answers were averaged, their collective estimate was \$685. While AFDC payments vary from state to state depending on how much the state supplements the federal amounts, the national average for a single mother with two children is \$366. This misperception correlated with various attitudes about poverty. [See Box]

Percentage of the poor who do not work. The public estimates that 32% of the poor do not work. In fact, 51% of the poor do not work according to Census Bureau statistics. This misperception may be explained, though, by the fact that the 51% includes students, the retired and the disabled--all subgroups that people may not include when they think about the poor.

Percentage of the federal budget devoted to poverty programs. The public's average perception is that 17% of the federal budget is devoted to programs that assist the poor. The actual percentage is 14.5%--somewhat lower. It may be, though, that some members of the public include in their estimate payments from Social Security and Medicare that go to the poor, though these are social insurance programs for all Americans, not poverty programs.

Perceptions of AFDC Payments and Attitudes About Poverty Programs

Perceptions of AFDC payments correlated strikingly with attitudes about efforts to alleviate poverty. In numerous cases, those who opposed such efforts estimated AFDC payments much higher than did those who favored efforts. Of course, correlation does not imply causation--it is difficult to say whether the perception of higher AFDC payments contributed to more opposition to poverty programs or if the perception of higher AFDC payments was formed as a way to justify opposition to poverty programs. Interestingly, though, even those who favored poverty programs far overestimated the average amount of AFDC payments for a single mother with two children. The correct amount is \$366 per month.

* Those who thought that "society has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty in this country" estimated the AFDC payment at \$664, while those who disagreed were almost \$200 higher (\$860).

* Those who wanted to increase general spending on poverty programs estimated the AFDC payment at \$590, while those wanted to cut general spending thought it was \$815--a gap of \$225. Those who wanted to keep spending at the same level estimated \$637.

* Those who wanted to spend more on AFDC specifically estimated the payment at \$561, while those who wanted to spend less on AFDC were \$251 higher at \$817. Those who wanted to spend less on "poor mothers on welfare" as a population estimated the AFDC payment at a more moderate \$769.

* Those who, after hearing the scenario about a hypothetical poor working mother ("Margaret"), said Margaret's benefits were "too much," estimated the AFDC payment at \$857. Those who thought her benefits "too little" estimated \$649, while those who thought them "about right" estimated \$679.

* Those who said they wanted to simply eliminate welfare were \$132 higher in their AFDC estimate than the total sample (\$817 instead of \$685). Those who wanted to maintain the welfare system without imposing time limits estimated \$587, while the 68% who did want time limits estimated \$700.

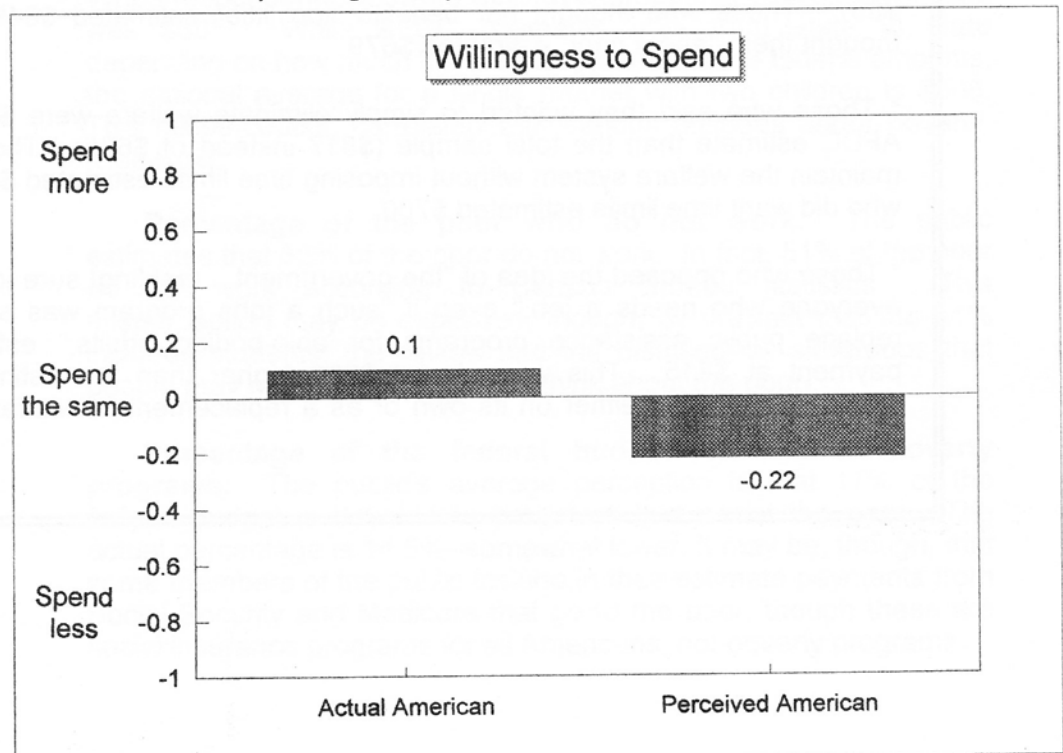
* Those who opposed the idea of "the government ...mak[ing] sure jobs are available to everyone who needs a job," even if "such a jobs program was set up as a way to replace public assistance programs for able-bodied adults," estimated the AFDC payment at \$815. This was almost \$200 higher than the estimate of those who approved the idea, either on its own or as a replacement for welfare (\$637 and \$623 respectively)

9. The public as a whole perceives the public (i.e. the public perceives itself) as more resistant to spending money on the poor than is actually the case.

To explore how Americans view the public's attitudes about spending on poverty (in other words, how the public views itself), respondents were asked whether they thought "the average American is more supportive or less supportive of spending money on poverty-related programs than you are." The majority, 51%, thought the average American was less supportive than they, themselves, are. Only 20% believed the average American was more supportive, while 24% believed that the average American was about the same as them.

Since this sample is representative of the general public, if respondents were correctly perceiving the average American as compared to themselves, the percentage who think the average American is more supportive would be approximately equal to the percentage who think the average American is less supportive. Instead, the number who thought the average American is less supportive was *more than twice* the number who thought the average American is more supportive.

Another way to calculate this discrepancy is to start with the way respondents described their own attitudes about spending. Scoring answers in favor of increased spending as +1.0, answers in favor of decreased spending as -1.0, and answers in favor of maintaining present levels as 0, the average score for all respondents was +0.10, a slight leaning toward increased spending. Using this as a baseline the mean perception of the average American's attitude about spending is -.22, which is .33 lower than the actual mean. In other words, while the actual average American leans slightly toward increased spending, the perceived average American leans even



further toward decreased spending.

This gap between reality and perception was especially acute among those who wanted to cut general spending on poverty programs (21% of the total sample). Of this group, 69% mistakenly believed that the average American wanted to cut spending as much or more than they did. In fact, the average American leans slightly toward increasing spending on poverty, and 77% favor spending at least as much as we are now.

In follow-up interviews, respondents were asked why they perceived the public in the way they did. Some cited impressions from the media. "I guess because on TV they are always saying, 'cut welfare!'" a Florida woman said. A Kentucky man who wanted to cut spending and believed that the average American was even less supportive of spending than himself explained, "You hear people are very, very dissatisfied."

Others expressed the assumption that people in general are selfish. "[They] just want to lower their taxes no matter who it hurts," said a woman in Florida. "Too many people are busy helping themselves out and not helping others. They don't care," a Virginia woman said.

This evidence that the public is misperceiving its own attitudes helps to explain why some poll results can seem to be at odds with the public climate around poverty issues and welfare reform. Opinion as expressed in public discourse may not always indicate public opinion as expressed in response to a poll questionnaire. But individuals take cues from what they hear of public discourse; they use it to guess how close or far from the mainstream their own opinions may be. Thus a collective sense of the mainstream is formed that may not reflect the opinions actually held by the majority.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, contrary to a widespread assumption, there has not been a dramatic decline in American public support for efforts to alleviate poverty. Such support appears to be as strong as it was during the 1960s War on Poverty and it may even be stronger.

But clearly something has changed since the 1960s. The public has lost a great deal of confidence in the government. In 1964, 76% of Americans said they were confident that the government would do the right thing all or most of the time. Today the number has dropped to 19%.

Clearly this loss of confidence extends to government poverty programs. In the CSPA poll three out of four saw widespread abuse, fraud and mismanagement in poverty programs. The average respondent estimated that only 31% of funds that go into

"[They] just want to lower their taxes no matter who it hurts."

A woman in Florida.

poverty programs benefit the poor (which, experts agree, is a gross misperception).

What is striking, though, is that Americans, nonetheless, hold strongly to the idea that government has a responsibility to try to alleviate poverty. Nongovernmental institutions do elicit much greater confidence than government in their ability to address poverty, but only a small minority wants to reduce the amount of funds going into government poverty programs. Apparently, Americans feel like they are pouring water into a leaky bucket: they are frustrated about the leak but they do not want to stop pouring the water.

But this perception of poor government performance coupled with the perception that poverty is getting worse, does lead Americans to look for new options--to try to find a new bucket. The CSPA poll, as well as other polls, found very strong support for aggressive large-scale programs that move the poor into the work force and an overwhelming majority say they are even willing to pay higher taxes to that end.

Perhaps most striking, the public is not really polarized on most of the major issues of poverty. All the key positions--the responsibility of government to address poverty, the frustration with government performance, the reluctance to cut spending, the willingness to spend more on work-oriented programs--are shared by the majority in demographic groups across the political spectrum.

Nonetheless, this combination of attitudes means that policymakers have a complex course to chart. Those who simply bank on public frustration and focus on making cuts in existing programs will soon run afoul of the public's deeply held values--the public does care. On the other hand, those who only focus on defending existing programs will run afoul of the public's feeling that the present system does not put enough emphasis on moving the poor into the workforce and breeds dependency. Since there is no majority that holds one of these values and not the other, policymakers must look for ways to integrate both of these values into a coherent program. Short of such an integrative approach, the two values of work and caring will continue to conflict in the public--with inevitable consequences for those policymakers who attempt to ride momentary waves of feeling that arise from one value or the other.

APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATIONS

Overall, the most striking demographic finding of this study was the degree of homogeneity in respondents' attitudes. The various subgroups within the sample diverged only occasionally from the responses given by the total sample. A close analysis of white males' responses, the swing voters in the 1994 midterm elections, failed to turn up any significant pattern of deviation from the total sample.

Age

Across all spending questions, 18-to-25 year olds were more likely to favor increasing spending, while those over 65 were less likely. Averaging the questions about spending on five different poor populations, those 18 to 25 were 13% more in favor of increasing spending than the total sample, while those over 65 were 10% below the total sample. This pattern appeared consistently, with intermediate age groups falling between the youngest and oldest.

Such a pattern also appeared in the level of confidence in the federal government's effectiveness in dealing with poverty. While only 38% overall expressed some or a lot of confidence, 60% of those 18 to 25 expressed this degree of confidence. Confidence dropped with increasing age: 40% of those between 26 and 45 expressed some or a lot of confidence while and only 32% of those over 65 did.

Whether these numbers show only the optimism natural to the young, or whether they show the emerging outlook of a generation is impossible to say. However, the data's strength suggests that this difference between age groups could be politically significant.

Party Affiliation

Overall, the similarities between Democrats and Republicans were much more striking than their differences. While there were some differences in predictable directions, and some of these differences were statistically significant, on only seven questions did the majority of Democrats or Republicans differ from the majority position of the total sample.

Democrats differed from the total sample on the following questions:

--While 51% of the total sample agreed that "we cannot really afford" antipoverty programs, a minority of Democrats--43%--took this position.

--While only 38% of the total sample expressed some or a lot of confidence that the federal government could deal effectively with poverty, this question split Democrats, with 50% expressing some or a lot of confidence and 49% expressing little or no confidence.

--While only a minority of the total sample--38%--had positive feelings toward the War on Poverty, a majority of Democrats--54%--had positive feelings.

Republicans differed from the total sample on the following questions:

--While 64% of the total sample agreed that "businesses have a moral responsibility to give something back to the community by making efforts to help the poor," only 47% of Republicans agreed.

--While 60% of the total sample favored a program in which the government would make sure that jobs are available to poor parents with dependent children, 49% of Republicans agreed.

--While 57% of the total sample favored a government program to make sure jobs are available to anyone who needs a job but cannot find one, 46% of Republicans agreed.

--While 64% of the total sample felt that narrowing the gap between rich and poor should be either a high priority or a secondary priority for the government, 50% of Republicans felt this way.

Gender

When all questions are taken into account, the "gender gap" was minimal. On some broader questions women showed more concern for the poor. The strongest example was that 56% said they were "very concerned" about poverty as compared to 40% of men. Women were

significantly more supportive of spending money on the homeless, but not significantly more supportive of spending on mothers on welfare. And when asked about spending on existing programs, the gender gap disappeared: men's support for spending was as strong as women's support.

Income Groups

Though it might be assumed that income level would be strongly related to respondents' views on poverty, the data does not bear out this assumption. For example, income level did not appear to significantly affect attitudes toward the War on Poverty; whether poverty programs were affordable; whether business has a responsibility toward poverty; whether to spend more to help poor children, poor working adults, or poor mothers on welfare; and all questions about spending on specific programs.

In only a few cases did the majority of those with incomes over \$75,000 differ from the majority of the position of total sample. Contrary to the general sample the majority of the high income group did not favor increased spending on the homeless and disabled adults, did not favor guaranteeing a job to every American who wants one, or believe it should be high or secondary priority to narrow the gap between rich and poor.

Education

More educated respondents tended to make lower estimates of user fraud in poverty programs while those with less education made higher estimates. More educated respondents showed somewhat more reluctance to support jobs programs. Only 44% of those with college degrees or higher supported the idea of making sure jobs are available to anyone who needs a job but cannot find one, while 57% supported it in the overall sample. However, when educated respondents were asked about such a jobs program as a replacement for other assistance programs, support jumped to 84% -- the exact same number as for the total sample. Also, when respondents were asked about spending on existing programs, education levels showed no differences.

Race

African-Americans' views on poverty were strikingly convergent with the total sample on the great majority of questions. There were, however, a few noteworthy exceptions. Fifty-nine percent of African-Americans had positive feelings about the War on Poverty (as compared to 38% of the total sample). But their estimate of government waste was similar to that of the sample as a whole. Also, asked to estimate the average AFDC payment received by a mother of two, African-Americans' estimate of \$508 were somewhat lower than the average estimate of \$685 but still substantially above the correct amount of \$366.

The size of the sample does not permit a meaningful profile of the views of Hispanic and Asian minorities.

APPENDIX B

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

CSPA used a combination of a national poll, focus groups, interviews, and a review of previous poverty polls conducted by other organizations to prepare this report.

THE POLL

The poll was conducted on October 13-16, 1994, with a sample of 900 American adults. Respondents were interviewed by telephone by Communications Center Inc. (CCI) on a CATI system using a survey designed by CSPA. Each interview lasted an average of twenty-four minutes. Respondents were chosen from all households in the continental United States by a random digit dialing sample using the Genesys System, provided by Marketing Systems Group. Interviewers observed gender quotas.

Questions that were asked to the entire sample have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5%. However, many questions were asked to a smaller number than the entire sample and, in most cases have a margin of error of 4%. The poll also included questions that were only asked when respondents answered a particular way to a previous question; consequently, the number of respondents varied on these questions.

The results were weighted for race and income level to better reflect national demographics.

The order and placement of some questions were varied to reduce biases that might derive from question order or respondents falling into patterns of responses.

All statistics used in the poll questions were checked with reliable sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

FOCUS GROUPS

CSPA used focus groups to help craft questions for the poll so that they reflected how people talk and think about poverty as well as to

generate qualitative data. Focus groups -- or group discussions -- provide participants with the opportunity to think about various issues and topics, to talk about their views and feelings in their own words, and to describe the underlying assumptions behind their views.

CSPA conducted two focus groups -- one in Baltimore, Maryland and the other in Richmond, Virginia. The groups were held on the evenings of October 3 and 4, 1994. Each discussion lasted about two hours and a total of twenty-five citizens participated. Citizens were recruited by CSPA from a sample of random households in the Baltimore and Richmond areas provided by Metromail in Lincoln, Nebraska.

A strong effort was made by CSPA to recruit a mix of citizens to ensure a range of perspectives and views were heard. The demographic makeup of each group was designed to roughly mirror society in general. Thus, there was a mix of men and women; white, black or other minorities; income levels; ages; education levels; and employment status.

INTERVIEWS

Telephone interviews were conducted by CSPA staff members both before and after the poll was conducted. The *before* interviewees were administered a draft of the questionnaire and then asked to elaborate on their answers in greater depth. This supplied qualitative data as well as helped to shape individual questions and to test early drafts of the poll. Those citizens interviewed were selected randomly from households around the country pulled from the sample provided by Metromail. The *after* interviews were held with individuals who actually participated in the CSPA poll to probe deeper into their responses to specific questions. Respondents were chosen based on how they answered specific poll questions that were of interest to CSPA. A total of 23 interviews were conducted between October 1 and November 8, 1994. Interviews lasted between 15 and 50 minutes and were audiotaped.

REVIEW OF POLLS BY OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

A comprehensive review of publicly released polls on poverty-related issues was conducted, going back to the 1960s. The primary source was the Public Opinion Location Library (POLL) database of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut.