

Perceptions of Welfare Recipient Fraud and Provider Fraud: A 20-Year Follow-Up

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Abstract: *This study replicated Roff & Klemmack's (1983) investigation of adult Alabamians' opinions regarding the degree to which welfare recipients and welfare employees defraud the government. The majority of the current respondents continue to see recipients as dishonest, but the mean recipient fraud index score dropped from 13.34 to 11.34. As was the case in the earlier study, beliefs that recipients defraud the government predicted lower support for government programs. The percentage of respondents who believed welfare employees to be dishonest doubled from 15.4% to 30.0% from 1981 to 2000, and the mean worker fraud index score increased from 4.14 to 7.02. Consistent with the previous study, beliefs that welfare employees are dishonest predicted higher, not lower, support for government programs and services. Social workers should be aware that a growing proportion of the population questions the integrity of those running welfare programs.*

Keywords: *Welfare, fraud, support, public opinion*

The American public welfare system has changed dramatically in recent years. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L.104-193) represented a major change in governmental policy that resulted in tightened eligibility requirements, strict time limits for receipt of benefits, and strenuous efforts to assure that potential recipients who can work do so instead of receiving government aid. One impetus for these changes was a strong belief on the part of the public and legislators that there was substantial misuse of the public welfare system by recipients capable of self-support. Numerous studies pointed to public perceptions of welfare recipients as lazy, immoral, dishonest in applying for benefits, and uninterested in working to support their families (Cook & Barrett, 1992; Feagin, 1972; Gilens, 1999; Kallen & Miller, 1971; Kaufman, Stuart, & MacNeil, 1999; Kluegel, 1987; MacLeod, Montero, & Speer, 1999; Ogren, 1973; Williamson, 1974).

The citizenry held negative opinions not only about welfare recipients but also about the administration of public welfare programs. Studies have found the pub-

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lic to believe welfare programs to be inefficient, ineffective in reaching their goals, and subject to fraud (Cook & Barrett, 1992; Emerson & van Buren, 1992; Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995).

In 1981, two of the authors of this study conducted a study of attitudes toward welfare in Alabama, a conservative, Deep South state. They found that citizens had very strong beliefs that welfare recipients defraud the government, and these beliefs relate to a lower level of support for the government's helping poor people. A significant proportion of respondents also believed that welfare workers and officials were dishonest in performing their duties, both in helping recipients defraud the government and diverting welfare funds meant for poor people into their own pockets (Roff & Klemmack, 1983).

In the intervening years, Alabama has implemented changes mandated by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act. In October 1996, the AFDC caseload in Alabama was 40,328 families (calculated from information in the American Institute for Full Employment, 2000). In October 2000, the caseload had dropped 53.3% to 18,818 families, with an average household benefit of \$142 (Alabama Department of Human Resources, 2000).

Following these changes, the authors were interested in learning whether the perceptions of dishonesty among welfare recipients and welfare employees had changed. This article reports on a replication of the 1981 study. The specific purpose of the replication study was to determine if perceptions of provider fraud, recipient fraud, and welfare orientation had changed in the nearly 20-year period and whether the relationships among these opinions had changed, as well.

METHODS OF STUDY

The original study was based on analysis of data collected in the fall of 1981, from a probability sample of 1,030 Alabama adults. The authors used probability sampling to identify names from telephone directories and collected data using a mailed survey. The response rate was 57.7%. Respondents were predominantly White (81.3%), male (66.2%), married (71.9%), and at least high school graduates (75.2%).

The replication study is based on data collected in the summer of 2000 from a sample of 467 Alabama adults obtained using telephone interviews and a random digit dialing method. Using the most stringent of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2000) standard response rate calculations (RR1), the response rate was 20.5%.

Similar to the previous sample, respondents tended to be White (80.7%), married (67.2%), and at least high school graduates (87.3%). However, unlike the previous sample, respondents were predominantly female (63.8%). The predominance of females is typical for telephone surveys.

Measures used in both studies were composed of items using a four-point response scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The specific measures were (a) a three-item Likert-type index measuring beliefs about whether welfare employees attempt to defraud the government, (b) a four-item Likert-type index measuring beliefs about whether recipients of services attempt to defraud the government, and (c) a four-item Likert-type index measuring sup-

port for governmental assistance to needy persons (see Tables 1 and 2). The authors constructed the first two indices; the welfare orientation measure was based on a measure developed by Comrey & Newmeyer (1965).

FINDINGS

As was the case in the earlier study, a majority of respondents to the 2000 study saw welfare recipients as dishonest, undeserving of help, and unwilling to leave the welfare rolls (see Table 1). However, the percentage of respondents holding unfavorable opinions of welfare recipients was substantially lower in the 2000 study than in the 1981 study. There was a 23% decline in the percentage of people agreeing that recipients who get welfare do not deserve it. There was a 14.8% increase in the percentage of those agreeing that people who get welfare try to get off of it as soon as possible and an 18% decrease in the percentage agreeing that people applying for welfare are not honest about their needs. Not surprisingly, given the significant changes in these items, the mean score on the recipient fraud index dropped from 13.34 (*SD*=2.74) to 11.34 (*SD*=2.72) on a scale ranging from 4 (no perception of fraud) to 20, a statistically significant change $t(1427)=-12.82, p<.0001$.

In contrast with their more positive perceptions of welfare recipients, respondents to the 2000 survey were more negative about the honesty of providers than were their counterparts in 1981 (see Table 2). Still, a minority hold negative views of welfare workers, but that minority is noticeably larger than in 1981. While there was virtually no change in beliefs about whether welfare workers help recipients cheat (slightly more than a quarter think they do), there was a 12.3% decline (from 52.1% to 39.8%) in the percentage of respondents agreeing with the statement that welfare officials are honest and a 50% increase in the percentage believing that welfare funds intended for poor people go into the pockets of welfare officials (30.9% to 45.2%). The mean score on the provider fraud index increased from 4.14 (*SD*=2.81) to 7.02 (*SD*=2.08) on a scale ranging from 3 (no perception of fraud) to 15, a statistically significant change $t(1420)=19.26, p<.0001$.

Table 1: *Percentage of Respondents Perceiving Different Types of Fraud by Welfare Recipients*

Item	Percent Perceiving Fraud	
	1981 (<i>N</i> =1,030)	2000 (<i>N</i> =467)
Many of the people who apply for welfare are not honest about their needs.	86.2*	68.3
Most of the people who get welfare try to get off it as soon as possible.	9.0	23.8
Many of the people who get welfare do not deserve it.	84.9*	62.1
People on welfare turn down jobs so they can keep collecting benefits.	73.7	67.7

Note. The values represent the percent agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.
 *Difference between percentages in 1981 and in 2000 is statistically significant ($p<.05$) using a two-tailed *t*-test of differences in proportions.

Item	Percent Agreeing	
	1981 (N=1,030)	2000 (N=467)
Most welfare officials are honest.	52.1*	39.8
Welfare workers help people on welfare try to cheat the government.	29.1	28.7
Much of the money that is supposed to go to poor people ends up in the pockets of welfare officials.	30.9*	45.2

Note: The values represent the percentage agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. differences in proportions.
*Difference between percentages in 1981 and in 2000 is statistically significant ($p < .05$) using a two-tailed t-test of differences in proportions.

Item	Percent Agreeing	
	1981 (N=1,030)	2000 (N=467)
The government should guarantee that every citizen has enough to eat.	40.7*	67.4
It is the responsibility of government to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves.	52.5*	62.1
The government should use tax dollars to provide services to special groups of people such as the poor, the old, and the disabled.	75.8*	87.6
If the government must go deeper into debt to help needy people, it should do so.	32.2*	42.6

Note: Values represent the percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with each statement.
*Difference between percentages in 1981 and in 2000 is statistically significant ($p < .05$) using a two-tailed t-test of differences in proportions.

Finally, current respondents were considerably more supportive of government assistance to needy persons than were those in the 1981 study (see Table 3). The greatest gains in support were on items that specifically mentioned in-kind benefits. The percentage believing the government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat rose 27%, and the respondents who agreed that the government should provide services to help the poor, old, and disabled rose 12%. The mean score on the welfare orientation index increased from 9.91 ($SD=3.75$) to 11.07 ($SD=2.73$) on a scale ranging from 4 (no assistance) to 20, a statistically significant change $t(1432)=5.90$, $p < .0001$.

One hypothesis to explain why the 2000 sample is more favorable toward welfare recipients and welfare policies is that the 2000 sample is predominantly female. Analysis of the 2000 sample by gender, however, revealed only one statis-

Variable	1981	2000
	β	β
Perceived Recipient Fraud	-.25	-.26
Perceived Government Official Fraud	.12	.12

Note: All beta coefficients are statistically significant, $p < .05$.

tically significant difference: females were more accepting of government debt to help needy individuals ($M=3.13$, $SD=1.06$) than were males ($M=2.87$, $SD=1.16$) $t(460)=2.40$, $p < .05$.

The authors used multiple regression analysis to determine how respondents' beliefs about provider and recipient fraud affected their willingness to have the government help needy persons (see Table 4). As was the case in 1981, beliefs that recipients defraud the government predicted low support for governmental programs ($\beta = -.25$ in 1981 and $\beta = -.26$ in 2000). Also, as was the case in 1981, beliefs that welfare workers defraud the government predicted higher, rather than lower support for government assistance programs ($\beta = .12$ for both 1981 and 2000). This last finding requires explanation. Official fraud was not correlated with welfare orientation in either 1981 or 2000, suggesting that respondents do not wish to deprive recipients of help because of any fraudulent actions by welfare workers. When beliefs about recipient fraud are controlled, the emergent positive relationship between official fraud and welfare orientation could be compensatory. That is, respondents may think it necessary for the government to be more generous to recipients to correct for abuses of officials.

DISCUSSION

These findings indicate there have been shifts in the attitudes of Alabama citizens about welfare in the last two decades. The tendency to see welfare employees as dishonest, while still characteristic of a minority of respondents, has grown substantially despite the absence of scandals regarding the use of welfare funds in the state in the last 20 years. It may be that a generalized distrust of government and public officials accounts for this change. In the years between 1981 and 2000, for example, one Alabama governor was convicted of illegal use of campaign funds and forced from office. Also, a recent CEO of the state's public welfare department (a political appointee who was not a social worker) was forced to resign her post when it was discovered that she had falsified her resumé.

Harsh attitudes toward welfare recipients appear to have softened somewhat in the 20-year period, although the clear majority of respondents continue to doubt recipients' honesty and motivation to work. Current respondents may believe that changes in the welfare system, which have occurred since 1996, have helped rid the rolls of many fraudulent recipients. Similarly, current respondents are more favorably disposed toward government programs for needy people than were their predecessors. These findings may reflect recent respondents' reactions to an improved economy and unprecedented Federal budget surpluses.

Alabama citizens are generally favorably disposed toward government assistance for poor people. This support is reduced, however, when recipients are seen as dishonest. As was the case in 1981, although a substantial minority of respondents believe welfare providers are dishonest, this perception does not translate into lower support for government assistance to needy people.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social work has a long history of challenging stereotypes about poor people and advocacy for programs and benefits for people in need. Thus, it is encouraging to see that there has been a substantial reduction in negative beliefs about the poor over the last 20 years. As this study indicates, however, beliefs about the dishonesty of poor people remain prevalent. Practitioners should continue to try to shape public opinion about the realities of welfare recipients and welfare programs. This is particularly important because of the strong relationship this study found between perceptions of the poor and levels of support for government programs and services for poor people.

Social workers must also be aware that a growing minority of the public has little confidence in the integrity of people employed in welfare departments and offices. Fortunately, these negative perceptions of providers have not affected program support. It is possible that these increasingly negative attitudes are primarily due to negative impressions of executive level management, rather than of most social workers or other lower level workers in public welfare agencies. Nevertheless, these findings underscore the importance of honest and ethical conduct on the part of all workers in human services.

Clearly, findings from a single state cannot appropriately be generalized to any other state or to the nation as a whole. However, since states now have unprecedented discretion in policymaking about public welfare programs, state-level analyses of public opinion about public welfare are becoming increasingly important. Social work advocates for poor people in other states should contribute to the efforts to understand state-specific public opinion about welfare programs and how these opinions affect program support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

It is important that social work students understand the stigmas attached to the clients they serve and the need for them to develop skills to challenge inaccurate, negative stereotypes whenever possible. Skills that shape public opinion and state level lobbying on behalf of poor people will become increasingly important due to the recent shift in decision-making regarding public welfare policy at the state level (Schneider & Netting, 1999).

As social work professionals, students must also be aware that they are likely to be stigmatized by association with an unpopular client group. The growing mistrust of public welfare employees reflected in this study highlights the fact that as representatives of the state, social workers may be subject to the same kinds of public scrutiny as are high-level elected and appointed officials. This underscores the importance of social work students' early socialization to impeccable ethical behavior as a hallmark of the social work profession.

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