

# Welfare Queens or Undeserving Poor? Racialized Depictions of Welfare and Poverty in News Media 2001-2007

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Today, the American public views poverty and welfare as “African American issues,” while in reality, most individuals receiving welfare benefits are not black.<sup>1</sup> Subtly and unnoticeably, “hot button issues” like welfare and poverty have become and continue to be “racially coded” without ever explicitly “raising the race card.”<sup>2</sup> This hypothesis was first brought to the forefront by a popular study published in 1999 in which scholar Martin Gilens examined images concerning poverty and welfare in American news media articles from 1950-1992.<sup>3</sup> Gilens theorized that American news media not only fosters but also perpetuates certain inaccurate portrayals of welfare and poverty along the lines of race: more often than not, whites are casted as “deserving” clients who are legitimately unable to escape poverty through no fault of their own, while blacks are labeled “undeserving” recipients of welfare benefits cajoling the government to “subsidize their slothfulness.”<sup>4</sup> Gilens argues that racial stereotypes play a central role in generating opposition to welfare in America.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1999, two studies have applied Gilens’s research methods to examine whether his findings hold true for time periods after 1992. Relying on Gilens’s methods, as well as considering the findings of the two subsequent studies (Clawson and Trice 2000 and Van Doorn 2015), I investigate the depiction of welfare and poverty in news media between 2001 and 2007, specifically examining whether the unsympathetic depictions of welfare and poverty continue to be associated with African Americans during this time period.<sup>6</sup> My research indicates that although the depiction of African Americans in poverty and benefiting from welfare remains disproportionately large, the articles and images examined seem to treat African Americans with slightly more sympathy, as deserving poor and as victims of unjust larger systems out of their control, compared to their unsympathetic depictions in previous years and in previous studies.

## Background: News Media Depiction and Bias

Gilens’s research focuses on the images and visual depictions of the poor, in part because studies

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media,” In *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, edited by Sanford F Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording, 101-130. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 103; Here, and throughout this paper, I use the terms “African-American” and “black” interchangeably. I understand the differences and nuances of these terms, but for simplification purposes in this paper, they will be used synonymously.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, *Perception and Prejudice Race and Politics in the United States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 11, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> “Welfare Recipients...Which Race Gets More Benefits?” *The Militant Negro*. January 5, 2012. Accessed 2015. <http://theobamacrat.com/2012/01/05/welfare-recipients-which-race-gets-more-benefits/>.

<sup>5</sup> Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the terms “African American” and “Black” interchangeably.

have shown that visuals often provide more salient and long lasting memories than reading text.<sup>7</sup> Scholar Dean Kazoleas finds that more often than not, individuals retain information more vividly when presented with qualitative data in the form of images than when presented with quantitative data.<sup>8</sup> Specifically concerning news media, even when a subscriber to a magazine does not bother to read a particular story, they are more likely to associate their knowledge about a topic with the visual example they were provided: more often than not, readers will “form impressions based on [visual] examples of specific individuals rather than on abstract statistical information.”<sup>9</sup>

Higher levels of publicity surrounding an issue have often been correlated with a greater degree of perceived conflict about that issue.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, while conflict increases the awareness of a topic, it may not necessarily “lead to increased understanding of the underlying issues in the population at large.”<sup>11</sup> A related study titled “Insensitivity to Sample Bias: Generalizing from Atypical Cases” finds that people often make unwarranted generalizations from samples to populations, even when that sample is not “highly typical of the population.”<sup>12</sup> Relating to Gilens’s research, then, the more African Americans depicted as undeserving poor, the more readers will believe that the majority of welfare recipients or poor individuals are both African American and “undeserving.”

## Martin Gilens, “Why Americans Hate Welfare” (1999)

Researching the depictions of welfare recipients and poor populations in America, Martin Gilens examines the images in relevant articles from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* between the years of 1950 and 1992. Gilens’s set of “core topic” search terms include “poor,” “poverty,” “welfare,” and “relief.”<sup>13</sup> In the 1,256 total articles studied, each of the 6,117 individuals was identified as either black, non-black, or undeterminable. In addition to tracking the perceived race of the pictured individuals, Gilens also tracked the specific topics and the tones of each article. Gilens differentiates between what he labels “sympathetic” topics or frames—in which the poor people depicted show effort, as “deserving poor”—and “unsympathetic” topics or frames—in which those depicted show “welfare dependency as a way of life,” often indicating the “undeserving poor.”<sup>14</sup> Gilens identifies particularly sympathetic topics as those concerned with or including images of poor children, educational opportunity, medical care, hunger, employment programs, and the elderly. Unsympathetic topics include public welfare, the underclass, intergenerational poverty, chronic unemployment, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and drugs.<sup>15</sup> As a disclaimer, Gilens cautions that “the stories selected for this analysis were only those that focused directly on poverty or related topics...[not] stories with a primary focus on race relations, civil rights, urban riots.”<sup>16</sup>

Gilens’s findings indicated not only that “the face of poverty in the news media became markedly darker between 1965 and 1967,” but also that this trend lasted throughout the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s: 53.4% of all poor people pictured were African American, when in reality the average percentage

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<sup>7</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black”, 41-2.

<sup>8</sup> Dean C. Kazoleas, “A comparison of the persuasive effectiveness of qualitative versus quantitative evidence: A test of explanatory hypotheses.” (*Communication Quarterly* 41, 1993): 40-50.

<sup>9</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black”, 109.; Hans-Bernd Brosius, and Anke Bathelt, “The Utility of Exemplars in Persuasive Communications.” (*Communication Research* 21, 1994): 49.

<sup>10</sup> Philip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue, and Clarice N. Olien. “Community Conflict and Citizen Knowledge.” In *Framing Friction*. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999), 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Hamill, Timothy DeCamp Wilson, and Richard E. Nisbett. “Insensitivity to Sample Bias: Generalizing from Atypical Cases.” (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39 vol 4, 1980): 597-589.

<sup>13</sup> Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black,” 109.

of poor African Americans during 1967-1992 averaged 29.3% [see figure 1].<sup>17</sup>

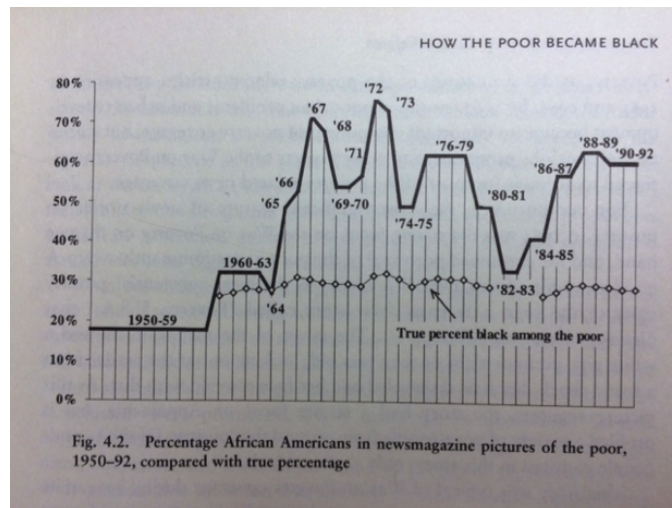


Figure 1

While the quantitative data proves that African Americans are, in fact, over-represented in news media articles about the poor, the qualitative data shows that, more often than not, African Americans are depicted in negative, unsympathetic articles [see figure 2]. As Gilens writes, “[s]tories on new policy initiatives tended to be both neutral in tone and dominated by images of whites, [while] more critical stories about existing programs, such as reports on the Byrd Committee’s investigation of welfare abuse, were more likely to contain pictures of blacks.”<sup>18</sup>

Exploring the implications of his findings, Gilens notes that this inaccurate media presentation serves as a negative feedback loop or a “self-reinforcing cycle” in which negative images of the black poor “feed media coverage of poverty that then strengthens these images in the culture at large. Society’s stereotypes are reflected back—and thereby reinforced—by the mass media.”<sup>19</sup> Gilens argues that “the media’s tendency to associate African Americans with the undeserving poor reflects—and reinforces—the centuries-old stereotype of blacks as lazy.”<sup>20</sup>

Not only does this media distortion affect the “political culture” of social welfare, but Gilens also stresses that because news media has the power to affect public opinion, by extension, it has the power to affect public policy.<sup>22</sup> Arguing that the public’s resulting inaccurate and racist perceptions of welfare recipients in the United States affects real, implemented policy decisions, Gilens cites studies that conclude about 66% of the time, public policy aligns with public opinion

<sup>17</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black,” 101, 110; Gilens argues that the media is partially responsible for Americans’ ‘rediscovering poverty’ in the 1960s. Gilens posits three background conditions for the increase in racialized popular images of poverty in the 1960s.

<sup>18</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black,” 111.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 102; James M Avery, Mark Peffley, and Jason Glass, “Race Matters: The Impact of News Coverage of Welfare Reform on Public Opinion,” Lecture, 2000 meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C., Washington D.C., August 30, 2000. [http://www.uky.edu/AS/PoliSci/Peffley/pdf/WelfareAPSA\\_8-23-00\\_.pdf](http://www.uky.edu/AS/PoliSci/Peffley/pdf/WelfareAPSA_8-23-00_.pdf) According to a 1994 CBS News/New York Times public opinion survey, respondents who believed most welfare recipients were black “held consistently more negative views about welfare recipients’ true need and commitment to the work ethic than did respondents who thought most welfare recipients were white.” <sup>21</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Gamson, William A., and Kathryn Eilene Lasch, “The Political Culture of Social Welfare Policy,” (Center for Research on Social Organization, 1980).

**TABLE 4.1. Newsmagazine Stories by Topic, 1950–92**

Topic	Number of Stories	Number of Poor People Shown	Percent Black
Underclass	6	36	100
Urban problems, urban renewal	91	97	84
Poor people, poverty	182	707	59
Unemployment	102	268	59
Legal aid	30	22	56
Welfare, antipoverty programs	399	965	54
Housing/homeless	272	508	52
Children	45	121	51
Employment programs	45	181	50
Education	22	95	43
Medical care	43	36	28
Hunger	52	176	25
Old-age assistance	28	12	0

*Note:* An additional 79 stories (not shown above) were indexed under miscellaneous other topics; 133 stories (11% of all poverty stories) were indexed under more than one topic. The database includes all stories on poverty and related topics published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* between January 1, 1950, and December 31, 1992. See Gilens 1999 for details.

Figure 2

on a specific issue.<sup>23</sup> By extension, then, welfare reforms and future policy will favor non-black over black individuals, or enact implicitly racist policies, though Gilens’s writing is not specific about this.<sup>24</sup> Still, scholars Avery, Peffley, and Glass question why racial portrayals in news coverage of welfare are assumed to be so consequential for public opinion and argue that “little direct evidence exists at this point.”<sup>25</sup>

## Updates Since Gilens: Clawson and Trice (2000) and Van Doorn (2015)

Two articles that update Gilens’s work have been published: “Poverty As We Know It: Media Portrayals of the Poor” by Rosalee A. Clawson and Rakuya Trice in 2000 and “Pre-and Post-Welfare Reform Media Portrayals of Poverty in the United States: The Continuing Importance of Race and Ethnicity” by Bas W. Van Doorn in 2015. In their own words, Clawson and Trice “pick up where Gilens left off,” analyzing media portrayals of the demographics of poverty between 1993 and 1998, a time “when welfare reform was high on the nation’s agenda” in the years surrounding the passage of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) under the Clinton administration in 1996.<sup>26</sup> Employing Gilens’s methods, Clawson and Trice examine five U.S. news magazines, adding *Business Week* and *New York Times Magazine* to Gilens’s other three sources. Like Gilens, they find that pictures of blacks are disproportionately featured in news magazine portrayals of the poor: although only about 27% of the poor population during this

<sup>23</sup> A. D. Monroe, “Consistency between Public Preferences and National Policy Decisions.” (American Politics Research, 1979), 3-19.; Benjamin I. Page, and Robert Y. Shapiro, “Effects of Public Opinion on Policy.” (The American Political Science Review, 1983), 175.

<sup>24</sup> As I explain the findings of my original research, I will extrapolate upon what I consider the limitations of Gilens’s method.

<sup>25</sup> Avery Peffley and Glass, “Race Matters,” 3.

<sup>26</sup> Rosalee A. Clawson and and Rakuya Trice, “Poverty as We Know It,” (Public Opinion Quarterly 64, no. 1, 2000): 54.

time period was African American, 49% of the images in magazine articles featured poor African Americans.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1993 and 1998, African Americans were pictured specifically in stories concerning poverty topics that were not very popular with the public such as pregnancy, public housing, and the welfare cycle of dependency.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, Clawson and Trice find that blacks were less often associated with more sympathetic topics such as welfare reform, poor children, childcare, and job training. Thus, their findings converge on a single conclusion with those of Gilens: news portrayals of welfare and poverty tend to racialize welfare by disproportionately using images of blacks to illustrate the most negative stories about poverty. Clawson and Trice articulate that the stereotypical and inaccurate picture of poverty revealed through their research “results in negative beliefs about the poor, antipathy toward blacks, and a lack of support for welfare programs.”<sup>29</sup>

Bas Van Doorn’s 2015 study, titled “Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Media Portrayals of Poverty in the United States: The Continuing Importance of Race and Ethnicity,” further supports these conclusions. Van Doorn examines 474 total stories on poverty between 1992 and 2010 in the same three news sources as Gilens, using the search terms “poor,” “poverty,” “welfare,” and “relief.”<sup>30</sup> Consistent with Clawson and Trice and Gilens, Van Doorn finds that African American are portrayed as disproportionately poor in the news media and in stories concerning the unsympathetic poor: 52.3% of the individuals pictured were African American, while over 2000-2010, only 25% of poor people were African American. Van Doorn concludes that even though the features of welfare policy have changed considerably since Gilens’s research (1992-2010 includes the Clinton administration, the Bush administration, and the beginning of the Obama administration) there is no significant difference in the level of overrepresentation of blacks. My research examines a time period (2001-2007) within Van Doorn’s dates of interest, yet it reveals some different conclusions, upon which I will extrapolate in the following section.

Examining news media depictions of race and welfare from 2001-2007, my research attempts to update Gilens’s work (more specifically Clawson and Trice’s work) by examining media depictions of welfare during the beginning of the George W. Bush presidential administration.<sup>31</sup> Since the dates my research examines fall within Van Doorn’s research time frame (1992-2010), I am able to cross-compare my findings with his; and by narrowing in on a time span of seven years, I focus on a smaller time frame than Van Doorn’s expansive research study. I will first explain the contextual details of welfare reform and the economy at the historical moment, following which I will explain my methods, findings, and conclusions as they relate to the previous studies outlined above.

## Historical Context: Clinton, Bush, and Welfare Policy

Most Americans and scholars of American social policy do not associate significant changes in welfare policy with the George W. Bush presidential administration. Rather, poverty policies are more often discussed as a prominent legacy of the Clinton administration, otherwise known as the era of “welfare crackdown.”<sup>32</sup> Former president Clinton famously vied to “end welfare as we know it” with the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act

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<sup>27</sup> Clawson and Trice, “Poverty as We Know It,” 57.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Avery Peffley and Glass, “Race Matters,” 3.

<sup>30</sup> Bas Van Doorn, “Pre- and Post- Welfare Reform Media Portrayals of Poverty in the United States: The Continuing Importance of Race and Ethnicity,” (*Politics and Policy* 43, no. 1, 2015): 152.

<sup>31</sup> In the following section, I will further extrapolate on the context-relevant specifics about why I chose to examine the Bush administration.

<sup>32</sup> Scott. W. Allard, “The Changing Face Of Welfare During The Bush Administration,” (*The Journal of Federalism* 37, no. 3, 2007): 304.

(PRWORA), which required more work as a condition of welfare assistance, limited lifetime welfare receipt to five years, and expanded state discretion over welfare program administration.<sup>33</sup> By ending the federal guarantee of support for the poor and turning control of welfare programs over to the states, this legislation reversed six decades of social policy and “begot a new era of welfare politics.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, this time period from 1993 to 1997 experienced a spike in the amount of news articles and TV coverage on welfare topics. In contrast with the negative focus on welfare “problems” in past decades as shown by Gilens’s research, many news accounts of welfare reform in the 1990s declared it a “success,” and thus one might optimistically expect more favorable news media depiction. However, as concluded by Clawson and Trice, news stories about welfare and poverty during this time period continued to be illustrated using African American images and examples, often in a negative or unsympathetic light.<sup>35</sup>

Compared to the War on Terror, tax cuts, budget deficits, and Medicare drug coverage, welfare and poverty were not prominent issues in the minds of the public or policymakers during the Bush administration. However, scholar Scott Allard notes several important shifts in welfare policy that occurred under the Bush administration.<sup>36</sup> On May 16, 2002, the House passed the Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Promotion Act of 2002 (H.R. 4737), which continued and updated the 1996 PRWORA passed under the Clinton administration. Under this legislation, a shift occurred from delivering most assistance through welfare checks to providing more assistance through social service programs supporting work activity—what some scholars might deem an act of neoliberal paternalism.<sup>37</sup> Under this legislation, welfare recipients were expected to pursue work activity for 30 hours per week to maintain eligibility. This era also delegated tougher work participation requirements and increased state-level discretion, what Soss, Fording, and Schram term “second-order devolution.”<sup>38</sup> Resulting from the increase in requirements, the percentage of households eligible for welfare assistance that received welfare declined from 82% in 1993 to 48% in 2002.<sup>39</sup> One of the implications of these policies is that “a service oriented welfare system minimizes the structural causes of poverty, instead casting poverty as simply an individual-level pathology,” where the poor—whether underserving or deserving—must have what neoliberals deem their individual responsibility to improve their condition.<sup>40</sup> This holds important ramifications for media depictions of the poor.

During this time period, the stable nuclear family unit was held on a pedestal as a method to avoid or escape poverty. The Bush administration encouraged faith-based organizations to become more involved in government-funded human service programs, including Bush’s welfare reform goals to reduce out-of-wedlock births and promote marriage. The Healthy Marriage Initiative supplied federal funding to programs that helped support the formation of two-parent families and responsible fatherhood.<sup>41</sup> George McGovern, the assistant secretary of Health and Human Services for

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<sup>33</sup> “Welfare - A Brief History Of Welfare Reform.” Assistance, Act, Programs, and Recipients. 2015. Accessed 2015. <http://law.jrank.org/pages/11266/Welfare-BRIEF-HISTORY-WELFARE-REFORM.html#ixzz3b5JKHTXB>.

<sup>34</sup> Clawson and Trice, “Poverty as We Know It,” 53.

<sup>35</sup> Avery, Peffley, and Glass, “Race Matters,” 5.

<sup>36</sup> Allard, “The Changing Face Of Welfare During The Bush Administration,” 304.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 305; Joe Soss, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Soss, *Disciplining the Poor*.

<sup>39</sup> Allard, “The Changing Face of Welfare During the Bush Administration,” 307.

<sup>40</sup> Soss, *Disciplining the Poor.*; Allard. ‘The Changing Face of Welfare During the Bush Administration’. 310.

<sup>41</sup> Acknowledgment of the deterioration of poor (and specifically black) family structures in this time period likely stems from important research conducted by scholars William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman. In their study “Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap Between Evidence and Public Policy Issues,” they find that though the black family’s deterioration was often attributed to male joblessness in the 1960s, over the 1970s and 1980s, male joblessness receded into the background as welfare was increasingly blamed for family breakup. Wilson, William J. “Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap Between Evidence and Public Policy Issues.” In *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

Children and Families at the time, aimed to “embellish Clinton’s 1996 reform with \$300 million in experimental programs to promote marriage...such as family therapy centers that offer courses in parenthood and pre-wedding counseling.”<sup>42</sup> The passage of H.R. 4737 reauthorized Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding for an additional five years, continued to fund childcare, and worked to strengthen child support laws to increase money available to mothers and children. Again, this emphasis on poor families, marriages and children holds important ramifications for my analysis of the sympathetic depictions of poverty in news media.

## Methods

Adopting and applying the same methods as Gilens, I track the relevant articles between January 2001 and December 2007. I identify the races of each individual in the pictures featured in these articles, and labeled each image and corresponding article as “sympathetic” or “unsympathetic,” relying on Gilens’ parameters (see page 3). To locate and identify relevant articles, I used the search terms “welfare”, “public welfare”, “poor”, “poverty”, “TANF”, and “PRWORA”. I chose to specifically examine articles between 2001 and 2007 because (1) with a similar time frame of seven years of articles in my archive, I attempt to roughly pick up where their research leaves off and (2) I aim to track the depiction of poverty and welfare during the Bush administration, specifically relating the images to Bush’s welfare policy agenda and policies, which previous scholarship has yet to specifically examine (though these years are included in Van Doorn’s study). On account of time and scope limitations, I chose to investigate solely articles in *Time Magazine*, because it has consistently held the highest circulation rates of all news magazines in the United States both during the time period of Gilens’ research (1950-1992), in the time period of this my research (2001-2007), and today in 2015.<sup>43</sup> Between the years 2001-2007, *Time Magazine* was the most popular news magazine in the United States, circulating 4.1-4.0 million copies per year.<sup>44</sup>

## Findings

I identify 13 relevant articles from in *Time Magazine* between January 2001 and December 2007. Of the 62 individuals depicted in those 13 articles, I identify 48% as black, and 52% as non-black (often white).<sup>45</sup> This is still a disproportionately high depiction rate of black individuals, considering the average percent of the black population actually in poverty during this time period of seven years is approximately 24.2% and about 3% of the US Population [see figure 3].<sup>46</sup> Additionally, during this time period, African Americans made up about 36% of all families receiving benefits from TANF

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1987. Page 63

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Cooper, 2002, “GOING TO THE CHAPEL.” (*Time* 159, no. 23: 31. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost) (accessed June 5, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> “Time Magazine Still on Top in Circulation.” *POLITICO*. 2015. <http://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2012/08/time-magazine-still-on-top-in-circulation-131349.html>.

<sup>44</sup> “News Magazines: By the Numbers.” *News Magazines: By the Numbers*, 2014, Accessed 2015. <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2013/news-magazines-embracing-their-digital-future/news-magazines-by-the-numbers/>.; Today in 2015, *Time Magazine* still holds the most readership of all news magazines at the average single copy sale at about 60,145.

<sup>45</sup> I understand the risks in labeling the race of someone else, since perceived race does not always align with the true racial identity of an individual. However, for consistency with Gilens’s method, I identify the race of each individual to the best of my ability, aware that I might, at times, mislabel.

<sup>46</sup> “U.S. Census,” Poverty in the United States, Accessed June 6, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p60-235.pdf>; <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p60-235.pdf>; <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p60-235.pdf>;

(Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), a higher percentage than any other racial group, but still far from a majority to merit such overrepresentation [see figure 4].

Year	% of Black Population in Poverty	% of Blacks in Poverty in U.S. Population	% Black in Poverty in Media
2001	22.7%	2.8%	
2002	24.1%	3.0%	
2003	24.4%	3.0%	
2004	24.7%	3.0%	
2005	24.9%	3.0%	
2006	24.3%	3.0%	
2007	24.3%	3.0%	
<b>Average</b>	<b>24.2%</b>	<b>3.0%</b>	<b>48%</b>

Figure 3

**Figure B**  
Trend in TANF Families by Race/Ethnicity  
FY 2002 - FY 2006

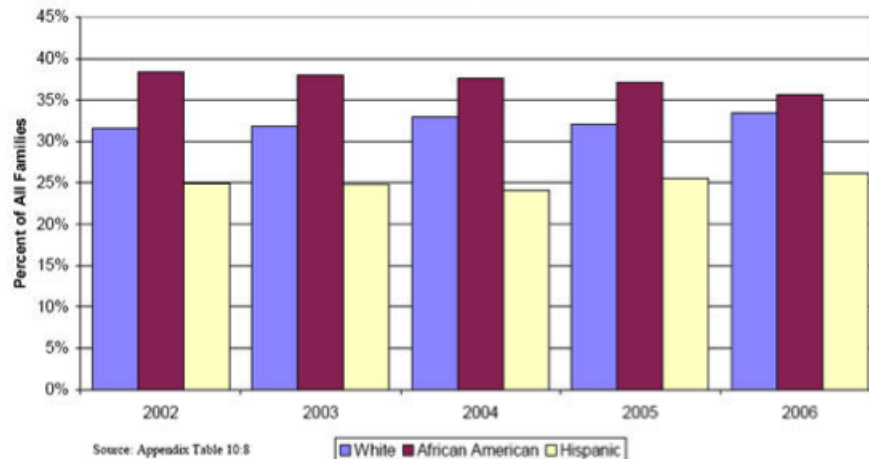


Figure 4

Where my findings depart from previous studies is in the degree of “sympathy” or the valence in the coverage of poverty in news media. Overall, I find 77% of the relevant articles to depict the poor in a sympathetic manner, marking a significant difference to previous studies. Relying on Gilens’s definitions and indicators of “sympathetic” and “unsympathetic” coverage of poverty [sympathetic indicated by “+” and unsympathetic indicated by “-” in Figure 2], I identify 63% of images of poor African Americans are actually depicted through a sympathetic lens, more often than not denoting African Americans as more deserving than underserving poor, and as individuals actively trying to escape poverty. This marks a dramatic specific shift in conclusions from Gilens’s era of study, when, by contrast, much of the media coverage of the poor involved chronic unemployment, crime, and



welfare dependency.<sup>47</sup> Still, the 11 unsympathetic images of poor African Americans outnumber the 3 unsympathetic images of poor whites [see figure 5].

	Black	Non-Black	Total
Sympathetic	19	29	48
Unsympathetic	11	3	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>62</b>

Figure 5

Multiple factors might help explain this shift in findings. First, since the passage of PRWORA in 1996, “the tone of coverage [of welfare and poverty] has been much more positive...[thus] one might optimistically expect more favorable public attitudes toward welfare and welfare recipients.”<sup>48</sup> I identify that more emphasis was placed on stories relating to children and families in poverty, education, employment programs, childcare in both legislation and thus also in news media coverage of poverty and welfare during the 2000s, falling within the bounds of what Gilens labels a “highly sympathetic topic” that is likely to appeal to readers. While Clawson and Trice note that very few individuals in images from 1992-1998 were shown engaging in criminal behavior (“no alcoholics were presented and only one person was smoking a cigarette”), this didn’t shift the discussion of their empirical findings: Clawson and Trice still identified that African Americans were depicted more often and in more negative lights, concluding that the patterns of media coverage in 1950-1992 held consistent through the 1990s. Additionally, Van Doorn does not identify this trend of increased sympathy in his findings at all.

An article titled “A New Marriage Proposal: How a Controversial Program Promotes Matrimony as a Way to Tackle Poverty” published in the November 8, 2004 issue of *Time Magazine* highlights an African American family in a particularly sympathetic and positive light [see figure 6]. This image depicts a two smiling parents, a son, and a newborn baby displaying a sense of collective familial effort and motivation, supplemented by similarly optimistic caption: “Bryand and Sims hope to move their baby Stephan and her son Qasim out of the housing projects one day.”<sup>49</sup> For this family, not only does marriage provide more financial and emotional stability, but so does the father’s stable job, as indicated by his uniform that reads “Skip’s Maintenance and Repair Inc.”<sup>50</sup> This article frames marriage as a step towards higher educational opportunity for children in two-parent households, higher income, and lower dependence on social services. The article quotes the father: “Marriage is a chance you have to take.”<sup>51</sup>

Another representation of African Americans in a positive light can be found in an exposé on Kimberly Hubbard, found in the October 22, 2007 issue of *Time Magazine* [see figure 7]. An image of Hubbard holding an African American baby in her “after hours daycare” is accompanied by a caption that reads “Hubbard keeps children safe and cozy when their parents have to work nights.”<sup>52</sup> This brief article frames Hubbard as a mother of two who used to struggle to find childcare when she worked late night shifts at Goodwill. Deciding to open a child-care center, Hubbard is depicted not as a “welfare queen” or as lazy but as a caregiver with an entrepreneurial idea that benefits

<sup>47</sup> Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black”, 124.

<sup>48</sup> Avery, Peffley, and Glass. “Race Matters.” 5.

<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Winters, “A New Marriage Proposal.” (*Time* 164, no. 19, November 8, 2004, 58-60. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost) (accessed June 5, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Tiffany Sharples, 2007. “Kimberly Hubbard.” (*Time* 170, no. 17: 80-81. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost) (accessed June 5, 2015).

other parents (perhaps single mothers) like her.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Still, not every article in this time period depicted African Americans in an optimistic manner. The following example portrays the dichotomy between deserving white poor and undeserving black poor that Gilens, Clawson and Trice, and Van Doorn report in their findings [see figure 8 below]. Within a larger article about homelessness, the first image on the left page depicts Debra Rollins, a white woman with her white daughter. Though Rollins was a teenage runaway, she is now “trying to obtain a GED and is working part time as a cashier so she can get a place of her own.”<sup>53</sup> This indication of effort towards educational opportunity and employment are clear markers of what Gilens labels the “deserving poor.” On the other hand, the following image on the right side of the page depicts Gary Jones, a black homeless man who lost his job as a welder. After “drinking heavily and doing drugs,” he lost his self esteem to work or obtain an education. He states: “I’ve thought

<sup>53</sup> Stein, Joel, Simon Crittle, Jyoti Thottam, Laura A. Locke, Deborah Edler Brown, Magot Roosevelt, and Matt Baron, et al. 2003. “THE REAL FACE OF Homelessness.” *Time* 161, no. 3: 54. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed June 5, 2015).

about trying to get back out there and find work, get myself off these here mean streets, but you have to be in the right frame of mind to do that.”<sup>54</sup> Jones represents the undeserving poor, the lazy African American stereotype, literally wrapped in a blanket, facing chronic unemployment, drug addiction, and what Gilens terms, “welfare dependency as a way of life.”<sup>55</sup>

The juxtaposition of these two images shows that the pictures in the articles I examine between 2001-2007 still fall prey to the trope of the deserving white poor, undeserving black poor of Gilens, Clawson and Trice, and Van Doorn: though I find *more* sympathetic depictions of blacks, still 37% of blacks depicted are labeled unsympathetic. However, it is important to note that individuals like Gary Jones are not depicted nearly as often as in previous years or as often as individuals like Kimberly Hubbard between 2001-2007.

## Discussion and Implications

A hypothesis to potentially explain this shift in from unsympathetic to majority sympathetic depictions of African Americans (aside from the increased family, child, and marriage-related legislation under the name of welfare reform, as mentioned above) is that news media sources became aware of Gilens’s work and subsequently adjusted their reporting and photographing practices. When contacted about whether he received direct or indirect responses from *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News and World Report*, Gilens responded:

I never heard from anyone at *Time* or any other media outlet after my research came out. The photo editors I spoke with at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News* were at least generally aware of what I was doing but I don’t know if any of them ever sought out the findings.<sup>56</sup>

After explaining that his work was not directly acknowledged by news sources (though it still may have been without his knowledge of it), Gilens suggested a possible explanation: “Some might suspect that the 9/11 attacks at least temporarily shifted Americans sense of ‘us’ in a more inclusive (internally, at least) direction. Just a thought.”<sup>57</sup>

As my findings show, there appears to have been a shift since Gilens’s research (and at least since Clawson and Trice’s research) indicating a more sympathetic tone towards all poor as more deserving, whether African American or not. One scholarly critique of Gilens suggests that he is “too content to accept as legitimate that the American public relies on the prevailing distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor...Gilens fails to consider the possibility that no one ‘deserves’ to be poor.”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps in response to this critique, after the release of Gilens’ article, the news media took note and began depicting most poor as deserving and in a more sympathetic light.

Further, perhaps there is minimal difference between the degree of sympathy, the tone, or valence of the images of the poor, but rather what remains with the reader is purely the race of the individual. Testing this, in a study titled “Race Matters: The Impact of News Coverage of Welfare Reform and Public Opinion,” scholars James M. Avery, Mark Peffley, and Jason Glass manipulate the race of individuals in newspaper stories about welfare reform as well as the photographs that accompany them.<sup>59</sup> In this study, a random half of the white readers are given an article with an

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 128-129.

<sup>56</sup> Gilens, Martin. E-mail interview by author. June 2, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Gilens, Martin. E-mail interview by author. June 2, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Sanford F. Schram, *Reviewed Work: Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. by Martin Gilens. (*American Journal of Sociology* 105, No. 4, Jan., 2000): 1226-1227.

<sup>59</sup> Avery, Peffley, and Glass. “Race Matters.” 5.

accompanying photograph of a white woman and her child and the other half read an article with a photo of a black woman and her child. A random half of the respondents read an article that describes welfare reform as a success (“Welfare Reform’s Triumph Is Affirmed”) while the other half read about the problems of welfare reform (“Welfare Reform’s Problems are Confirmed”). In total, there are four possible articles a reader could receive, variables being race and (un)sympathy valence as measured by the success or failure of welfare reform generally. This study finds that when welfare reform is described as a success, the race of the welfare mother has “no effect”; when welfare reform is described as having problems, however, readers are likely to blame the black woman more than the white woman.<sup>60</sup>

The findings of this study illuminate some valuable implications for my findings. Since I identify 77% of the articles I examine as having positive tones about the individuals based on Avery, Peffley, and Glass’s study, then, the race of these positively framed individuals doesn’t affect the reader’s opinion about the person in the image. Still, however, I find 11 unsympathetic images of black individuals, while only 3 unsympathetic images of non-black individuals. This study’s findings, then, would still indicate a disproportionate amount of readership stereotyping towards the black individuals than the non-black individuals.

One must consider what scholars Hurwitz and Peffley call the “exception to the rule” hypothesis. A positive depiction of a black person as “well-behaved” or “hard working,” though better than the alternative, in their view, still exists alongside negative stereotypes of black people as lazy and violent, as yet another “racial subtype.”<sup>61</sup> This may allow “negative stereotypers to deny, in a sense, their own prejudice by being able to conceptualize ‘good’ blacks while simultaneously disparaging most others.”<sup>62</sup> This implies that both the readers in Avery, Peffley, and Glass’s study, as well as the readers of *Time* magazines between 2001-2007, might still hold negative racialized stereotypes of black people, though the sympathetic coverage outweighs the negative coverage.

Gilens clearly asserts his perceived connection between public opinion—which is influenced by news media—and its direct effect on public policy. Hurwitz and Peffley, however, are skeptical about the direct effect of racial images on public opinion or even public policy:

Quite clearly, there is no one-to-one correspondence between racial images and policy preferences. Whites who perceive blacks negatively will not inevitably oppose welfare and affirmative action, and whites who perceive them more favorably will not inevitably support such policies. Policy preferences are far more complicated than that.<sup>63</sup>

Further challenging Gilens’s assumption that this news, public opinion is only one among many influences on policy. Newspaper sources are not the only suppliers of inaccurate or biased stories that influence the ideologies of citizens, voting population, and policy makers. With this in mind, though, newspaper bias and the overrepresentation of African Americans in welfare articles with a negative tone still serve undoubtedly one present and prominent force of misrepresentation of many.

What I identify as another shortcoming of Gilens’s methodology (and thus also of the subsequent studies that replicated his methodology) is the alleged mutual exclusivity of the sympathetic and unsympathetic topics. I believe that some articles my research examines, though they depict someone in an employment program, could be classified as unsympathetic; conversely, an article that deals with intergenerational poverty, which Gilens labels an unsympathetic topic, could be actually discussed and depicted in a hopeful light, presenting the individuals at hand as examples of the deserving poor. Additionally, many of the articles I examined were classified under multiple topics. Gilens cites that 11% of the news stories he worked with were indexed under more than one

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<sup>60</sup> Avery, Peffley, and Glass. “Race Matters.” 5.

<sup>61</sup> Hurwitz and Peffley, *Perception and Prejudice Race and Politics in the United States*, 92.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

topic. This made it difficult to clearly distinguish between what might be considered a sympathetic and an unsympathetic depiction of a poor person. Still, despite any ethical qualms I encountered while tracking the sympathetic and unsympathetic depictions of individuals, I employed Gilens's distinctions to the best of my ability for the sake of methodological consistency.

## Conclusion and Further Research

Examining the news media depiction of race and welfare in *Time Magazine* from January 2001-December 2007, I found that a disproportionately large percentage of poor individuals depicted are African American, consistent with findings in similar previous studies. However, my research reveals that in this time period, depictions of poor African Americans and welfare generally are portrayed through increasingly sympathetic lenses. These findings imply that welfare is consistently framed as an "African American problem," which risks an increase in and perpetuation of unfounded stereotypes about African Americans in poverty in America. Yet simultaneously, from a hopeful point of view, these findings indicate the potential beginnings of a disassociation of poor blacks with laziness or lack of motivation.<sup>64</sup>

I suggest that further research explores these findings from 2007 to the present day, keeping in mind my findings concerning the potential shifts in sympathetic valence of articles. Additionally, while Gilens's research fails to track gendered stereotypes within poverty media discourse, Van Doorn begins to examine gender distribution in images, as well as stereotypes such as the "welfare queen" in his analysis. Further research on this topic would benefit from a deeper investigation of the role of gender during this time period, specifically as it relates to female agency and centrality in depictions of family welfare issues in this time of the Healthy Marriage Initiative.<sup>65</sup>

To widen the scope of inquiry, further research would also benefit from examining other popular sources and locations where poor blacks are stereotyped as lazy or not motivated: Clawson and Trice (2000) cite that "race coding of poverty in news magazines is not an isolated incident; rather, the racial bias reported here is a widespread phenomenon."<sup>66</sup> Future research on this topic should continue to refer to textbooks, children's programs, "reality-based" programs, sitcoms, and advertising—all spaces in which blacks are portrayed in a stereotypical fashion.

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<sup>64</sup> For more information, see <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2012/02/23/11130/moving-away-from-racial-stereotypes-in-poverty-policy>.

<sup>65</sup> Specifically examining William Julius Wilson's conception of the lack of black "marriageable men" would be useful. William J. Wilson, "Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap Between Evidence and Public Policy Issues," In *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>66</sup> Clawson and Trice, 62.

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