

The Public Narrative of Welfare and the Impoverished: Effects of Social Stereotypes on Low-Income Individuals

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Abstract

In the context of the United States, there are many widely held misconceptions of poverty and the individuals who experience it. The narrative negatively stereotypes and criticizes individuals facing destitution. It goes on to suggest that people in poverty are lazy, stupid, and responsible for their situation. This notion is also accompanied by the idea that the welfare programs in place to alleviate poor individuals from their unfortunate circumstances are actually counterproductive. Accordingly, the welfare system is ineffective and allows individuals to idle while having their needs met through tax-payer funding. However, this narrative is visibly perpetuated by the media and politicians who have never experienced poverty, nor likely have personally known anyone in such a circumstance. The intention of this study is to challenge the public opinions of the poor. In doing so, this study interviewed six individuals who have experienced life in poverty. One key finding is that participants overwhelmingly have heard and experienced the negative public narrative of the poor. Additionally, based on the experience of participants, welfare is effective and does not create idle individuals.

1 Introduction

Indisputably, poverty is an incurable disease in all human societies, and the richest nation on Earth is no exception. Of the 195 countries in the world, the United States is ranked the richest. It has the strongest economy in the world, as measured by Gross Domestic Product ([International Monetary Fund, 2021](#)), with a worth of *20trilliondollarsoftheworld's*90 trillion. However, the US is also notorious as one of the highest-ranked nations with the worst wealth disparity. As of 2021, 724 of the world's 2,755 billionaires were citizens of the United States, making the US the largest manufacturer of the obscenely wealthy ([Tognini, 2021](#)). Despite this tremendous wealth, 37 million people, or 13 percent of the US population, live in poverty ([Poverty USA, 2020](#)).

Along with the wealth gap, there is also a disparity of opinion on the issue of poverty in the US. Perspectives on the matter vary widely and are comparable to a spectrum. On one side, poverty is proposed as a societal issue that requires government solutions. Poverty is understood to be an undesirable experience caused by economic, social, and personal misfortune. This side also believes that the violence, social immobility, bad habits and other negative characteristics of

poverty are not inherent to the individuals. Rather, they are situationally and environmentally caused by the stresses and difficulties of living below economic means. In opposition, many hold the opinion that poverty is an individual and personal problem that should be dealt with accordingly. It should not be the responsibility of the whole society to care for the misfortunes of the few. Commonly, it is believed that the cause of poverty is the lack of willingness to work toward betterment and supports the desire to live off of the welfare of the state. Moreover, the negative characteristics associated with poverty are inherent to the individuals rather than the situation. National and personal opinion on poverty is not two-sided, but rather dynamic and complex. Regardless of how it is viewed, poverty and all of its realities remain unaffected and continue to wreak uncontrollable hardship on the lives of those faced with it.

In the US, the opinion of the wealthy is seen as more valuable than that of the impoverished. This is unfortunately true even while discussing poverty and its matters that are not consequential to the opinionated elite. It seems that even while discussing the experience of being in poverty, the conversation is dominated by individuals who have not experienced poverty in the past or in the present. Indeed, it is a social phenomenon for the poor to be blatantly dis-

regarded even in the narration of poverty itself. Owing to this fascinating revelation, I am interested in understanding poverty from the perspective of those who have experienced it. Particularly, I want to know if the experience of people in poverty supports the claim that public opinion negatively views people in poverty and welfare. Furthermore, I want to know if such allegations hold any truth as understood through the experiences of people who have personally faced poverty.

Since the focal point of this study is to gain insight into the perspective of the poor, I focused on interviewing individuals who are living in or have previously lived in poverty. Data were collected from six different interviews from individuals varying in age, sex, race, religion, and gender. All participants experienced poverty while living in Chicago, Illinois. Each interview was conducted using the same set of questions and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed at a later date. The data was coded based on effective coding methods. First cycle codes included outcome, perspective on the rich, perspective on the poor, welfare, food, housing, stereotypes, discrimination, education, community, and income. Second cycle codes were simplified to better focus on the central claims of the research. Codes included welfare, food, housing, stereotypes, and discrimination. It was also necessary to address the public rhetoric itself. Public documents such as media broadcast transcripts and speeches from political figures were collected and analyzed. This was to support the claim that public opinion views welfare as ineffective and associates people in poverty with negative characteristics. The conclusion of my study found that individuals who have or are experiencing poverty contradict popular public narratives regarding the poor. This includes the idea that the poor are stupid, lazy, and that welfare is ineffective.

2 Background and Literature Review

Poverty in the United States is widely disputed in public discourse. It is also one of the most debated and discussed public issues in politics and the media for generations. Similarly, stigmatizing individuals in poverty has remained a social paradigm for centuries. Those subjected to poverty by misfortune were viewed as responsible for their situation. Although the causes and consequences of poverty are not limited to individuals, it has not always been an issue of public responsibility. In the early days of the

US the major opinion was that poverty was a personal matter. Those who could not sustain themselves due to financial limitations turned to charity organizations and religious institutions for help ([Hansan, 2014](#)). However, the most destitute were forced into “poor houses” or government funded housing complexes designed to make poverty insufferable. The intention was that doing so would incentivize social mobility. Although the rancid, overly crowded and inhumane complexes no longer exist, their sentiment remains. Even today, politicians, the media and regular citizens support the opinion, and myth, that the struggles of poverty should not be alleviated. That is, the unbearable conditions of being poor is what forces people to do better, reducing the number of people in poverty. Poverty as a public affair, as known today, was conceptualized in the mid 20th century. Propelled by the Great Depression, the US government adopted a national welfare system to combat poverty under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’.

Poverty in the United States is unfathomably misunderstood. For those who have never lived in poverty, it can be difficult to empathize with and easy to form misguided and uninformed opinions. Moreover, it is common for many people to misidentify themselves as poorer than they actually are ([Friedman et al., 2021](#)). That is, individuals unjustifiably perceiving themselves as poor or living in poverty. This supports the idea that despite poverty being a major issue in the US, it alludes to common knowledge. So, what is poverty, how is it measured, and what are the real consequences of it?

Poverty is defined as “the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.” ([Merriam-Webster, nd](#)). In the US, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) sets the guidelines, known as the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), for determining what constitutes poverty. Simplistically, poverty is determined by annual income, subjective to size of household, necessary for sustaining basic needs. The FPL is most importantly used to determine eligibility for government assistance programs. In the US, individuals who live below the FPL are eligible for government assistance programs, also known as the umbrella term, welfare. The intent of welfare is to help struggling individuals through programs tailored to different needs.

2.1 SSI

Individuals who meet the cross-road eligibility requirements of being either blind, mentally or physically disabled, or over the age of 65 and who also have

limited income and other resources are able to apply for monthly cash benefits ([SSA.gov](https://www.ssa.gov), 2022). This is known as Supplemental Security Income or SSI for short. SSI is meant to be a financial support for individuals who are unable to work and earn an income through their own means. However, these monthly stipends only cover basic necessities such as rent, clothing, and other bills. Thus, SSI checks are not large or generous by any means. As with other welfare programs, the monthly SSI income an individual receives is determined by their locality and the subsequent cost of living for that area.

2.2 SNAP

Aside from water, the most important need for human survival is food. Although access to food is a human right, it is also not guaranteed. In 2020 the United States Department of Agriculture recorded an estimated 38.3 million people living in food-insecure households with children making up 6.1 million of that estimate. The USDA defines food insecurity as “disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake”. This is exemplified by not eating in a day, worrying if food will run out, eating less than what is nutritionally necessary, and feeling hungry but not eating. To combat this problem, the US government created the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The program is also referred to by its past and present forms of use, Food stamps or Link. The program today operates through the use of a debit-like card known as the Link card. The card is refilled automatically every month with the maximum amount of funds allotted to each recipient. The monthly stipend is dependent on a few factors including household income, household size, and whether children live in the household.

2.3 Housing Assistance

According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, an estimated 575,714 Americans were faced with homelessness in 2020 ([USICH](https://www.usich.gov) United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2020). Homelessness is an integral part of poverty and it is defined as when a person “lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and if they sleep in a shelter designated for temporary living accommodations or in places not designated for human habitation.” ([Oxford Encyclopedia of Social Work](https://www.oxfordreference.com), nd). Homelessness is the severest housing consequence of poverty, but it is not the only one. Housing insecurity is another major issue many people are faced with, whereas an estimated 3.7 million people

are facing the likelihood of eviction from their residence and another 7.7 million estimated people are behind on their monthly rent payments ([NAEH](https://www.naeh.org) National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). To mitigate this crisis, the US government has three housing assistance welfare programs as overseen by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In order to qualify for housing assistance programs, applicants must meet the income limit set by the HUD which varies by state, county, or city of applied residence. Qualified incomes are less than 50

Public Housing is a program that settles accepted individuals and families into furnished housing units operated by federally funded public housing agencies. There are around 1.2 million housing units throughout the US housing an estimated 550,000 families with children ([Sard and Daskal](https://www.sardanddaskal.com), 1998). The demand for public housing is increasingly high and with limited units, applicants can be waitlisted for years without guaranteed approval. If accepted, the annual income of applicants is evaluated, and an appropriate rent payment is formulated (25 minimum to 50 maximum) ([HUD](https://www.hud.gov) US Department of Housing and Urban Development, nd).

Section 8 Tenant-Based Vouchers and Certificates is a rental assistance program that allows recipients to rent units in the private housing market. Recipients are allowed to apply to units of their choice so long as the landlord accepts Section 8 vouchers, passes building inspection, and agrees to maintain quality standards. There are currently 1.5 million housing vouchers in circulation, of which it supports 980,000 families with children ([Sard and Daskal](https://www.sardanddaskal.com), 1998). Unlike Public Housing, housing vouchers on the private market require recipients to contribute adequately to their monthly rental costs. The Department of Housing and Urban Development follows the widely accepted “30 percent” rule. In order to sustain a financially balanced life, households pay at most 30 percent of their monthly income after taxes on rent. The remaining rental balance is paid to the landlord by the local public housing agency. However, the rent must be acceptably priced as indicated by the PHA standards.

Project-based Section 8 Assistance is a rental assistance program that is only applicable for privately owned government subsidized housing units. In contrast to Section 8 Vouchers, recipients of Project-based Section 8 are not given freedom of choice in picking a housing unit. However, it is similar in regard to how much a recipient is required to pay monthly toward rental costs. There are 1.4 million units designated for Project-based Section 8, of which 500,000 accommodate families with children ([Sard](https://www.sardanddaskal.com)

and Daskal, 1998).

2.3.1 Medicaid and CHIP

Healthcare in the United States is notorious for its outrageous and unaffordable costs. In fact, it is ranked number one in the world for highest medical expenses. In comparison to countries with similar sophisticated healthcare systems, the US still spends double on healthcare per capita (Kurani and Cox, 2020). Simultaneously, there is no national publicly funded health care system to mitigate the burden of cost. The majority of Americans turn to private employer-based health insurance to afford healthcare. However, low-income earners are more likely than higher-income earners to be left uninsured. To mediate the disparity of healthcare accessibility, low-income and uninsured citizens are able to apply for one of two welfare programs.

Medicaid is a federal and state funded welfare program that pays for the healthcare costs of its recipients. Medicaid is exclusive to pregnant women, children, caretakers of children, individuals with disabilities, or those who are 65 years or older. Qualified applicants must also have a very low income close to the FPL (Benefits.gov, nda). Medicaid is comprehensive and covers dental and vision care, outpatient and inpatient services, physician services, x-ray scans, prescription drugs and more. As of 2021, 77.8 million individuals were receiving Medicaid benefits (Medicaid.gov, 2021).

CHIP is a closely related program to Medicaid, but it is designed exclusively for children under the age of 18 years old. The Children's Health Insurance Program differs as it provides health coverage for children of uninsured parents that also don't qualify for Medicaid. Almost 7 million children were enrolled in CHIP as of 2021 (Medicaid.gov, 2021).

2.4 TANF

The most recent program addition to the US welfare system was signed into law in 1997. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, was designed to relieve the financial stresses of low-income families through cash assistance. Although it is federally funded, TANF operates independently in all 50 states. In order to qualify for TANF, applicants must be pregnant, be the parent of a child 18 years or younger, be 18 years or younger and be the head of household and also have an income at or below the FPL. TANF goes beyond cash assistance, offering participants childcare services, job training and preparation and work assistance (Benefits.gov, ndb).

Recipient benefits vary by state, the number of children, and the number of income-earning caretakers. Finally, benefits are automatically applied monthly on the Link card along with SNAP benefits.

2.5 The Public Narrative

Regardless of the severe destitution an individual must live in to qualify for welfare programs in the US, a negative narrative persists for those individuals. In fact, in comparison to opinions on middle class people, the general opinion towards people in poverty is significantly more negative. This not only includes opinions, but stereotypes that are attributed to them as well (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). The common conception of people in poverty is that they present themselves relatively the same. That is, people in poverty are drunk, dirty, and beg for money on the street. However, the reality is that people in poverty do not always succumb to these stereotypes. Most individuals facing poverty and who are in need of assistance are actually regular citizens who are simply experiencing a tumultuous time in their life (Musrò, 2013).

The public narrative regarding people in poverty also works as a means to determine why people are poor. It is common for public narratives to portray people in poverty as masters of their own faith. Studies show that people are most likely to blame poor people for their poverty (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Without taking into consideration typical variables that result in poverty, such as mental illness, loss of work, disabilities, or lack of a living wage, the personal characteristics of individuals are prioritized. This being said, the public opinion of the poor is that people who find themselves in poverty are there because they are lazy and do not want to work (Kim, 1998). Indeed, this narrative expresses that there are jobs that are hiring and people who are in poverty are there because they don't want to work (Lauter, 2016). Additionally, those with or without a job but who are still facing poverty are because they are simply not working hard enough (Lauter, 2016). The most destitute citizens in the US often turn to welfare as a means of aid. The intention of the program and of the recipient is to alleviate the difficulties of their temporary situation. However, it is another commonly held belief that welfare actually maintains poverty through a relationship of dependence (Lauter, 2016). Therefore, the poverty that they are experiencing is their fault, their responsibility, and their personal issue. This, however, colors situational poverty in a false and narrow-minded view.

Although this narrative of laziness is popular

amongst the general public, it is not commonly held nor practiced among individuals in poverty. Indeed, there have been many studies done so far that have exhausted this idea from having any credibility. Many reports claim that people in poverty are strongly in support of having a high work ethic (Tickamyer et al., 2000). Meaning, the claim that poor people are lazy lacks support from poor individuals themselves. These views are often held by politicians who are against high welfare spending and who wish to cut federal funding. The aforementioned studies provide support against this narrative that is often held by political figures such as policy analysts, policy makers and other operators under the guise of welfare reform. (Tickamyer et al., 2000).

An interesting take on the opinion of the poor and on welfare is that the general public does not pay significant attention to the political plight of people in poverty. In fact, the average US voter tends to pay significantly more attention to policies that are generous to the middle class. This is in contrast to the much less attention that is given to policies that are harmful to people in poverty (Wilson et al., 2012). This seems to draw on the point that the situation of people in poverty are less valued than that of the middle class. Or rather, the lives of the middle classes are superior to those of the lower classes. This is despite the situational differences between the two, being that people in poverty face unfathomable consequences due to their reality. This supports the idea that the general public is unable to empathize with people in poverty and thus lack a proper understanding of their situation. Regardless, the public still holds many opinions on the poor in terms of welfare. This is likely due to the fact that welfare is federally funded through taxes paid by working citizens. Many believe that welfare is ineffective and that the struggles of the poor are not the responsibility of the government (Lauter, 2016).

One common way public opinion is perpetuated is through the media. The media is widely accessible in the modern US. The media, such as social media networks like Facebook and Twitter, television programs like Fox News and MSNBC, is a great resource of information distribution. However, it is also riddled with biases and does not always accurately portray all subjects. This includes how the existence of people in poverty is in reality. Indeed, it is widely known that the biases in media influence their audience and readers to think a certain way on a topic (Yarborough, 2008). However, due to its accessibility and credibility amongst most of society, the opinions projected into new segments and commentary are often regurgitated by the public. This perpetuation then

solidifies itself into the common opinion of the public. This is exemplified by the way in which the media discusses people in poverty and welfare and how those rhetorics are common opinions amongst the public.

3 Methodology

Qualitative methods were used in this study to further understand the social perception and challenges of poverty as experienced by individuals directly affected. The primary source of data for this study was collected through six semi-structured interviews. The interviews were not time restricted, and participants were encouraged to speak freely and as long as they liked. Each interview typically lasted between 10-20 minutes in length. All of the interviews were manually transcribed in full for coding and analysis purposes. The approach of this study was focused solely on gathering data from individuals who have direct experience with poverty. It is integral to the perspective of this research study and its intent is to challenge the general narrative of poverty cultivated by those with no direct experience in it. The collecting of data from only individuals who have experienced poverty may be viewed as a disadvantage as the perspectives are limited to only one side. However, I believe this to be advantageous to gain an insightful perspective of poverty from within the community itself. I relied on purposive sampling to identify and select interview respondents. Criteria to be interviewed was simple, respondents must at some point experienced life in poverty. To measure this, participants must have lived in a household or have been the head of a household that had a total earned income that was at or below the Federal Poverty Level. All participants chosen to have lived and experienced poverty in Chicago, Illinois. Six participants were chosen and ultimately interviewed, half of which identified as male, and the other half identified as female. The ages of the participants are as follows: 22, 25, 29, 35, 40, 66. As for the racial makeup, two participants identified racially as White and four as Mexican. A set of 12 pre-determined questions related to the subject material were used in each interview. Questions were curated to gain useful insight into the challenges, social rhetoric, and opinion of poverty by those with direct experience.

During my first round of data analysis, I coded for any small references to the theme of poverty. This included references to community, education, and the perspective on wealth. In my second round of data analysis, I used theoretical coding to narrow in on the central themes of the research study as analyzed

below.

3.1 Stereotypes

Stereotypes are when individuals attribute certain characteristics to a person, community, neighborhood without knowing them solely based on ascribed characteristics. Stereotypes can be expressed directly or indirectly through comments. This code is used when stereotypes are referenced by the interviewee, often relating to their personal experience. This code often was used when participants mentioned the association between lazy and stupid and the poor. Stereotypes can be perpetuated by the media too.

3.2 Discrimination

Discrimination is the treatment someone receives based on ascribed characteristics, their SES, or their community. This code was used when an interviewee felt as though they were experiencing discrimination. Discrimination among participants referred to the treatment associated with what they believed people who thought they were stupid or lazy because they were poor.

3.3 Food

Food is what someone eats for substance and survival. This code was used to reference food security/insecurity, types of food they eat, food habits/behaviors, their opinion of food, ect.

3.4 Housing

Housing is where an individual lives, their shelter. This can be in reference to their housing, their opinion of it, or their understanding in relation to someone else. Housing doesn't just need to reference the structure where they live but it can also reference where in the structure they sleep. It can also be used to reference how many occupants live with them. This code was not utilized, however, in the final product of data analysis.

3.5 Welfare

Welfare is an umbrella term that encompasses public aid and social safety net programs including SNAP, Medicare/Medicaid, Section 8, ect. This code will be used when welfare is referenced. Welfare is often referenced when the interviewee is talking about their experience or opinion of welfare. The code is most commonly used for SNAP as the most referenced program by participants.

4 Results

The most insightful finding from the data collected was that the reality of individuals who have experienced welfare and poverty contradicts the popular narrative created by the general public. This study found that despite the negative characteristics associated with individuals in poverty, such characteristics are false. Common associated characteristics include impoverished individuals being stupid, lazy, and responsible for their situation. Another interesting finding that counters public opinion is that welfare is ineffective. It is often said that welfare programs that are designed to uplift the poor are actually counterproductive. So far, welfare softens the hardships of poverty and allows recipients to live off of the state without the ambition to become self-reliant.

4.1 Bad Traits of the Poor

As previously explained, there are many popular perceptions of individuals who are experiencing poverty. It is undeniable that the US promotes itself as a meritocracy. A meritocracy is a society where anyone, regardless of class, is able to achieve economic success with enough effort. With that in mind, it is also undeniable that the US values hard work, independence, and self-reliance considerably. So much so that the value of such successes defines a person and how they are perceived by others. In this society, there is no excuse for one's inability to do so. Moreover, people who struggle to achieve these social standards are immediately labeled with negative attributes. This includes being seen as lazy, stupid, and responsible for their situation. While conducting this study and interviewing individuals who have experienced poverty themselves, the idea that they were lazy solely because of their financial situation was reoccurring. In fact, there was a pattern of connecting the trait of laziness to the idea that the poor were responsible for their plight.

There are many different forms of documentation that supports the claim that public opinion considers people in poverty as stupid and lazy. The most insightful findings come from media programs and addresses from high profile politicians.

Firstly, public opinion on the poor suggests that people in poverty are stupid. High profile politician and Fox News personality Sean Hannity remarked in a speech at a Politicon Convention that he "never got a job from a poor person, but those rich people didn't get rich by being stupid." Here Hannity supports the claim that people who are poor are poor because they are stupid as opposed to the rich who are financially

success because they are indeed not stupid.

Ray Suarez, a newsman for Aljazeera also supported the claim in a broadcast. Suarez said “People who are poor are poor because of the poor choices that they make. They’re drug addicts or engaging in self-destructive behavior.” This reinforces the claim that the general opinion of the poor is that their existence in poverty is their responsibility. According to this logic, this is the case because people in poverty make poor choices in their life.

Moving on, on MSNBC news host Chris Matthews explains that the public opinion that poor people are lazy is due to conservative politicians. Matthews goes on to say “You know, part of the sort of core of the conservative message these days is telling a lot of suburbanites, is telling people who perceive themselves as taxpayers who are under siege that their taxes are so high because the government is taking their money and wasting it on poor, lazy, undeserving people. . . People who don’t understand what work is.” Not only in this quote does Matthews remark on the narrative that the poor are lazy, but he also insinuates to the popular notion that welfare that aims to help the poor is actually a waste of money. He does so by referencing how welfare programs that are taxpayer funded is equivalent to “wasting it” on people in poverty who are lazy and who do not understand what it means to work for your living.

To support these claims, participants who have experienced poverty personally were asked whether or not they ever heard public opinions regarding the poor and if so, what they were. This question was meant to retrieve data on what rhetoric people in poverty were exposed to.

“Media how people betray people who are in poverty. In the sense of being lazy, of being ungrateful, being. . . Yeah like laziness, you’re not doing enough. What else. . . Yeah just the notion that because there’s this cooccurrence of because you’re poor you must not have done enough, you must be lazy and yeah. That’s kind of what I faced and kind of weird stereotypes that kind of gravitated towards people who are poor.”

This quote was from a participant who has lived in poverty their whole life, not knowing life outside of it. Here they explain that in their experience, they have witnessed how the media perpetuates the idea that people in poverty are lazy. In this context, it appears that laziness assumes that people in poverty are not “doing enough” to better their lives or predicament.

As explained in the quote, there is a relationship between the opinion that being poor is consequential because of an individual’s inherent laziness. This negative stereotype narrow mindedly disregards all other variables for why people find themselves in poverty.

Interestingly all six participants in this study remarked on the same characteristics they believed the general public to have regarding people in poverty, although much more simplistically.

Another participant remarked that “The poor are lazy, don’t want to work, rather get everything handed to them.” This public opinion as understood by our participant goes so far as to assume that people in poverty are there because they are too lazy to obtain and hold a job with sufficient income to sustain themselves without the assistance of welfare. As well as to suggest that people who are incredibly poor are so intentionally because they are so extremely lazy, they rather have their survival needs satisfied such as income, food, and shelter by simply being handed such things. This also reinforces the claim of this study as well as supplementing the previous participant’s connection that it is the individuals who are responsible for their own existence in poverty.

Every participant in this study also claimed that in their experience a common public opinion of poor people is that they’re stupid. That is, people who find themselves in financial destitution are so because they are not intelligent. Among the responses of participants expressing this idea, it was interesting to see that stupidity was used to reference perceived lack of intelligence in multiple areas. This included skill and knowledge-based intelligence and the intelligence required to make appropriate health related decisions. This assumption on the inherent intellectual capabilities of poor people also insinuates that people in poverty are inferior to people who are not.

“One case was when one of my teachers in high school said something that really at the moment hurt my feelings because both of my parents, my mom she works at a- she does cleaning, so she’s a maid and my dad is a delivery driver and bus driver. And I remember one of my teachers saying how those kind of jobs where they’re really labor intensive and really working with your hands, you didn’t have to be smart enough, you could be an idiot and do something like that. Going back to the stereotype of laziness, not laziness, stupidity. Like it didn’t require much, anything. And that the job that he had of teaching and educating,

of those kind of things where you're not working with your hands, they required you to actually think and to use your brain he said. Just kind of that polarizing division where... it just really hurtful to hear from a teacher that taught students that were all poor that were all brown and where in a disadvantaged situations and where facing a lot of adversities. It was really hurtful to hear something being said like that."

One participant of the study had personal experience with the negatively held stereotype that people in poverty are less intelligent. While discussing manual or laborious jobs, the teacher expressed his opinion that such jobs don't require intelligence. In this situation, the jobs being referred to don't require a college degree or any technical skills. These jobs include, like our participant's parent's occupations, maids, bus drivers, waitresses, janitors, cashiers, factory workers and others of the same sort. These jobs usually pay minimum wage, are not full-time positions with benefits, and lack job security. Additionally, such jobs may even hire and pay workers "under the table." This is an informal phrase for jobs that hire workers off the legal records and do not report their employees to their municipality. These jobs are not on a pay-roll, not registered with the local, state or federal government and thus are not taxed as they are paid in cash or checks. Consequently, jobs of this nature are overwhelmingly occupied by people experiencing financial hardship and are more likely to experience poverty. This rhetoric supports the claim the people in poverty inherently lack intelligence and are stupid. It is also another insinuation that poor people are somehow inferior to people who are not in poverty.

The claim that people in poverty are stupid was experienced by another participant. However, this participant experienced this negative stereotype directly.

"Well like I said the average act score at my public high school being low and people making assumptions that I was stupid because I'm poor and brown. Or just be surprised by things that I would say. Like oh how does he have that knowledge? He's poor and brown. University as well because there's not a lot of poor brown kids. In university there's always a surprise to meet a lot of people from the suburbs and they're like "oh my god I never got to meet someone from an urban

school before" like bruh, what you trying to say with that."

Here, the participant summarizes that in various situations people made assumptions that they were stupid just because they were poor. Our participant makes reference to the ACT score at their high school, a public institution. The ACT is a test that measures comprehension in school related topics in literature and the math and sciences. In this context, a low ACT score is often relied upon to justify stupidity among low-income students. Low-income students are referenced here through "public high school" which is federal and locally funded academic institutions that do not require tuition fees and also have limited to no admission requirements. Enrollment at public schools are most typically dominated by low-income students, although this does vary by the location of the school. Moreover, the comment regarding someone from an "urban school" in a university setting is indirectly exposes the opinion that people from such institutions are stupid. An urban school is closely associated with public school, schools that are in the city, often public, and as previously mentioned, often attended by low-income students. This comment assumes that low-income students do not typically attend university as they may be too stupid or incapable to do so. This participant was also indirectly considered stupid through sleigh remarks such as being questioned as to how they are knowledgeable in a certain area. That is, people in poverty are stupid and it is rare for them to show signs of intelligence.

"They thought I was neglecting you because I let you eat junk food, but at the time I was like what's really going to fill her up for the same price, an apple or a honey bun or you know those 0.50 sweet rolls, and I didn't have much, so I had to make the call that was right at the time. Then I got all these doctor's saying how terrible I am for feeding you all that sugar. But like I was trying but I didn't have options, I tried, but they saw me as stupid and like I shouldn't be a mom."

Lastly, one of the participants in this study described a time when they felt stereotyped as stupid because they were impoverished. As explained above, the participant often made decisions appropriate to their situation, yet was questioned and received criticism by doctors. Due to financial limitations, the individual consciously fed their child unhealthy foods

that were not nutritious and were for a child to consume. However, they deemed this the best decision as it was more satisfying, fulfilling, and cost effective when compared to healthier alternatives. Yet, during doctor's appointments for their child, they were often criticized for making bad decisions as a parent. Here, the participant notes how they felt as if they were being demeaned and indirectly viewed as stupid. Going further, it can be noted that in this context, stupidity is referencing the intellectual capacity to make healthy decisions. Or rather, the lack of understanding as to what is healthy, what is not, and what the body needs. Here the doctors supported the claim that public opinion believes that people in poverty are stupid.

4.2 Welfare is Ineffective

Poverty is synonymous with welfare. People who are experiencing poverty turn to welfare to aid them with consequential struggles of their situation. It provides a support line to meet basic needs and also as a line of defense against the real dangers of destitution like homelessness and starvation. However, there has always been opposition and criticism towards welfare. Critics of welfare say that it is ineffective and too costly when it does not yield helpful results. They believe that welfare creates people who are lazy and supports their desire to live off the state without working, ultimately being handed money for nothing. Moreover, critics tend to support welfare cuts and stricter eligibility requirements. However, the results from this study suggest otherwise. Indeed, the participants interviewed in this study described how welfare gave them support in dire situations. Participants also described how their experience on welfare contradicts claims that welfare breeds laziness and the lack of motivation to become self-sufficient.

"I had a case manager help me apply for all my benefits after my first hospitalization. When I was manic I just thought it was fun money, I was still living with my parents so I'd go to the movies and would get my nails done. Things like that. Then that would flip and I'd just sit on the money not knowing what to even do with my head. I didn't really understand how grateful I should've been until after I had already had my second baby and I was finally taking my meds regularly. I remember when I got to this sort of point of clarity and I was like God, what would I do without this. It never occurred to me

because I had never been stable minded enough to even think about it. But then I thought and I was like wow, I'm fortunate enough to be offered this. I wasn't in the right mindset when I was in my 20s, if no one told me about it, I would never have applied to SSI or foodstamps or the cash for the girls. Now I'm like I don't even know what I would do. It's helped me survive and helped me take care of my girls when I couldn't even take care of my own mind."

The experience of a participant of the study, a 35 year old who has firsthand experience on SNAP, refutes the claim that welfare is not effective. As a reminder, SNAP, the welfare program that provides food to people in poverty and unable to afford food. Here, the participant explains that in their life, food stamps allowed them to not only feed themselves, but to also feed their two daughters. Without food stamps, the participant would struggle to do so. Subsequently, this welfare program is a great example as to how welfare is a productive means to helping people with their basic survival needs and lives.

"Right now, I am definitely not in a position to get off of welfare. I can't really do it on my own, but not because I don't want to. Like I said I was in and out of hospitals for a long time and I'm 35 now. I only got a high school diploma, no experience, no skills. I've always had the goal of making it on my own, I even got a job that pays me on the side. It's not much so I can't have it mess with my SSI, but the older like the older I get, I'm getting more mature and the reality is I might be like this for the rest of my life. I'm not lazy, I want to work, that's a given with my job, but with my BD and psychosis and all the meds I can't pretend like I don't need an extra leg to stand on."

The criticism that welfare is not effective is supplemented by the claim that it harbors people who do not desire to work. But who would rather have their rent, food, and excess cash handed to them at no charge from the government. The same participant went on to refute the claim by explaining their perspective on existing on welfare now and in the future. Here, the participant explains that they are not lazy and do not want to live off of the welfare of the state. Contrary to popular opinion, their work ethic is still intact as they have pursued a part time job.

However, they also explained that although they desire to live financially independent, they understand that due to their mental illness they are unable to do so.

A different participant, a 22 year old, also explained how welfare was effective in their own life. Here the participant explains that although they grew up incredibly poor and without money to meet basic necessities, they were saved in part by food stamps. Thanks to SNAP, they were able to satisfy their basic needs and avoid going hungry.

“Luckily since we had the Link card we had money, ha well we didn’t have money, I mean luckily we had food in our stomach and food to kind of be okay in that sense.”

This participant went on to explain their current situation. This is another example that goes against the idea that welfare counterproductively creates people who do not want to work, but rather live on welfare forever.

“Yeah, I go to UIUC and I’m a senior. It was a bumpy road, I had to get through community college where, well I’m a year behind the four year plan. I’m definitely not a traditional student, I’m on a scholarship and probably couldn’t be here without it which is scary and stressful. I still got welfare, I mean just food stamps because I don’t make much money and there’s rent and stuff I need to pay. But I’m graduating in June and I’m so close, I’ve never lived without welfare, always been in poverty, I don’t know anything else except from what people tell me. But I’m so close to being out of it and it’s scary, I’m not sure what I’m going to really do. It’s going to be a huge thing, like finally being doing this myself, not having to rely on welfare, not worrying how I’m going to make it. I’m might let myself to be bougie and shop at Whole-Foods.”

Finally, a third participant, aged 66, explains a point in their life where welfare gave them an effective lifeline. As with the previous examples, this participant explained that during a time of intense struggle, they were able to survive because of the efficiency of food stamps. By having access to a Link card, as said by the participant, they were able to avoid starving.

“I didn’t have two nickels to rub together, understand, I spent day and night thinking how in the hell to pay the mortgage. I got the bank parked outside the house, what do you call the banker, got him taking pictures like they’re threatening me. Then I got people’s gas sending shut off notices. I had nothing. The only thing I had going for me was the Link. Everything was to hell but at least I wasn’t starving.”

Their finishing remarks are another example against the claim that welfare is ineffective. The participant explains that when they no longer believed they needed food stamps, they withdrew from the program. They remarked that although SNAP was effective and helpful, welfare was not something they wanted to rely on forever.

“I haven’t been on welfare in a few years. Stamps really helped me save money and put it towards bills. So I kept that for a while. I had to get a hell of a lot of stuff situated first, I had to get caught up on a lot of bills. I still qualified for stamps, but I didn’t need it, I sorted my finances, got caught up on my bills, I own the house now so that’s nice. I guess the only welfare I’m on now is Medicare, but hell I can’t even see how that’s welfare when everyone should have the right to healthcare, but what are you going to do.”

5 Discussion

The results of this study support the central claim that the reality of individuals who have experienced welfare and poverty invalidate the popular but negative narrative created by the general public about the poor. The most significant result was that all participants independently supported the claim that the general opinion on people in poverty is that they are stupid and lazy. Another insightful finding was that most participants had strong arguments in support of the claim that contrary to public opinion, welfare is indeed effective, supporting those in need without creating dependency. In the larger context outside of this study, the results support the idea that public rhetoric is often riddled with misconceptions on the character and experience of people in poverty. In fact, it is necessary that the narrative surrounding poverty is supported by the real life experience of

poverty. Future research is necessary to get a more holistic understanding of the experience of those in poverty. This study relied on only a set of 12 questions, and although the questions were well curated, more questions could provide more insight and understanding of the subject. There were a few major limitations for this research study. Firstly, the study relied on the participation of six individuals. Future studies are necessary with a more appropriate amount of participants. Moreover, the study was mismanaged in the beginning of data collection. The first interview had only a basic set of questions or the simple version of the final set. The questions were refined, and depth was added for the second interview. However, it was not until the third interview that all questions were finally established. Consequently, the first two participants were contacted again and given the new follow-up questions. This likely reduced the quality of answers from the first two participants as the questions were separated into two sets. Nonetheless, these findings offer a peek into a more in-depth understanding of what the life of people in poverty, outside of the negative public opinion, is really like.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Future Iterations

If given the opportunity to further pursue this research study there are many aspects that I would improve upon. Firstly, I would ensure that I have a well-established set of questions already prepared before I begin my interviews. This would be to improve upon my previous mistake of jumping into an interview prematurely and possibly skewing the results. Additionally, I would increase the number of participants in my study. This would also be to ensure that a more holistic understanding of the topic is met. I would also want to further pursue different avenues of poverty, including specific stories or examples relating to the struggles of poverty from participants. An estimation of the time necessary to complete these improvements and further pursue this study would be around 10 weeks.

I would begin my second attempt at researching this topic 10 weeks at minimum before the final paper is due. I would use the deadline for my capstone paper to determine the start and end dates. There are many stages to a research study. To start a topic must be chosen, then background literature on the topic must be collected. Next, a research design must be determined. After that the literature should be reviewed, data should be collected. If the study is qualitative, the data should be coded and analyzed and

if the data is quantitative, it should be statistically analyzed. After that the data research should begin to be written up. The objectives of this future study are as indicated above. Based on this current study and the understanding that this future study would still be small, I do believe that the below timetable is realistic. I would provide a weekly regular update to my supervisor, indicating whether or not the goals of the week according to the timetable have been met. I would indicate progress by providing evidence of the completed weekly goal.

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