Replacing "Welfare" with More Race-Neutral Alternatives

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Overview

Use of the word "welfare" can undermine the goals of the progressive anti-poverty and anti-racism movements. That's because the word "welfare" is not race-neutral. It is a dog whistle[1] that cues up pernicious racial stereotypes — primarily, that Black Americans lack a work ethic, are undeserving, and make up the lion's share of public assistance recipients[2] — that weaken white voters' support for public assistance programs.[3] Most Americans approve of "assistance to the poor" but oppose "welfare." In other words, language matters.

We recommend alternatives to "welfare" (see table below) that are likelier to build public support for programs that improve the economic prospects of millions of Americans.

This white paper examines common themes in public opinion research regarding Americans' views of "welfare," explains how media and political rhetoric have helped shape those negative views, documents the pitfalls of the term "welfare reform," and concludes with messaging guidance to ensure that we do not inadvertently undermine the programs that we work hard to protect and strengthen.

Instead of this...	Say this...	Notes
Welfare	Assistance to help people struggling to make ends meet Programs that help people facing tough times get back on their feet/ programs that help people make ends meet /economic security programs	While the public is deeply suspicious of and has conflicting views on welfare, they can still support programs that reduce poverty, especially when (1) that support is labeled as "assistance" to people who are experiencing poverty and (2) we use vivid language to describe the struggles that poverty creates. On second reference, you can drop the vivid language and use shorthand, such as "economic security programs." Significant challenges will remain to build public support, but these alternatives appear less harmful than "welfare."
Cash welfare or welfare grants	Cash assistance or cash benefits Direct financial assistance for families struggling to afford the basics	There isn't research on the best language to use as an alternative, so the best option is to experiment with different phrases and see which appears to work best. Research shows that cash is important, but the public often associates the flexibility of cash assistance with fraud (e.g., the purchase of drugs and alcohol). Another option is to experiment with terms like "direct financial assistance" in hopes that it doesn't trigger the negative images of cash.
The 1996 welfare reform law, or the 1996 welfare law	The 1996 law that created TANF The 1996 law that significantly weakened (changed) programs that help people meet their basic needs	Reform sounds like a positive thing, but it is misleading in this case. When there's no need to refer to the broader debate that took place at the time, it is best to say, "the 1996 law that created TANF." Or, if you are referring to the broader federal changes enacted in 1996, you can say, "the 1996 law that significantly changed (or weakened) core basic needs programs." If it is difficult to avoid saying the original phrase, putting "reform" in quotations would signal that the changes are not true reform.

Defining Welfare & Common Themes in Public Opinion Research

Americans have strong views about welfare, even though it has no widely shared definition. It has historically referred to cash assistance provided to working-age people (primarily those with children) living in poverty. As discussed below, in recent years, many right-wing organizations and policymakers have started extending the term to cover a broad range of income-based programs that serve low-income people, including SNAP, housing assistance, and Medicaid. In contrast, welfare and its related racial stereotypes are rarely associated with universal social programs that provide support to people across income levels, such as Medicare and Social Security, and other social benefits delivered through the tax code.[4]

Americans often hold conflicting views on poverty and the role of government, public opinion research shows. They tend to support helping people living in poverty but are far less likely to support welfare. In the same breath, the public may voice the desire to help those "who deserve it" and lament people's "over-dependence" on government programs. As Martin Gilens, an expert on the intersection of race and welfare, wrote in *Why Americans Hate Welfare,* "the public's views on welfare are a complex mixture of cynicism and compassion; misinformed and racially charged, they nevertheless reflect both a distrust of welfare recipients and a desire to do more to help the 'deserving' poor."[5]

Public attitudes about welfare are inextricably intertwined with race, research shows. Americans exaggerate Black people's share of the population living in poverty, and white people, whose beliefs about the racial makeup of those living in poverty are the most exaggerated, are most likely to oppose welfare. The major themes in the literature about the intertwining of race and welfare are as follows:

- **Two attitudes shape white opposition to welfare.** The two factors that most weaken white people's support for welfare are the extent to which they see (1) Black people[6] as lazy, particularly Black mothers receiving assistance, and (2) people who are poor as lazy and undeserving. These findings have been shown to be stronger predictors of white attitudes than self-interest, egalitarianism, and individualism.[7]
- **Perceived threats to white people's dominant status can lead to a "welfare backlash" among white people, but not among people of color.** White Americans are likelier to favor welfare cuts when they believe that their share of the total population is shrinking relative to people of color, in part due to what researchers call elevated "racial resentment" (racism) resulting from the perceived threat to their status.[8] They are also likelier to oppose welfare when told that it benefits people of color the most, even when controlling for other factors such as small-government beliefs. (When people of color are told this same information, it does not affect their attitudes toward welfare spending and programs.)

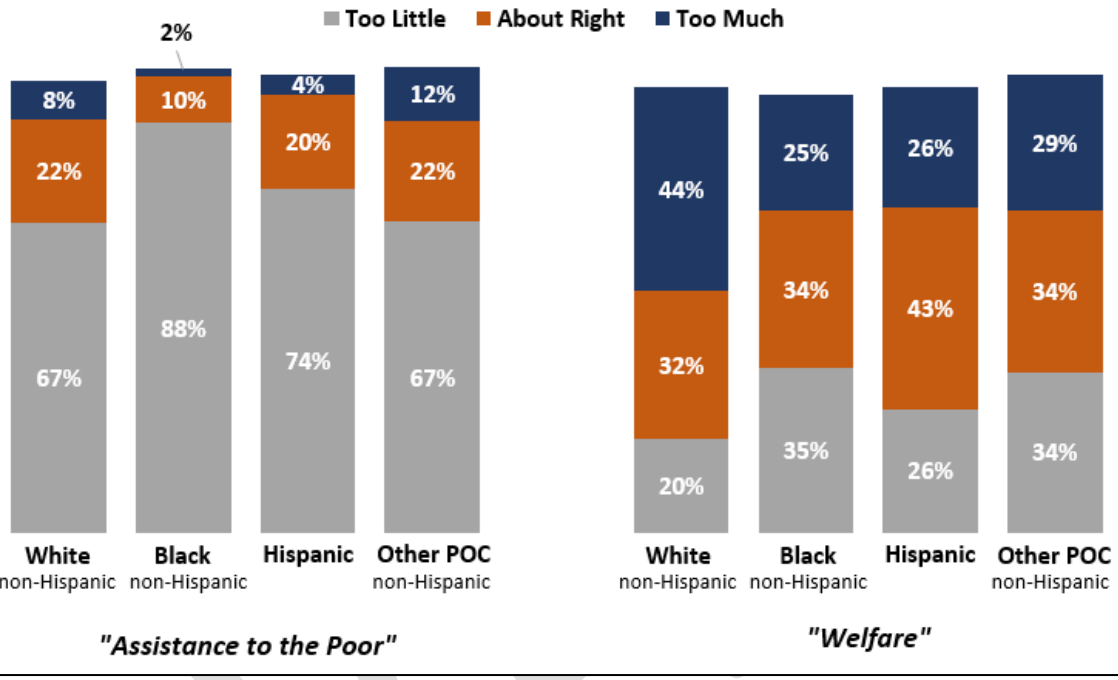
Public opinion research shows that a small shift in language may boost public support for anti-poverty programs. Most Americans approve of "assistance to the poor" but oppose that spending if it is labeled as "welfare," according to the 2019 General Social Survey. For example, in 2018, 71.4 percent of Americans said that the country spends too little assisting people who are poor, whereas only 22.4 percent said it spends too little on welfare. Similarly, 37.0 percent of Americans said that the country spends too much on welfare, but only 7.0 percent said it spends too much on assisting people who are poor. These statistics suggest that it may be far more effective to say "assistance" than "welfare."

In the same 2018 survey, people of color *and* white, non-Hispanic people were more likely to support "assistance to the poor" over "welfare," suggesting that people across races and ethnicities harbor some anti-welfare sentiment. (See Figure 1.) With that said, 3.3 times more white people said that we spend too little on public assistance than said that we spend too little on welfare— the largest gap of any race or

ethnicity. Overall, Black, non-Hispanic Americans expressed more support for additional spending on assistance than people of other races.

Figure 1. Americans Are Far More Supportive of Anti-Poverty Programs When They Don't Hear the Word "Welfare," Regardless of Race or Ethnicity

Percent Saying Spending for "Assistance to the Poor" vs. "Welfare" is:



Source: CBPP analysis of 2018 General Social Survey data.
Notes: Some sample sizes are small so the percentages should be viewed with caution. Figures do not total 100 percent because a small number of respondents answered "Don't know" to the survey question. POC means people of color. Respondents could report up to three races. "White" and "Black" includes non-Hispanic people who reported those respective races at first mention. "Hispanic" is an ethnicity that includes people of various races. "Other POC" includes non-Hispanic people who did not report being "White" or "Black" and those who reported multiple races but did not mention "White" or "Black" first. Surveyors asked each respondent the following question: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. First...are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on [ITEM]?" The survey asked half of the sample about spending on "public assistance to the poor" and the other half about "welfare."

Media and Political Rhetoric Contribute to Opposition to Welfare

While anti-Black racism and prejudice about people who are poor (i.e., the notion of who is deserving) have been the primary drivers of anti-welfare sentiment, the media and political rhetoric have inflamed such attitudes. Media images of poverty have grossly overrepresented Black Americans — especially those living in urban areas.[9] An analysis of media portrayals of poverty from the 1950s to the 1990s showed that Black Americans were likelier to appear in stories that were more critical of people living in poverty and less likely to appear in more sympathetic stories. "The media's tendency to associate African Americans with the undeserving poor reflects — and reinforces — the centuries-old stereotype of blacks as lazy,"[10] the researcher concluded. These practices continue today, according to a recent study commissioned by Color of Change.[11]

Disingenuous political rhetoric that galvanizes white racism without explicitly touching on race has long fueled opposition to welfare. The most infamous narrative is President Reagan's "Welfare Queen," portrayed as a jobless, unmarried Black mother who has multiple children, isn't working, and is milking the welfare system to sustain an indulgent and lazy lifestyle. The implicit message is that many people (i.e., Black ones) who do not deserve cash assistance unfairly receive it, taking away supports from hard-working people (i.e., white ones) who play by the rules.

When President Clinton championed the 1996 law that created the TANF block grant, which has led states to erect significant hurdles to accessing and maintaining cash assistance for families with children living in poverty, he used coded language like President Reagan's to build public support for the law. He claimed that we must "end welfare as a way of life" and "make work and responsibility the law of the land"— two messages that tapped into anti-Black racism and reinforced the "undeserving poor" narrative. In fact, President Clinton and proponents of the law used Black mothers as props — including at the signing ceremony — to send a political message to primarily white Americans about self-empowerment among mothers, particularly Black ones, living in poverty. Racist tropes have been highly effective tactics: many white Americans continue to view welfare through a racialized lens.[12]

These tactics are part of a centuries-long divide-and-conquer strategy to keep low-income people of color and white Americans from unifying over a shared economic agenda that would benefit everyone.[13] Dog whistles, including welfare, are employed to rupture class solidarity, with the end goal of upward redistribution to profitable corporations and the wealthy. Emerging research from Demos shows that a combined race-class message can overcome these stereotypes and build support for economic justice.[14] (That research is outside the scope of this memo.).

The Agenda Behind Expanding the Definition of "Welfare"

As previously explained, welfare has historically referred to cash assistance provided to mothers living in poverty, but more recently, conservative politicians and researchers have aggressively expanded its definition to include Medicaid and food and housing assistance when pushing "welfare reform" proposals. For example, in 2018 President Trump proposed moving food assistance from the Agriculture Department to the Department of Health and Human Services and renaming that agency the "Department of Health and Public Welfare."[15] More recently, AEI President Robert Doar published a piece on Medicaid and SNAP programs titled, "'Means Tested' Welfare Means Nothing in Practice."[16]

By rebranding multiple anti-poverty programs as "welfare," the President and others are likely trying to leverage a racialized term that has been very effective at building public opposition to government assistance — which can set the stage for deep funding cuts, harsh eligibility rules, and other access barriers.

The Downside of Saying "Welfare Reform"

When pushing policies that would make it more difficult for families to qualify for, maintain, or regain public assistance, policymakers on both sides of the aisle have framed them as "reform" to suggest that they would reduce poverty and help families when, in fact, they do the opposite. Calling these income supports "welfare" — again, a racialized term — weakens support for those programs from the start, while "reform" implies positive changes to hold undeserving people accountable who would rather have a handout than work. It is a powerful combination that harms families in need of medical, food, housing, and/or direct financial assistance.

It is also common to hear the 1996 law that created the TANF block grant referred to as "welfare reform" or the "1996 welfare reform law." In its truest definition, however, "welfare reform" refers to the

multi-year era from the early 1990s, when the federal government granted state waivers to AFDC (the cash assistance program that preceded TANF), to the enactment and subsequent state implementation of the law that created TANF.

Better Language Is Available

Some people may want to reclaim the word "welfare"—that is, to remind the public that it is not a dirty word but instead concerns our collective responsibility to care for and about everyone, including single parents and their children. Some may also argue that reclaiming this word is one way to pay homage to the Black mothers living in poverty who led and largely ran the national welfare rights movement as part of the National Welfare Rights Organization.[17] These mothers shared their lived experiences and fought against the racist stereotypes that politicians and the media perpetuated in the public sphere. As we advance economic justice, we must not forget how mothers receiving cash assistance represented themselves in the public debate, built a movement, and helped secure policy wins.

But, while we understand the desire to re-appropriate stigmatizing labels, we recommend that the progressive community think twice before using "welfare" in its written and oral statements because racism and prejudice about people who are poor continue to heavily influence many people's views on welfare. Given the obstacles to dismantling welfare's racialized connotations, we can better protect and strengthen economic security programs by avoiding this word whenever possible.

As the table on p. 1 shows, better alternatives are available that are less likely to dampen public support for the economic security programs that millions of Americans desperately need. In addition to avoiding "welfare," we recommend talking about poverty and public assistance programs in concrete ways by using language that vividly illustrates the struggles that Americans living in poverty face. For example, advocates can say "economic security programs" or "basic needs programs" or "cash assistance" that help(s) people who are struggling to make ends meet and support their children. Avoiding "welfare" may make our language less concise, but this is better than perpetuating racial stereotypes.

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[1] Ian Haney Lopez defines a dog whistle as "coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites." See *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class,* Oxford University Press, 2015, https://www.law.berkeley.edu/php-programs/courses/fileDL.php?fID=7213.

[2] Jazmin L. Brown-Iannuzzi *et al.,* "The Relationship Between Mental Representations of Welfare Recipients and Attitudes Toward Welfare," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28, No. 1, November 2016, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797616674999. For a summary of the research, see Association for Psychological Science, "Image of 'Typical' Welfare Recipient Linked with Racial Stereotypes," December 2016, https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/image-of-typical-welfare-recipient-linked-with-racial-stereotypes.html.

[3] Martin Gilens, "Racial Attitudes and Opposition to Welfare," *Journal of Politics,* Vol. 57, No. 11, November 1995; Martin Gilens, "'Race Coding' and White Opposition to Welfare," *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 90, No. 3, September 1996, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/race-coding-and-white-opposition-to-welfare/2837C0201E31551B4D0BE520E5E46E6B; Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, University of Chicago Press, 1999, https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo3633527.html.

[4] Christopher Ellis and Christopher Faricy, "Race, 'Deservingness,' and Social Spending Attitudes: The Role of Policy Delivery Mechanism," *Political Behavior*, January 10, 2019, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-018-09521-w

[5] Book Summary for Gilens 1999.

[6] *Ibid.* Gilens documents that white concerns about excessive reliance on government handouts focus primarily on African Americans, not other people of color.

[7] Gilens 1996 and 1999.

[8] This study relied on non-representative samples for practical reasons, which may limit the inferences that can be drawn from the results. Rachel Wetts and Robb Willer, "Privilege on the Precipice: Perceived Racial Status Threats Lead White Americans to Oppose Welfare Programs," *Social Forces,* Vol. 97, No. 2, December 2018.

[9] Martin Gilens, "Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* Vol. 60, 1996, https://web.stanford.edu/class/comm1a/readings/gilens-race-poverty.pdf.

[10] Martin Gilens, "How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media," in Sanford Schram *et al., Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform,* University of Michigan Press, 2003, https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472068319-ch4.pdf.

[11] Travis Dixon, "A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media," Color of Change, January 2017, https://colorofchange.org/dangerousdistortion/#key_findings.

[12] Brown-Iannuzzi *et. al* 2016; Wetts and Willer 2018.

[13] Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, Oxford University Press, 2004, https://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/quadagno-the-color-of-welfare-how-racism-undermined-the-war-on-poverty.pdf.

[14] To learn more about the research, which Demos commissioned for the Race-Class Narrative Project, see https://www.demos.org/race-class-narrative-project.

[15] Executive Office of the President, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations," June 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Government-Reform-and-Reorg-Plan.pdf.

[16] Robert Doar, "'Means Tested' Welfare Means Nothing in Practice," AEI, December 11, 2018, https://www.aei.org/articles/means-tested-welfare-means-nothing-in-practice/.

[17] To learn more about Black mothers' role in the movement, see Mary Eleanor Triece, *Tell it Like It Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement*, University of South Carolina Press, 2013.