

A person with curly hair is seen from behind, looking out a window. The window is framed by red curtains on the left and right, and a light-colored checkered curtain in the center. The view outside the window shows a city street with buildings and a red brick building in the foreground. The person is wearing a dark blue or black shirt.

# **A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY II**

**An Analysis of Public  
Opinion on Poverty**

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# HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS REPORT

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this report is based on publicly available survey data and public opinion studies by reputable research organizations, news outlets, government bodies, and social issue groups related to poverty. Analysis includes an exploration of perceptions about seriousness and causes of poverty, attitudes toward those living in poverty, beliefs about upward mobility, and support for anti-poverty policies. We reviewed data from more than 40 sources, including peer-reviewed articles. Data from the Opportunity Survey, a national representative survey of more than 2,000 respondents, was also analyzed for new insights. These studies meet The Opportunity Agenda's standards and best practices for research.

## LIMITATIONS

Because this report reviews existing studies, our analysis is limited by the severe gaps in data regarding many demographic groups, including Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, biracial and multiracial Americans, undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities. This is an important limitation—data from Pew Research Center indicates that roughly 29.1 percent of Native Americans/Alaska Natives live below the federal poverty line,<sup>1</sup> yet survey and polling research often fails to examine these communities. Existing research similarly overlooks the many differences within Asian American, Latino, and other groups in terms of national origin, immigrant status, and other characteristics. In an effort to bring a more intersectional lens to this research, we have included data examining public support for policies that directly affect the ability of underserved communities to climb out of poverty, including affordable health care, subsidized housing, and a rise to the minimum wage.

## TERMINOLOGY

The use of secondary sources has limitations related to language and terminology use. We have noted instances in this report when the data or source quoted makes use of terms and phrases that are not in line with our **organizational guidelines and objectives**.

## ICONS



### Highlighted References

A focus on the most thought-provoking research on poverty.



### Change In Action

Case studies of people and organizations fighting for economic opportunity.



### Highlighting the invisible

These often overlooked ideas and insights are essential to understanding poverty in the U.S.



### Key Findings

The most important takeaways from this research.



### Key points

The most useful research findings on this topic.



### Practical applications toolkit

Tools, tips, and resources for communicating about poverty in a way that builds the public will for change.

As America prepares for what promises to be a pivotal election and history-defining presidency, the mood of the nation is shifting. In the past two years, the rise of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and populist sentiments within a large segment of the electorate has pushed the issue of systemic inequality to the forefront of public discourse. These major social shifts - coupled with declining poverty rates and bipartisan recognition that poverty is a serious issue in need of redress- indicate that we are in a critical moment when it comes to tackling poverty, and more broadly, inequality in America.

The American public is primed to hear a new story and new solutions for poverty. In order to leverage this moment, it is necessary for anti-poverty advocates and social justice leaders to understand how Americans currently think and feel about the issue, how attitudes on poverty intersect with other social justice issues, and what specific policies are likely to galvanize widespread support.

This report examines existing polling and survey data in an effort to identify major attitudinal shifts, lasting challenges, and opportunities for advocates and leaders seeking to advance anti-poverty narratives and policies.

# SUMMARY

In 2014, fifty years after President Lyndon Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty,” the Opportunity Agenda published *A Window of Opportunity*, a three-part examination of prevailing public opinion and media representation of poverty in America. The report set out to answer several key questions: What is the public perception about the causes of poverty? Do people still have faith in the American Dream? What do Americans feel is the responsibility of government in tackling poverty and income inequality? What role, if any, do stereotypes and other biases play in shaping attitudes towards people living in poverty? Are there major differences in opinion between demographic groups? How has opinion changed over time?

Our analysis found that two competing, often conflicting narratives—individualism and personal responsibility on the one hand, and equal opportunity and shared responsibility on the other—have governed the American public’s overall perception of poverty-related issues. Our research also identified key openings of support for anti-poverty policies.

Our examination of data since 2014 and additional, previously unexplored data points reveal that Americans’ simultaneous belief in equal opportunity and individualist ideals largely persist and continue to influence support for anti-poverty policies. For instance, as of January 2016, more than 7 in 10 (72 percent) of surveyed Americans said that reducing poverty is an “extremely/very important” issue for the next president of the United States, while just under 6 in 10 (57 percent) express the same belief about reducing the “gap between the rich and the poor.”<sup>2</sup> Despite public concern about poverty and income inequality, our analysis of recent polling and survey data shows that this concern has not resulted in significantly higher levels of support for tax reform. In fact, recent research shows that public support for higher taxation of the rich and/or expansion of social safety nets has remained stable over the last three decades.<sup>3</sup>

While many trends in public opinion have stayed the same in the last two years, there have been some notable attitudinal shifts. While the majority of Americans (60 percent) still believe in the power of hard work and other individualistic ideals, there is growing discontent about the possibility of people born into poverty being able to achieve the American Dream—that is, the belief that hard work can overcome poverty and inequality. As of 2015, nearly 6 in 10 Americans (57 percent) believe that the American Dream no longer holds true, up from 48 percent in 2014.<sup>4</sup>

Americans' skepticism about the viability of the American Dream is coupled with rising concern about the state of equal opportunity in the United States and the fairness of the economic system. The somewhat unexpected popularity of former presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders pushed the discussion of income inequality into the forefront of political debates, and survey data from 2010 to 2015 suggests that Americans are more concerned about equal opportunity today than at any other time within the last five years. As of 2015, 65 percent of Americans believe that "one of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance in life," while fewer than three in ten (28 percent) believe that "it is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others."<sup>5</sup> Concern about the lack of equal opportunity has increased considerably since 2014, when 55 percent said that one of the big problems in the U.S. was the lack of equal opportunities for all. Survey data also indicates that Americans are increasingly concerned about unfair economic systems and corporate greed, while there is rising public awareness about the structural barriers faced by black Americans—an important opening for advocates seeking to educate the public and increase support for policies aimed to alleviate systemic inequality. In addition, research conducted by Topos Partnership indicates that there is a strong correlation between public perception of quality of life and the willingness to pay more in taxes<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, while research is still lagging in terms of providing data that examines the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and public opinion of poverty and low-income people, available survey data indicates strong support for policies that directly concern populations disproportionately affected by poverty, particularly a rise in the federal minimum wage and government housing subsidies. More than 7 in 10 people (74 percent) surveyed expressed the belief that housing subsidies would be very or somewhat effective in helping people struggling in the current economic climate.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, there is clearly reason to be optimistic about tackling poverty in America.

This report begins with a series of key findings and concludes with recommendations for narrative and message building, audience engagement, and future research.

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Modified Photo (cover): Nate Steiner



## **Executive Summary**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

### **1 Americans' Definition of Poverty**

Many Americans report having a direct, personal experience with poverty.

Americans define poverty in terms of economic security and basic needs.

More Americans are self-identifying as working class and lower class.

### **2 Perceptions About Poverty & Homelessness**

The vast majority of Americans believe poverty is a serious issue, and there is growing public concern about homelessness.

Many Americans embrace a structural explanation for poverty.

Perceptions about the causes of poverty differ among low-income women.

### **3 Perceptions About Income Inequality & Equal Opportunity**

The majority of Americans are concerned about income and wealth inequality and support some form of government intervention.

Americans' faith in the viability of the American Dream is at a five-year low.

Many Americans are skeptical about trickle-down economics and a growing percentage of Americans believe the economic system unfairly favors the wealthy.



Americans' faith in the importance of hard work in getting ahead has increased slightly.

Many Americans believe that people tend to be wealthy or poor because of the availability of opportunities.

Americans are increasingly concerned about equal opportunity.

#### **4 Perceptions of People Living In Poverty and Racial Attitudes**

Perceptions of how difficult it is to live in poverty remain divided.

Americans are dissatisfied with the state of race relations but more open to structural barriers presented by racial discrimination.

#### **5 Views About the Role of Government, Free Market Economy, and Attitudes Toward Public Spending and Taxation**

The majority of Americans believe the government should play a major role in tackling poverty.

There is growing dissatisfaction with government efforts to reduce poverty.

Americans are conflicted about the role government should play in reducing income and wealth inequality.

#### **6 Americans' Policy Preferences**

Public support for an increase in the national minimum wage has increased significantly in recent years.

Support for Social Security remains high.

The majority of Americans view foreign trade as an opportunity for the economy but are more divided on the benefits of free trade agreements.

Americans' attitudes about taxation are divided but the majority of Americans now support a more even distribution of money and wealth among people and higher taxation of the highest earners.

Americans are more open to living in racially diverse communities.

Americans are largely supportive of subsidized housing.

While opinion is divided across party lines, many Americans are satisfied and supportive of the Affordable Care Act.

Affirmative action remains a somewhat contentious issue.

The majority of Americans support continuation of programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, but there is stigma attached to the term "welfare".

1

# HOW AMERICANS DEFINE POVERTY



## **Section 1**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

- 1.1** **Many Americans report having a direct, personal experience with poverty**
- 1.2** **Americans define poverty in terms of economic security and basic needs**
- 1.3** **More Americans are self-identifying as working class and lower class**

## 1.1

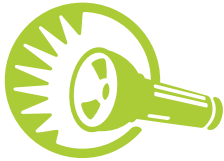
**MANY AMERICANS REPORT HAVING A DIRECT, PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH POVERTY**

The first edition of *A Window of Opportunity* identified a longstanding definitional challenge that makes interpreting available public opinion data on poverty difficult: the significant gap between official government definitions for poverty and the public's understanding and definition. In January 2014, when asked what should constitute the poverty line for a family of four, the average estimate from survey respondents was \$30,000 annually, markedly higher than the official poverty line at the time, which stood at \$23,550. When asked in the same 2014 survey if anyone within their family was “poor,” 54 percent of Americans reported that someone in their own family was poor,<sup>8</sup> a significant increase from 2001 when around a third (36 percent) reported that someone in their family was living in poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Polling data from 2015 and 2016 indicate there has been little change in public understanding of poverty in the last few years. In a July 2016 poll sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the *Los Angeles Times*, respondents were asked what they think the highest annual income a family of four can have and still be considered to be living in poverty by the federal government.<sup>10</sup> The average estimate among those surveyed was \$32,293, again, significantly higher than the 2016 poverty threshold for a family of four, which is \$24,500. As of 2015, a large portion of Americans continue to report having a direct, personal experience with poverty. In a survey administered by Ipsos Public Affairs in collaboration with researchers at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in the Bronx, NY, more than half (54 percent) of those surveyed state that they personally know someone who has experienced poverty. As of January 2016, 64 percent of black Americans stated that they personally know someone who has experienced poverty, as do 54 percent of white Americans, only a 1 percent increase for black Americans since 2014 (65 percent) and no change for white Americans.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2

## AMERICANS DEFINE POVERTY IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC SECURITY AND BASIC NEEDS



### ***Highlighting the Invisible: Poverty - Technical vs. Perceived***

While federal standards for poverty are defined in concrete income terms, research shows that individual perceptions of what poverty means are nuanced and deeply personal. The difference between formal definitions and lived experiences is crucial to understand when communicating around poverty, and may present an opportunity for developing more effective anti-poverty strategies.

Americans' widespread experiences with poverty are likely a product of their less abstract and data-driven definition of the issue. While official figures are useful for highlighting the extent of economic hardship, they do little to

capture how those living in economic hardship define their own everyday realities.

When open-ended questions are included, Americans define poverty largely on feelings of economic security and the ability to meet basic needs. For instance, when respondents were asked in a May 2015 survey if they consider themselves to be poor, 73 percent said no. When asked to explain their response, only 6 percent of people stated that their selection was based on "today's standard/definition of poverty." For the 27 percent who self-identified as poor, the most common

responses included "don't make enough money," "not working," "living paycheck to paycheck," and "lack of health insurance/health care." For those who do not self-identify as poor, the most common responses explaining why included "have enough/everything I need," "have home/property," "working/have a good job," and "have enough food."<sup>13</sup>

The general public's definition of what it means to be poor in America is further demonstrated by the American Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). The American Values Survey includes questions that aim to "identify specific economic challenges Americans face," in addition to questions that enable self-reporting.<sup>14</sup> Respondents were asked to select or list instances when they or someone in their household has personally experienced "economic hardship." More than one third (36 percent) of Americans report that they or someone in their household has experienced food insecurity (defined as having to reduce meals or cut back on food to save money), while nearly 3 in 10 (29 percent) report that they or someone in their household put off seeing a doctor because of financial reasons.<sup>15</sup>

## 1.3

**MORE AMERICANS ARE SELF-IDENTIFYING AS WORKING- AND LOWER CLASS**

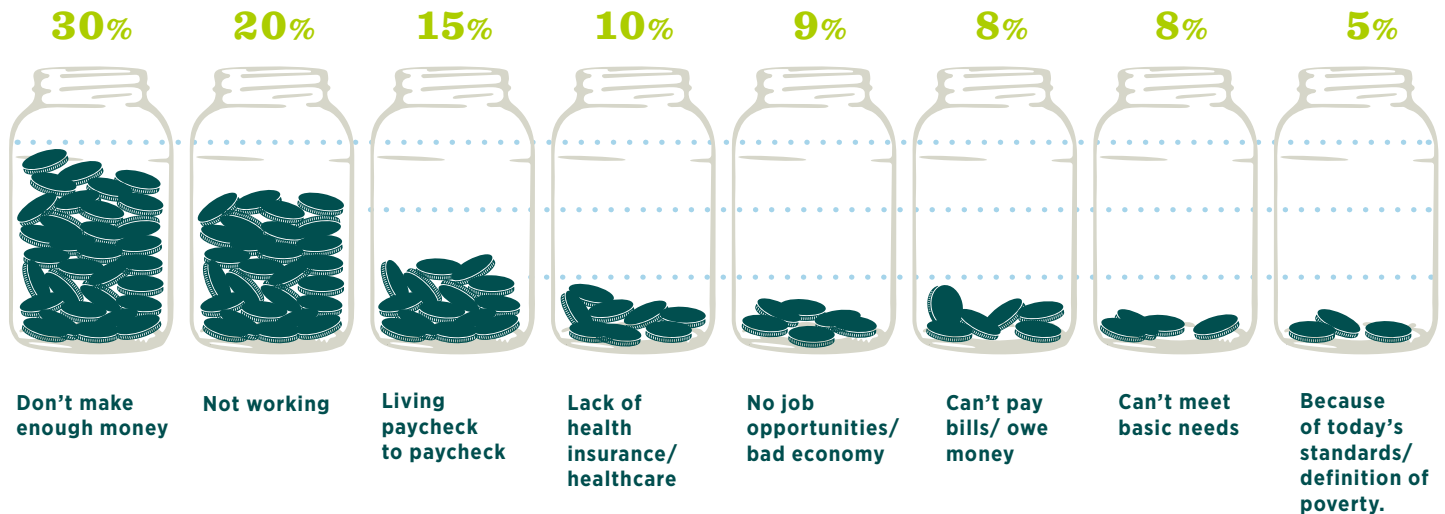
A central finding from *A Window of Opportunity* was the critical role that class identification plays in shaping perception of poverty and support for anti-poverty policies. Lower-income Americans (individuals earning less than \$40,000 per year) emerged in survey and polling data as a key base of support for anti-poverty policies, such as a rise in the minimum wage and the expansion of government-funded job training programs.<sup>16</sup> While an important base of support, prior research has shown that even when people fall within the lower-income bracket, many reject this label and identify as middle class. As noted by Kristen Mickelson and Emily Hazett in their analysis of the attribution of poverty among low-income women, individual class identification is heavily influenced by people's values and aspirations. As such, "even though an individual may not have the monetary resources to be in the middle-class, they believe that they hold the same value system of hard work as the middle-class—thus, they are (or will be) in the middle-class."<sup>17</sup>

In recent years, a growing number of young Americans are self-identifying as working class and lower class. In a recent study, researchers examined data spanning 34 years and found that Millennials (aged 18–35 in 2016) see themselves as less middle class and more working class than any other generation when they were the same age. Only about a third (34.8 percent) of Millennials self-identify as middle class, while 56.6 percent self-identify as working-class. Another 8 percent self-identify as lower class.<sup>18</sup> This compares to 49.8 percent of Generation Xers self-identifying as working-class (aged roughly between 36 and 54 years in 2016), 44.2 percent of Baby Boomers (aged between 55 and 70 in 2016), and only 28.8 percent of those over 70.<sup>19</sup>

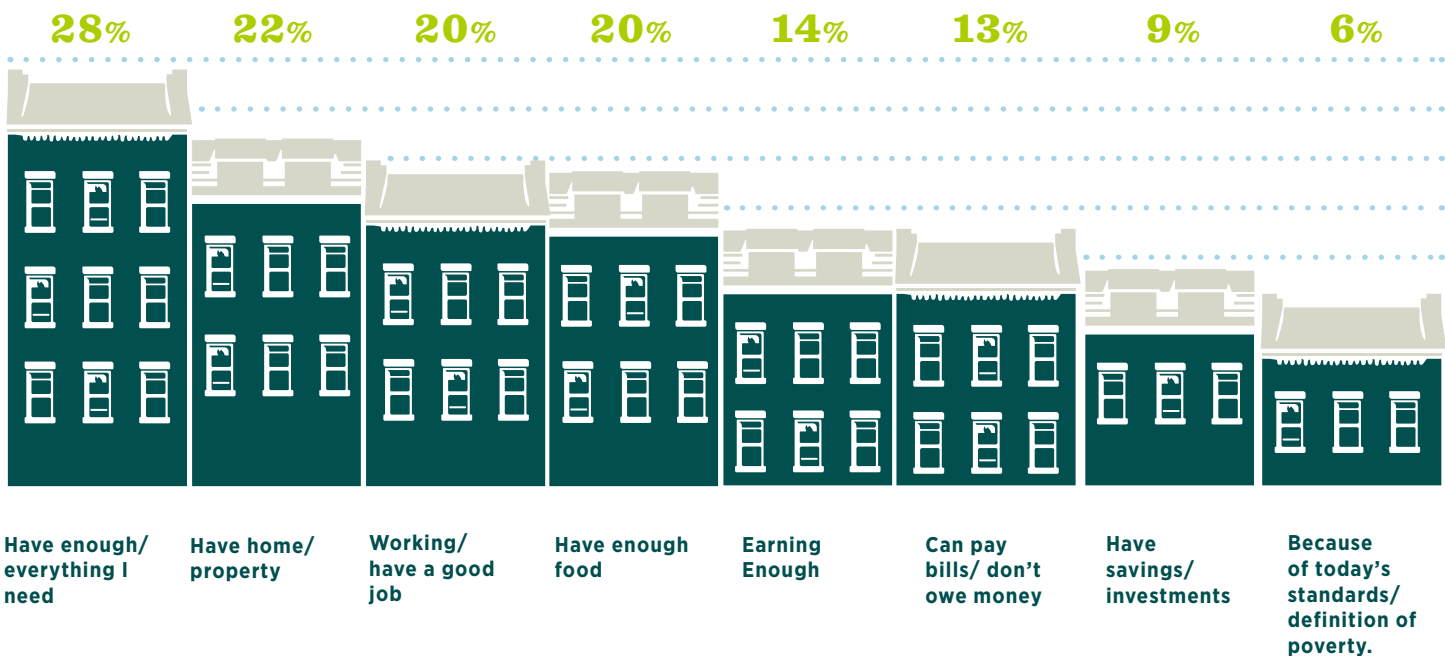
The growth of working- and lower-class identification is also reflected in longitudinal survey data provided by the General Social Survey, a national data program administered by NORC at the University of Chicago, which has tracked public opinion since 1972. Between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of Americans self-identifying as lower class more than doubled, rising from 4.2 percent in 2000 to 9.1 percent in 2014.<sup>20</sup> Between 2012 and 2014, the

## Figure 1: AMERICANS DEFINE POVERTY IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC SECURITY AND BASIC NEEDS\*

### Self-identify as poor because:



### Do not consider self poor because:



Source: College of Mount Saint Vincent, Social Issues in the United States, May 2015.

\*Percentages add to more than 100 percent because multiple responses were accepted.



percentage of Americans self-identifying as working class increased from 44 percent to 47 percent (within a +/- 2.2 percent margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level).<sup>21</sup>

Survey data from Pew Research Center suggests that a key driver of this increase in lower-class identification is Latino Americans. Between 2008 and 2016, lower-class identification among people who self-identified as “Hispanics”<sup>22</sup> increased by 12 percentage points from 8 percent in 2008 to 20 percent as of May 2016.<sup>23</sup> This compares to an increase in lower identification among black Americans from 7 percent in 2008 to 15 percent in 2016.<sup>24</sup> White Americans saw the smallest increase from 5 percent in 2008 to 9 percent in 2016.<sup>25</sup>

Such a shift may have important implications for other public opinion trends. As noted in *A Window of Opportunity*, people living in poverty are viewed by a large segment of the public as having less influence in the public arena. In 2014, only 29 percent of the public agreed that people living in poverty have either a “great deal” or “a good amount” of ability to help change things for the better.<sup>26</sup> Cross-tabulation of data from the Opportunity Survey reveals a strong correlation between class identification and perception of the seriousness of poverty, as well as of people living in poverty. Americans who identify as poor are significantly more likely to think poor people have the ability to change things for the better than those who identify as middle-income or upper middle income (41 percent vs. 28 and 24 percent, respectively).<sup>27</sup> People who identify as poor or low-income are also less likely to attribute poverty to the personal behavior of people living in poverty (11 percent vs. 17 percent) indicating that more Americans are not only self-identifying as working and lower class, but may in turn, increasingly see poor people as potential change agents and poverty as a solvable issue.<sup>28</sup>



# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

## ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Focus on real-world economic challenges**

Public opinion data suggests Americans' understanding of poverty is less abstract and data-driven. Communications must move beyond official government definitions and instead touch on the real-world challenges facing many Americans, while also highlighting the solutions.

### ⚡ 1.2 ENGAGING STRATEGIC AUDIENCES

#### **Engaging those most affected**

Public opinion research suggests that low-income Americans, while knowledgeable about the realities of living in poverty and interested in change, tend to lack information about structural causes and solutions, and are doubtful about their influence in society. Providing that information, and opportunities for leadership and civic engagement, should be priorities.

### ⚡ 1.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

#### **Avoid stereotypical or negative language in survey design**

The language used in survey and polling questions often makes use of terms or categories that carry negative social connotations, such as “poor” or “lower class”—labels that people may be eager to reject. Sociologists and psychologists have explored at length the social and political forces that influence low-income individuals to reject such categorization and that influence both high- and low-earners to self-identify as middle class, regardless of actual income. More open-ended questions that allow people to self-identify and define the issue of poverty and inequality for themselves should provide more insightful results and improve public opinion research.

## ⚡ 1.4 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT:

Center for Community Change: How to talk about poverty: Lessons from our communities

<http://www.communitychange.org/real-power/focus/poverty-message-research-tool-kit/>

## Words to Avoid and Words to Embrace

The Center for Community Change culled from its research words that work and words that push audiences away in the context of talking about poverty and its solutions:

AVOID	EMBRACE
Poor; working poor; low income	Can't make ends meet; living on the brink; working to provide for family
Safety net	Basic living standards; resources for our seniors
Entitlements	Your health and retirement security
The top; the bottom	Wealthiest; poorest
Unemployment rate rose	CEOs fired more Americans; X handed out pink slips
Workers	People, mothers, fathers, servers, cooks, nurses, etc.
Gap between rich and poor	Barriers between rich and the rest of us; obstacles for those struggling
Reform social security/medicare/welfare/etc.	Improve, enhance, shore up social security/medicare/welfare
We	You and I
America's children; future generations; senior on Medicare	"that newborn you swear already smiles"; "your mom going her last round with cancer"
Systemic inequities	Greedy few rigged the game; corporations/CEOs have taken advantage
Fight poverty; war on poverty; casualties of poverty	Barriers to success; obstacles to economic stability
Economic inequality	Economy off kilter; out of balance

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2

**Perceptions about**  
**POVERTY &**  
**HOMELESSNESS**



## **Section 2**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

- 2.1**    **The vast majority of Americans believe poverty is a serious issue, and there is growing public concern about homelessness**
- 2.2**    **Many Americans embrace a structural explanation for poverty**
- 2.3**    **Perceptions of the cause of poverty among low-income women provide insights into the unique structural barriers faced by many women**

## 2.1

## THE VAST MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVE POVERTY IS A SERIOUS ISSUE AND THERE IS GROWING PUBLIC CONCERN ABOUT HOMELESSNESS



### ***Welfare? What Welfare?***

Though Americans broadly support programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, most oppose “welfare” as a concept. This dichotomy may reflect a misunderstanding of how programs to protect basic living standards are administered today--in the two decades since “welfare reform” and the introduction of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families--the closest thing the U.S. has to a pure federal cash assistance program), the number of people receiving actual cash has plummeted. Today, **roughly a quarter of TANF dollars spent** are spent on basic assistance, with the remainder going to job training, child care, and even programs that combat teen pregnancy.

In 2014, our analysis of data from 2012, 2013, and 2014 revealed that the majority of Americans viewed poverty as a serious problem that should be prioritized by the federal government.<sup>29</sup> Polls conducted in 2015 show that poverty continues to be seen as an important issue. In a May 2015 survey of 1,253 adults, respondents were asked how important they think a number of social issues are in the United States today. The vast majority of Americans (74 percent) agreed that poverty is an “extremely/very important” issue,<sup>30</sup> up from 69 percent in May 2012.<sup>31</sup>

An area not previously explored is public perceptions of homelessness. In recent years, researchers and policy advocates have pointed to the pressing need to better under-

stand public attitudes towards homeless people disaggregated from overall perceptions of poverty. Data from 2011, 2013, and 2016 suggest that the public’s concern about homelessness is on the rise. For more than a decade, Gallup has been asking survey respondents how much they personally worry about hunger and homelessness. In 2003, 37 percent of respondents said a great deal, 33 percent said a fair amount, and 30 percent said a little or not at all.<sup>32</sup> In 2011, 41 percent said a great deal, 34 percent said a fair amount, and 26 percent said a little or not at all. As of March 2016, nearly 5 in 10 (47 percent) of surveyed Americans say they think about hunger and homelessness a great deal, while only 17 percent say a little or not at all.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, in a November 2015 poll, nearly 9 in 10 (89 percent) of those surveyed agreed that homelessness in the United States is a “very serious” or

“somewhat serious” problem. Sixty-three percent agree that the government spends “too little” on helping homeless people find housing.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.2

### **MANY AMERICANS EMBRACE A STRUCTURAL EXPLANATION FOR POVERTY**

In *A Window of Opportunity*, our examination of data spanning 40 years revealed that in periods of relative economic stability, Americans are more evenly split in their opinions about the causes of poverty (with notions of personal responsibility gaining ground), but in times of economic downturn, structural explanations gain traction.<sup>35</sup> Despite this longitudinal trend, data also suggest that Americans in general are beginning to embrace structural explanations for poverty, even in times of relative economic stability.

In recent years, Americans’ satisfaction with the economy and their overall quality of life has improved. In a January 2015 Gallup Poll, 60 percent of people surveyed expressed that they are “very/somewhat satisfied” with the state of the economy—up 6 points compared to January 2014.<sup>36</sup> Despite these improvements, a large portion of Americans continue to embrace a more structural explanation for poverty. For instance, in a survey conducted in May 2015, when asked if poverty is caused by “society’s inequality” or a “lack of individual effort,” nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) agreed that poverty is caused by society’s inequality, while 42 percent agreed with the lack of individual effort statement.<sup>37</sup> When posed a similar question in 2014, 50 percent of respondents chose “conditions in society,” while 14 percent chose “their own behavior.”<sup>38</sup>

## 2.3

### **PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSE OF POVERTY AMONG LOW-INCOME WOMEN PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO THE UNIQUE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS FACED BY MANY WOMEN**

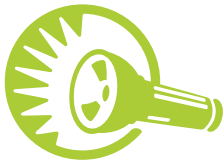
In recent years, experimental research has provided some insights into attitudes and perspectives of those living at the intersection of socioeconomic and gender inequality. In a 2014 paper, social and behavioral scientists Kristen Mickelson and Emily Hazett surveyed low-income mothers residing



in the Midwest in an effort to examine how women living in poverty perceive the causes of their own poverty.

Participants were presented with a survey which contained 37 possible reasons for their own poverty or low-income status, within five subgroups:

- 1 structural (e.g., “failure of society to provide good schools/education,” “insufficient support from government in times of need”).
- 2 individualistic (e.g., “no desire to make effort to improve self,” “not enough education”).
- 3 fatalistic (e.g., “God’s will,” “nothing I can do to change my situation”).
- 4 romantic relationships (e.g., “divorce/separation/widow,” “domestic violence”).
- 5 children (e.g., “having children too young,” “having too many children that I cannot support”).<sup>39</sup>



### ***Raising a Family on an Uncertain Schedule***

Service industry employers increasingly use dynamic scheduling software to decide how many employees are needed for any given shift. While, on first blush, this may sound like a smart use of technology, it has a profoundly negative impact on people working in low-wage jobs. Inconsistent work schedules make it nearly impossible to predict income month-to-month, much less to plan around kids’ school schedules or a partner or family member’s work schedule. Add in long commutes resulting from chronic underinvestment in public transportation and the high cost of child care, and it becomes clear that parenting while living in poverty is a high-wire act.

When the women were asked to rate the extent to which each of these reasons contributed to their current status, (5) having children and (4) romantic relationships were the most endorsed reasons. As noted by Mickelson and Hazett, while both child-bearing and relationships may appear to be individualistic explanations of poverty, what these causes point to is the unique structural barriers faced by women. Women remain the primary caregivers of children, are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, and are more likely to experience economic consequences by ending a relationship and/or having children.<sup>40</sup>



# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

## ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Craft a shared narrative and uplift each other's voices and concerns.**

Anti-poverty voices are relatively prominent in the public discourse, but they are diffuse, lacking a coherent narrative that can persuade undecided audiences or counter the disciplined narrative of their most frequent opponents.

We recommend that while anti-poverty leaders and groups maintain their individual perspectives and priorities, they also craft a shared narrative in which they:

- Emphasize the values of equal opportunity and community.
- Highlight systemic causes.
- Describe a path from poverty to economic participation.
- Promote effective solutions and successes.
- Invoke a positive role for government.

Shared messaging should build on public concerns about growing inequality, low wages, and long-term unemployment while educating audiences about less visible forces like racial and gender bias, globalization, and tax and labor policies.

#### **Document and explain unequal obstacles**

Researchers have amply documented the disparate obstacles that contribute to higher poverty rates among communities of color, women, immigrants, and other demographic groups. Yet there is still a dearth of reporting on those dynamics—and for that reason, among others, many audiences are

skeptical that such obstacles still exist. Moreover, research and experience show unchallenged subconscious stereotypes will infect attitudes about poverty generally and erode support for positive solutions. Our communications need to both explore and explain this evidence, as well as tell the human stories behind it. A focus on unequal obstacles—not only unequal outcomes or disparities—is an important part of that formula.

## ⚡ 1.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

### **Include perspective of overlooked communities**

Current data is lagging behind the reality of the racial and ethnic makeup of America, and public opinion polling needs to focus more on the opinions of Asian Americans, Native Americans, biracial/multiracial Americans, and other communities of color. Future research should oversample these frequently overlooked communities, in addition to disaggregating data by national origin and other characteristics.

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3

# **Perceptions about INCOME INEQUALITY & EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**



## **Section 3**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

- 3.1**    **The majority of Americans are concerned about income and wealth inequality and support some form of government intervention**
- 3.2**    **Americans' faith in the viability of the American Dream is at a five-year low**
- 3.3**    **Many Americans are skeptical about trickle-down economics and a growing percentage of Americans believe the economic system unfairly favors the wealthy**
- 3.4**    **Americans' faith in the importance hard works plays in getting ahead has increased slightly**
- 3.5**    **Many Americans believe that people tend to be wealthy or poor because of the availability of opportunities**
- 3.6**    **Americans are increasingly concerned about equal opportunity**

## 3.1

## THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT INCOME AND WEALTH INEQUALITY AND SUPPORT SOME FORM OF GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION



### ***Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government (Pew Research Center)***

Though most Americans do not trust the government in the abstract, they do see a clear role for government action on many issues, including several related to poverty. Only 19% of Americans trust the government always or most of the time, but 74% want government action to strengthen the economy and 55% want government action to help people get out of poverty. Pew's research on Americans' views of government is [Here](#).

Attitudes concerning the distribution of wealth and income have a significant impact on perceptions of poverty, in addition to support for or opposition to more even economic distribution. Prior research examining survey and polling trends has shown that Americans' beliefs about mobility and meritocracy (that is, the idea that people succeed or advance in life based on their abilities or hard work) has limited wider support for a reduction in income and wealth inequality.<sup>41</sup>

In 2014, our examination of public perceptions of the gap between the wealthy and those living in poverty revealed that

Americans are overwhelmingly concerned about wealth distribution in the nation and support some form of government intervention. As of 2013, the majority (70 percent) of Americans said they believe that the "gap between the rich and the poor in the United States" has gotten larger, while 21 percent believe it has stayed about the same.<sup>42</sup> In a 2011 poll, the majority (60 percent) of Americans also agreed that "the government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor," while 39 percent disagreed.<sup>43</sup>

In recent years, Americans' concern about income inequality, specifically the gap between the nation's richest and poorest individuals, has not subsided. A substantial majority (67 percent) surveyed in 2015 continue to express the belief that the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States has gotten worse, while 25 percent believe it has stayed about the same.<sup>44</sup> As of 2015, the majority of Americans (57 percent) also continue to agree that the government should do more to "reduce the gap between rich people and poor people."<sup>45</sup>



### ***Economic Insecurity, Rising Inequality, and Doubts About the Future (PRRI)***

Despite some progress, most Americans do not feel financially stable. Roughly 4-in-10 Americans say they are currently in excellent (7%) or good (34%) shape financially, while a majority of the public report being in only fair (37%) or poor financial shape (20%). This assessment represents a notable drop from 2010 when half of Americans indicated they were in excellent (9%) or good (41%) shape financially.

Americans are split on whether there has been recent progress, though. Today, 30% of Americans believe the economy has gotten better over the last two years, while 35% say it has gotten worse, and 33% say it has stayed about the same. [Read P.R.R.I.'s Report](#)

Other survey data also points to rising public concern about this. In a November 2015 survey, respondents were asked how important the growing gap between the rich and the poor was to them personally—nearly 9 in 10 (86 percent) reported that it is “critical” or “one among many important issues.”<sup>46</sup> When Americans were posed a similar question in 2014, 78 percent of respondents said that the widening gap is a “very big” or “moderately big” problem, up from 74 percent in 2013.<sup>47</sup>

There are notable partisan differences in opinion. In an early 2015 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 67 percent of Democrats surveyed identified reducing income inequality as an “absolute priority,” compared to 19 percent of Republicans.<sup>48</sup>

## **3.2**

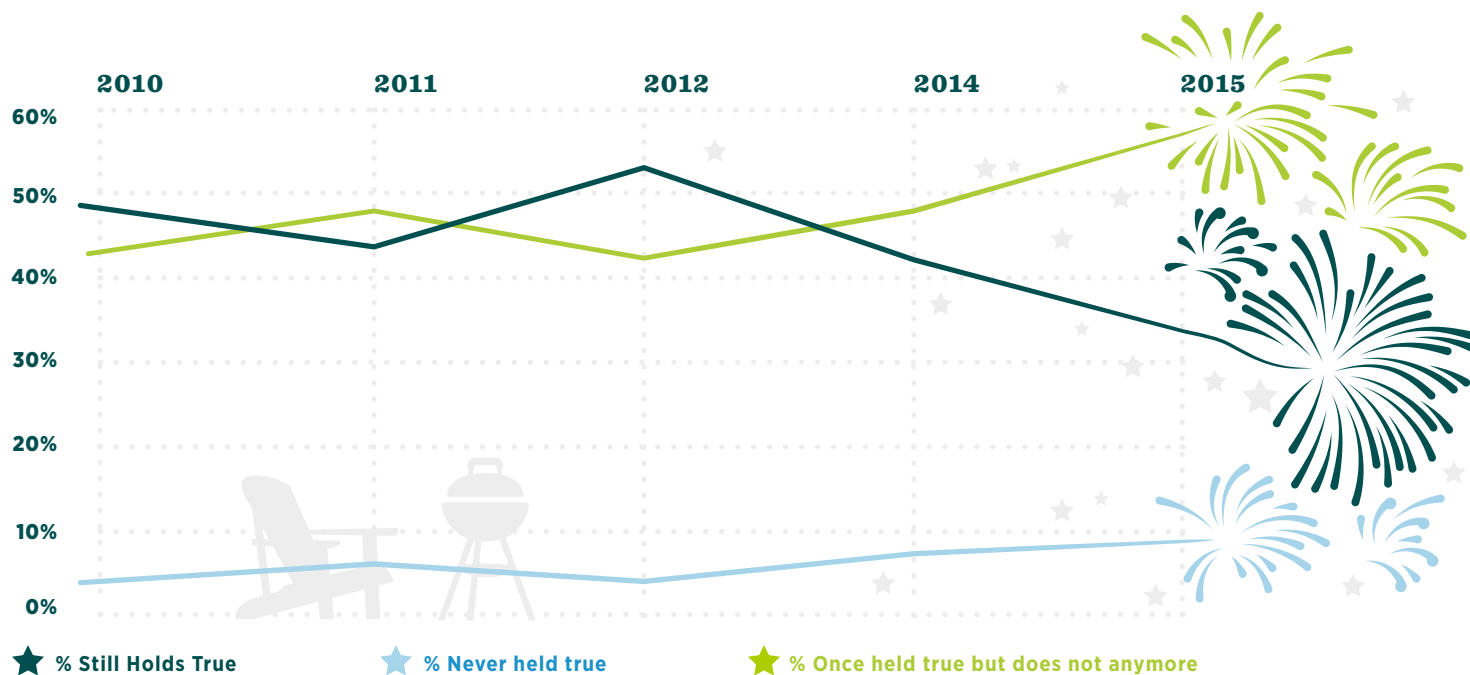
### **AMERICANS' FAITH IN THE VIABILITY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IS AT A FIVE-YEAR LOW**

Americans' faith in the principle of the American Dream—defined as achieving financial security, self-sufficiency, a good job, and home ownership—is at a five-year low. In 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2014 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) surveys, respondents were asked if they think the American Dream “still holds true,” “never held true,” or “once held true but does not anymore.”<sup>49</sup> While responses to this question have fluctuated over the years, in 2010, 50 percent of those surveyed expressed the belief that the American dream still holds true, while 43 percent were in agreement that the American Dream once held true but does not anymore, and 4 percent felt that it never held true.<sup>50</sup> By 2014, 42 percent of Americans expressed the belief that the American dream still holds true, down 8 percentage points from 2010, while nearly half (48 percent) stated that the American Dream once held true but does not anymore, and another 7 percent stated the American Dream never held true.<sup>51</sup>

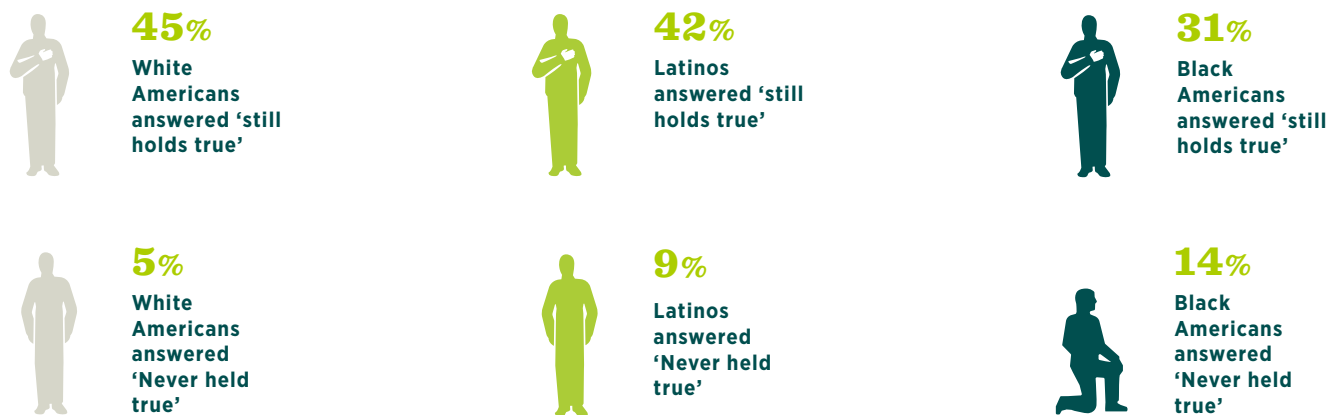


## Figure 2: AMERICANS' FAITH IN THE AMERICAN DREAM IS IN DECLINE

*Do you think the American Dream still holds true, never held true, or once held true but does not anymore?*



### 2014 responses by racial/ethnic background



Source: NBC Poll, 2015; Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014.

As of 2015, only 3 in 10 (33 percent) of surveyed Americans said that the American Dream still holds true, compared to 57 percent who say it once held true but does not anymore, and 10 percent who said it never held true.<sup>52</sup> White Americans (45 percent) and Latinos (42 percent) are more likely than black Americans (31 percent) to believe that the American Dream still holds true today, while black Americans are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to say that the American Dream never held true (14 percent versus 7 percent of all Americans, 9 percent of Latino Americans, and 5 percent of white Americans).<sup>53</sup>

### 3.3

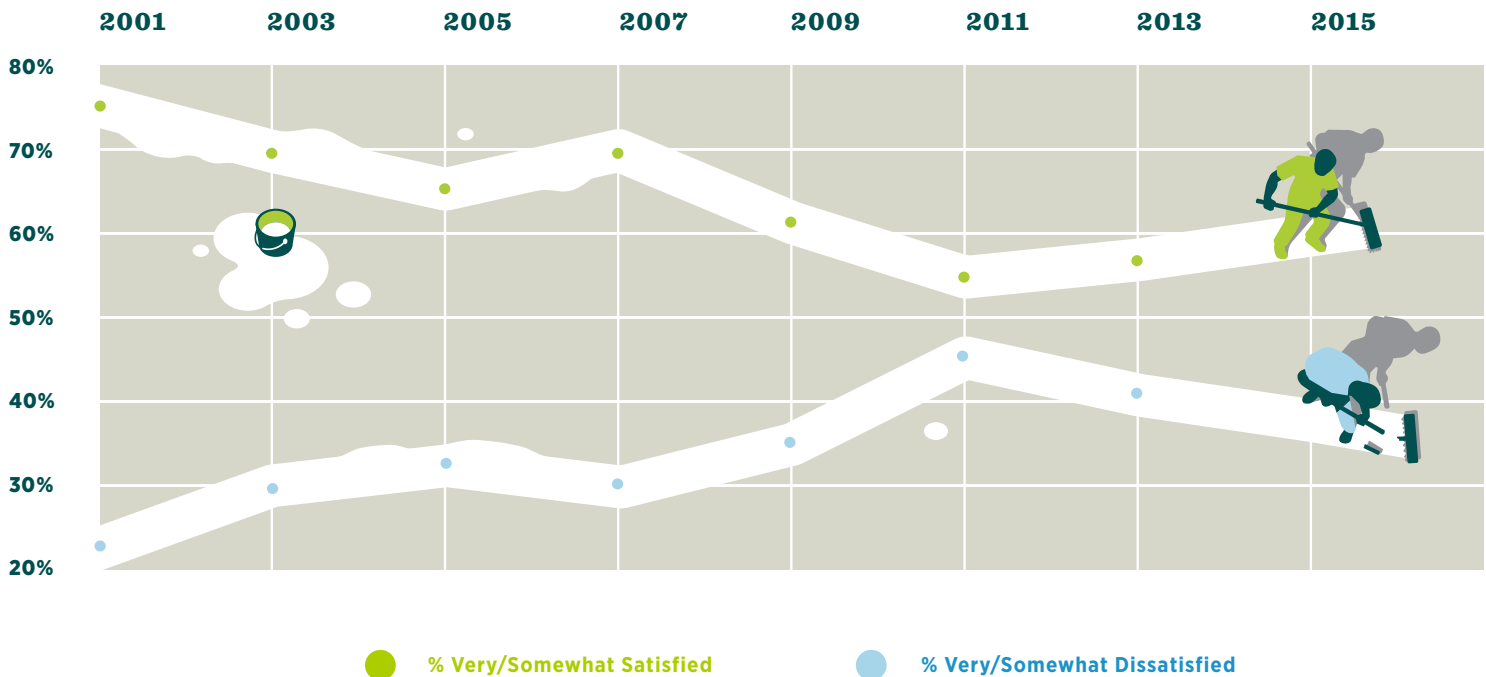
## **MANY AMERICANS ARE SKEPTICAL ABOUT TRICKLE-DOWN ECONOMICS AND A GROWING PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS BELIEVE THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM UNFAIRLY FAVORS THE WEALTHY**

Americans tend to be skeptical of the notion that less taxation on the rich will also benefit those at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder, a concept popularly known as trickle-down economics. In a 2015 survey, 45 percent of Americans said that they disagree “that lower taxes on the wealthy stimulates the economy, with the end result of greater wealth for everyone.” Agreement differs across party lines, with the majority of Democrats (62 percent) disagreeing, while 5 in 10 Republicans (50 percent) agree. Independents tend to disagree (42 percent) rather than agree (28 percent).<sup>54</sup>

Another indication of Americans’ growing discontent with the current economic system is seen in their changing attitudes towards large corporations. The majority of Americans (56 percent) believe that large corporations are having a negative effect on the way things are going in the country these days, and 57 percent believe corporations make too much money. In addition, when asked if “selfish” describes business leaders very well, fairly well, not too well, or not at all well, nearly 7 in 10 Americans (67 percent) believe that “selfish” describes business leaders very well or fairly well.<sup>55</sup> The percentage agreeing with the statement “business corporations do not share enough of their success with their employees” increased from 69 percent in 2014 to 88 percent as of late 2015. In addition, the percentage of Americans agreeing

## Figure 3: AMERICANS' BELIEF IN THE IMPORTANCE HARD WORK PLAYS IN GETTING AHEAD HOLDS STRONG

*How satisfied are you with the opportunity for a person in this nation to get ahead by working hard?*



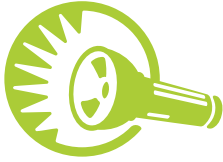
Source: Gallup News Service, 2015

with the statement “the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy” increased from 66 percent in 2012 to 79 percent in 2015.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.4

## AMERICANS' FAITH IN THE IMPORTANCE OF HARD WORK IN GETTING AHEAD HAS INCREASED SLIGHTLY

Despite rising pessimism concerning the viability of the American Dream, recent survey data indicate that Americans' faith that people can get ahead through hard work has increased after a period of steady decline that began in 2007 and ended in 2012. In a 2014 Gallup social series poll, 54 percent of Americans said that they were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with “the opportunity for a person to get ahead by working hard.” When this same question was posed again in 2015, 6 in 10 of those surveyed said that they were



### ***Paid Sick Leave***

It can be hard for salaried professionals to understand the choice that people working low-wage, hourly jobs face when they get sick. Staying home to rest and recover without paid sick leave means forgoing income, and it also potentially means losing out on favorable shifts when the next schedule is drawn up as well. Going in to work while sick, though, is not only physically taxing but dangerous to everyone, particularly for cooks, dishwashers, waiters, and others in the food service industry. Over the past decade, though, anti-poverty advocates have fought to take people living in poverty out of this bind, winning paid sick leave in dozens of cities and three states. Their next targets? Policy changes at major national employers and federal legislation.

very or somewhat satisfied with the opportunity to get ahead through hard work.<sup>59</sup>

In recent years, researchers at The Stanford Institute on Poverty and Inequality have taken a closer look at the role that belief in social mobility plays in shaping public opinion on poverty and inequality. They found that in addition to economic conditions, an individual's level of belief in social mobility, or "mobility optimism," is just as predictive as annual household income in determining their attitude towards economic inequality: "[M]obility optimists may simultaneously express hostility to the 'rich' or the '1 percent' and harbor doubts about the 'fairness' of the economy. But they may also retain a belief in the promise of their own (or their children's) economic prospects that insu-

lates them from reacting to historical trends with more vigorous support for policy reform efforts."<sup>60</sup>

## **3.5**

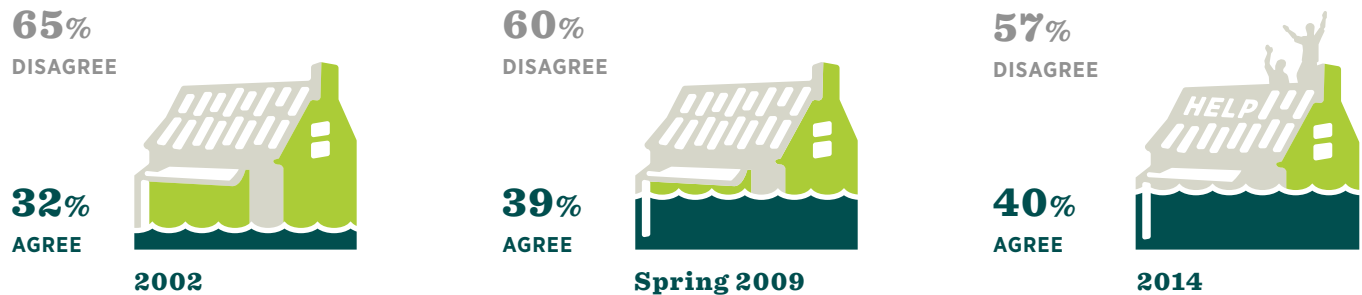
### **MANY AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE TEND TO BE WEALTHY OR POOR BECAUSE OF THE AVAILABILITY OF OPPORTUNITIES**

While the steadfast belief that hard work yields prosperity continues to shape public attitudes towards poverty, Americans are becoming more aware that hard work alone is not a guarantee of success. A study from the Center for Community Change examined public perception of both poverty and wealth, and found that an increasing number of Americans believe that wealthy and poor people got that way because of the availability of opportunities as opposed to just hard work or talent. Between 2014 and 2015, the percentage of Americans agreeing with the statement "poor people have fewer opportunities to be successful than others" increased from 52 percent

to 62 percent.<sup>61</sup> There has also been a slight increase in the percentage of Americans who believe success is determined by forces outside of individual control. Between 2002 and 2014, the percentage of Americans agreeing with

## **Figure 4: MORE AMERICANS ACCEPT THAT SUCCESS IN LIFE CAN BE DETERMINED BY FORCES OUTSIDE OF OUR CONTROL**

*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control.*



Source: Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Survey, 2002, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2014

the statement: “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control” increased from 32 to 40 percent.<sup>62</sup>

### **3.6**

## **AMERICANS ARE INCREASINGLY CONCERNED ABOUT EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**

A report published by the Public Religion Research Institute reveals that Americans are becoming more concerned about the state of equal opportunity in America. As of 2015, 65 percent of Americans believe that “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life.”<sup>63</sup> When the same question was posed in 2010, 53 percent of Americans expressed agreement with this statement.

There are considerable differences of opinion between racial and ethnic groups, and based on socioeconomic status. The overwhelming majority (87 percent) of black Americans says that one of the big problems facing the country is a lack of equal opportunity, compared to roughly 62 percent of

Latinos, 58 percent of Asian Americans and half of white Americans. More than 4 in 10 (42 percent) of white Americans believe that it is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others; however, opinion between working-class and college-educated white Americans differs by 9 percentage points. More than 6 in 10 (64 percent) of working-class white Americans agree that a lack of equal opportunity is one of the big problems facing the country compared to 55 percent of college-educated white Americans.<sup>64</sup>

### **Figure 5: THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE STATE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**

*Which of the following statements comes closest to your own view: “it is not really that big of a problem if some people have more chances in life than others” or “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance”?*



Source: Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010



# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

## ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Highlight systemic solutions for systemic problems**

While news reports generally ascribe poverty to systemic causes, they do so through fleeting references to general trends such as plant closings, the scarcity of jobs, or the “weak economy.” Few stories explain root causes in any detail, and forces behind the disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender receive practically no attention.

However, our research shows that a majority of Americans agree that “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life,” so there is an opening for advocates to talk about the systemic underpinnings of poverty and system-wide changes needed to address it. Because many Americans are not knowledgeable about effective solutions to poverty, anti-poverty policies and programs that have demonstrated positive results, along with research pointing the way to positive outcomes, should be made more visible, as should the positive role that government plays in creating opportunity.

#### **Show the connections**

The idea that we are interconnected and all in this together is crucial to the success of anti-poverty communications. Americans intuitively understand that increasing inequality and poverty hold back the economy and country as a whole and also create an environment in which serious social problems develop and worsen. But their thinking on poverty easily defaults to an extreme “personal responsibility” and “bad decisions” frame. Both showing and telling how we’re all affected and connected—through images, research, spokespeople, and storytelling, as well as specific messaging—is crucial.

## ⚡ 1.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

### **Make a distinction between poverty and inequality**

Over the years, public opinion research has included questions about inequality that often conflate inequality of outcomes (such as disparities in health outcomes, wealth, and income) with inequality of opportunities (such as access to quality education, housing, and employment). This lack of distinction presents major challenges to interpreting public opinion on inequality. There is a pressing need to adopt more sophisticated analysis of public perceptions of poverty and inequality, including greater exploration of the distinction between public perception of “inequality” versus “perpetual poverty”.

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4

# **Perceptions of People LIVING IN POVERTY and RACIAL ATTITUDES**



## Section 4 **KEY FINDINGS**

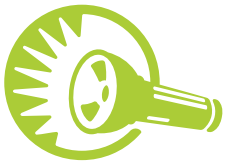
- 4.1**    **Perceptions of how difficult it is to live in poverty remain divided**
- 4.2**    **Americans are dissatisfied with the state of race relations but more open to structural barriers presented by racial discrimination**

## 4.1

## PERCEPTIONS OF HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO LIVE IN POVERTY REMAIN DIVIDED

The public's perception of how difficult it is to live in poverty is divided. In a 2015 poll administered by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, respondents were asked if "poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return" or if "poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently." Americans were nearly evenly split, with 42 percent agreeing with the "easy" statement, and 48 percent agreeing with the "hard lives" statement.<sup>65</sup> This compares to a 45 percent (easy lives) and 44 percent (hard lives) divide when the same question was posed in 2013.<sup>66</sup>

Black Americans and people with household incomes under \$40,000 are significantly less likely than other groups to blame poverty on the poor work ethic of those living in poverty. In the same survey, when asked the reason they think people tend to be poor, because "good jobs aren't available" or "poor work ethic," the majority (62 percent) of black Americans favored the lack of good jobs explanation, with only 21 percent saying people are poor due to having a poor work ethic. White and Latino opinions are more aligned.



### ***The High Cost of Living in Poverty***

Ironically, people living in poverty pay more for just about everything. From high-fee money orders for the nearly 10% of Americans with no bank account, to prepaid cell phone plans for users with poor credit, to expensive and low-quality produce at convenience stores in food deserts, many of the products and services marketed to people living in poverty carry unavoidable costs that individuals on surer financial footing are not subjected to.

In response to the same question, 45 percent of white people and 48 percent of Latino people prefer the "lack of good jobs" explanation, a 14- and 17-point difference from black Americans. When asked which comes closer to their own views about people who are unemployed, "most are trying hard to find jobs but can't" or "most could find jobs if they wanted to," 7 in 10 black Americans say that most unemployed Americans are trying hard to find jobs. About half of Latino Americans (51 percent) and white Americans (48 percent) agree.

## 4.2

**AMERICANS ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THE STATE OF RACE RELATIONS BUT MORE OPEN TO STRUCTURAL BARRIERS PRESENTED BY RACIAL DISCRIMINATION**

The persistent divide in public perception of how difficult it is to live in poverty is influenced in large part by the racialized nature of thinking about poverty in America, particularly negative stereotypes concerning black Americans. The role that conscious and subconscious racial attitudes play in shaping public attitudes towards poverty has been explored extensively in social science research.<sup>67</sup> As noted in *A Window of Opportunity*, stereotypes about the work ethic of black Americans have skewed assumptions about the percentage of black Americans living in poverty and has greatly affected support for particular anti-poverty policies.<sup>68</sup> For example, individuals with more negative racial attitudes (e.g., who believe black Americans tend to be lazy) have been shown to be more likely to oppose welfare spending and are also more likely to attribute inequality facing black Americans to individual failings.<sup>69</sup> Attitudes towards race and racial inequality are therefore essential to understanding the public's overall perception of poverty and support for anti-poverty policies.

Survey data from 2014, 2015, and 2016 indicate that several important attitudinal shifts have taken place among the public in terms of how people view race relations and racial inequality. American's overall satisfaction with race relations in the United States has declined dramatically in recent years. In January 2014, 55 percent of surveyed Americans stated that they were "very/somewhat" satisfied with the state of race relations, a figure that declined to 30 percent as of January 2015.<sup>70</sup> This large change is no doubt in part due to the Black Lives Matter movement and widespread media coverage of high-profile police shootings involving black Americans, which have pushed racial inequality into the forefront of national discourse. However, this sharp downturn in satisfaction with race relations is accompanied by an interesting rise in awareness concerning racial inequality between white and black Americans.

Between 2009 and 2016, Pew Research Center presented survey respondents with two statements: “our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites” or “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with rights.”<sup>71</sup> In 2009, 47 percent of respondents were in agreement that enough changes have already been made, while 43 percent agreed that more changes are needed to give black Americans equal rights to white Americans.<sup>72</sup> By 2014, not much movement had been made: 49 percent of those surveyed were in agreement that enough changes have been made and 46 percent agreed that more changes are needed.<sup>73</sup> From 2014 to 2015 there was a significant shift in opinion, with the percentage of people in agreement that enough changes have been made declining from 49 percent in 2014 to 32 percent in 2015, while those in agreement that more changes are needed increased from 46 percent in 2014 to 59 percent in 2015.<sup>74</sup> As of May 2016, 61 percent of people surveyed express the belief that the United States needs to continue making changes to give black people equal rights with white people, while only 30 percent are in agreement that the United States has already made the changes needed to give black Americans equal status.<sup>75</sup>

There has also been some movement in people’s perceptions about the causes of inequality faced by black Americans. In 2014, our analysis of survey data revealed that most Americans reject the structural barrier of racial discrimination “as the main reason why many black people can’t get ahead these days.” In a 2012 survey, only 23 percent of people agreed that racial discrimination was the main reason, while 61 percent agreed that “blacks who can’t get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition.”<sup>76</sup> As of 2016, 45 percent Americans agree that racial discrimination is a “major reason why black people in our country may have a harder time getting ahead than whites” while 32 percent agree it is a minor reason.<sup>77</sup> Only 20 percent believe racial discrimination is not a reason at all. There are marked differences between racial and ethnic groups: 70 percent of black Americans believe racial discrimination is a major reason why black people have a harder time getting ahead, compared to 36 percent of white people, and 58 percent of Latino people.<sup>78</sup>



# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

## ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Talking about Race and Poverty

Americans strongly believe that opportunity should not be hindered by race, gender, ethnicity, or other aspects of who we are. However, much of the public is skeptical of the existence of racial discrimination in particular, and negative racial stereotypes about people living in poverty persist among many Americans.

We need to acknowledge and confront these deep-seated stereotypes. To do that, our messaging on poverty needs to take into account that race matters in at least four crucial ways:

- Stereotypes and bias warp perceptions of poor people.
- Stereotypes and bias can undermine support for solutions.
- Views and beliefs about poverty differ significantly across demographic groups.
- People's conscious values on racial equity are generally more positive than their subconscious stereotypes.

Taken together, these trends call for talking about race explicitly and strategically, through the lens of shared values. Keep these guidelines in mind when talking about barriers that hamper opportunity for diverse populations and promoting solutions:

- Show that it's about all of us. Remind audiences that racial equity is not just about people of color; achieving racial equity upholds our values and benefits our entire society. For example, lax federal regulators allowed predatory subprime lenders to target communities of color, only to see that practice spread across communities, putting our entire economy at risk.
- Over-document the barriers to equal opportunity—especially racial bias. Don't lead with evidence of unequal outcomes alone, which can sometimes reinforce stereotypes and blame. Amply document how people of color frequently face stiff and unequal barriers to opportunity. For example:

- **Don't** Don't begin by discussing the income gap between white and black Americans.
- **Do** lead by talking about how studies have found that employment agencies frequently preferred less qualified white applicants to more qualified black Americans.
- Acknowledge the progress we've made. This helps to persuade skeptical audiences to lower their defenses and have a reasoned discussion rooted in reality rather than rhetoric.
- Present data on racial disparities through a contribution model instead of just a deficit model. When we present evidence of unequal outcomes, we should make every effort to show how closing those gaps will benefit society as a whole. The fact that the Latino college graduation rate is a fraction of the white rate also means that closing the ethnic graduation gap would result in many more college graduates each year to help America compete and prosper in a global economy—it's the smart thing to do as well as the right thing to do.
- Be thematic instead of episodic. Select stories that demonstrate institutional or systemic causes and solutions over stories that highlight largely focus on individual choices.
- Use opportunity as a bridge, not a bypass. Opening conversations with the ideal of opportunity helps to emphasize society's role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations there does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from the value of opportunity to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling that value for all.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT

#### ⚡ 1.2

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Frameworks Institute: Narrative Lesson in the Presentation of Race Policies: [http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF\\_race/illogic\\_literalness.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_race/illogic_literalness.pdf)

Frameworks Institute: Talking About Disparities Toolkit: <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/race/resources/pdf/disparitiesmessagetemplate.pdf>





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5

**Role of**  
**GOVERNMENT, FREE**  
**MARKET ECONOMY,**  
**and Attitudes Toward**  
**PUBLIC SPENDING**  
**AND TAXATION**



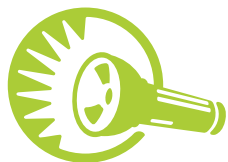
## **Section 5**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

- 5.1**    **The majority of Americans believe the government should play a major role in tackling poverty**
- 5.2**    **There is growing dissatisfaction with government efforts to reduce poverty**
- 5.3**    **Americans are conflicted about the role government should play in reducing income and wealth inequality**

## 5.1

### THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN TACKLING POVERTY



#### *A Rising Generation Who Understands Poverty*

Millennials are the largest generational cohort since the baby boomers, and their economic self-perceptions may shift the political calculus on poverty. Millennials in the US are more likely to identify as working class than any generation in the last three decades, with more than 55% doing so, increasing the likelihood that they will support efforts to combat poverty. See the Guardian's [research](#) on millennials and poverty.

In an August 2015 Pew Research Center Governance Survey, respondents were asked what the government's role should be in helping people get out of poverty: 55 percent said they believe government should play a major role,

38 percent believe government should play a minor role, and 5 percent express the view that government should play no role at all.<sup>79</sup>

Opinion becomes slightly more divided when the question is framed in the context of government spending. When presented with two statements: "the government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt" or "the government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy," 46 percent agreed with the first statement, and 47 percent with the second.<sup>80</sup>

## 5.2

### THERE IS GROWING DISSATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO REDUCE POVERTY

The American public's satisfaction with federal poverty efforts are at a 15-year low. When a 2015 Gallup survey asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with the federal government's work in 20 different areas, only 16 percent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the federal government's handling of poverty,<sup>81</sup> compared to 26 percent in 2001, 24 percent in 2005, and 19 percent in 2013.<sup>82</sup> In another 2015 survey, 6 in 10 people said they think the government is doing a very bad or somewhat bad job of helping people out of poverty. This compares to 36 percent who believe the government is doing a very good or somewhat good job, and 2 percent of Americans who believe helping people out of poverty is not a government job.<sup>83</sup>

There are major partisan differences in satisfaction with the federal government's efforts to tackle poverty. Gallup poll data demonstrates that Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are the key drivers of the decline in satisfaction with federal poverty efforts. As noted in an accompanying Gallup article, Republicans' satisfaction with the federal government's efforts to handle poverty have taken a significant dive since the election of Barack Obama in 2008. In 2001 and 2005, during George W. Bush's presidency, roughly 4 in 10 Republicans and Republican-leaners were satisfied with government actions to address poverty.<sup>84</sup> Since the election of Barack Obama, Republican satisfaction has declined to 14 percent. A similar variation is seen when people are examined by ideology, with conservatives' satisfaction with poverty efforts down from 36 percent in 2001 to 16 percent as of May 2015. Liberals' satisfaction is up from 10 percent in 2001 to 17 percent as of May 2015.<sup>85</sup>

Partisan differences may be explained by conflicting opinions about the ideal role government should play in solving the issues of poverty and inequality. Republicans are less supportive of using the federal government to help people out of poverty or to reduce income differences.<sup>86</sup> In a recent publication, Ron Haskins, a researcher for The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, gives some context to this conflict of opinion. "The poll results are consistent with respective philosophies of the two parties," he notes; "namely, Democrats favor higher taxes and bigger government to solve the nation's domestic problems, including help for the poor and boosting economic mobility, while Republicans favor lower taxes, less government, and more personal and civic responsibility to deal with poverty and opportunity."<sup>87</sup> Political commentators have noted that policies introduced during the Obama administration, namely the Affordable Care Act, are seen by many Republicans and conservatives as being in direct opposition to the ideals of small government and even an attempt by the Obama administration to redistribute wealth.<sup>88</sup>

However, Haskins's cross-tabulation of data revealed that lower-income Republicans' views diverge significantly from high-income Republicans. When asked in a 2015 survey<sup>89</sup> if the government should play a "major role," "minor role," or "no role at all" in helping people out of poverty, 53 percent of low-income Republicans support the government playing a major role versus only 24 percent of high-income Republicans.<sup>90</sup>

### 5.3

## **AMERICANS ARE CONFLICTED ABOUT THE ROLE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PLAY IN REDUCING INCOME AND WEALTH INEQUALITY**

While the majority of Americans are in agreement that the government should play a major role in tackling poverty, opinion is more mixed when it comes to the role government should play in tackling income and wealth inequality.

Since 1974, the General Social Survey has asked respondents if Washington should reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or giving income assistance to the poor, or if the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences between the rich and the poor.<sup>91</sup> Respondents are presented with a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 meaning a strong belief that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor, and a score of 7 indicating a strong belief that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences.

Analysis of this data shows that public support for the higher taxation of the rich to reduce income inequality has remained stable over the last three decades, however more Americans strongly support government intervention than strongly oppose. When the question was posed in 1974, roughly 19 percent of respondents were strongly in support of government intervention in reducing the gap between the rich and poor people through higher taxation of the rich, while roughly 12 percent were in strong opposition. By 1990, there had been minimal change, with 20 percent in strong support of government intervention and 10 percent in opposition. Roughly 21 percent of Americans were in strong support of government intervention in closing the gap between the rich and poor in 2015, possibly through higher taxation on the rich, while 15 percent were strongly opposed to such measures.<sup>92</sup>

American's attitudes towards taxation have been explored in-depth in a new report, "Taxlandia," published by Topos Research Partnerships. The research notes that there is a prevailing perception among the American public that lower taxes are "better." When asked to think about the taxes they pay at the federal, state, and local levels, and whether the amount they pay is

“high,” “low,” or “about right,” the majority of Americans (63 percent) believe their taxes are currently too high, compared to 32 percent who believe their taxes are about right, and roughly 2 percent who believe they are too low.<sup>93</sup> In addition, while the majority of those surveyed agree that government assistance helps people meet their needs (84 percent) and helps lift people out of poverty (50 percent), notions about over-dependency still hold strong: More than 9 in 10 of Americans surveyed in the Topos study agreed that “government assistance makes people too dependent on government.”<sup>94</sup>



## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

### ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

#### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

##### **Tell a new economy story**

Americans are increasingly concerned about income inequality, and a substantial majority thinks the government should do something to reduce the gap. This rising public concern presents an important opening for anti-poverty advocates seeking to tell a new story about the economic system and government responsibility. The Topos Partnership and Public Works collaborated on a project which aimed to create a new public conversation on the role of government in the economy. The project included both qualitative and quantitative research, and resulted in a set of recommendations about the elements of a successful message and established central pillars of a new economy story.

Core pillars of a new economy story:

- The economy is man-made and intentional – policy matters.
- Systems and structures affect outcomes.
- Everyone's interests are connected and interdependent.
- Average people's economic wellbeing matters.
- Government's role is fundamental and proactive.
- As citizens, we all have the ability and responsibility to shape the economy we need.<sup>95</sup>

#### ⚡ 1.2 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT:

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6

# POLICY PREFERENCES



## **Section 6**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

- 6.1 Public support for an increase in the national minimum wage has increased significantly in recent years**
- 6.2 Support for Social Security remains high**
- 6.3 Americans' attitudes about taxation are divided but the majority of Americans now support a more even distribution of money and wealth among people and higher taxation of the highest earners**
- 6.4 The majority of Americans view foreign trade as an opportunity for the economy but are more divided on the benefits of free trade agreements**
- 6.5 Americans are more open to living in racially diverse communities**

- 6.6 Americans are largely supportive of subsidized housing**
- 6.7 While opinion is divided across party lines, many Americans are satisfied and supportive of the Affordable Care Act**
- 6.8 Affirmative action remains a somewhat contentious issue**
- 6.9 The majority of Americans support continuation of programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, but there is stigma attached to the term “welfare.”**

**6.1****PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR AN INCREASE IN THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE HAS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY IN RECENT YEARS.**

As of 2015, three-quarters (76 percent) of Americans support raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10 per hour—a nine-point increase compared to 2010 when 67 percent of Americans were in favor and a 7-point increase since 2013 (69 percent).<sup>95</sup> The majority (59 percent) of Americans also support raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, but as noted by researchers at PRRI, there is less agreement across party lines. Roughly equal numbers of Democrats favor raising the minimum wage to either \$10.10 or \$15 (91 percent vs. 84 percent, respectively). In contrast, while 6 in 10 Republicans support raising the minimum wage to \$10.10, only a third (32 percent) say they favor raising it to \$15 per hour.<sup>97</sup>

**6.2****SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL SECURITY REMAINS HIGH.**

Social Security remains one of the most universally supported social safety nets. In a January 2016 poll, more than 8 in 10 surveyed respondents expressed the view that protecting the future of Social Security is an extremely or very important issue that should be tackled by the next president of the United States.<sup>98</sup>

**6.3****AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT TAXATION ARE DIVIDED BUT THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS NOW SUPPORT A MORE EVEN DISTRIBUTION OF MONEY AND WEALTH AMONG PEOPLE AND HIGHER TAXATION OF THE HIGHEST EARNERS.**

In a 2015 New York Times and CBS poll, respondents were asked how they feel about the distribution of money and wealth in the United States, specifically, if they feel the distribution of money and wealth is fair or that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among more people?<sup>99</sup> Nearly 7 in 10 (66 percent) of those surveyed agree that money and wealth in the United States should be more evenly distributed among more people, compared to just 27 percent who think the

distribution is fair.<sup>100</sup> In the same survey when asked if they support or oppose raising taxes on people earning more than \$1 million per year, just under 7 in 10 (68 percent) support higher taxes on those earning more than \$1 million, while about a third (30 percent) oppose this measure.<sup>101</sup> There are significant partisan differences: 87 percent of Democrats support higher taxes on people earning more than \$1 million vs. 53 percent of Republicans.

## 6.4

### **THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS VIEW FOREIGN TRADE AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE ECONOMY BUT ARE MORE DIVIDED ON THE BENEFITS OF FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS.**

In recent months, foreign trade deals have been increasingly discussed in the context of unemployment and inequality,<sup>102</sup> with Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump making the reform of trade agreements a cornerstone of his campaign. Debate has centered on the role existing trade deals have played in the loss of manufacturing jobs among the American working class. Survey data spanning more than 20 years indicates that while Americans' overall attitude towards foreign trade has become more positive, as of 2016, the majority of Americans support more restrictions on trade policy.

Gallup polls have asked about foreign trade since 1992, presenting respondents with two statements:

- 1 Foreign trade is an opportunity for economic growth through increased U.S. exports.
- 2 Foreign trade is a threat to the economy from foreign exports.<sup>103</sup>

Opinions on these statements have fluctuated over the years, with the percentage of people viewing foreign trade as a threat reaching a high of 52 percent in 2008 and a low of 33 percent in 2015. In 1992, the public was almost evenly split, with 48 percent perceiving foreign trade as an opportunity for economic growth and 44 perceiving it as a threat.<sup>104</sup> By 2000, 56 percent of surveyed Americans viewed foreign trade as an opportunity, while roughly 35 percent deemed it a threat. As of April 2016, the majority (58 percent)

view foreign trade as an economic opportunity, while only 34 percent agreed that it is a threat to the economy. This compares to 54 percent agreeing with “opportunity” and 38 percent agreeing with the threat statement in 2014.<sup>105</sup>

However, as Gallup researcher Frank Newport noted, when trade policy was linked directly to job security in an April 2016 Bloomberg survey, public opinion almost reversed. Respondents were asked if they thought U.S. trade policy should have more restrictions on imported foreign goods to protect Americans jobs, or have fewer restrictions to enable American consumers to have the most choices and lower prices.<sup>106</sup> Sixty-five percent of those surveyed agreed with the “more restrictions” statement, 22 percent believed there should be fewer restrictions, and 12 percent were unsure.<sup>107</sup> This opinion has not seen much movement in the last year. When a similarly worded question was posed in a June 2015 poll, 66 percent of respondents agreed that “protecting American industries and jobs by limiting imports from other countries” is preferential to “allowing free trade so people can buy products at low prices no matter what country they come from.”<sup>108</sup>

Survey data from 2014, 2015, and 2016 suggest that the public is growing more concerned about the benefits of free trade agreements. When asked whether the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has been a good or bad thing for the U.S. economy, a large segment of Americans (44 percent) says NAFTA has been bad for the economy, while only 29 percent say it has been a positive development. Republicans are more likely to view NAFTA as bad than Democrats and Independents (53 percent versus 36 percent and 46 percent, respectively).<sup>109</sup> When a similar question was posed in a May 2015 Pew survey, 58 percent of respondents said free trade agreements are a good thing for the United States and 33 percent said they are bad. In 2014, similarly, 59 percent of people surveyed said free trade was good, while just 30 percent said it was a bad thing.<sup>110</sup>

## 6.5

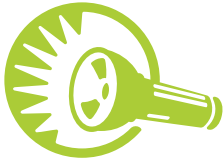
**AMERICANS ARE MORE OPEN TO LIVING IN RACIALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

The General Social Survey has included questions exploring Americans' willingness to live in racially diverse neighborhoods for more than four decades. Data from 1990, 2000, and 2014 suggests that Americans are increasingly open to living in racially diverse areas. In 1990, the GSS survey asked participants whether they would be in favor, somewhat in favor, neither in favor nor opposed, somewhat opposed, or very much opposed to living in a neighborhood where half of their neighbors were black. In 1990, a large segment of Americans (42 percent) was strongly or somewhat opposed to living in neighborhoods where half of their neighbors would be black, compared to 15.9 percent of respondents who were strongly or somewhat in favor. By 2000, the rate of opposition had decreased to 26.9 percent, while the number of Americans expressing that they were strongly/somewhat in favor of living in a neighborhood where half of the residents are black was up by more than 10 percentage point (27.5 percent). As of 2014, only 18.5 percent of Americans strongly oppose/oppose living in a neighborhood in where half the population is black, and 26.6 percent are strongly or somewhat in favor.<sup>111</sup>

Trends in attitudes concerning residential segregation present important implications for anti-poverty advocates. Cross-tabulation of General Social Survey data reveals that people's attitude about residential segregation, specifically strongly favoring or strongly opposing living in a neighborhood where half the residents are black, is a strong predictor of attitudes about affirmative action, income inequality, government assistance to the poor, the causes of racial inequality, and support for improving the conditions of black Americans. For instance, people who strongly favor living in an area where half the residents are black are more than six times as likely than people who strongly oppose this (62.1 percent vs. 10 percent) to believe that "too little" government resources are being allocated to improving the conditions of black people in America.<sup>112</sup>



## 6.6



## AMERICANS ARE LARGELY SUPPORTIVE OF SUBSIDIZED HOUSING

Americans are not only more open to living in more racially diverse

communities, they are largely supportive of providing affordable housing to people struggling in the current economic climate.

When asked whether subsidizing affordable housing would be very effective, somewhat effective, not too effective, or not at all effective when it comes to helping people who are struggling, more than 7 in 10 (74 percent) of people surveyed expressed the belief that housing subsidies would very effective or somewhat effective.<sup>113</sup>

### ***Poverty is Urban, Rural, Suburban, and Exurban***

Even communities traditionally thought of as affluent are not immune to poverty. A recent PBS NewsHour **Weekend story** showed how soaring home and property values are forcing lower income and even middle class people into living in RV's in the Silicon Valley's boom town of Mountain View, CA, the home of Google.

## 6.7

## WHILE OPINION IS DIVIDED ACROSS PARTY LINES, MANY AMERICANS ARE SATISFIED AND SUPPORTIVE OF THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Roughly one quarter (24 percent) of Americans support an expansion to the Affordable Care Act, 16 percent believe it should be kept the same, and 22 percent say the law should be repealed and/or replaced with a Republican alternative.<sup>114</sup>

There are also major partisan differences in opinion as well as divisions between racial and ethnic groups. The majority (69 percent) of Democrats support expansion of the law, or it being kept the same, while more than 8 in 10 Republicans (76 percent) believe the law should be repealed and replaced. In addition, while nearly 7 in 10 (66 percent) of black Americans and nearly 6 in 10 (57 percent) of Latinos support the maintenance or expansion of the law, the majority of white Americans (56 percent) believe the law should be repealed or replaced.<sup>115</sup>

## 6.8

**AFFIRMATIVE ACTION REMAINS A SOMEWHAT CONTENTIOUS ISSUE**

The Fisher vs. University of Texas Supreme Court case, which sought to challenge the use of race in the college admission, has brought the question of affirmative action into national discussions once again. Results from a recent survey show that the majority (8 in 10) of Americans strongly oppose or somewhat oppose race-based preferences in hiring, specifically in the hiring of black Americans.<sup>116</sup> Data spanning 1990 to 2014 shows that the majority of Americans also believe that whites are disadvantaged by the existence of affirmative action. When asked in both 1990 and 2000 if white Americans are hurt by affirmative action, 65 percent stated that it was very likely or somewhat likely. As of 2014, the majority (57.8 percent) of Americans are still in agreement.<sup>117</sup> The public is somewhat less oppositional to hiring preferences that take gender into account. In a 2015 survey, respondents were asked if they were for or against the preferential hiring of women. More than 6 in 10 (66.4 percent) are strongly against hiring that favors women, compared to 33.8 percent who are strongly for the preferential hiring of women.<sup>118</sup>

## 6.9

**THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS SUPPORT CONTINUATION OF PROGRAMS SUCH AS THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) AND MEDICAID, BUT THERE IS STIGMA ATTACHED TO THE TERM “WELFARE”**

More than 6 in 10 Americans believe that the current level of assistance to poor Americans is “too little.”<sup>119</sup> At the same time, survey data from between 2010 and 2014 suggest that stigma attached to the word “welfare” is still shaping public perceptions. When asked about what programs should be prioritized, when “welfare” is included as an umbrella term, public support is low. A 2015 study revealed that “welfare” (a catchall term used in this survey to refer to all welfare programs) ranked in 22nd place among spending priorities, well below Social Security (ranked 4th or 5th between 1998 and 2014) and education and halting crime, which are now ranked as the first and second-most important spending priority, respectively.<sup>120</sup> In addi-

tion, despite the economic downturn, support for welfare did not rise from 2010 to 2014 but has instead declined since 2008. As noted in the report, “People favor the idea of the government helping those with low incomes, but many consider welfare a failed program.” When Americans are asked about specific programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly referred to as food stamps or Medicaid, the majority of the public is supportive of those programs. For instance, when asked in an April 2015 survey if government programs assisting poor people like Medicaid or food stamps should be abolished, nearly 7 in 10 (69.5 percent) of those surveyed strongly or somewhat disagree, compared to 19.8 percent who strongly or somewhat agree that these programs should be abolished.<sup>120</sup>



# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

## ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Build on policies with high levels of support**

A number of anti-poverty strategies receive high levels of support from the public. Lifting up these popular solutions while explaining and promoting more complex or less popular ones can help to build broader and more lasting support. Solutions with the greatest support include:

- Raising the federal minimum wage.
- Increasing taxes on those earning over \$1 million annually.
- The continuation of SNAP and Medicaid.

#### **Tell a compelling story with the data**

In 2015, we conducted an extensive literature review of research examining public attitudes towards income, gender, and racial inequality, including message-testing experiments and surveys. A key finding of our exploration of the literature is the centrality of data presentation in building an effective message. As noted in the literature review, many of the arguments advocates make in support of public policies to solve problems of inequality are based on statistics involving large numbers and complex systems. Communications scholars from the Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) recommend using a technique they call “social math,” which they define as follows:

“Social math is the practice of translating statistics and other data so that they become interesting to the journalist, meaningful to the audience, and helpful in advancing public policy. Unlike infographics which use visuals such as charts and graphics to present data, social math is the practice of making large numbers comprehensible and compelling by placing in the social context that provides meaning. The best social math surprises people and provokes an emotional response”.<sup>122</sup>

BMSG offers pointers on how advocates can use social math to make data more compelling:

- A number broken down by time: Given the amount over the course of one year, what does that look like per day, per hour, or per minute?

- A number broken down by place: Comparing a statistic with a well-known place can give people a sense of the statistic's magnitude.
- A localized number: Make numbers meaningful to community members and policymakers in a specific region.
- A comparison to familiar things: Compare and contrast numbers with something easily identifiable to the audience.
- An ironic comparison: In order to draw attention to an unmet need, suggest more appropriate use of resources, point out skewed priorities, and make a case for a policy change.

### **⚡ 1.2** **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT**

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Berkeley Media Studies Group: Using social math to support your policy issue: <http://bmsg.org/blog/social-math-support-public-health-policy>



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# RECOMMENDATIONS



## Section 7

# KEY FINDINGS

### 7.1 Narrative, Messaging, and Storytelling Recommendations

Craft a shared narrative and uplift each other's voices and concerns

Focus on real-world economic challenges

Document and explain unequal obstacles

Highlight systemic solutions for systemic problems

Show the connections

Acknowledge and confront deep-seated racial stereotypes

Build on policies with high levels of support

### 7.2 Engaging Strategic Audiences

Activating the base

Persuading undecided audiences

Engaging those most affected

### 7.3 Future Research

Include perspectives of overlooked communities

Make a distinction between poverty and inequality

Avoid stereotypical or negative language in survey design



# NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

## 7.1.1

### CRAFT A SHARED NARRATIVE AND UPLIFT EACH OTHER'S VOICES AND CONCERNS

Anti-poverty voices are relatively prominent in the public discourse, but they are diffuse, lacking a coherent narrative that can persuade undecided audiences or counter the disciplined narrative of their most frequent opponents.

We recommend that while anti-poverty leaders and groups maintain their individual perspectives and priorities, they also craft a shared narrative in which they:



- Emphasize the values of equal opportunity and community.
- Highlight systemic causes.
- Describe a path from poverty to economic participation.
- Promote effective solutions and successes.
- Invoke a positive role for government.

#### ***Using Pop Culture to Highlight Poverty***

Movies, songs, and memes, and breaking news can allow you to reach far larger audiences than traditional news. For example: anticipating the release of the Oscar-nominated movie *The Help* (about African American domestic workers in 1960s Mississippi), the **National Domestic Workers Alliance** started their #BeTheHelp campaign, capitalizing on the movie's popularity to raise awareness of the struggles of modern domestic workers. The link to the popular film attracted the attention of both news and pop culture media outlets, which helped audiences understand the issues and the need for change.

Shared messaging should build on public concerns about growing inequality, low wages, and long-term unemployment while educating audiences about less visible forces like racial and gender bias, globalization, and tax and labor policies.

**7.1.2****FOCUS ON REAL-WORLD ECONOMIC CHALLENGES**

Public opinion data suggests that Americans' understanding of poverty is less abstract and data-driven. Communications must move beyond official government definitions and instead touch on the real-world challenges facing many Americans, while also highlighting the solutions.

**7.1.3****DOCUMENT AND EXPLAIN UNEQUAL OBSTACLES**

Researchers have amply documented the disparate obstacles that contribute to higher poverty rates among communities of color, women, immigrants, and other demographic groups. Yet there is still a dearth of reporting on those dynamics—and for that reason, among others, many audiences are skeptical that such obstacles still exist. Moreover, research and experience show unchallenged subconscious stereotypes will infect attitudes about poverty generally and erode support for positive solutions. Our communications need to both explore and explain this evidence, as well as tell the human stories behind it. A focus on unequal obstacles—not only unequal outcomes or disparities—is an important part of that formula.

**7.1.4****HIGHLIGHT SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS FOR SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS**

While news reports generally ascribe poverty to systemic causes, they do so through fleeting references to general trends such as plant closings, the scarcity of jobs, or the “weak economy.” Few stories explain root causes in any detail, and forces behind the disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender receive practically no attention.

However, our research shows that a majority of Americans agree that “the primary cause of America’s problems is an economic system that results in continuing inequality and poverty,” so there is an opening for advocates to talk about the systemic underpinnings of poverty and system-wide changes needed to address it. Because many Americans are not knowledgeable about effective solutions to poverty, anti-poverty policies and programs that have demonstrated positive results, along with research pointing the way to positive outcomes, should be made more visible, as should the positive role that government plays in creating opportunity.

**7.1.5****SHOW THE CONNECTIONS**

The idea that we are interconnected and all in this together is crucial to the success of anti-poverty communications. Americans intuitively understand that increasing inequality and poverty hold back the economy and country as a whole and also create an environment in which serious social problems develop and worsen. But their thinking on poverty easily defaults to an extreme “personal responsibility” and “bad decisions” frame. Both showing and telling how we’re all affected and connected—through images, research, spokespeople, and storytelling, as well as specific messaging—is crucial.

**7.1.6****ACKNOWLEDGE AND CONFRONT DEEP-SEATED RACIAL STEREOTYPES**

Americans strongly believe that opportunity should not be hindered by race, gender, ethnicity, or other aspects of who we are. However, much of the public is skeptical of the existence of racial discrimination in particular, and negative racial stereotypes about poor people persist among many Americans.

We need to acknowledge and confront these deep-seated stereotypes. To do that, our messaging on poverty needs to take into account that race matters in at least four crucial ways:

- Stereotypes and bias warp perceptions of poor people.
- Stereotypes and bias can undermine support for solutions.
- Views and beliefs about poverty differ significantly across demographic groups.
- People’s conscious values on racial equity are generally more positive than their subconscious stereotypes.

Taken together, these trends call for talking about race explicitly and strategically, through the lens of shared values. Keep these guidelines in mind when talking about barriers that hamper opportunity for diverse populations and promoting solutions:

- Show that it's about all of us. Remind audiences that racial equity is not just about people of color; achieving racial equity upholds our values and benefits our entire society. For example, lax federal regulators allowed predatory subprime lenders to target communities of color, only to see that practice spread across communities, putting our entire economy at risk.
- Over-document the barriers to equal opportunity—especially racial bias. Don't lead with evidence of unequal outcomes alone, which can sometimes reinforce stereotypes and blame. Amply document how people of color frequently face stiff and unequal barriers to opportunity. For example:
  - **Don't** begin by discussing the income gap between whites and African Americans
  - **Do** lead by talking about how studies have found that employment agencies frequently preferred less qualified white applicants to more qualified black applicants.
- Acknowledge the progress we've made. This helps to persuade skeptical audiences to lower their defenses and have a reasoned discussion rooted in reality rather than rhetoric.
- Present data on racial disparities through a contribution model instead of a deficit model. When we present evidence of unequal outcomes, we should make every effort to show how closing those gaps will benefit society as a whole. The fact that the Latino college graduation rate is a fraction of the white rate also means that closing the ethnic graduation gap would result in many more college graduates each year to help America compete and prosper in a global economy—it's the smart thing to do as well as the right thing to do.
- Be thematic instead of episodic. Select stories that demonstrate institutional or systemic causes and solutions over stories that largely focus on individual choices.

- Use opportunity as a bridge, not a bypass. Opening conversations with the ideal of opportunity helps to emphasize society's role in affording a fair chance to everyone. But starting conversations there does not mean avoiding discussions of race. We suggest bridging from the value of opportunity to the roles of racial equity and inclusion in fulfilling that value for all.

**7.1.7****BUILD ON POLICIES WITH HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT**

A number of anti-poverty strategies receive high levels of support from the public. Lifting up these popular solutions while explaining and promoting more complex or less popular ones can help to build broader and more lasting support. Solutions with the greatest support include:

- Raising the federal minimum wage.
- Increasing taxes on those earning over \$1 million annually.

# ENGAGING STRATEGIC AUDIENCES

Key to building the national will to address poverty is activating the base of existing supporters while persuading undecided groups over time. That, in turn, requires prioritizing strategic audiences by:

## 7.2.1 **ACTIVATING THE BASE**

The most fertile ground for anti-poverty policy and activism lies with self-identifying low-income Americans, black Americans, and Latinos.

These groups should be prioritized for organizing and calls to action.

## 7.2.2 **PERSUADING UNDECIDED AUDIENCES**

Millennials, independent voters, women, low-income Republicans, and people of faith are disproportionately open and persuadable on poverty issues. Evangelical Christians, for example, seem to be increasingly in play; nearly 7 in 10 (67.8 percent) of them agree that “unequal treatment facing Americans living in poverty is a serious problem.”

## 7.2.3 **ENGAGING THOSE MOST AFFECTED**

Public opinion research suggests that low-income Americans, while knowledgeable about the realities of living in poverty and interested in change, tend to lack information about structural causes and solutions and are doubtful about their influence in society. Providing that information, along with opportunities for leadership and civic engagement, should be priorities.

# FUTURE RESEARCH

The following section outlines suggestions for future research and new approaches to polling and survey research.

## 7.3.1

### **INCLUDE PERSPECTIVES OF OVERLOOKED COMMUNITIES**

Current data is lagging behind the reality of the racial and ethnic makeup of America, and public opinion polling needs to focus more on the opinions of Asian Americans, Native Americans, biracial/multiracial Americans, and other communities of color. Future research should oversample these frequently overlooked communities, in addition to disaggregating data by national origin and other characteristics.

## 7.3.2

### **MAKE A DISTINCTION BETWEEN POVERTY AND INEQUALITY**

Over the years, public opinion research has included questions about inequality that often conflate inequality of outcomes (such as disparities in health outcomes, wealth, and income) with inequality of opportunities (such as access to quality education, housing, and employment). This lack of distinction presents major challenges to interpreting public opinion on inequality. There is a pressing need to adopt more sophisticated analysis of public perceptions of poverty and inequality, including greater exploration of the distinction between public perception of “inequality” versus “perpetual poverty”.

## 7.3.3

### **AVOID STEREOTYPICAL OR NEGATIVE LANGUAGE IN SURVEY DESIGN**

The language used in survey and polling questions often makes use of terms or categories that carry negative social connotations, such as “poor” or “lower class”—labels that people may be eager to reject. Sociologists and psychologists have explored at length the social and political forces that influence low-income individuals to reject such categorization and that influence both high- and low-earners to self-identify as middle class, regardless of actual income. More open-ended questions that allow people

to self-identify and define the issue of poverty and inequality for themselves should provide more insightful results and improve public opinion research.

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