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## RACE AND POVERTY IN AMERICA PUBLIC MISPERCEPTIONS AND THE AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA

MARTIN GILENS

**Abstract** Over the past decades, the black urban poor have come to dominate public images of poverty. Surveys show that the American public dramatically exaggerates the proportion of African Americans among the poor and that such misperceptions are associated with greater opposition to welfare. In this article I examine the relationship between news media portrayals and public images of poverty. I find that network TV news and weekly newsmagazines portray the poor as substantially more black than is really the case. In more detailed analyses of newsmagazines, I find that the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor, such as the elderly and the working poor, are underrepresented, while the least sympathetic group—unemployed working-age adults—is overrepresented. Finally, these discrepancies between magazine portrayals of the poor and the true nature of poverty are greater for African Americans than for others. Thus the unflattering (and distorted) portrait of the poor presented in these newsmagazines is even more unflattering (and more distorted) for poor African Americans.

## Introduction

The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event. That is why until we know what others think they know, we cannot truly understand their acts. (Lippmann [1922] 1960, p. 13)

As Walter Lippmann argued 70 years ago, our opinions and behavior are responses not to the world itself but to our perceptions of that world. It is the "pictures in our heads" that shape our feelings and actions, and

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these pictures only imperfectly reflect the world that surrounds us. Just as important, our experience of the world is largely indirect. "Our opinions," Lippmann wrote, "cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported" (Lippmann 1960, p. 79). Already in Lippmann's time, and even more so in our own, "reports about the world" come primarily through the mass media.

To understand the roots of American public opinion, we need to understand Americans' perceptions of the social and political world they inhabit and the role of the media in shaping those perceptions. Survey data show that public perceptions of poverty are erroneous in at least one crucial respect: Americans substantially exaggerate the degree to which blacks compose the poor. Furthermore, white Americans with the most exaggerated misunderstandings of the racial composition of the poor are the most likely to oppose welfare.

This study investigates the portrayal of poverty in the national news, compares these images with the reality of poverty in America, and offers some preliminary evidence that media coverage of poverty shapes public perceptions—and misperceptions—of the poor. Examining weekly news-magazines and, to a lesser extent, network television news shows, I find that news media distortions coincide with public misperceptions about race and poverty and that both are biased in ways that reflect negatively on the poor in general and on poor African Americans in particular.

I argue in this article that the correspondence of public misunderstandings and media misrepresentations of poverty reflects the influence of each upon the other. On the one hand, the media are subject to many of the same biases and misperceptions that afflict American society at large and therefore reproduce those biases in their portrayals of American social conditions. On the other hand, Americans rely heavily on the mass media for information about the society in which they live, and the media shape Americans' social perceptions and political attitudes in important ways. Media distortions of social conditions are therefore likely to result in public misperceptions that reinforce existing biases and stereotypes.

#### PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF RACE AND POVERTY

African Americans account for 29 percent of America's poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990a). But recent national surveys show that the public substantially overestimates the percentage of blacks among the poor. When one survey asked, "What percent of all the poor people in this country would you say are black?" the median response was 50 percent (Survey Research Center 1991).<sup>1</sup> Another survey simply asked, "Of all

1. This datum is from the 1991 National Race and Politics Study, a nationwide random digit telephone survey administered by the Survey Research Center at the University of

the people who are poor in this country, are more of them black or are more of them white?" Fifty-five percent of the respondents chose black compared to 24 percent who chose white, with 31 percent volunteering "about equal."<sup>2</sup>

The public's exaggerated association of race and poverty not only reflects and perpetuates negative racial stereotypes but it also increases white Americans' opposition to welfare. Whites who think the poor are mostly black are more likely to blame welfare recipients for their situation and less likely to support welfare than are those with more accurate perceptions of poverty. In one national survey, 46 percent of the white respondents who thought African Americans make up more than half of the poor wanted to cut welfare spending. In contrast, only 26 percent of those who thought blacks compose less than one-quarter of the poor wanted welfare spending cut (Los Angeles Times 1985).<sup>3</sup>

Americans' views on poverty and welfare are colored by the belief that economic opportunity is widespread and that anyone who tries hard enough can succeed. For example, 70 percent of respondents to one survey agreed that "America is the land of opportunity where everyone who

California, Berkeley, directed by Paul M. Sniderman, Philip E. Tetlock, and Thomas Piazza. Data were collected between February and November 1991 from 2,223 respondents, with a response rate of 65.3 percent (Survey Research Center 1991).

2. CBS/New York Times national telephone survey, conducted December 6–9, 1994. Comparing public perceptions of the poor with Census Bureau statistics implies that the public holds at least a roughly compatible understanding of who is included among the poor. According to census data, a decrease in the poverty threshold would result in a higher proportion of African Americans among the poor, while an increase in the poverty line would result in a lower proportion of blacks. Thus, if the public has a lower implicit poverty threshold than the Census Bureau, public perceptions of the racial composition of the poor may not be as inaccurate as would otherwise appear to be the case. All evidence, however, suggests that, if anything, the public has a higher (more inclusive) definition of poverty than is reflected in official government statistics. When a recent survey informed respondents that the federal poverty line for a family of four is now about \$15,000 a year, 58 percent of respondents said the poverty line should be set higher and only 7 percent said it should be set lower (Center for the Study of Policy Attitudes 1994). When asked in another survey what the level of income should be below which a family of four could be considered poor, the median response was about 15 percent higher than the official poverty line for a four-person family (National Opinion Research Center 1993).

3. The association between perceptions of the racial composition of poverty and opposition to welfare spending does not, of course, prove that perceptions of poverty cause opposition to welfare. The causal influence might run in the opposite direction. That is, whites who oppose welfare for other reasons (such as its perceived cost to taxpayers) may come to view the poor as largely black. It is not clear, however, why such misperceptions of the poor should follow from welfare policy preferences. A more plausible alternative account of the association of perceptions of poverty and opposition to welfare is that both are consequences of a third factor. But when a number of such possible factors are controlled for, the relationship between perceptions of poverty and opposition to welfare is unaffected. In a regression equation predicting whites' opposition to welfare, the coefficient for perceived percent black among the poor is 1.16 ( $\beta = .19$ ) when percent black is used as the only predictor. When age, sex, income, race, liberal/conservative ideology, and party identification are added to the model, the coefficient for percent black barely declines to 1.08 ( $\beta = .18$ ).

works hard can get ahead" (Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 44). For those who perceive abundant opportunities, poverty itself is presumptive evidence of personal failure. Thus Americans' exaggerated association of race and poverty perpetuates longstanding stereotypes of African Americans as poor and lazy. When social scientists began studying stereotypes in the early twentieth century, they found a widespread belief that blacks are lazy,<sup>4</sup> and this stereotype does not appear to have faded much over the years. In 1990, the General Social Survey asked respondents to place blacks as a group on a 7-point scale with "lazy" at one end and "hard working" at the other (National Opinion Research Center 1990). Forty-seven percent of whites placed blacks on the "lazy" side of the scale; only 17 percent chose the "hard working" side (General Social Surveys 1972-90).

Negative stereotypes of African Americans as lazy and misperceptions of the poor as predominantly black reinforce each other. If poverty is a black problem, many whites reason, then blacks must not be trying hard enough. And if blacks are lazy in comparison with other Americans, and economic opportunities are plentiful, then it stands to reason that poverty would be a predominantly black problem. In sum, the public rather dramatically misunderstands the racial composition of America's poor, with consequences harmful to both poor people and African Americans.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON POVERTY IN THE NEWS

The portrayal of poverty by the American news media has never been systematically studied. There have, however, been a number of studies of minorities in the news that have some relevance to the current project. The most common such studies have examined the proportion of ethnic or racial minorities appearing in news coverage and have consistently found that blacks are underrepresented in the American news media, whether it be television (Baran 1973), newspapers (Chaudhary 1980), or newsmagazines (Lester and Smith 1990; Stempel 1971). The underrepresentation of African Americans has decreased over time, however. Lester and Smith (1990), for example, found that only 1.3 percent of the pictures in *Time* and *Newsweek* during the 1950s were of blacks, compared with 3.1 percent in the 1960s and 7.5 percent in the 1980s. Another study looked at the representation of African Americans in newsmagazine advertisements (Humphrey and Schuman 1984). Advertisements, of course, constitute a very different subject matter from news content, and we would not expect to find many poor people in advertisements. Nevertheless, 10

4. In one early study (Katz and Braly 1933), Princeton students were given a list of 84 traits and asked to select the five that were "most characteristic" of blacks. Over 75 percent chose "lazy" as among these five traits (second in popularity only to "superstitious").

percent of the blacks in advertisements in *Time* magazine in 1980 were either Africans or Americans in poverty, while none of the whites in these ads were shown as poor.

#### Data and Methods

The primary data for this study consist of every story on poverty and related topics appearing between January 1, 1988, and December 31, 1992, in the three leading American newsmagazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. The *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* was used to identify stories related to poverty and the poor. In each year the "core categories" of *poor*, *poverty*, and *public welfare* were examined. Any cross-references listed under these topics were then followed.<sup>5</sup> In total, 182 stories related to poverty were found under 31 different topic headings (the topic headings and number of stories indexed under each are found in the appendix).

Specifically excluded from the list of topics are references to blacks or African Americans. The stories identified thus represent only those that are primarily focused on some aspect of poverty or poor relief. To the extent that stories that focus on African Americans also discuss poverty, the body of stories examined here will underestimate the true degree to which poverty is presented as a black problem.

Once the poverty stories were identified, each accompanying picture (if any) was examined to determine if it contained images of poor people. In total, 214 pictures containing 635 poor people were found. Of these, the vast majority were photographs, but a few consisted of drawings, most often as part of a chart. Finally, the race of each poor person in each picture was coded as black, nonblack, or not determinable.

Of the 635 poor people pictured, race could be determined for 560 (88 percent). To assess the reliability of the coding, a random 25 percent sample of pictures was coded by a second coder. The intercoder reliability was .97 for percent African American in each picture.<sup>6</sup> In addition to race, the age of each poor person pictured was coded as under 18 years old,

5. The *Reader's Guide* is inconsistent in citing cross-references to related topics. Therefore, when a cross-reference to another topic was found in a particular year, this topic was checked for all 5 years under study.

6. Intercoder reliability was calculated on the basis of percent African American in each picture. This is because the picture, not the individual, is the unit of analysis in the computer data file. It is possible that the intercoder reliability for individuals would be slightly lower than the figures based on pictures. For example, two coders might agree that there are five blacks and five nonblacks in a picture but disagree on which individuals are black and which are nonblack. Such a scenario is unlikely to occur often, however, and the picture-based intercoder reliability coefficient is therefore very close, if not identical, to what one would find using individuals as the unit of analysis. The reliability coefficients for age and work status are picture-based as well.

between 18 and 64, or over 64 years old. For this coding both the picture and any accompanying textual information (often including the exact age of the person pictured) were used. Intercoder reliability for under or over 18 years old was .98, and reliability for under or over 64 years old was .95. Finally, each poor person 18–64 years old was coded as working or not. Again, textual information accompanying the picture was used. Intercoder reliability for work status was .97.

In addition to newsmagazines, coverage of poverty by network television news was also examined. Stories on poverty and related topics were identified using the *Television News Index and Abstracts*, published by Vanderbilt University (see appendix for specific topics). During the 5-year time frame for this study, the three weeknight network television news shows broadcast 534 stories on poverty and related topics, the equivalent of about one story every week and a half per network. Although the differences among networks were not great, ABC broadcast the largest number of poverty stories (207), followed by NBC (173) and CBS (154). Of these 534 stories, 50 stories were randomly chosen for analysis. These 50 stories contained pictures of 1,353 poor people.

Television news stories typically include far more pictures of poor people than do magazine stories but provide far less information about the individual poor people pictured. Consequently, only race of the poor was coded for the television stories on poverty. Of the 1,353 poor people in these stories, race could be coded for 1,100 (81 percent).<sup>7</sup> Intercoder reliability for percent African American in each scene was .94.

## Findings

During the 5-year period examined, *Newsweek* published 82 stories on poverty and related topics, an average of about one story every 3 weeks (table 1). Fewer stories on poverty were found in the other two magazines, with *U.S. News and World Report* publishing 56 poverty stories over this period and *Time* only 44. Overall, African Americans made up 62 percent of the poor people pictured in these stories, over twice their true proportion of 29 percent. Of the three magazines, *U.S. News and World Report*

7. Race coding was done by first identifying individual "scenes" within each news story. A scene was defined as one or more camera shots of the same people in the same setting (or a subgroup of the same people in the same setting). Within each scene people were then identified as poor or nonpoor based on both the information contained in the text of the story and the visual information in the scene itself. Finally, the number of black, non-

**Table 1.** Stories on Poverty in U.S. Newsmagazines, 1988–92

	Number of Stories	Number of Pictures	Number of Poor People Pictured <sup>a</sup>	Percent African American <sup>b</sup>
<i>Time</i>	44	36	86	65
<i>Newsweek</i>	82	103	294	66
<i>U.S. News and World Report</i>	56	67	180	53
Total	182	206	560	62

<sup>a</sup> Excludes 75 people for whom race could not be determined.

<sup>b</sup> Difference in percentage African American across the three magazines is significant at  $p < .02$  (see n. 8).

showed the lowest percentage of African Americans in poverty stories (53 percent,  $p < .02$ ), but the differences between magazines were not great.<sup>8</sup>

A reader of these newsmagazines is likely to develop the impression that America's poor are predominantly black.<sup>9</sup> This distorted portrait of the American poor cannot help but reinforce negative stereotypes of blacks as mired in poverty and contribute to the belief that poverty is primarily a "black problem." Yet as problematic as this overall racial misrepresentation of the poor is, we shall see that the portrayal of poor African Americans differs from the portrayal of the nonblack poor in ways that further stigmatize blacks.

8. As traditionally understood, significance tests and probability levels are not appropriate to the data on newsmagazine photographs. Since every photograph from every poverty story during the period of interest is included in the data set, these data do not constitute a sample drawn from a larger population. Nevertheless, the operation of producing and selecting photographs can be viewed as a stochastic process (e.g., a given photo editor might select pictures of African Americans for particular types of stories with some specific probability.) Viewed this way, the resulting set of photographs can be understood as representative of a larger hypothetical population consisting of the universe of photographs that might equally likely have been published in these magazines during this time period. From this perspective, significance tests illuminate the question of how likely it is that similar results would have been found if a larger set of photographs—generated by the same processes that generated the actual photographs—were available for analysis (see Henkel 1976, pp. 85–86).

9. For the next stage of this research, the percentage black among the magazine poor has been coded for the period 1950–94. Since 1965, when these magazines began to include large numbers of African Americans in their pictures of the poor, the percent black has averaged 54 percent. Thus it appears that for the period under study in this article, 1988–92,

## AGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE "MAGAZINE POOR"

The public is more sympathetic toward some age-groups of poor people than others. Working-age adults are expected to support themselves, and poverty among this group is viewed by many Americans as indicating a lack of discipline or effort. Children and the elderly are, to a large extent, not held to blame for their poverty, and these groups are looked upon much more favorably for government assistance. In one survey, for example, respondents gave the disabled elderly the highest priority for government financial assistance, followed by the poor elderly and poor children (Cook and Barrett 1992). Respondents were much less sympathetic toward the working-age poor, who were given the lowest priority for government help of the six groups examined. Yet as the authors of this study point out, sympathy toward poor children is often not translated into support for government aid when providing that aid means helping their working-age parents. In terms of public policy, therefore, the elderly are the only unambiguously privileged age-group among the poor.

Given the public's greater willingness to help the elderly poor, and to a lesser degree poor children, public perceptions of the age distribution of the poor are likely to have an impact on overall levels of support for government antipoverty efforts. Although dramatically off base in terms of the racial composition of the poor, newsmagazine portrayals of poverty are fairly accurate in showing large numbers of children among the poor. Forty-three percent of the poor people pictured were coded as under 18 years old, compared with the true figure of 40 percent of America's poor (table 2). And newsmagazines are also accurate in showing a somewhat larger number of children among the black poor than among the nonblack poor. The census bureau reports that 47 percent of poor African Americans are under 18, while newsmagazines show 52 percent. Similarly, children make up 37 percent of the nonblack poor, while newsmagazines show 35 percent.

With regard to the elderly, however, the magazine poor and the true poor differ substantially. In reality, those over 64 years old account for 11 percent of all poor people, but they are scarcely to be found at all in magazine poverty stories (table 2). If newsmagazine pictures reflected the true nature of American poverty, we would expect to find about 70 elderly people among the 635 poor people pictured; instead we find a mere 13 (2 percent). (In coding the age of the magazine poor, a very lax criterion was applied, so that any poor person who could at all plausibly be thought to be over 64 years old was so coded.)

The most sympathetic age-group of poor people—the elderly—while a small proportion of the true poor, are virtually invisible among the magazine poor. Furthermore, of the 13 elderly poor shown over the 5-year

**Table 2.** Age Distribution of the American Poor and Age Distribution of the "Magazine Poor," by Race (Percent)

	Total <sup>a</sup>	African American	Non-African American
True poor:			
Under 18 years old	40	47	37
18-64 years old	49	45	51
Over 64 years old	11	8	12
Magazine poor:			
Under 18 years old	43	52*	35
18-64 years old	55**	48	60***
Over 64 years old	2***	1***	5***
Number of magazine poor	635	345	215

SOURCE.—U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990a.

NOTE.—Significance levels indicate differences between magazine portrayals and census figures for each category (see n. 8). Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding error.

<sup>a</sup> Includes 75 people for whom race could not be determined.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

period under study, 10 are white and only two are black (the race of one person could not be determined). According to census data, those over 64 constitute 12 percent of the nonblack poor and 8 percent of poor African Americans (table 2); but in newsmagazines, the elderly represent only 5 percent of poor nonblacks and a scant six-tenths of 1 percent of the black poor. Thus, the most sympathetic age category of the poor is both under-represented in general and reserved almost exclusively for nonblacks.

## WORK STATUS OF THE "MAGAZINE POOR"

For centuries, Americans have distinguished between the "deserving poor," who are trying to make it on their own, and the "undeserving poor," who are lazy, shiftless, or drunken and prefer to live off the generosity of others (Katz 1989). More remarkable than the tenacity of this distinction is the tendency to place a majority of the poor in the "undeserving" category. In one survey, for example, 57 percent of the respondents agreed that "most poor people these days would rather take assistance from the government than make it on their own through hard work"

**Table 3.** Work Status of the Working-Age American Poor and Work Status of the Working-Age "Magazine Poor," by Race (Percent)

	Total <sup>a</sup>	African American	Non-African American
True poor:			
Working	51	42	54
Not working	49	58	46
Magazine poor:			
Working	15***	12***	27***
Not working	85***	88***	73***
Number of working-age magazine poor	351	165	129

SOURCE.—U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990b.

NOTE.—Significance levels indicate differences between magazine portrayals and census figures for each category (see n. 8). Working age includes those 18–64 years old.

<sup>a</sup> Includes 57 working-age poor for whom race could not be determined.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

(Survey Research Center 1991). While the true preferences of the poor are hard to measure, the fact is that 51 percent of the working-age poor (and 62 percent of poor working-age men) are employed at least part-time (table 3).

The magazine poor are much less likely to be employed than their real-world counterparts. Overall, only 15 percent of the working-age magazine poor hold a paying job (table 3). If we add in all those described as looking for work, or participating in some kind of vocational training program, or even just collecting bottles and cans, the number only increases to 21 percent. Thus the clearest indication of "deservingness"—preparing for or engaging in some form of employment—is rare indeed among the magazine poor. Whatever public sympathy might accompany the perception that the poor are trying to work their way out of poverty is unlikely to emerge from these newsmagazines.

Just as newsmagazines' underrepresentation of the elderly poor is greater for African Americans than for others, so is their underrepresentation of the working poor. In reality, poor African Americans are somewhat less likely to be employed than non-African Americans, but the difference is modest: 42 percent of poor African Americans work compared with 54 percent of the non-African American poor (table 3). But among the magazine poor, this difference is much greater. While 27 percent of the non-black poor are shown as working, only 12 percent of the African American poor are portrayed as workers. Thus the true proportion of poor nonblacks

**Table 4.** Percent African Americans in Pictures of the Poor by Topic of Story

Topic	Number of Stories	Number of Poor People Pictured <sup>a</sup>	Percent African American
Underclass	6	36	100
Poor	33	147	69
Housing/homelessness <sup>b</sup>	96	195	66
Education for the poor <sup>c</sup>	4	17	65
Poor children <sup>d</sup>	24	70	60
Public welfare	25	97	57
Employment programs for the poor <sup>e</sup>	9	52	40
Medicaid	7	6	17
Miscellaneous others <sup>f</sup>	14	13	43
Total	182	560	62

NOTE.—Column entries exceed totals shown because stories may be indexed under more than one topic.

<sup>a</sup> Excludes 75 people for whom race could not be determined.

<sup>b</sup> Includes Housing [city/state], U.S.; Housing projects; Housing, federal aid; Housing vouchers; Department of H.U.D.; Homeless; Poor, housing; Welfare hotels; Habitat for Humanity; Covenant House.

<sup>c</sup> Includes Head Start; Poor, education.

<sup>d</sup> Includes Child welfare; Children, homeless; Runaways; Socially handicapped children.

<sup>e</sup> Includes Workfare; Job Corps; American Conservation Corps.

<sup>f</sup> Includes MadCAPP; LIFE program; I Have a Dream Foundation; Refugees; Economic assistance, domestic; Legal aid; Relief work; Unemployment insurance; Street News; Entitlement spending.

percent vs. 27 percent), while the true proportion working among the black poor is three and one-half times that shown in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* (42 percent vs. 12 percent). Once again, the misleadingly negative portrait of the poor presented in these news stories is even more misleading and more negative for poor African Americans.

#### THE "MAGAZINE POOR" BY TOPIC OF STORY

To examine portrayals of the poor by story topic, the 31 topics were grouped into nine major categories (including a residual "other" category). The

sure. For example, surveys show greater sympathy for the poor in general than for welfare recipients (Smith 1987). And we would expect more sympathetic responses to stories about poor children or poor people in employment programs than to stories about nonworking poor adults. Most of the topics shown in table 4 are illustrated with approximately the same proportion of African Americans. These include "sympathetic" topics such as poor children (60 percent black) and education for the poor (65 percent black) and "unsympathetic" topics such as public welfare (57 percent black).

Of those topics that do differ substantially in percent African American, however, fewer blacks are shown in stories on the more sympathetic topics of employment programs (40 percent black) and Medicaid (17 percent black), while stories on the underclass—perhaps the least sympathetic topic in table 4—are illustrated exclusively with pictures of African Americans. While the underclass lacks any consistent definition in either popular or academic discourse, it is most often associated with intergenerational poverty, labor force nonparticipation, out-of-wedlock births, crime, drugs, and "welfare dependency as a way of life" (Jencks 1991).<sup>10</sup>

In fact, blacks do compose a large proportion of the American underclass; just how large a proportion depends on how the underclass is defined. But even those definitions that result in the highest percentages of African Americans do not approach the magazine portrait of the underclass as 100 percent black. One such definition counts as members of the underclass only poor residents of census tracts with unusually high proportions of (1) welfare recipients, (2) female-headed households, (3) high school dropouts, and (4) unemployed working-age males (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988).<sup>11</sup> By this definition, 59 percent of the underclass is African American. However defined, it is clear that the American underclass contains substantial numbers of nonblacks, in contrast to the magazine underclass composed exclusively of African Americans.

With regard to topic of story, then, we find a tendency to portray a variety of subgroups of the poor as roughly similar in the proportion of African Americans. For those aspects of poverty that do differ in this regard, however, the more sympathetic groups among the poor are shown

10. Some argue that the very notion of an underclass is misguided at best and pernicious at worst (e.g., Reed 1991), but this is not the place to debate the utility of this concept. Because the media have adopted the term *underclass*, those interested in understanding public attitudes must acknowledge its importance, irrespective of our feelings about the desirability or undesirability of the concept.

11. To qualify as an underclass area based on Ricketts and Sawhill's criteria, a census tract must be at least one standard deviation above the national average on all four of these characteristics. By this definition, 5 percent of the American poor live in underclass areas (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988).

as relatively less black, while the least sympathetic element—the underclass—is shown as made up completely of African Americans.<sup>12</sup>

#### RACE AND POVERTY IN TELEVISION NEWS STORIES

The three newsmagazines examined here have a combined circulation of over 10 million copies (Folio 1994), and 20 percent of American adults claim to be regular readers of "news magazines such as *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, or *Newsweek*."<sup>12</sup> In addition, these magazines influence how other journalists see the world. In one study, for example, magazine and newspaper journalists were asked what news sources they read most regularly (Wilhoit and Weaver 1991). Among these journalists, *Time* and *Newsweek* were the first and second most frequently cited news sources, far more popular than the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or the *Washington Post*.

Despite the broad reach of these weekly magazines and their role as "background material" for other journalists, there can be little doubt that television is the dominate news source for most Americans. In recent surveys, about 70 percent of the American public identifies television as the source of "most of your news about what's going on in the world today" (Mayer 1993). If TV news coverage of poverty were to differ substantially from that found in newsmagazines, the implications of this study would be severely limited.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to analyze television news in the way that newsmagazine coverage of poverty was analyzed here because television news typically provides far less information about the individuals pictured in poverty stories than do newsmagazines. The analysis of television news is therefore limited to the race of the poor people used to illustrate stories on poverty.

During the 5-year period of this study (1988–92), weeknight news shows on ABC, NBC, and CBS broadcast 534 stories on poverty and related topics, of which 50 stories were randomly selected for analysis. Of the 1,100 race-codable poor people in these stories, 65.2 percent were black—a slightly higher figure than the 62 percent black found in newsmagazine stories on poverty. Clearly, then, the overrepresentation of African Americans found in weekly newsmagazines is not unique to this particular medium but is shared by the even more important medium of network television news.

12. A Times Mirror national telephone survey of February 20, 1992, asked, "I'd like to know how often, if ever, you read certain types of publications. For each that I read tell me if you read them regularly, sometimes, hardly ever or never. . . . News magazines such as *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, or *Newsweek*." Twenty percent of respondents claimed to read such magazines regularly, 38 percent sometimes, 20 percent hardly ever, and 21 percent never.



## Do Media Portrayals of Poverty Influence Public Perceptions?

Although we lack the data to demonstrate directly the impact of media portrayals of poverty on public perceptions, a variety of evidence suggests that such portrayals are likely to be important influences. First, both experimental and nonexperimental studies have demonstrated the power of the media to shape public perceptions and political preferences. Media content can affect the importance viewers attach to different political issues (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Rogers and Dearing 1988), the standards that they employ in making political evaluations (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990), the causes they attribute to national problems (Iyengar 1989, 1991), and their issue positions and perceptions of political candidates (Bartels 1993).

None of these studies focused on the visual aspect of media content. Other evidence suggests, however, that visual elements of the news—including the race of the people pictured—are highly salient to viewers. In a study aptly titled "Seeing Is Remembering," Graber (1990) found that people were more likely to remember what they saw in a television news story than what they heard. With regard to viewers' use of race as a visual cue, Iyengar and Kinder (1987, p. 41) presented subjects with television news stories about unemployment in which the unemployed individual pictured was either black or white. Following the unemployment story (which was included as part of a larger compilation of news stories), subjects were asked to name the three most important problems facing the nation. Of those white viewers who were randomly assigned the story about an unemployed white person, 71 percent said that unemployment was among the three most important national problems. Of those whites who saw a story about an unemployed African American, however, only 53 percent felt that unemployment was a pressing national concern.

Thus past research has shown that the mass media can exert a powerful influence on public perceptions and attitudes, that news pictures convey important information that viewers are comparatively likely to remember, and that the race of people pictured in news stories is a salient aspect of the story for many viewers. While past studies have focused largely on television news, there is no reason to think that the impact of pictures, or the salience of the race of those pictured, would be any less in newsmagazines.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In fact, the relative impact of pictures may be even greater in newsmagazines than in

A second source of evidence concerning the plausibility that media portrayals shape public perceptions of the poor comes from the limited available longitudinal data. If the media drive public perceptions, then changes over time in media portrayals should be associated with changes in public beliefs. For many issues, this strategy for assessing media effects is complicated by the problem of "real-world" changes. That is, any association found between media coverage and public opinion could be due to the dependence of both upon some real change in social conditions. This is not a problem with regard to the racial composition of the poor, however, which has remained remarkably constant since the government started collecting official poverty data in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

Although the data gauging public perceptions of the racial composition of the poor are sparse, the patterns are consistent with the media effects hypothesis. Two different questions asking about the racial composition of the poor are available from national surveys, each asked at two points in time. To assess the relationship between media portrayals and public perceptions, I examined the percent black among the poor in the three magazines for the 6-month periods prior to each survey. The median response to a straightforward question asking what percent of the poor are black increased from 39 percent in 1985 to 50 percent in 1991; the percentage of African Americans in media portrayals of poverty also increased across this period, from 50 percent in 1985 to 63 percent in 1991. The second survey question asked whether most poor people in this country are white or black. This question elicited a larger "most are black" response in 1982 than in 1994 (63 percent vs. 55 percent), and similarly the percentage of blacks among the magazine poor decreased from 34 percent to 26 percent.<sup>15</sup> These corresponding patterns of change in the media and public perceptions hardly constitute proof that the media is the causal agent, but they are consistent with that hypothesis.

A final indication that the media shape perceptions of the racial composition of the poor concerns the implausibility of the alternative hypotheses.

viewers with little interest in a particular story are not likely to turn off the sound but may busy themselves with other things (like making or eating dinner) and may not bother to look at the pictures.

14. Between 1961 and 1995, the percent of all poor people who are black fluctuated between 27 percent and 32 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993b, 1996).

15. The two surveys asking for the percentage of blacks among the poor are the *Los Angeles Times* Poll no. 96, April 1985 ( $N = 2,439$ ; *Los Angeles Times* 1985) and the National Race and Politics Study, February–November 1991 ( $N = 2,223$ ; see n. 1 for details). The surveys asking whether more of the poor are black or white are the CBS/*New York Times* Poll, March 1982 ( $N = 1,545$ ) and the CBS/*New York Times* Poll, December 1994 ( $N = 1,147$ ). The low percentage of blacks among the magazine poor prior to March 1982 and December 1994 (34 percent and 26 percent, respectively) is consistent with the hypothesis that the media shape public perceptions of the racial composition of the poor.



If the media are not the dominant influence on public perceptions of the racial composition of the poor, then these perceptions must be shaped by either personal encounters with poor people or conversations about poverty with friends and acquaintances. Conversations with others might indeed be an important influence, but this begs the question of how an individual's conversation partners arrived at their perceptions. If personal encounters with poor people explain the public's perceptions, then variations in individuals' perceptions should correspond with variations in the racial mix of the poor people they encounter in everyday life.

Although the personal encounter thesis is plausible, survey data show that the racial makeup of the poor in an individual's state appears to have almost no impact on his or her perceptions of the country's poor as a whole. For example, residents of Michigan and Pennsylvania, where African Americans make up 31 percent of the poor, believe that 50 percent of America's poor are black.<sup>16</sup> In Washington and Oregon, blacks constitute only 6 percent of the poor, yet residents of these states believe that the American poor are 47 percent black. Finally, blacks make up only 1 percent of the poor in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Utah, yet survey respondents from these states think that blacks account for 47 percent of all poor people in this country. Thus, despite the large state by state differences in the percentage of blacks among the poor, personal experience appears to have little impact on public perceptions of the racial composition of poverty.

Not only do we find little variation in racial perceptions of the poor across states but also we find little variation across other population groups. Although one might expect those with more education to hold more accurate understandings of current social conditions, differences in racial perceptions of the poor are fairly small and nonmonotonic. When asked whether most poor people are white or black, for example, 47 percent of respondents who lack a high school degree chose black, compared with 59 percent of high school graduates, 57 percent of those with some college education, and 48 percent of college graduates ( $p < .01$ ). A similar pattern, but with smaller (and nonsignificant) differences, was found when respondents were asked the percentage of all poor people who are black. Nor do perceptions differ for blacks and whites. Fifty-two percent of blacks and 55 percent of whites said that most poor people are black, while the average estimate of the percentage of blacks among the poor is 51 percent for black respondents and 48 percent for whites.<sup>17</sup>

16. Data on public perceptions come from the 1991 National Race and Politics Study (see n. 1). Figures for the true percentage of blacks among the poor are from the 1990 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993a).

17. Figures for whether more poor people are black or white are from the CBS/*New York Times* Poll, December 1994; figures for the percentage of the poor who are black are from the 1991 National Race and Politics Study (see n. 1).

In sum, then, previous work on related issues shows that the media can have a significant impact on public opinion. Second, changes in media portrayals over time are associated with corresponding changes in public perceptions. And finally, as judged by the similarity in public perceptions across states, differences in personal exposure to poor people of different races appears to have little impact on perceptions of the poor as a whole. Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that the portrayals of poverty in the media do matter: at least with regard to the racial composition of the poor, public perceptions appear to be shaped by the images offered up by the mass media.

### Explaining News Media Misrepresentations

Studies of the news process suggest a number of factors that might help to account for distortions in the news media's coverage of poverty. In his classic study of newsmagazines and network television news, Herbert Gans (1979) identified "availability" and "suitability" as the most significant determinants of news content. By availability, Gans referred to the accessibility of potential news to a journalist facing a variety of logistical constraints and time pressures, while suitability concerns a story's importance and interest to the audience and its fit within the framework of the news medium (whether newspaper, magazine, or television news).

Gans argued that availability is a product of both the news organization and the social world in which it operates. For example, the location of news bureaus in large cities lends an urban slant to the national news, while economically and politically powerful individuals and organizations use their resources to make themselves more easily available to journalists. Thus news "availability" reflects the social structure that exists outside of news organizations as well as decisions made within those organizations.

With regard to the pictorial representation of poverty, the availability of different subgroups of the poor may shape the images captured by news photographers. Because news bureaus and the photographers they employ tend to be found in and around large cities, it should not be surprising that the poverty images produced by these organizations are dominated by the urban poor. And if African Americans make up a larger share of the urban poor than of the country's poor in general, then the "availability" of poor blacks to news photographers might explain their overrepresentation in magazine and television news.

This "geographic" explanation for the overrepresentation of blacks in poverty news sounds plausible, but census data show that it is clearly wrong, at least in this form. Within the nation's 10 largest metropolitan areas, blacks constitute 32.1 percent of the poverty population, only mar-

52 ginally higher than the 29 percent of all poor American's who are black.<sup>18</sup>  
 Thus the poverty population that urban-based photographers have ready  
 T access to does not differ substantially in its racial composition from the  
 F American poor as a whole.

Another version of the "geographic" explanation may hold more  
 promise in accounting for the overrepresentation of blacks in newsma-  
 A gazine pictures of poverty. When an urban-based photographer receives an  
 I assignment for pictures of poor people, he or she is likely to look in those  
 1 neighborhoods in which poor people are most concentrated. It is simply  
 more efficient to look for poor people in neighborhoods with high poverty  
 rates than to seek out the relatively few poor people in more economically  
 heterogenous neighborhoods.

To the extent that photographers look for poor people in poor neigh-  
 borhoods, the racial mix of their photographs will reflect not the racial com-  
 position of poverty in the entire metropolitan area but the composition of  
 poverty in poor neighborhoods within the metropolitan area. Because poor  
 blacks are more geographically concentrated than poor whites (Massey  
 and Denton 1993), neighborhoods with high poverty rates are likely to  
 be more disproportionately black than the percentage of blacks among  
 the poverty population as a whole would suggest. In other words, poor  
 whites tend to be "spread around" in both poor and nonpoor neigh-  
 borhoods, while poor African Americans tend to live in neighborhoods with  
 high poverty rates.

To gauge the extent to which the geographic concentration of African  
 American poverty might lead to the misrepresentation of the poor in news-  
 magazines, I again examined the 10 largest metropolitan areas, this time  
 looking at the racial composition of only those poor people living in poor  
 neighborhoods. Wilson (1987, p. 46) identifies as "poverty areas" census  
 tracts in which at least 20 percent of the population are poor. Using this  
 criterion, about half (50.9 percent) of the poor people in these 10 cities  
 live in "poverty areas," and blacks constitute 46.5 percent of the poor  
 people living in these neighborhoods—substantially higher than the over-  
 all proportion of 29 percent, yet still far below the proportion of blacks  
 among portrayals of the poor in newsmagazines and on television news  
 shows. But if photographers were even more selective in the neigh-  
 borhoods they chose, they would encounter poverty populations with even  
 higher percentages of African Americans. For example, in what Wilson  
 (1987) calls "high poverty areas" (census tracts with at least a 30 percent  
 poverty rate), blacks comprise 53.2 percent of the poor in these 10 cities.

18. The 10 largest metropolitan areas (based on 1980 population) and the percentage of  
 blacks among the poor are New York, 34.9 percent; Los Angeles, 13.0 percent; Chicago,  
 49.9 percent; San Francisco, 19.3 percent; Philadelphia, 45.4 percent; Detroit, 52.9 percent;

And if photographers were to visit only "extreme poverty areas" (with  
 poverty rates of at least 40 percent), they would find that 60.7 percent of  
 the poor are black.

In the 10 largest metropolitan areas as a whole, then, just over 30 per-  
 cent of poor people are black, but in the very poorest neighborhoods of  
 these 10 large cities, blacks comprise over 60 percent of the poor. For  
 photographers working under deadline, the easier availability of poor Af-  
 rican Americans might skew the images of poverty that appear in the  
 national news. Although Gans focused on the forces that shape the sub-  
 stantive text of the news, the production of news pictures follows the same  
 logic. Social structures outside of the newsroom influence the availability  
 of news content. Because poor blacks are disproportionately available to  
 news photographers, they may be disproportionately represented in the  
 resulting news product.

But the disproportionate availability of poor African Americans cannot  
 explain all of the racial distortions in media images of poverty. First, only  
 the very poorest neighborhoods come close to the extremely large propor-  
 tions of poor blacks found in news stories on poverty. And by focusing  
 exclusively on these neighborhoods, photographers would have to ignore  
 the vast majority of urban poor, not to mention the millions of poor people  
 living in smaller cities or rural areas. According to Jargowsky and Bane  
 (1991), only 8.9 percent of all poor people live in "extreme poverty ar-  
 eas" as defined above, and as we saw, once the definition of poverty areas  
 is broadened to include a larger percentage of the poor, the proportion of  
 blacks declines significantly.

Furthermore, the residential concentration of black poverty can at best  
 explain the racial mix of photographs that a newsmagazine photo editor  
 has available to choose from. Because a photo editor typically has a vastly  
 larger number of pictures available than will be used for publication, the  
 racial composition of the photographs that ultimately appear in the maga-  
 zine will reflect the selection criteria of the photo editor. A photographer  
 will typically produce anywhere from 400 to 4,000 photographs for a  
 single newsmagazine story.<sup>19</sup> Thus even if photographers submit, on aver-  
 age, three pictures of poor African Americans for every two pictures of  
 poor whites, magazine photo editors have the ability to determine the ra-  
 cial mix of the few pictures that find their way into print.

The third and perhaps most important limitation of accessibility as an  
 explanation for media portrayals of the poor is that racial distortions are  
 not limited to the overall proportion of African Americans in news stories  
 on poverty. As we saw above, there also exists a pattern of racial misrep-  
 resentation, such that blacks are especially overrepresented.

sympathetic groups of the poor and comparatively underrepresented among the most sympathetic poverty groups. Such a consistent pattern cannot be explained by the differential accessibility of the black and non-black poor and suggests instead that judgments of "suitability," rather than (or in addition to) accessibility, shape the pictorial representation of poverty in the national news.

Judgments of suitability enter into both the selection of news stories and the content of those stories (and of the pictures used to illustrate them). Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of suitability with regard to story content concerns the veracity of the news story. "Accuracy" and "objectivity" remain primary goals among news professionals (Fishman 1980; Gitlin 1980), yet as Gans argued, journalists cannot exercise news judgments concerning story accuracy and objectivity without drawing upon their own set of "reality judgments." Such judgments constitute the background understanding of society upon which a news story is built, and journalists' efforts to accurately portray the subject matter of their stories depend not only upon the specific information newly gathered for a particular story but also upon this background understanding. While journalists' understandings of society derive in part from their professional work, they inevitably share as well the popular understandings—and misunderstandings—held by the larger society in which they live.

Most photo editors are as concerned with providing an accurate impression of their subject matter as are the writers they work with. In interviews I conducted with photo editors at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*,<sup>20</sup> most expressed a concern that their selection of photographs should faithfully reflect the subject of the story and, in particular, that the photographs of poor people should provide a fair portrayal of the demographics of poverty in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

Given the professed concern for accuracy of the photo editors I talked

20. To better understand the media processes that produce the coverage of poverty news documented above, I interviewed the photo editors responsible for selecting pictures for stories on poverty at each of the three national newsmagazines. Poverty stories appear in two different sections of these magazines, the "national news" section, which tends to contain hard news stories such as government poverty or unemployment statistics, and the "society" section, which contains softer news like stories on runaways, welfare hotels, and so on. At each of the three magazines, I spoke with the senior photo editor responsible for the national news and the society sections. I asked the photo editors about the process of choosing photographs, about their own perceptions of the poor, and about the discrepancy between the racial representation of poverty in their magazines and the true nature of the American poor. I am grateful to Guy Cooper and Stella Kramer at *Newsweek*, Richard L. Boeth and Mary Worrell-Bousquette at *Time*, and Richard Folkers and Sara Grosvenor at *U.S. News and World Report* for their time and cooperation. These interviews were conducted in October 1993.

21. Not all of the photo editors I spoke with shared this concern about accuracy, however. Two of the editors responsible for "back-of-the-book" (i.e., softer news) stories stressed that the primary consideration was the "power" of the image, its human or emotional content. For these editors, the demographic characteristics of the poverty images was a distant consideration, when it was considered at all.

with, it is important to know whether these news professionals subscribe to the same stereotypes of the poor as the rest of the American public. If photo editors believe that most poor Americans are black, then their choice of pictures may simply reflect the world as they believe it truly is. To assess whether newsmagazine photo editors share the public's stereotypes of the poor, I asked each of the editors I contacted the same question that the public was asked in the 1991 National Race and Politics Study: What percent of all the poor people in this country would you say are black? (Survey Research Center 1991). As a group, these photo editors did share the public's misperceptions regarding the racial composition of the poor, but not to the same degree. On average, the photo editors estimated that 42 percent of America's poor people are black, somewhat less than the public's estimate of 50 percent but still a good deal higher than the true figure of 29 percent.

Some part of the misrepresentation of poverty found in weekly newsmagazines may be attributable to the misperceptions of the photo editors responsible for selecting the pictures. However, a substantial gap still remains between the editors' perception that 42 percent of the American poor are black and the pictures of poor people that appear in their magazines, consisting of 62 percent blacks.

One possible explanation for this remaining discrepancy is that in responding to my explicit query about the racial composition of the poor, these photo editors provided a "reasoned judgment"—a judgment that may differ from the seat-of-the-pants intuition that in fact guides their selection of photographs. That is, given the opportunity to reflect upon the question, these editors conjecture that most poor Americans are non-black, but in the everyday process of choosing news photographs, the unexamined, subconscious impressions guiding their ideas of "what the poor should look like" reflect a sense that blacks compose a majority of America's poor.

Social psychologists have demonstrated that even people who explicitly reject specific stereotypes often use those same stereotypes subconsciously in evaluating members of the relevant social group (Banaji, Hardin, and Rothman 1993; Devine 1989; Dovidio, Evans, and Tyler 1986). Similarly, photo editors who consciously reject the stereotype of the poor as black may nevertheless subconsciously employ just that stereotype in selecting pictures to illustrate American poverty.

Alternatively, photo editors may be aware that popular perceptions of the poor as largely black are misguided, but may choose to "indulge" these misperceptions in order to present to readers a more readily recognized image of poverty. That is, if an editor wants a picture that is easily identified as a poor person, and believes that readers strongly associate poverty with blacks, he or she may feel that a picture of a poor African American would be more easily recognized as a poor person than a picture

of a poor white. (This need not be a conscious process. An editor might sense that one picture is more easily recognized as a poor person than another without being aware of the importance of race in generating that recognition.)

The possibility that photo editors hold unconscious stereotypes, or that editors (consciously or unconsciously) indulge what they perceive to be the public's stereotypes, necessarily remains speculative. Yet it is clear that the other explanations for distortions in the portrayal of poverty cannot fully account for the very high proportions of blacks in news stories about the poor. More important, it is the pattern of racial misrepresentation that most clearly signals the impact of negative racial stereotypes on the portrayal of poverty. The absence of blacks among pictures of the working poor, the elderly poor, and poor people in employment programs; the abundance of blacks among pictures of unemployed working-age adults; and the association of blacks with the least favorable poverty topics indicate the operation of a consistent prejudice against poor African Americans. As one photo editor I talked with acknowledged, it appears that only some kind of "subtle racism" can explain the racial patterning of poverty in American newsmagazines.

## Summary and Conclusions

If 560 people were selected at random from America's poor, we would expect 162 to be black. But of the 560 poor people of determinable race pictured in newsmagazines between 1988 and 1992, 345 were African American. In reality, two out of three poor Americans are nonblack, but the reader of these magazines would likely come to exactly the opposite conclusion.

Although the newsmagazines examined grossly overrepresent African Americans in their pictures of poor people as a whole, African Americans are seldom found in pictures of the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor. I found that the elderly constitute less than 1 percent of the black poor shown in these magazines (compared with 5 percent of the nonblack poor) and the working poor make up only 12 percent of poor blacks (compared with 27 percent of poor nonblacks).

I also found that stories dealing with aspects of antipoverty policy that are most strongly supported by the public are less likely to contain pictures of African Americans. Although 62 percent of all poor people pictured, African Americans make up only 40 percent of the poor in stories on employment programs and only 17 percent in stories on Medicaid. In contrast, we find far too many African Americans in stories on the least favorable subgroup of the poor: the underclass. Every one of the 36 poor people pictured in stories on the underclass was black.

A number of explanations for the racial misrepresentation of poverty were considered in this article. First, the greater geographic concentration of poor blacks in comparison with poor whites might lead photographers to overrepresent African Americans in their pictures of poor people. Second, photo editors' own misperceptions of the racial composition of American poverty can explain some of the overrepresentation of blacks among published photographs of the poor. But since neither of these factors can fully account for the dramatic distortions of the racial composition of the poor, two additional possibilities were considered. First, editors' conscious or unconscious indulgence of what they perceive to be the public's stereotypes could explain distortions in the portrayal of poverty. Alternatively, editors' own unconscious stereotypes concerning the nature of poverty in America could be at work. Although considerations of unconscious stereotypes must be somewhat speculative, the consistent pattern of racial misrepresentation (along with the consistently liberal nature of these editors' conscious beliefs about racial inequality) strongly suggests that unconscious negative images of blacks are at work.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most disheartening aspect of the situation is that apparently well-meaning, racially liberal news professionals generate images of the social world that consistently misrepresent both black Americans and poor people in destructive ways. Whether these distortions stem from residential patterns, conscious efforts to reflect the public's existing stereotypical expectations, or editors' own unconscious stereotypes, these racial misrepresentations reinforce the public's exaggerated association of blacks with poverty.

Whatever the processes that result in distorted images of poverty, the political consequences of these misrepresentations are clear. First, the poverty population shown in newsmagazines—primarily black, overwhelmingly unemployed, and almost completely nonelderly—is not likely to generate a great deal of support for government antipoverty programs among white Americans. Furthermore, public support for efforts to redress racial inequality is likely to be diminished by the portrait of poverty found in these newsmagazines. Not only do African Americans as a whole suffer from the exaggerated association of race and poverty but poor African Americans (who are often the intended beneficiaries of race-targeted policies) are portrayed in a particularly negative light.

A more accurate portrayal of poverty would still, of course, include a large number of blacks. But rather than portraying poverty as a predomi-

22. This characterization of the photo editors as racially liberal is based both on our general conversations about race and poverty and on their responses to survey-style questions about the causes of racial inequality. For example, when asked whether blacks or whites are primarily to blame for racial inequality, the photo editors either blamed whites alone or both blacks and whites together. In contrast, when the same question was asked of the public in the 1991 National Race and Politics Study (Survey Research Center 1991), Americans were more likely to attribute blame for racial inequality to blacks rather than to whites.

nantly black problem, a true reflection of social conditions would show the poverty population to be primarily nonblack. The danger, perhaps, is that a more accurate understanding of current conditions might lead some to feel the problem of racial inequality is less pressing. But current misunderstandings may pose a greater danger: that whites will continue to harbor negative stereotypes of blacks as mired in poverty and unwilling to make the effort needed to work their way out. By implicitly identifying poverty with race, the news media perpetuate stereotypes that work against the interests of both poor people and African Americans.

## Appendix

### Number of Magazine Stories by Topic

Stories can be indexed under multiple topics.

Poor, U.S./Poor, statistics/Poor [city or state]/Poor, taxation	33
Economic assistance, domestic	4
Public welfare/Public welfare, U.S./Public welfare [city or state]/Public welfare, law	25
Department of Housing and Urban Development	26
Homeless	47
Housing [city or state]/Housing, U.S./Housing projects/Housing, federal aid/Housing vouchers	10
Poor, housing	7
Welfare hotels	1
Habitat for Humanity	1
Covenant House	4
American Conservation Corps	2
Job Corps	1
Workfare	6
Head Start	3
Poor, education	12
Child welfare	4
Children, homeless	1
Runaways	7
Socially handicapped children	1
Legal aid/Legal service	1
Medicaid	7
Old age assistance	2
Refugees	1
Relief work	1
Unemployment insurance	3
Underclass	6
MedCAPP	1

## Race and Poverty in America

### LIFE program

Street News	1
I Have a Dream Foundation	1
Entitlement spending	1

Total number of magazine stories = 182; total number of index entries = 221.

### Number of Television Stories by Topic

Stories can be indexed under multiple topics.

Appalachia	7
Children and youth, housing project	6
Children and youth, child care and support, low-income	1
Children and youth, medicine and health, homeless	15
Children and youth, medicine and health, hunger	2
Children and youth, poverty	40
Children and youth, runaways	2
Children and youth, welfare	1
Cities, homeless	249
Cities, inner cities	1
Covenant House	12
Employment, wages, working poor	7
Food stamps	8
Housing, programs, Habitat for Humanity	6
Head Start	20
Housing, programs, [city or state]/Housing, programs, low income/Housing, public housing/Housing, cities, tenements	68
Hunger	19
Job Corps	1
Legal aid association, national/Law and lawyers, legal aid issues	9
Medicaid	43
Poverty	83
Welfare	86
Poverty, beggars	4
Poverty, rural areas [state]	2

Total number of television stories = 534; total number of index entries = 692.

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