

CHAPTER 4

## How the Poor Became Black

### *The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media*

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Race and poverty are now so closely entwined that it is hard to believe there was a time when discussions of American poverty neglected blacks altogether. African Americans have always been disproportionately poor, but black poverty was ignored by white society throughout most of our history.

In the following pages, I analyze over 40 years of news media coverage of poverty in order to trace changes in racial images of the poor. I find that until the mid-1960s, poverty appeared overwhelmingly as a “white problem” in the national news media. But in a very brief period beginning in 1965, the media’s portrayal of American poverty shifted dramatically. Although the true racial composition of the American poor remained stable, the face of poverty in the news media became markedly darker between 1965 and 1967.

The most obvious explanations for the news media’s changing racial portrayal of the poor—the civil rights movement and the urban riots of the mid-1960s—played a role, but cannot account for the nature or timing of the shifts in media images. Nor is this change in the media’s portrayal of poverty merely a reflection of the increasing visibility of African Americans in the news more broadly.

Instead, the changing racial images of the poor in the mass media are

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

best understood as reflecting two very different processes that converged in the mid-1960s. First, the stage was set by a series of historical changes and events that made black poverty a less remote concern for white Americans. These included the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, the increasing representation of blacks among AFDC beneficiaries, the civil rights movement, and the riots of the mid-1960s. But these changes only created the environment in which racial portrayals of poverty were transformed. The proximate cause of that transformation was the shift in the moral tone of poverty coverage in the news. As news stories about the poor became less sympathetic, the images of poor blacks in the news swelled.

The association of African Americans with the “undeserving poor” is evident not only in the changing media coverage of poverty during the mid-1960s, but throughout the period studied. From the early 1950s through the early 1990s, images of poor blacks increased when the tone of poverty stories became more critical of the poor and decreased when coverage became more sympathetic. Similarly, images of African Americans were most numerous in news stories about the least sympathetic subgroups of the poor. As I discuss below, these differences in the racial portrayal of the poor cannot be accounted for by true changes in the racial composition of the poverty population or by racial differences across subgroups of the poor. Rather, the media’s tendency to associate African Americans with the undeserving poor reflects—and reinforces—the centuries-old stereotype of blacks as lazy.

Real-world changes in social, economic, and political conditions combined with existing racial stereotypes to shape the media’s coverage of welfare and poverty over the past decades. But this coverage has in turn shaped social, economic, and political conditions as states have dismantled and reformulated their welfare policies in response to the 1996 PRWORA reforms. American democracy is far from perfect. But public policies do reflect—if inconsistently and incompletely—the public’s preferences (Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1983; Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1987; Monroe and Gardner 1987; Shapiro and Jacobs 1989; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). In the case of welfare, however, citizens’ preferences have been shaped by media portrayals that exaggerate the extent to which poverty is a “black problem” and that systematically associate African Americans with the least sympathetic subgroups of the poor. Other chapters in this volume ably document the many ways in which welfare reform has been infused with racial considerations and reflective of racial biases. In this chapter, I show how distorted news cov-

erage of poverty has helped to generate a citizenry that views welfare and poverty through a racial lens.

### African Americans: The Once-Invisible Poor

The American public now associates poverty and welfare with blacks. But this was not always the case. The “scientific” study of poverty in America began around the end of the nineteenth century. During this period social reformers and poverty experts made the first systematic efforts to describe and analyze America’s poor (e.g., Warner 1894; Hapgood 1902; Lee 1902; Hunter 1904; Hollander 1914). Racial distinctions were common in these works, but such distinctions usually referred to the various white European “races” such as the Irish, Italians, and Poles; this early poverty literature had little or nothing to say about blacks.<sup>1</sup> The Great Depression, of course, brought the topic of poverty to the forefront of public attention. But as the American economy faltered and poverty and unemployment increased, white writers and commentators remained oblivious to the sufferings of the black poor.<sup>2</sup>

The economy grew dramatically after the war, and living standards rose quickly. In contrast with the depression, poverty seemed like a distant problem during the postwar years. Poverty was “rediscovered,” however, in the 1960s. Stimulated by the publication of John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* (in 1958) and Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (in 1962), the American public and policymakers alike began once more to notice the poor. During the 1960 presidential campaign John Kennedy is said to have been shaken by the grinding poverty he saw in West Virginia, where a lack of both education and job opportunities had trapped generations of poor whites in the primitive conditions of rural poverty (Patterson 1994, 126). And early in his presidency Kennedy inaugurated a number of antipoverty programs focusing on juvenile delinquency, education and training programs for those lacking marketable skills, and federal assistance for depressed regions of the country. But the poverty programs of the early 1960s, and the popular images of the poor that went along with them, were just as pale in complexion as those of the turn of the century. Attention to poor blacks was still quite limited both in the mass media and, apparently, among Kennedy administration staffers.<sup>3</sup> If there was a dominant image of poverty at this time, it was the white rural poor of the Appalachian coalfields.

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

*Background Conditions for the Racialization of Poverty*

Popular images of poverty changed dramatically, however, in the mid-1960s. After centuries of obscurity, at least as far as white America was concerned, poor blacks came to dominate public thinking about poverty. Two decades-long changes helped to set the stage for the “racialization” of popular images of the poor. The first was the widespread migration of rural southern blacks to northern cities. At the turn of the twentieth century, over 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South, and three-quarters of all blacks resided in rural areas (Meier and Rudwick 1970, 213). Blacks had been leaving the South at a slow rate for decades, but black out-migration from the South grew tremendously during the 1940s and 1950s before tapering off during the 1960s. As a consequence of this migration, African Americans, who only accounted for 2 percent of all northerners in 1910, comprised 7 percent by 1960, and, perhaps more importantly, made up 12 percent of the population in urban areas (Turner 1993, 249, 251).

As we’ll see below, the racialization of public images of the poor occurred fairly suddenly and dramatically between 1965 and 1967. Clearly there is no simple connection between the growth of African American communities in northern cities and public perceptions of the poor as black. Nevertheless, the growth of the black population in the North was one link in a chain of events that led to the dramatic changes in how Americans thought about poverty.

A second change that paved the way for the racialization of poverty images was the changing racial composition of AFDC, the nation’s most conspicuous program to aid the poor. As established in 1935, the ADC program (as it was then called) allowed individual states considerable discretion to determine both the formal rules governing ADC eligibility and the application of those rules. As a result, African Americans were disproportionately excluded from ADC. In 1936, only 13.5 percent of ADC recipients were African American, despite blacks’ much higher representation among poor single mothers (Turner 1993, 108). Over the next three decades, however, the proportion of blacks among ADC recipients rose steadily (fig. 4.1). This increase resulted from a variety of influences, both legislative and economic. For example, the establishment of Social Security Survivors’ Benefits in 1939 removed proportionately more white than black widows from the ADC rolls, thereby increasing the percentage of blacks among those remaining.<sup>4</sup> In addition, an increase in the federal matching-grant contribution to the ADC program from one-third to one-

HOW THE POOR BECAME BLACK

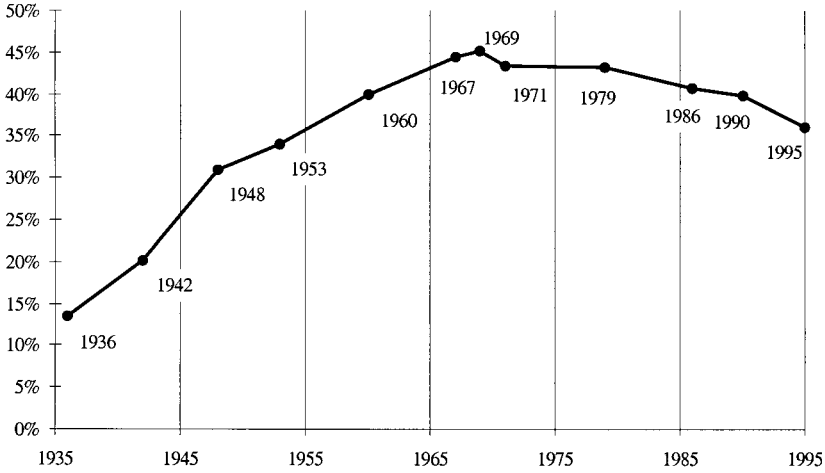


Fig. 4.1. The percentage of blacks among ADC/AFDC recipients, 1935–95

half of total state ADC expenditures encouraged some states to expand their coverage or to begin participating in the ADC program for the first time (Turner 1993).

As figure 4.1 shows, the percentage of African Americans among ADC/AFDC recipients increased steadily from about 14 percent in 1936 to about 45 percent in 1969, after which point the proportion of blacks declined slowly until it reached 36 percent in 1995.<sup>5</sup> During the middle to late 1960s, then, African Americans made up a very substantial minority of AFDC recipients. Consequently, as the welfare rolls expanded sharply in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the public's attention was drawn disproportionately to poor blacks. Yet the pattern of growth of African American welfare recipients shown in figure 4.1 also makes clear that the sudden shift in images of poverty during the 1960s cannot be attributed to any sudden change in the makeup of the welfare population. The proportion of blacks among AFDC participants had been growing steadily for decades. Like black migration to the North, the changing racial composition of the welfare rolls constituted a background condition that contributed to the changes in public perceptions of the poor, but it did not serve as a precipitating cause of those changes. After all, the proportion of blacks among welfare recipients was almost as high in 1960 as it was in 1967, yet public concern in 1960 was still focused on poor whites, in particular, the poor rural whites of Appalachia.

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

*Proximate Events in the Racialization of Poverty*

Gradual demographic changes in residential patterns and welfare receipt by African Americans helped lay the groundwork for the changes to come in how Americans viewed the poor. The more proximate events that contributed to these changes were a shift in focus within the civil rights movement from the fight for legal equality to the battle for economic equality, and the urban riots that rocked the country during the summers of 1964 through 1968.

Black protests against racial injustice had been sporadic in the early decades of the twentieth century and had largely died out during World War II. But in the mid-1950s, the modern civil rights movement began a concerted and sustained effort to force an end to the injustice and indignities of racial segregation. In December 1955 Rosa Parks was jailed for refusing to vacate her seat on a segregated bus. Ms. Parks's quiet protest began the Montgomery bus boycott, led by a previously unknown young black minister named Martin Luther King Jr. The eventual success of the yearlong bus boycott led to a decade of demonstrations, protests, and sit-ins, throughout the South, all pressing the demand for legal equality and an end to racial segregation.

The struggles of the early civil rights movement were for equal rights, black enfranchisement, and an end to legal segregation. These efforts produced their most significant successes with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In the second half of the 1960s, civil rights leaders shifted their attention from legal inequality to economic inequality. Although the battle for black enfranchisement in the South had a long way to go, the first large urban uprisings during the summer of 1964, and the greater number of ghetto riots during the summers to follow, shifted both the geographical and programmatic focus of the struggle for racial equality.

Of course, racial economic inequality was hardly a new concern to civil rights leaders. In 1963, the National Urban League called for a "crash program of special effort to close the gap between the conditions of Negro and white citizens," and released a ten-point "Marshall Plan for the American Negro." In the same year, Martin Luther King issued a similarly conceived "G.I. Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" (Davies 1996, 56ff.). But these early efforts were almost wholly overshadowed by the struggle for basic civil rights in the South.

In 1966, however, Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) focused their attention on the plight of

the black urban poor of the northern ghettos. With help from the AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers, King and the SCLC organized demonstrations and rent strikes in Chicago to dramatize the dire economic conditions facing so many urban blacks. King called for a variety of measures aimed at improving the lot of Chicago's black population: Integrating the de facto segregated public schools, reallocating public services to better serve minority populations, building low-rent public housing units, and removing public funds from banks that refused to make loans to blacks (Brooks 1974; Bloom 1987).

For all his efforts, King achieved little in Chicago. But the concern with northern urban blacks' economic problems exemplified by the Chicago Freedom Movement, and the 1968 Poor People's March on Washington helped to focus public attention on the problem of black poverty.

At least as important as the shifting focus of civil rights leaders were the ghetto riots themselves. Poor blacks, for so long invisible to most of white America, made their presence known in the most dramatic way possible. During the summer of 1964 riots broke out in Harlem, Rochester, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Jersey. Five lives were lost and property damage was estimated at six million dollars (Brooks 1974, 239). Civil rights leaders attempted to respond to these disturbances, but much of their attention, and the rest of the country's as well, was still focused on the South. The Voting Rights Act had been passed, but much work remained in actually registering black voters. Mississippi, in particular, had been staunchly resisting blacks' efforts to vote.

To press for voting rights in Mississippi, the leading civil rights organizations united to mobilize local blacks and out-of-state volunteers for the Freedom Summer of 1964. Nine hundred volunteers, many of them white college students from the country's elite universities, joined the effort to register Mississippi's blacks. White Mississippi responded with violence. Twenty-seven black churches were burned that summer in Mississippi, and 30 blacks were murdered between January and August 1964 (Brooks 1974, 245). But the nation's attention was grabbed by the murder of three young civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, the first a black Mississippian, the other two white New Yorkers. The three disappeared while returning from an investigation of the burned-out Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Only after a six-week search by the FBI were their bodies found, buried in an earthen dam.

Despite the riots, news coverage of race relations during the summer

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

of 1964 was dominated by the events in Mississippi. But in the next few years, ghetto uprisings and the militant voices of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and the Black Panthers would become increasingly central fixtures in the struggle for racial equality. In August 1965, the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts exploded. A six-day riot left 34 people dead (all but 3 of them black), 900 injured, and nearly 4,000 arrested (Sitkoff 1993, 187). The Watts riots were followed that summer by more disturbances in Chicago, and in Springfield, Massachusetts. The summers of 1966 and 1967 saw even more rioting, as blacks took to the streets in literally dozens of American cities. In 1967 alone, rioting led to at least 90 deaths, more than 4,000 injuries, and nearly 17,000 arrests (Sitkoff 1993, 189).

Portrayals of Poverty in the News Media

It is clear that the black poor were ignored by white Americans through most of our history, including the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, and equally clear that blacks now figure prominently in public perceptions of the poor. Unfortunately, pollsters did not think to ask about perceptions of the racial composition of the poor until recently. But we can examine changes in the way the poor have been portrayed in the mass media. While we cannot assume that media portrayals necessarily reflect popular beliefs, changing images of the poor in the news can tell us both how news professionals thought about the poor during different time periods, and what sort of images of poverty the public was being exposed to through the mass media. Since we have good reason to think that media portrayals have a strong impact on public perceptions (see below), news images provide at least some evidence of how the American public viewed the poor. At the very least, media coverage will tell us something about the aspects of poverty (or the subgroups of the poor) that played a prominent role in public discussion of these issues during different periods.

To assess changes in news media portrayals of poverty, I examined three weekly newsmagazines: *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. I chose these magazines because they are widely read, national in scope and distribution, and have been published continuously for many decades. They also contain large numbers of pictures, an especially important consideration in studying the *racial* portrayal of the poor. To the extent that our interest lies in the perceptions of the racial



composition of the poor that magazine readers are likely to form, the pictures of poor people are far more influential than the textual information these magazines contain. First, the typical reader of these magazines looks at most, if not all, of the pictures, but reads far fewer of the stories. Thus, even a subscriber who does not bother to read a particular story on poverty is quite likely to see the pictures of poor people that it contains (Kenney 1992). Second, while specific information about the racial makeup of the poor is found periodically in these newsmagazines, such information is quite rare. Between 1960 and 1990, less than 5 percent of poverty-related stories had any concrete information on the racial composition of the poor, or any subgroups of the poor such as AFDC recipients or public housing tenants.<sup>6</sup> Finally, research on the impact of news stories and the process by which readers (or television viewers) assimilate information suggests that people are more likely to remember pictures than words, and more likely to form impressions based on examples of specific individuals than on abstract statistical information.<sup>7</sup>

To assess media portrayals of poverty, I first identified every poverty-related story in these three magazines published between 1950 and 1992. Using the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, a set of core topics, including "poor," "poverty," "welfare," and "relief," were developed. In each year, stories indexed under these topics as well as cross-references to related topics were collected. In all, 1,256 stories were found under 73 different index topics. (See Gilens 1999 for details of the topics and number of stories indexed under each.) It is important to note that the stories selected for this analysis were only those that focused directly on poverty or related topics. Many stories with a primary focus on race relations, civil rights, urban riots, or other racial topics also included discussions of poverty, but in these contexts readers would expect to find coverage of black poverty in particular, and might not draw conclusions about the nature of American poverty in general. By excluding race-related stories, however, this analysis provides a conservative estimate of the extent to which African Americans populate media images of the poor.

To determine the racial content of news magazine coverage of poverty, each poor person pictured in each of these stories was identified as black, nonblack, or undeterminable. In all, there were pictures of 6,117 individual poor people among the 1,256 poverty stories, and of these race could be determined for 4,388, or 72 percent (poor people for whom race could not be determined are excluded from the results reported below).<sup>8</sup> The percentage of blacks among pictures of the poor was similar at each magazine, ranging from a low of 52 percent at *U.S. News and World*

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

Report to a high of about 57 percent at *Time*.<sup>9</sup> Combining the coverage of poverty from the three magazines, over half (53.4 percent) of all poor people pictured during these four-and-a-half decades were African American. In reality, the average percentage of African Americans among the poor during this period was 29.3 percent.<sup>10</sup>

Magazine portrayals overrepresent African Americans in pictures of the poor, but the degree of overrepresentation of blacks was not constant throughout this period. The thick line in figure 4.2 shows the variation in the percentage of African Americans pictured in poverty stories in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* between 1950 and 1992. (Adjacent years with small numbers of poverty stories are combined to smooth out the random fluctuations that result when the percentage of blacks is calculated from a small number of pictures.) Images of poverty in these magazines changed quite dramatically in the mid-1960s. From the beginning of this study through 1964, poor people were portrayed as predominantly white. But starting in 1965 the complexion of the poor turned decidedly darker. From only 27 percent in 1964, the proportion of African Americans in pictures of the poor increased to 49 percent and 53 percent in 1965 and 1966, and then to 72 percent black in 1967. Nor did the portrayal of the poor return to its previous predominantly white orientation. Although there have been important declines and fluctuations in the extent to which blacks were overrepresented in pictures of poverty (which we'll explore shortly), African Americans have dominated news media images of the poor since the late 1960s. In the period between 1967 and 1992, blacks averaged 57 percent of the poor people pictured in these three magazines.

*Early Newsmagazine Coverage of Poverty: 1950–64*

The 1950s contained both few stories on poverty and few pictures of blacks in the stories that were published. Between 1950 and 1959, only 18 percent of the poor people pictured in these magazines were African American. The increased attention to poverty in the early 1960s was accompanied by some increase in the proportion of blacks among the poor, but this racialization of poverty images was quite modest compared with what was to come.

Newsmagazine coverage of poverty was generally rather sparse between 1960 and 1963. The poverty stories that did appear during this period were primarily in response to the Kennedy administration's antipoverty initiatives, which included a new housing bill, the revival of

HOW THE POOR BECAME BLACK

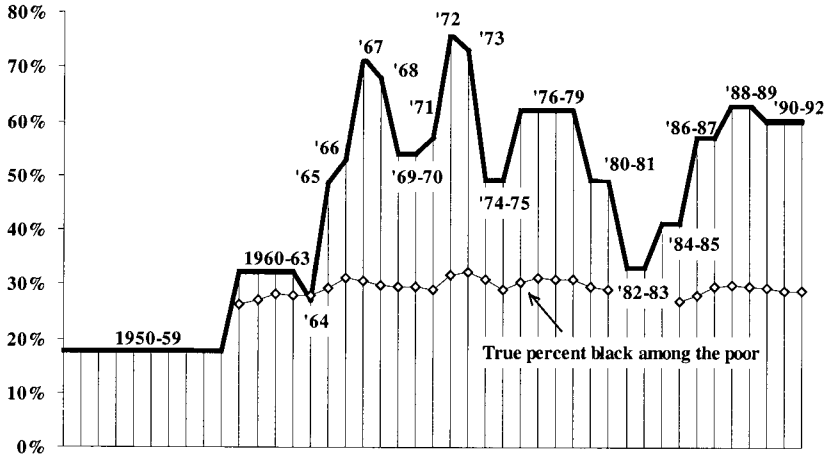


Fig. 4.2. Percentage African Americans in newsmagazine pictures of the poor, 1950-92, compared with true percentage

the depression-era food stamp program, and federal aid for distressed areas. These policy-focused stories were illustrated almost exclusively with pictures of poor whites.

A second theme in media coverage of poverty during 1960-63 was welfare abuse and efforts to reduce it. Some of these stories focused on Senator Robert Byrd's 1962 investigation into welfare fraud in Washington, D.C. Pictures of poor blacks and poor whites were both found in these strongly antiwelfare stories.

Newsmagazine coverage of poverty in the early 1960s presaged later coverage in two ways. First, stories on new policy initiatives tended to be both neutral in tone and dominated by images of whites, a pattern that was repeated in coverage of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty three years later. In contrast, the more critical stories about existing programs, such as reports on the Byrd committee's investigation of welfare abuse, were more likely to contain pictures of blacks. Once again, this pattern is repeated in the later 1960s as largely negative "field reports" from the War on Poverty programs start to appear in the media.

The quantity of poverty coverage in the news expanded dramatically beginning in 1964 and reached its height between 1965 and 1969. The impetus for this growth in coverage was the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, announced in January 1964. Almost four-fifths of all poverty-related stories published in 1964 dealt explicitly with the War on

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

Poverty, as did a majority of the poverty-related articles appearing in 1965 and 1966. By 1967, stories about urban problems and urban redevelopment became an important component of poverty coverage, but stories on welfare, jobs programs, and other aspects of the War on Poverty continued to account for most of the poverty-related news coverage.

For our purposes, the most significant feature of news stories on poverty in 1964 was the strong focus on the War on Poverty on the one hand, and the continued portrayal of the poor as predominantly white. A good example of this overall tendency is the most substantial poverty story of the year, a 12-page cover story called "Poverty, U.S.A." that *Newsweek* ran on February 17. The cover of the magazine showed a white girl, perhaps eight or ten years old, looking out at the reader from a rustic shack, her hair disheveled and her face covered with dirt. As this picture suggests, the story had a strong focus on Appalachia, but it profiled a variety of poor people from around the country. Of the 54 poor people pictured in this story, only 14 were black.<sup>11</sup>

This story was typical of War on Poverty coverage during 1964 in its substantial focus on rural poverty, in its emphasis on images of poor whites, and in its generally neutral tone. Like this story, most of the early coverage of the War on Poverty consisted of descriptions of its programs, profiles of Johnson's "poverty warriors," and accounts of poverty in America, most often illustrated with examples of individual poor people. Clearly, the expansion of news coverage that accompanied the War on Poverty did not coincide with the racialization of poverty images. At its inception at least, the War on Poverty was not portrayed by the news media as a program for blacks.

*The Racialization of Poverty in the News: 1965–67*

The year 1965 saw another large jump in media attention to poverty, and a clear turning point in the racialization of poverty images in the news. The percentage of blacks among pictures of the poor jumped from 27 percent in 1964 to 49 percent in 1965. One factor that clearly does *not* explain the racialization of poverty in the news during this period is true change in the proportion of blacks among the poor. As the thin line in figure 4.2 shows, the true percentage of blacks among the poor increased only marginally between the early and late 1960s (from 27 percent to 30 percent), while the percentage of blacks found in news magazine portrayals of the poor more than doubled during this period.

Nor can the dramatic change in the racial portrayal of poverty be

attributed to a broader increase in the representation of African Americans in the news. It is true that the proportion of black faces in the major weekly newsmagazines increased steadily from only 1.3 percent in the 1950s to 7.2 percent in the 1980s (Lester and Smith 1990).<sup>12</sup> But a close look at the mid-1960s shows no evidence of a sudden shift in the overall racial mix of newsmagazine photographs. In fact, the overall proportion of African Americans among people pictured in *Time* and *Newsweek* actually declined slightly between 1964 and 1965.<sup>13</sup>

What did change dramatically between 1964 and 1965 was the evaluative tone of stories covering welfare and the War on Poverty. Whereas coverage in 1964 focused on the initiation of the War on Poverty and general descriptions of the American poor, stories in 1965 were much more critical examinations of the government's antipoverty efforts. Three lines of criticism were prominent: First, many stories questioned Sargent Shriver's leadership of the antipoverty effort, focusing on mismanagement, confusion, and waste in the Office of Economic Opportunity. Second, considerable attention was devoted to local disputes between city government and community groups over control of War on Poverty resources. Finally, substantial coverage focused on difficulties within the Job Corps program, one of the first War on Poverty programs to get off the ground. General stories on the War on Poverty and stories about problems in the Job Corps accounted for most of the poor people pictured in early 1965. Fifty percent of the poor pictured in War on Poverty stories during this period were black, as were 55 percent of those in stories on the Job Corps.

We saw above that media coverage from the early 1960s tended to use pictures of poor blacks to illustrate stories about waste, inefficiency or abuse of welfare, and pictures of poor whites in stories with more neutral descriptions of antipoverty programs. This pattern is repeated in 1964 and 1965, as coverage of the War on Poverty becomes more critical and portrayals of the poor become "more black." This association of African Americans with negative stories on poverty is clearest in coverage of the Job Corps. The most visible of the War on Poverty's numerous job training programs, the Job Corps consisted of dozens of residential centers in both urban and rural locations at which young men (and less often young women) were to learn discipline along with basic job skills.

News coverage of the Job Corps program focused on problems such as poor screening of participants, inadequate facilities, and high dropout rates. But the most sensational objections concerned the behavior of Job Corps members and the aversion to Job Corps centers by nearby towns.

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

For example, a long story in *U.S. News and World Report* published in July 1965 (and illustrated with about equal numbers of blacks and non-blacks) reported charges of “rowdyism” at Job Corps centers, including a dormitory riot in Tongue Point, Oregon, “in which lead pipes were hurled,” and the expulsion of eight girls from a St. Petersburg, Florida, center for drinking. “Another worry,” the story indicated, was the “antagonism between Corpsmen and nearby townsmen.” People in Astoria, Oregon, for example, “complain about hearing obscene language at the movie theater,” while residents of Marion, Illinois were upset about a disturbance at a roller skating rink that occurred when some Job Corps members showed up with liquor. Although these incidents were not explicitly linked to black Job Corps participants, the pictures of blacks in Job Corps stories (comprising 55 percent of all Job Corps members pictured) was much higher than the proportion of African Americans pictured in the more neutral stories about the War on Poverty from the previous year.

As we’ll see, the pattern of associating negative poverty coverage with pictures of blacks persists over the years and is too widespread and consistent to be explained as the product of any particular antipoverty program or subgroup of the poor. But the sharp increase in the percentage of African Americans pictured in poverty stories in 1965 can also be attributed to the increasing involvement of civil rights leaders in the antipoverty effort. Neither civil rights leaders nor the civil rights movement was mentioned in any of the 32 poverty stories published in 1964, but during the first half of 1965 almost one-quarter (23 percent) of the poverty-related stories made some mention of black leaders. Most of these stories dealt with the battles for control over War on Poverty funds, especially, but not only, those channeled through the Community Action programs. Although the involvement of black community leaders was a minor element in news coverage of poverty from this period, it undoubtedly helped to shift the media’s attention away from the previous years’ focus on poor whites.

Coverage of poverty during the second half of 1965 was similar to that of early 1965 with two exceptions. First, the Watts riots, which began on August 11, intensified the growing awareness of black poverty in this country. Perhaps surprisingly, neither the Watts riots themselves, nor the problems of inner-city blacks, figured prominently in poverty coverage during the second half of 1965. Nevertheless, 26 percent of poverty stories from the latter half of 1965 did make at least a brief mention of the riots.

To more fully assess changes in media coverage of poverty during the

HOW THE POOR BECAME BLACK

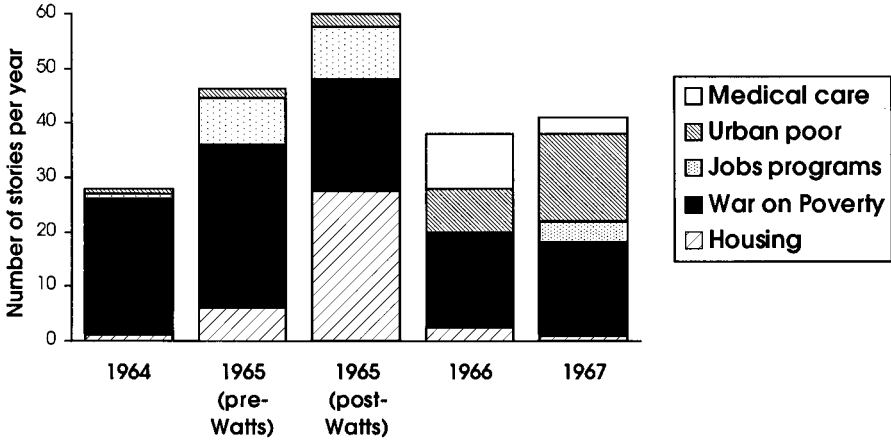


Fig. 4.3. Subject matter of newsmagazine poverty stories, 1964-67

crucial years of 1964 to 1967, figure 4.3 shows the main subject matter of newsmagazine poverty stories (with 1965 broken into two periods to compare pre-Watts and post-Watts coverage). In every year during the mid-1960s, the War on Poverty was the single most common poverty subject in these magazines, accounting for 45 percent of all poverty stories over these four years. As figure 4.3 shows, coverage of urban poverty did increase in 1966 and 1967 to the point where almost as many stories in 1967 were written on problems of the urban poor as on the War on Poverty.

Part of the racialization of poverty during this period clearly concerns the growing focus on America's cities. There is little evidence of an immediate change in media coverage of poverty after Watts. But coverage did change in response to the greater number of riots in the summers of 1966 and 1967. At least as important as the riots themselves was the reactions to those riots both in the greater focus on urban poverty among civil rights leaders and in government efforts to address the problems of the black ghettos, or at least to placate their residents. The percentage of poverty stories that mentioned ghetto riots or civil rights leaders increased from 26 percent in 1965, to 31 percent in 1966 and 38 percent in 1967.

How are we to understand the changing focus of poverty coverage over this four-year period and the concomitant racialization of poverty images? One possibility is that a series of events (e.g. riots, new govern-

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

ment programs) led news organizations to focus on new aspects of poverty or new subgroups of the poor, and that these subgroups happened to be disproportionately black. This explanation is almost surely true to some degree. For example, pictures of the poor in stories on urban poverty in between 1964 and 1967 were 95 percent black. Consequently, the increase in urban poverty stories accounts for some part of the racialization of poverty coverage during this period. On the other hand, even if we exclude urban poverty stories, the percentage of blacks in pictures of the poor grew dramatically over these four years; of those stories that were not focused on urban poverty, the percentage of blacks among pictures of the poor more than doubled, growing from 27 percent in 1964 to 58 percent in 1967.

While growing attention to urban poverty did contribute to the changing racial portrayal of the poor between 1965 and 1967, it cannot explain the sharp increase in the percentage of blacks in poverty pictures between 1964 and 1965. Coverage during both of these years was dominated by stories on the War on Poverty with no particular emphasis on urban problems in either year. Furthermore, the jump in percentage black had already occurred before the Watts riots in August 1965; indeed, newsmagazine poverty stories included just as high a percentage of blacks in the first half of 1965 as they did in the months following Watts.

A second possibility is that the mainstream (white-dominated) news media were more likely to associate negative poverty stories with blacks and neutral or positive stories with whites. I have already suggested that this tendency can be observed in the coverage of poverty between 1960 and 1963, and this same phenomenon might explain the sharp increase in pictures of poor blacks between 1964 and the earlier (pre-Watts) months of 1965. Negative views of blacks were even more common in the 1960s than they are today (e.g., Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan 1997), and it would be surprising if these attitudes were not shared, at least to some degree, by the white news professionals who shaped the coverage of poverty under examination. Notions about blacks' "cultural foreignness" especially with regard to the mainstream values of individual initiative and hard work might well have led newsmagazine writers, editors, and photographers to associate African Americans with negative coverage of poverty.

Of course, the racial patterns within poverty coverage in 1960–63 and 1964–65 are slender threads on which to hang so important a claim. A wealth of other evidence, however, points in this same direction. In particular, we can make use of the full breadth of newsmagazine coverage



between 1950 and 1992 to examine, first, how racial images of the poor change over time as media coverage responds to changing social conditions, and second, the differences in the racial portrayals of different subgroups of the poor. In both cases, we'll find that positive coverage of poverty that focuses on either more sympathetic subgroups of the poor, or periods of time in which the poor as a whole were viewed more sympathetically, was more likely to include pictures of poor whites than the negative coverage of poverty associated with less sympathetic groups and less sympathetic times.

### *Changing Racial Portrayals of the Poor: 1968–92*

Poverty took on a black face in newsmagazines during the tumultuous years of the mid-1960s. But as urban riots subsided and the country's attention turned elsewhere, the racial portrayal of the poor in news coverage did not return to the predominantly white images of the 1950s and early 1960s. Instead, as figure 4.2 shows, the racial representation of the poor in media images of poverty fluctuated considerably, with very high proportions of African Americans in 1972 and 1973, and dramatic "whitening" of poverty images during the economic recessions of 1974–75 and 1982–83. To understand variations over time in the racial portrayal of poverty, I next examine the two extremes in the racial images of the poor.

*Images of Blacks and the "Welfare Mess": 1972–73.* Coverage of poverty during 1972 and 1973 focused primarily on perceived problems with welfare and efforts at welfare reform. The percentage of all Americans receiving welfare increased dramatically from about 2 percent in the mid-1960s to about 6 percent in the mid-1970s. By the early 1970s, the expansion of welfare came to be viewed as an urgent national problem that demanded action. Newsmagazine stories during 1972 and 1973 almost invariably referred to this situation as the "welfare mess," and published story after story focused on mismanagement in state welfare bureaucracies and abuse of welfare by people who could be supporting themselves.

Welfare recipients were no more likely to be black during 1972–73 than they were a few years earlier. Nevertheless, this period of sustained negative coverage of welfare portrayed poor people and welfare recipients as black to the greatest extent of any point in the 43 years of coverage examined. Blacks comprised 70 percent of the poor people pictured

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

in stories indexed under poverty and 75 percent of those pictured in stories on welfare during these two years. Nor was the heavy representation of blacks limited to stories on poverty and welfare per se. Virtually all poverty-related coverage during these two years—whatever the topic—was illustrated with pictures of blacks. During 1972 and 1973, African Americans composed 76 percent of the poor people pictured in stories on all other poverty-related topics, including housing, urban problems, employment programs, old age, unemployment, and legal aid.

*Sympathetic Coverage of White Poverty: 1982–83.* The recession of the early 1980s brought America's worst economic performance in decades. Per capita gross domestic product fell over 3 percent between 1981 and 1982, unemployment rose to almost 11 percent, and the poverty rate increased from about 11 percent in 1979 to over 15 percent in 1983 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, 414, 445; Patterson 1994, 211). Coincident with this economic downturn came the Reagan administration's domestic spending cutbacks and rhetorical attacks on government antipoverty programs.

The rather dire conditions of America's poor, and the political controversy that erupted in response to President Reagan's efforts to "trim the safety net," led to a substantial increase in the amount of news coverage of poverty. Reflecting the nature of the times, news coverage of poverty during the early 1980s was concentrated on the growing problems of poverty and unemployment, and on debates over the proper response of government to these conditions. This period of widespread public concern with poverty also saw the lowest percentage of blacks in magazine portrayals of the poor of any time since the early 1960s. Overall, only 33 percent of poor people pictured in poverty-related stories during 1982 and 1983 were black.

The two most common themes of poverty stories during this period concerned the growth of poverty and the debates over government cutbacks. Although a few of these stories sought to convince readers that "The Safety Net Remains" (as a *Time* magazine story from February 1982 was titled), most of this coverage was highly critical of the Reagan administration's efforts to trim government programs for the poor. A good example is *Newsweek's* prominent story titled "The Hard-Luck Christmas of 82," which proclaimed, "With 12 million unemployed and 2 million homeless, private charity cannot make up for federal cutbacks."<sup>14</sup> This story went on to describe the desperate condition of poor

families living in camp tents or in automobiles, portraying them as the noble victims “who are paying the price of America’s failure of nerve in the war on poverty.” Reflecting the general lack of black faces in these sympathetic poverty stories, “The Hard Luck Christmas of 82” included only three African Americans among the 18 poor people pictured.<sup>15</sup> As a whole, blacks made up only 30 percent of the poor people pictured in general stories on poverty and antipoverty programs from 1982 to 1983.

A less common, but important, theme in poverty stories from this period concerned the “newly poor,” that is, formerly middle-class Americans who fell into poverty during the recession of the early 1980s. Typical of this coverage is a (white) family of four profiled in a *U.S. News and World Report* story from August 1982. This story describes how the Telehowski family was “plunged into the ranks of the newly poor” when the father lost his job as a machinist with an auto-parts company. No longer able to afford a car or even an apartment, the Telehowskis reluctantly applied for welfare and became squatters in an abandoned house in inner-city Detroit. The Telehowski family, with their two small children and their determined struggle to support themselves, indicate the extraordinary sympathy that the “newly poor” received in news coverage from the early 1980s. *Time* magazine went even farther in proclaiming the virtues of the newly poor, writing, “The only aspect of American life that has been uplifted by the continuing recession: a much better class of poor person, better educated, accustomed to working, with strong family ties.”<sup>16</sup>

It is not surprising, of course, that poverty is portrayed in a more sympathetic light during economic hard times. What is noteworthy, however, is that along with shifts in the tone of news reporting on the poor come shifts in the racial mix of the poor people in news stories. As figure 4.2 shows, the true proportion of blacks among America’s poor did not change appreciably between the early 1970s and the early 1980s (or indeed, at any time during the past 35 years). But the racial portrayals of the poor in newsmagazines did shift dramatically as media attention turned from highly critical coverage of welfare during 1972–73 to highly sympathetic stories on poverty during the recession of the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

This pattern of associating African Americans with the least sympathetic aspects of poverty is consistent with what we found earlier in examining the initial racialization of poverty coverage in the mid-1960s. I next explore the use of poor blacks and poor nonblacks to illustrate stories on different poverty topics from the entire study period of 1950 to 1992.

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

*Racial Portrayals of Subgroups of the Poor*

Table 4.1 shows the percentage African American for pictures of poor people in 13 different aggregated subject categories (see Gilens 1999 for details). The story topics shown in table 4.1 relate to members of the poverty population that receive varying levels of public support or censure. For example, surveys show greater sympathy for the poor in general than for welfare recipients, and a stronger desire to help poor children or the elderly than poor working-age adults (Smith 1987b; Cook and Barrett 1992). And despite the negative coverage that the Job Corps received in stories from the mid-1960s, we would expect more sympathetic responses to stories about poor people in employment programs than to stories about nonworking poor adults.

Of the 13 topics shown in table 4.1, 7 fall into a fairly narrow range in which African Americans comprise between 50 percent and 60 percent of all poor people pictured. These include “sympathetic” topics such as poor children (51 percent black) and employment programs (50 percent black), and “unsympathetic” topics such as public welfare (54 percent black). Of those topics that do differ substantially in percentage African American, however, fewer blacks are shown in stories on the more sym-

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

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

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

pathetic topics of education (40 percent black), medical care (28 percent black), and hunger (25 percent black), while stories about the elderly poor—one of the most sympathetic subgroups of poor people—are illustrated exclusively with pictures of poor whites. In contrast, only African Americans are found in stories on the underclass, perhaps the least sympathetic topic in table 4.1. While the underclass lacks any consistent definition in either popular or academic discourse,<sup>18</sup> 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 1992). In fact, blacks do compose a large proportion of the American underclass, just how large a proportion depending on how the underclass is defined. But even those definitions that result in the highest percentages of African Americans consider the underclass to include at least 40 percent nonblacks, in contrast to the magazine portrait of the underclass as 100 percent black.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to topic of story, then, we find the same tendency that we found in examining changes in media coverage of poverty over time. In both cases, pictures of African Americans are disproportionately used to illustrate the most negative aspects of poverty and the least sympathetic subgroups of the poor.

### *Television News Coverage of Poverty*

The three newsmagazines examined here have a combined circulation of over ten million copies, 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*” (“Folio 500” 1994, 52).<sup>20</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 and were 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 dominant 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 the racial content of television news coverage of poverty were to differ substantially from that found in news-

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

magazines, our confidence in the analysis of newsmagazines would be severely limited.

Unfortunately, tapes of television news broadcasts are unavailable for shows aired before the middle of 1968. Still, we can to some degree determine whether newsmagazine coverage of poverty is unique to that medium by comparing patterns of news coverage on television with those found in newsmagazines for the period in which both sources are available.

Measuring the racial representation of poverty in television news requires the painstaking examination of hours of television news stories. Because it was impossible to code the full twenty-four years of television news, I chose three historical periods: 1968, the earliest year for which television news shows are available and a year in which magazines portrayed the poor as predominantly black; 1982–83, a time when magazine images of poverty contained the lowest proportion of blacks for the entire period studied; and 1988–92, a more recent period that also contained a high proportion of blacks in newsmagazine stories on poverty.

In each of the three periods examined, television news exaggerated the percentage of blacks among the poor to an even greater extent than did the newsmagazines. Equally important, the changing patterns of racial representation found in the newsmagazines was reflected in television news as well. In both media, 1968 contained extremely high proportions of blacks among pictures of the poor: 68 percent for newsmagazines and 93 percent for television news. As expected, news stories during 1982–83 contained much lower proportions of blacks at 33 percent and 49 percent in newsmagazines and television news respectively. Finally, for both media, the proportion of poor blacks during 1988–92 fell somewhere in between those of the other two periods at 62 percent of all poor people in newsmagazines and 65 percent in television news.

A more complete analysis of poverty coverage in these two media might reveal some important differences. But the data examined suggest that the patterns of coverage found in newsmagazines are not idiosyncratic to that particular medium. Television news also substantially exaggerates the extent to which blacks compose the poor, and as with newsmagazine coverage, the complexion of poverty in television news shifts over time as events draw attention to more sympathetic and less sympathetic subgroups of the poor. In short, it appears that the distorted coverage of poverty found in newsmagazines reflects a broader set of dynamics that also shape images of the poor in the even more important medium of television news.

### Do the Mass Media Shape Public Perceptions of the Poor?

The racial content of news media images of the poor have changed dramatically over time, and for most of the past three decades have overrepresented the proportion of blacks among the poor. News coverage itself constitutes an important “artifact” of American political culture. But news coverage has a special significance as a cultural product because we know that it not only reflects, but also influences, public concerns and beliefs.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the power of the media to shape public perceptions and political preferences. Media content has been shown to affect the importance viewers attach to different political issues, the standards that they employ in making political evaluations, the causes they attribute to national problems, their positions on political issues, and their perceptions of political candidates (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Rogers and Dearing 1988; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Iyengar 1987, 1991; Bartels 1993). Although most studies of media impact have examined the spoken or textual components of media content rather than the visual components, research has shown that the visual elements of the news—including the race of the people pictured—are highly salient to viewers (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Graber 1990; Iyengar 1991; Kenney 1992).

Another indication that the media shape perceptions of the racial composition of the poor concerns the implausibility of the alternative hypotheses. If the media are not the dominant influence on public beliefs about the poor, then these perceptions must be shaped by either personal encounters with poor people or by 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. On the other hand, if personal encounters with poor people explain the public’s perceptions, then variation 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>21</sup> In Washington and Oregon, blacks

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

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.

In sum, then, previous work on related issues shows that the media can have a significant impact on public opinion. And judging by the similarity in public perceptions across states, it appears that differences in personal exposure to poor people of different races has little impact on perceptions of the poor as a whole. People do draw upon other sources of information and imagery about the social world, but it would be hard to deny that the news media are a centrally important source in a society as large and “media-centric” as our own. As Walter Lippmann noted almost 80 years ago, we necessarily rely on the accounts of others to form our beliefs about the world we inhabit. “Our opinions,” he 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, 79). Most of what we know, or think we know, about social and economic issues and conditions we learn from the media. When news reports offer misleading images, it is inevitable that public perceptions and reality will diverge.

*Consequences of Public Perceptions of the Race of the Poor*

To understand how different racial images of the poor shape attitudes toward welfare, we can compare the views of those Americans who think most welfare recipients are black with those who think most welfare recipients are white. A 1994 CBS News/New York Times survey found that respondents who erroneously believed that most welfare recipients were black held consistently more negative views about welfare recipients’ true need and commitment to the work ethic than did respondents who thought most welfare recipients were white. As table 4.2 shows, among respondents who thought most welfare recipients were black, 63 percent said that “lack of effort on their own part” is most often to blame when people are on welfare, while only 26 percent blamed “circumstances beyond their control.” But among respondents who thought most welfare recipients were white, 50 percent blamed circumstances and only



40 percent attributed the problem to a lack of effort. Those who saw most welfare recipients as black also expressed substantially more negative views about welfare recipients when asked whether most people on welfare really want to work, and whether most people on welfare really need it (table 2). These differences between respondents with different perceptions of the racial composition of the poor are not caused by differences between these two groups in other characteristics. When regression analysis is used to control for respondents' age, sex, education, family income, and liberal/conservative orientations, the differences shown in table 4.2 diminish only slightly (Gilens 1999 for details).

### Conclusions

It would be naive to expect a "sociologically accurate" depiction of poverty in news stories. Some aspects of poverty and some subgroups of the poor may be more "newsworthy" than others. And news departments, after all, are in the business of selling news. If news photographers seek out the most sensational images of poverty in order to attract readers or viewers, we should hardly be surprised. For most Americans, the

**TABLE 4.2. Perceptions of Welfare Recipients**

	Think Most Welfare Recipients Are Black	Think Most Welfare Recipients Are White
<i>In your opinion, what is more to blame when people are on welfare . . .</i>		
Lack of effort on their own part	63%	40%
Circumstances beyond their control	26%	50%
<i>Do most people on welfare want to work?</i>		
Yes	31%	55%
No	69%	45%
<i>Do most people on welfare really need it?</i>		
Yes	36%	50%
No	64%	50%

Source: CBS/New York Times Poll, December 1994.

Note: Question wording: "Of all the people who are on welfare in this country, are more of them black or are more of them white?" Respondents volunteering "about equal" are not shown in the table. All differences between respondents who think most welfare recipients are black and those who think most welfare recipients are white are significant at  $p < .001$ . These differences diminish only slightly and remain highly significant when controls are added for age, sex, education, family income, and liberal/conservative self-identification. "Don't know" and "No answer" responses are excluded from the results shown above.

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

most powerful images of poverty are undoubtedly the black urban ghettos. These concentrations of poverty represent the worst failures of our economic, educational, and social welfare systems. Yet they also represent a minuscule portion of all the American poor. Only 6 percent of all poor Americans are blacks living in urban ghettos (Jargowsky and Bane 1991, 251).

Furthermore, racial distortions in the portrayal of poverty are not limited to stories on the urban underclass. The overrepresentation of blacks among the poor is found in coverage of most poverty topics and appears during most of the past three decades. Yet just as importantly, black faces are comparatively *unlikely* to be found in media stories on the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor, just as they are comparatively absent from media coverage of poverty during times of heightened sympathy for the least well off.

Journalists are professional observers and chroniclers of our social world. But they are also residents of that world and are exposed to the same stereotypes and misperceptions that characterize society at large.<sup>22</sup> A self-reinforcing cycle exists in which negative images of the black poor feed media coverage of poverty that then strengthens these images in the culture at large. Society's stereotypes are reflected back—and thereby reinforced—by the mass media.

The events of the 1960s played a role in bringing the black poor to the attention of the American public. But the riots of the mid-1960s, the shift in focus of the civil rights movement, and the growing concern over burgeoning welfare rolls did not change the color of poverty in the news in a simple or uniform way. As we saw above, the increased number of black faces in news stories about the poor reflected the growth of *negative* coverage of poverty. Only when stories about the War on Poverty turned negative did large numbers of poor African Americans begin to appear in the news. And as we saw, shifts over time in the tone of poverty coverage have been accompanied by shifts in the racial complexion of poverty images in the news. The overwhelmingly negative coverage of welfare from the early 1970s coincided with extremely high numbers of African Americans in poverty stories, while the decidedly more sympathetic poverty stories from the early 1980s were illustrated primarily with whites.

News coverage of poverty now reflects the close link between blacks and the poor that informs public thinking about poverty and welfare. The poor have indeed “become black” in the national news media. But as the fluctuations in the racial complexion of poverty images over time and

the differences across different subgroups of the poor both attest, it is the “undeserving poor” who have become most black.

It may well be that media attention to black poverty was important in mobilizing resources to redress racial inequality. Affirmative action, urban enterprise zones, minority scholarships, and other explicitly or implicitly race-targeted programs have all reflected a concern with black poverty that was absent before the mid-1960s.

Were the media to ignore or downplay black poverty, the public might be led to think that racial inequality was a problem of the past. But the news media’s overrepresentation of blacks among the poor and in particular the association of African Americans with the least sympathetic aspects of poverty serve to perpetuate negative racial stereotypes that serve to lessen public support for efforts to fight poverty in general, and black poverty in particular.

#### NOTES

1. The classic work from this era is Robert Hunter’s book *Poverty*, published in 1904 (see Patterson 1994 for a discussion of Hunter and other early authors writing on American poverty). While Hunter spent considerable time discussing the work habits, nutritional needs, and intelligence of the Italians, Irish, Poles, Hungarians, Germans, and Jews, African Americans escaped his attention altogether. Other popular early treatments of poverty similarly fail to mention blacks. These include Hollander 1914; Parmalee 1916; Gillin 1921; and Kelso 1929.

2. For example, I. M. Rubinow’s *The Quest for Security* (1934), published in the middle of the depression and often cited in subsequent literature on poverty, made no mention of blacks.

3. Debates still rage over the extent to which later antipoverty programs were a response to ghetto uprisings and growing black political strength, but most observers seem to agree that the Kennedy administration’s antipoverty efforts had little to do with either placating blacks or cementing their political allegiance to the Democratic party. See Katz 1989, 81–88; and Patterson 1994, 133–35.

4. One reason that Social Security Survivors’ Benefits disproportionately aided whites was that two occupations with large numbers of African Americans—agricultural and domestic workers—were initially excluded from the Social Security program.

5. Since 1995, African Americans have increased as a proportion of welfare recipients. As a consequence of a robust economy and the changes in welfare regulations instituted by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act welfare caseloads fell sharply during the latter half of the 1990s. In 1996, about 5 percent of the U.S. population was receiving welfare; by 1999, that number had fallen to only 2.6 percent (U.S. Department of Health and

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

Human Services 2000). This decline in welfare use was more pronounced among nonblacks than it was among African Americans. Consequently, the proportion of the welfare rolls accounted for by African Americans climbed from 34.5 percent in 1996 to 37.3 percent in 1998 (House 2000).

6. Of the 1,281 stories on poverty published in these three magazines between 1960 and 1990, a random sample of 234 were examined for any specific mentions of the racial composition of the poor. Only 11 of these 234 stories (or 4.7 percent) gave any concrete information on the proportion of blacks among poor people, AFDC recipients, public housing tenants, or any other subgroup of the poor. Extrapolating from this sample to all of the poverty stories published during this 31-year period, we would expect each magazine to provide this kind of information approximately once every year and a half.

7. On the impact of photographs, see Graber 1987, 1990; and Kenney 1992. On the tendency to be swayed by specific examples rather than statistical information see Brosius and Bathelt 1994; Hamill, Wilson, and Nisbett 1980; and Kazoleas 1993.

8. The reliability of the race coding was assessed by having two coders independently code a random sample of pictures. Using the picture as the unit of analysis, intercoder reliability for percentage black in each picture was .87.

9. A difficult issue in the analysis of news photographs concerns the relative impact that different pictorial content might have on the reader. For example, it is reasonable to assume that other things being equal, a picture of many poor people contains more information, and would have a bigger impact on readers, than a picture of a single poor person. But just how much more of an impact is not clear. Does a picture of 20 poor whites have 20 times the impact on readers' perceptions of the poor as a picture of one poor white?

On the one hand, we might expect each additional poor person in a picture to add somewhat to the overall impact of that picture. On the other hand, it seems likely that beyond some point each additional person would add only slightly to the picture's impact. The simplest approaches would be to count each picture equally in calculating the racial portrayal of the poor, or alternatively to count each person pictured equally. The first approach comes up short because it fails to assign greater weight to pictures with larger numbers of poor people. The second approach is also problematic, however, because it gives the same weight to the fiftieth person in a picture of a large group as it does to the sole individual in a picture of one poor person. In addition, counting each individual equally would allow a few pictures of large groups to dominate the results.

As a compromise, I have adopted the following procedure. In general, each poor person is counted equally, but any pictures that contain more than 12 poor people are adjusted to reflect more accurately the probable impact of the picture on readers, and to prevent pictures of large groups from dominating the results. Specifically, the number of poor people in a single picture is capped at 12. Thus all pictures with 12 or more poor people are coded as containing only 12 poor people. The race of these 12 people are constructed to be proportionate to the race of all the people in the picture. For example, if a picture contained ten poor whites and 30 poor blacks, it would be scored for analysis as containing three poor whites and 9 poor blacks to maintain the percentage of blacks at 75 percent.

Although this system is a fairly crude and imperfect compromise, it derives from the reasonable assumption that in general pictures with more people have a larger impact on readers' perceptions of the poor than do pictures with fewer people. Yet it also recognizes that this tendency has some limit, and that the impact of each individual within a large crowd is less than the impact of lone individuals or of individual people within a small group.

10. The figure for the average percentage of blacks among the poor includes only the years 1960 through 1992, since poverty data broken down by race are not available prior to 1960.

11. In addition to these 54 people for whom race could be identified, this story included 4 others of unidentifiable race.

12. These figures are for *Newsweek* and *Time* combined, for the years 1952 plus 1957 and 1983 plus 1988, respectively. See Lester and Smith 1990, tables 2 and 3.

13. Examining every fifth issue of *Time* and *Newsweek* between January 1963 and December 1965, I found that the proportion of African Americans (excluding advertisements) in newsmagazine photographs increased from 6.4 percent in 1963 to 8.7 percent in 1964 and then decreased to 5.5 percent in 1965. (The total number of individuals coded in the three years was 2,668, 2,744, and 3,115 for 1963, 1964, and 1965 respectively.)

14. *Newsweek*, December 27, 1982, 12.

15. These figures for the "Hard Luck Christmas" story reflect the adjusted counts of poor people using a maximum of 12 poor people per picture (see note 9 above). The raw counts from this story are 73 nonblack and 17 black poor. In this case the adjusted percentage black ( $3/18 = 17$  percent) and the raw percentage black ( $17/90 = 19$  percent) are quite similar.

16. *Time*, December 27, 1982, 13.

17. African Americans did represent a somewhat larger proportion of welfare recipients in the early 1970s (about 43 percent) than of poor people in the early 1980s (about 28 percent). But this difference is too small to account for the difference in media portrayals, which dropped from 75 percent to 33 percent black.

18. 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.

19. 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). 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, only five percent of the American poor live in underclass areas and 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.

*Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*

20. Readership is gauged by a Times Mirror survey of February 20, 1992, which 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.

21. Data on public perceptions come from the 1991 National Race and Politics Study. Figures for the true percentage of blacks among the poor are from the 1990 census (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993).

22. See Gilens 1996b for a discussion of the racial beliefs of news professionals.