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Welfare Dependency in America: Myth or Social Problem? A Public Opinion Analysis

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How society feels about its welfare system tells us much, especially about its beliefs and values. This study helps to shed some light on this by empirically examining public attitudes towards welfare policy. The purpose is to examine public opinion about welfare dependency. Specifically, controlling for several socio-demographic factors, to test whether such attitudes vary by subgroups. The results show that political ideology plays an important role in influencing attitudes towards the welfare system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

• An empirical study found that 40 percent of individuals who were dependent on welfare income were so for a short time, that is, they were dependent in only one or two of the ten years covered (Coe, 1982).

• In the view of its critics, the welfare system instills into recipients an attitude that they are not obligated to provide the basic necessities of life for themselves (Brezina, 2008).

• Closely allied to this distinction is the assumption that welfare recipients need special stimulus to seek employment. This view is motivated by the belief that recipients regard public dependency as a preferred alternative to work (Schaller, 1973).

• Researchers have found substantial congruence between public attitudes as expressed on surveys and public policy, for example, states with more conservative populations adopt more conservative policies (Giles, 1999).

• Two prominent influences, or likely influences, on welfare opinions are economy and race (Gilens, 1999). Other influences include, media (Gilliam, 1999), Individualism (Huber and Form, 1973) and Political Ideology (McClosky and Zaller, 1984).

RESULTS

Results of Independent Sample T-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I receive or have received welfare</td>
<td>5.13 (1.553)</td>
<td>5.14 (1.582)</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know someone who receives welfare</td>
<td>5.28 (1.611)</td>
<td>5.03 (1.544)</td>
<td>-.686</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. p < .05. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses besides means.

Results of the Ordinary Least Square Regression for Welfare Dependency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE(B)</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.(P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.552</td>
<td>.761</td>
<td>-.726</td>
<td>.471</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>-1.005</td>
<td>.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>3.546</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government should help the poor</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.290</td>
<td>.773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of welfare is a burden</td>
<td>.201</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.213</td>
<td>2.479</td>
<td>.016*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More women and children on welfare than men</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.274</td>
<td>3.515</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could get by if they tried</td>
<td>.467</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.486</td>
<td>5.496</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: R²=.634 *p<.05. Model Sig =.000, F = 17.925

CONCLUSION

• The results show that public opinion is of the belief that welfare dependency is present in the United States due to the nature of the welfare system and that it is a burden on taxpayers.

• They also believe that welfare recipients can work and get out of the welfare system if they tried harder. Though most of the respondents were moderates, the regression analysis shows that people who identify as more conservative are more likely to say that the welfare system causes dependency.

• There is no significant relationship between belief that the welfare system causes welfare dependency and receiving or knowing someone who has received welfare.

SELECTED REFERENCES