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

Toluwani Johnson
University of Northern Iowa

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

Toluwani Johnson
Public Policy



ABSTRACT

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 (Schiller, 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 (Gilens, 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).

METHODS

- An online survey was created using *Qualtrics*
- 72 participants
- The dependent variable was tested through the question "The welfare system causes welfare dependency"
- Measured on a 7-point likert scale
- The results were tested using Ordinary Least Square Regression and independent sample T-test.



RESULTS

Results of Independent Sample T-test

	Response		T	Df
	Yes	No		
I receive or have received welfare	5.13 (1.553)	5.14 (1.582)	.026	70
I know someone who receives welfare	5.28 (1.611)	5.03 (1.544)	-.686	70

Note. $p > .05$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses besides means.

Results of the Ordinary Least Square Regression for Welfare Dependency

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

Note: $R^2 = .634$ * = $p < .05$. Model Sig = .000, F = 17.925

FINDINGS

- 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.

CONCLUSION

- The four variables that were significant in this analysis have been identified as being influencers of public perception on welfare dependency.
- The results show that most Americans are dissatisfied with the welfare system mostly due to the belief that recipients are able to work and that the cost of welfare is a burden on others.
- This study further proved how a person's political ideology greatly influences their perceptions.
- This study has its limitations, the recruitment method could have led to selection bias and therefore the results may not be generalizable to the rest of the population.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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