



HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
JOHN F. KENNEDY  
SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll  
on  
**Poverty in America**

Americans aren't thinking a lot about the poor these days. A new survey by NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government found that only about one in 10 Americans names poverty, welfare, or something similar as one of the two top issues government should address. Nevertheless, when they are asked about it directly, most Americans think that poverty is still a problem in this country, even in these generally prosperous times. In fact, a majority of Americans think poverty is not just a problem but a big problem, and another third say it's somewhat of a problem. Despite that characterization, however, Americans are divided on why poverty is a problem and on what should be done about it, the survey found.

Here are some of the key findings:

**Americans perceive the federal government's definition of poverty as being too low.** The government says that a family of four with an income higher than \$17,029 is not poor. However, more than three in five Americans (64%) say that a family of four with an income of \$20,000 is poor, and two in five (42%) say a family of four earning \$25,000 is poor.

More important, perhaps, is the way low-income respondents themselves described their lives. Not surprisingly, people living below the official poverty level reported the most serious problems in such areas as having enough money for rent, transportation, or food. But people with incomes between the poverty level and twice the poverty level also reported serious problems in these areas. For instance, about 40% of the people in that group say they or someone in their immediate family fell behind in their utility payments or couldn't pay for medical care in the last year; and more than a third say that at some point they had too little money to buy enough food. By contrast, only 17% of those making more than twice the poverty level reported not being able to afford enough food.

**Americans are divided over the causes of poverty.** About half the public says the poor are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, and the other half says that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor. Low-income Americans — that is, those making less than twice the federal poverty level, or about \$34,000 per year for a family of four — are only slightly more likely than other Americans to feel it is due to circumstances. But when asked about specific causes of poverty, low-income Americans are significantly more likely than other Americans to name drug abuse, medical bills, too few jobs (or too many being part-time or low-wage), too many single-parent families, and too many immigrants. When asked what is the No. 1 cause of poverty, low-income Americans are much more likely to name drug abuse, and the poorest Americans — those living below the federal poverty level — are nearly twice as likely as

middle- and upper-income Americans to rank drug abuse so high. The non-poor are more likely to say that the No. 1 cause of poverty is poor-quality public schools, but, as noted in the chart below, both groups are equally likely to name schools as a major cause.

**Is (ITEM) a major cause of poverty, a minor cause of poverty, or not a cause at all?  
(Percentage saying major cause)**

	200%+	<200%
Drug abuse	68	75
Medical bills	54	69
Too many jobs being part-time or low-wage	50	64
Too many single-parent families	52	61
A shortage of jobs	27	52
Too many immigrants	27	39
The welfare system	47	45
Poor people lacking motivation	51	56
A decline in moral values	56	58
Poor quality public schools	47	46

“200%” references poverty level, so 200%+ means those making more than twice the poverty level, and <200% means those making less than twice the poverty level. There is no statistically significant difference in the items shaded gray.

**Americans are also divided over welfare.** Asked about welfare, Americans divide almost evenly in their views on how much welfare recipients really need help from the government. However, in this regard there are significant differences between the perceptions of low-income Americans and those with higher incomes. For instance, about half of Americans making more than twice the poverty level say that most welfare recipients could get along without assistance if they tried, and half say they could not. Similarly, about half say poor people today have easy lives because they get government benefits without doing anything in return; By contrast, only about a third of low-income Americans say the poor have it easy, and about four in 10 say welfare recipients could get along without it.

Although these are significant differences in attitudes between low-income Americans and those with higher incomes, it is interesting to note the high percentage of low-income people who think the poor have easy lives (35%) or that welfare recipients don’t really need the help (39%) — or who express similar views of the poor in other questions. The poor may generally not be as likely to hold such views as the non-poor, but a substantial number of them agree with those who are better off.

**Americans who know about the new welfare law like the way it is working.** The survey found similar results in its examination of the new welfare law. About half of Americans know of the new law’s existence. Among them, 61% say they think the new law is working well. And the most important reason they give for why it is working well is that it requires people to go to work. Americans appear to value work so strongly that they support welfare reform even if it leads to jobs that keep people in poverty. The vast majority of those who know there has been a major change in the welfare laws (73%) believes that people who have left the welfare rolls are still poor, despite having found jobs. (Although low-income Americans who know about the new welfare law are less likely to say that the law is working well or that the main reason it is working well is that it requires people to go to work, still a majority agrees with those in higher income brackets on both counts.)

**Americans are unsure about the effectiveness of government programs for the poor.**

Although Americans (at least those who know the law exists) generally approve of the new welfare law, they express some ambivalence about government programs aimed at helping the poor. For instance, about half believe that government programs aren't having much impact one way or the other on the condition of poor people (low-income people don't differ from others on this). On the other hand, people want the government to try — especially when it comes to programs designed to help people who are trying to help themselves. Large majorities support expanding job-training programs (94%), improving public schools in low-income areas (94%), increasing tax credits for low-income workers (80%), and expanding subsidized day care (85%) and subsidized housing (75%). Support, while still high, drops off when it comes to programs that provide cash or cash-like benefits; 54% support increasing cash assistance for families and 61% support making food stamps more available. Support for all these measures declines considerably when Americans are asked whether they would be willing to have their taxes raised to pay for them, but about three in five Americans (56%) are willing to accept a tax increase.

**Familiarity with poverty doesn't breed sympathy.** People with friends or family who are poor but are not poor themselves are not particularly sympathetic to the poor. For instance, 37% of people who are not poor and do not have any friends or family who are poor say that poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently; approximately the same percentage of people with friends or family who are poor (39%) say the same thing. This contrasts starkly with low-income people themselves; 54% of them say that the poor lead hard lives.

**Americans believe that poor people work, but that their jobs don't necessarily pull them out of poverty.** More than 60% of Americans say they think that most poor people work. This is an increase from the 49% who held this view in 1994. In fact, most low-income people report that they *do* work; excluding students and retirees, about 65% of low-income people work (53% of those making less than the poverty level, and 71% of those making between the poverty level and twice the poverty level). More than two-thirds of Americans (69%) say there are jobs available for anyone who is willing to work. Although this perception is strongest among people with incomes more than twice the federal poverty level (72% say there are jobs available), it is still high among those with low incomes (62%).

However, Americans also say that the jobs available to low-income people aren't very good ones. About three out of five (59%) of those who say there are jobs available for most welfare recipients who want to work also say that the jobs they can get do not pay enough to support a family. About the same proportion of low-income (62%) and non-low income (59%) Americans hold this view.

**Democrats and Republicans express substantially different opinions about poverty.** The survey reveals deep political divisions in the country on the subject of poverty. In question after question — especially those having to do with attitudes about poverty or welfare — the public was split about 50-50. But when the responses were separated by political party, 55%-65% of Democrats were on one side, and 55%-65% of Republicans were on the other side. Nevertheless, there is strong support even among Republicans for programs that help people who are trying to

help themselves (though support is not as strong as it is among Democrats). However, when it comes to paying for the programs, Republicans are much less likely to want to raise taxes. Forty-three percent of Republicans say they would be willing to raise taxes, while 53% say they would not; 67% of Democrats are willing to raise taxes, and only 31% are not.

	Total	Democrat	Republican	Independent
<b>Which is the bigger cause of poverty today — that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, or that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor?</b>				
People not doing enough	48	37	63	48
Circumstances	45	57	31	46
<b>If the government were willing to spend whatever it thought was necessary to eliminate poverty in the United States, do you think that this is something that could be accomplished, or not?</b>				
Yes	47	56	34	47
No	49	40	61	50
<b>Which of the following statements comes closer to your own views: Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return, or poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently?</b>				
Easy	46	38	60	45
Hard	43	55	28	45
<b>Do you think that most welfare recipients today really want to work or not?</b>				
Work	47	55	37	48
Not work	44	38	55	41

In most questions, Independents hover right around 50%. This is because nearly all Independents say they “lean” toward one party or the other — about half leaning toward the Democrats, and half leaning toward the Republicans — and their views generally coincide with the party toward which they lean.

**Black and white Americans are divided over the magnitude of the poverty problem, the causes of poverty, perceptions of the poor, and welfare.** Blacks (72%) are more likely than whites (52%) to rate poverty a big problem; to say outside circumstances are the main cause of poverty (57% to 44%); to say that poor people have hard lives (59% to 39%); to say it is harder today than it was ten years ago to get out of poverty through hard work (58% to 48%); to say that the government could eliminate poverty (67% to 40%); and to say that most welfare recipients really want to work (54% to 45%). Whites (49%) are more likely than blacks (36%) to say poor people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty; to say that poor people have it

easy (49% to 31%); to say the government cannot eliminate poverty (56% to 31%); and to say that welfare encourages women to have more children than they would otherwise (60% to 48%). These divisions generally hold across income lines.

### Methodology

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Survey about Poverty in America is part of an ongoing project of National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Representatives of the three sponsors worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results, with NPR maintaining sole editorial control over its broadcasts on the surveys. The project team includes:

**From NPR:** Marcus D. Rosenbaum, Senior Editor/Special Projects.

**From the Kaiser Family Foundation:** Drew Altman, President and Chief Executive Officer; Mollyann Brodie, Vice President, Director of Public Opinion and Media Research; and Anne E. Steffenson, Research Associate.

**From the Kennedy School:** Robert J. Blendon, a Harvard University professor who holds joint appointments in the School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government; John M. Benson, Deputy Director for Public Opinion and Health/Social Policy at the Harvard School of Public Health; and Stephen R. Pelletier, Research Coordinator.

The results of this project are based on a nationwide telephone survey conducted in English and Spanish between January 4 and February 27, 2001, among a random representative sample of 1,952 respondents 18 years of age and older. There was an oversample of 546 respondents who were identified as having an income of less than 200% of the federal poverty level. Overall the sample included 294 respondents having an income of less than 100% of the federal poverty level, 613 having an income of between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level, and 1,045 with an income above 200% of the federal poverty level. The results for all groups are weighted to reflect the actual distribution in the nation. The field work was conducted by ICR/International Communications Research. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.2 percentage points for total respondents, plus or minus 7.5 percentage points for those with an income of less than 100% of the federal poverty level, plus or minus 5.4 percentage points for those with an income of between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level, and plus or minus 2.6 percentage points for those with an income above 200% of the federal poverty level. For results based on subsets of respondents the margin of error is higher.

When interpreting these findings, keep in mind that because this was a telephone survey, it under-represents groups less likely to have telephones, such as people with very low incomes.

Additional free copies of this publication (#3118) are available on the Foundation's website at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org) or by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation's Publication Request Line at 1-800-656-4533.