Poverty Attributions and Attitudes toward Government Spending

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The Annual Mary Lou Fulton Mentored Research Conference showcases some of the best student research from the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences. The mentored learning program encourages undergraduate students to participate in hands-on and practical research under the direction of a faculty member. Students create these posters as an aide in presenting the results of their research to the public, faculty, and their peers.
**Introduction**

U.S. has the greatest inequality of any wealthy nation
• Third in per capita income; yet it has the highest poverty rate
• Over 20% have incomes at or below ½ the median income
• 1% of the population owns almost 70% of the wealth (Drier 2007)
• Among rich nations, the U.S. has
  • greatest income disparity
  • largest income inequality growth over past 20–30 yrs
• Public policy & institutional effects are more important than demographics in explaining these trends (Smeeding 2005).

Perceptions of the causes of poverty may underlie public policy.
We investigate whether there is a link between poverty attributions & opinions about spending on programs that benefit the poor.

**Methods**

• Data: 1992 American National Election Study (ANES)
• Analysis: Binary Logistic Regression
• Participants given poverty belief question (N=674)

**Results**

Compared to those who attribute poverty to structural factors, people who attribute poverty to laziness have a decrease in odds of favoring increased spending for the following programs:
• Food Stamps: 82%
• Welfare: 49%
• Childcare: 54%

Controlling for age, income, race, and political views.

**Conclusion**

We found that beliefs about the causes of poverty do impact one’s opinions toward government spending on food stamps, welfare, and child care. If people believe the poor are lazy, they are less likely to support increased government spending for them. By recognizing this, it is possible to educate the public about the realities of poverty and the circumstances of those in it, leading to more informed opinions about policy issues. The persistent and growing mismatch between poverty rates and increases in the GNP per capita (Hoynes 2006) may begin to decrease. We are hopeful that with a greater knowledge of these issues, support for programs targeted at the poor will increase and the inequality so prevalent in our society may begin to decrease.

**References**

Dreier, Peter. 2007. “Just the Numbers: The United States in Comparative Perspective.” Contexts 6(3):38–47.
