

NCCP National Center for
Children in Poverty

Columbia University

MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

**Public Attitudes Toward Low-
Income Families and Children**
RESEARCH REPORT No. 2

**How Belief in a Just World Influences
Views of Public Policy**

*Lauren D. Appelbaum • Mary Clare Lennon
J. Lawrence Aber*

October 2003

The National Center for Children in Poverty identifies and promotes strategies that prevent child poverty in the United States and that improve the lives of low-income children and families.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD LOW-INCOME FAMILIES AND CHILDREN RESEARCH REPORT 2

How Belief in a Just World Influences Views of Public Policy

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Recent research shows a softening of the negative attitudes historically directed toward low-income families. Large-scale changes in welfare policies in the United States and a generally strong economy in the 1990's may have combined to exert a substantial impact on the public's views.

Currently, reauthorization of federal welfare legislation remains on the national policy agenda, and state implementation of this legislation will face many funding challenges. It is especially important for organizations such as NCCP to understand public opinion toward low-income families and the policies designed to assist them. Attitudinal research suggests that support for social welfare spending is increased when poverty is framed as having a social, rather than individual, cause.

Between April and October, 2002, NCCP surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,570 adults using our innovative Vignette Study. For this research, we created a female subject whose description randomly varied 11 characteristics. In all cases, she was described as the mother of two children who faces difficulties providing basic necessities for her family. The research was funded by the Marguerite E. Casey Foundation.

This report, *How Belief in a Just World Influences Views of Public Policy*, examines the psychological concept of "Belief in a Just World" and how it influences public opinion about low-income mothers and their efforts to become economically self-sufficient. Understanding these attitudes helps organizations like NCCP generate support for policies that assist low-income families.

THE AUTHORS

Lauren D. Appelbaum, Ph.D., is a lecturer at Fairleigh Dickinson University and an NGO representative for the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues at the United Nations. Her research focuses on how public attitudes toward poor families and welfare recipients affects policy decisions.

Mary Clare Lennon, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow at NCCP where her research focuses on how family economic circumstances affect the psychological well-being of parents and children, particularly the role of work and unemployment in single-parent families.

J. Lawrence Aber, Ph.D. is director emeritus of NCCP and an NCCP Senior Fellow where his research focuses on children and youth at risk and effective programs and policies to help them.

Executive Summary

In the policy debates about how best to assist low-income families, societal attitudes toward these families are important. Policies that are viewed favorably by the public are more likely to be implemented whether or not they are the most effective. This report examines some of the ways that public opinion is shaped.

The Belief in a Just World—the psychological concept used to describe the belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get—influences opinions about how much assistance should be provided to women who have difficulty making ends meet.

The National Center for Children in Poverty’s innovative Vignette Study tested public opinion toward government assistance by creating a female subject whose description randomly varied 11 characteristics, including whether she works or receives welfare, whether she attends school, whether she is looking for a job, and whether she sometimes skips a meal so that her family can eat. In all cases, this subject was described as the mother of two children.

Respondents with a strong Belief in a Just World find women less deserving the more they act responsibly or make efforts to improve their situation.

Respondents with a weak Belief in a Just World find women more deserving the more they make an effort to improve their situation.

The results suggest that the belief system is challenged for people with a strong Belief in a Just World when they are presented with women who make efforts to improve their situation but still can’t get ahead. In order to protect their belief system, people with a strong Belief in a Just World will devalue and blame the victim.

In our sample, respondents had a range of beliefs about a just world, from strong to weak. For organizations such as the National Center for Children in Poverty, whose mission is to promote strategies to prevent child poverty and improve the lives of low-income children and their families, the need to appeal to both belief systems is crucial. Common descriptions of low-income families would increase support for aid from both groups if the threat to the general Belief in a Just World is reduced. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to highlight the systemic problems that lead to persistent economic struggles, rather than to portray the plight of individuals.

Introduction

Historically, welfare recipients have been viewed negatively.¹ However, trends in public opinion reveal a softening of attitudes toward the poor.²

Many studies have shown that how issues are presented shapes attitudes toward public policy. This report looks at how individuals' opinions are formed, particularly how their own belief system affects how they interpret information about low-income women. Specifically, we trace how one psychological factor—the Belief in a Just World—influences attitudes toward the poor and opinions about welfare policy.

The Belief in a Just World is a concept developed by psychologists to describe an individual's belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get.³ By giving an explanation for life's outcomes, the Belief in a Just World engenders a sense of order and stability. The belief that the world is a just place provides individuals with an explanation for adversity. Individuals are motivated to protect their belief that the world is a just place because such a belief protects them psychologically.⁴

Study Overview

This research hypothesizes that those with a strong general Belief in a Just World will find this belief threatened when presented with needy individuals who are acting responsibly or making an effort to improve their situation. Further, these people will tend to devalue and blame the victim in order to maintain their belief. Significantly, people with a strong general Belief in a Just World are less likely to find those in need of social welfare benefits to be deserving of aid than are people with a weak general Belief in a Just World.⁵

The research reported here uses data from a nationally representative sample of adults to examine the relationship between their general Belief in a Just World and their opinions about whether certain low-income mothers deserve governmental assistance. In particular, it looks at the specific conditions under which the general Belief in a Just World has an effect on these opinions.

Study Questions

This report addresses two questions:

1. How does the general Belief in a Just World affect attitudes about whether low-income mothers and their families deserve assistance?
2. Is the effect of this belief on attitudes altered when low-income mothers are portrayed as acting responsibly to improve their circumstances?

Study Methodology

Using both a factorial survey methodology and a general attitude survey, researchers from NCCP gathered information about public opinion toward people in need, low-income working families, welfare recipients, and welfare reform from a sample of 1,570 adults nationwide (see *Vignette Study Technical Note* for more information on the survey design). The factorial survey design involves creating a vignette subject who is represented by a profile of personal and situational characteristics that are randomly varied. This allows researchers to capture real world complexities and separate the differential influences of various characteristics on attitudes.⁶

This study uses a vignette subject named Lisa, a mother of two children having a difficult time making ends meet. A sample vignette, with italics indicating characteristics that were randomized, reads as follows: “Lisa is a *married, white* mother of *two children ages one and four*. She *was working last year and is still working at the same job*. *Lisa’s husband is working*. Lisa *has a physical disability*. *The family lives in poverty*. It is increasingly difficult to find enough money to pay rent, pay for food, pay for clothing for the children, and meet the family’s other expenses. Lisa *sometimes skips meals so that her children can eat*. Lisa *is going to school to improve her job skills*. Lisa *is looking for a better job*.” Random variation of the italicized phrases was done to give many survey respondents a different “Lisa” to evaluate.

After interviewers read the vignette to survey participants, they asked a number of questions assessing participants’ opinions about the vignette subject. This report focuses on how the public’s endorsement of government assistance is affected by their general Belief in a Just World and Lisa’s specific efforts to become self-sufficient.

Study Results

Although the large majority of respondents (84 percent) found the vignette subject, Lisa, to be either somewhat or very deserving, responses varied depending upon their demographic characteristics, their political beliefs, and—in certain circumstances—upon the extent to which they believed that the world was a just place for people generally.⁷

Demographic Characteristics and Deservingness

Judgments of deservingness were related to respondents’ race and political ideology. No such effects were found for respondent’s sex, income, or religiosity.

White respondents thought the vignette subject was less deserving of aid than did African-American and Latino respondents and those of other races. (See Figure 1.)

There was a significant relationship between political ideology and judgments of deservingness; liberal respondents were far more likely to think that Lisa was very deserving of aid than were conservative respondents (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Race and Judgment of Deservingness to Receive Aid, 2002

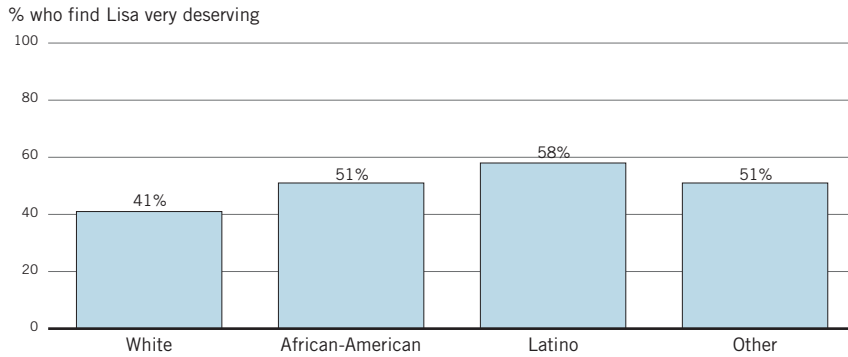
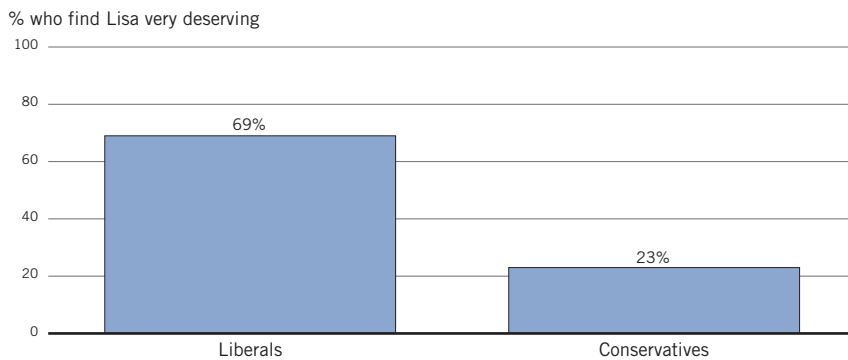


Figure 2: Political Ideology and Judgment of Deservingness to Receive Aid, 2002



Belief in a Just World and Deservingness

In this study, it is important to note that respondents varied in the extent to which they believed in a just world.⁸ We classified nearly 50 percent of the sample as having a strong general Belief in a Just World (34 percent moderately, 15 percent very strong), and almost half of the sample had a weak general Belief in a Just World (35 percent moderately, 14 percent very weak).

No overall association between the general Belief in a Just World and judgments of deservingness emerged. However, these analyses were averaged across a wide range of vignette descriptions. In other words, respondents were not all evaluating the same “Lisa.” Since prior research suggests that individuals with a strong general Belief in a Just World will evaluate particular descriptions of Lisa differently than will individuals with a weaker belief, the next section considers how vignette characteristics may effect judgments of deservingness.

Belief in a Just World Combined With Vignette Characteristics

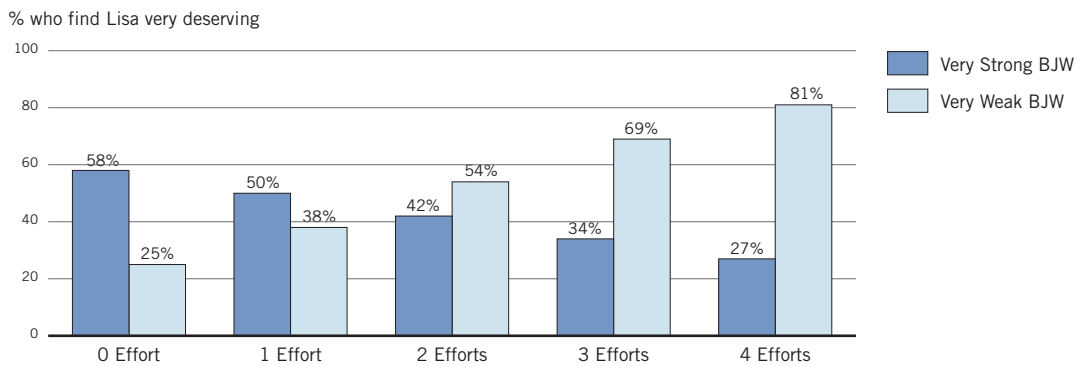
This research report also examined how a strong versus weak general Belief in a Just World affects judgments of deservingness when those in need behave “responsibly” and strive to improve themselves.

Four characteristics were analyzed: Lisa’s working status (i.e., whether she is working versus on welfare or her status is not indicated); whether she attends school to improve her job skills; if she is looking for a job (or a better job if she is employed); and whether she sometimes skips a meal so that her family can eat.

If Lisa does these things and still needs aid, then respondents with a strong general Belief in a Just World find her less deserving of aid. Other respondents, who have a less strong belief that the world is a just place, see Lisa’s efforts as contributing to her deservingness. In other words, the more indications given that Lisa was acting responsibly or making an effort to improve her situation, the more likely respondents with a strong general Belief in a Just World were to find her undeserving. Conversely, the more of these characteristics that Lisa possessed, the more likely respondents with a weak general Belief in a Just World were to find her deserving.

When Lisa makes no effort or takes just one step to improve her situation and that of her family, respondents with a stronger general Belief in a Just World find her to be more deserving than those with a weak general Belief in a Just World. When she takes two or more steps to improve her situation, this relationship reverses and respondents with a weak general Belief in a Just World now find her more deserving than those with a strong general Belief in a Just World (See Figure 3).⁹

Figure 3. Combined Effect of General Belief in a Just World and Efforts Toward Self-sufficiency on Judgment of Deservingness, 2002



Summary and Implications

The results of this study suggest that the belief systems of the general public, combined with vignette characteristics, shape their attitudes toward low-income women and children. Specifically, individuals with a strong belief in a just world respond differently than those with a weak belief to a woman who makes multiple efforts to improve her situation. These findings imply that efforts to garner wide-ranging support for policies designed to help low-income women and families should describe those in need as making only some effort to improve their situation.

Alternatively, rather than trying to appeal to both those with a strong and those with a weak general Belief in a Just World, it may be possible to reduce the threat to the general Belief in a Just World. One strategy would be to focus on the reasons for persistent poverty outside the control of individuals. The first report in this series found that support for governmental assistance could be increased when a low-income woman (Lisa) was portrayed as living in an area with high unemployment. With attention to systemic problems that keep individuals from attaining economic stability, public support may be strengthened.

Endnotes

1. Katz, M. B. (1989). *The undeserving poor: From the war on poverty to the war on welfare*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books; and Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
 2. Shaw, G. M. & Shapiro, R. Y. (2002). The polls-trends: Poverty and public assistance. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66(1), pp. 105-128.
 3. Lerner, M. J. (1980). *The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; Lerner, M. J. & Miller, D. T. (1978). Just world research and the attribution process: Looking back and ahead. *Psychological Bulletin*, 85(5), pp. 1030-1051; Lerner, M. J. & Simmons, C. H. (1966). Observer's reaction to the "innocent victim": Compassion or rejection? *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 4(2), pp. 203-210; Rubin, Z. & Peplau, A. (1973). Belief in a just world and reactions to another's lot: A study of participants in the national draft lottery. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 29(4), pp. 73-93; and Rubin, Z. & Peplau, A. (1975). Who believes in a just world? *The Journal of Social Issues*, 31(3), pp. 65-89.
 4. Dalbert, C. (1997). Coping with an unjust fate: The case of structural unemployment. *Social Justice Research*, 10(2), pp. 175-189; Dalbert, C. (1997). Der Glaube an eine gerechte Welt: Heilsame Überzeugung oder illusionäre Belastung? In H. Mandl (Ed.), *Bericht über den 40. Kongress der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychologie in München 1996*. Göttingen, Germany: Verlag für Psychologie, pp. 567-572; Dalbert, C. (1998b). Das Gerechtigkeitsmotiv und die seelische Gesundheit. In B. Reichle & M. Schmitt (Eds.), *Verantwortung, Gerechtigkeit und Moral: Zum psychologischen Verständnis ethischer Aspekte im menschlichen Verhalten*. Munich, Germany: Juventa Verlag, pp. 19-35; Lerner, M. J. & Miller, D. T. (1978). Just world research and the attribution process: Looking back and ahead. *Psychological Bulletin*, 85, pp. 1030-1051; and Dalbert, C. (1998a). Belief in a just world, well-being, and coping with an unjust fate, pp. 87-105, and Mohiyeddini, C. & Montada, L. (1998). Belief in a just world and self-efficacy in coping with observed victimization: Results from a study about unemployment, pp. 41-45, in L. Montada & M. J. Lerner (Eds.), *Responses to victimizations and belief in a just world*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
 5. Appelbaum, L. D. (2002). Who deserves help? Students' opinions about the deservingness of different groups living in Germany to receive aid. *Social Justice Research*, 15(3), pp. 201-225; Appelbaum, L. D. (2000). *The effect of the belief in a just world on aid to the poor*. Unpublished Manuscript; Cook, F. L. (1979). *Who should be helped? Public support for social services*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
 6. Rossi, P. H. & Anderson, A. B. (1982). The factorial survey approach: An introduction. In Rossi, P. H. & Nock, S. L. (Eds.), *Measuring social judgments: The factorial survey approach*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, pp. 15-68.
 7. Unless otherwise noted, all results are significant at $p < .05$.
 8. In this study, respondents whose general Belief in a Just World was more than one standard deviation above the mean are defined as having a very strong general Belief in a Just World, and those with scores more than one standard deviation below the mean are seen as having a very weak general Belief in a Just World.
- The items on the General Belief in a Just World scale (GBJWS) are as follows:
- I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice.
 - I am convinced, in the long run people will be compensated for injustices.
 - I believe that, by and large, people get what they fairly deserve.
 - I think basically the world is a just place.
 - I firmly believe that injustices in all areas of life(e.g., professional, family, politics) are the exception rather than the rule.
 - I think people try to be fair when making important decisions.
9. Figure 3 represents those respondents with either a very strong or a very weak general Belief in a Just World (scoring the highest or lowest on the General Belief in a Just World Scale, respectively). However, similar effects were found when the entire sample was included in the analysis.

Vignette Study Technical Note

Funded by a grant from the Marguerite E. Casey Foundation, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) commissioned Schulman, Ronca, & Bucavallas Inc. (SRBI) to interview a nationally representative sample of adults over 18 years of age, selected through random digit dialing. In addition, oversamples* of African-American and Latino populations were surveyed. Interviews were conducted in Spanish when the respondent wished to do so.

Between April and October of 2002, 1,570 people completed the telephone survey. The overall response rate was 36.5 percent. After applying population weights,** 47 percent of the respondents were men and 53 percent were women. Seventy-four percent of the participants were white, 11 percent were African American, 10 percent were Latino, and 5 percent were either other races or did not indicate their race. The median household income for participants was between \$30,000 and \$40,000.

This study utilized both a “factorial survey methodology” and a general attitude survey. The factorial survey design involves creating a vignette subject who is represented by a profile of characteristics or situations that are varied at random. In this case, NCCP researchers used a vignette subject named Lisa. As is prototypically true of welfare recipients, Lisa was a mother of two children having a difficult time making ends meet. Descriptions of Lisa varied on the following 11 characteristics: marital status, race, the ages of her children, her immigrant status, her labor force status, the children’s father’s support status, whether Lisa had a barrier to employment, whether Lisa’s family lived in poverty or not, whether Lisa sacrificed for her children, whether Lisa attended school, and whether Lisa looked for a job (or a better job if she already had one).

A sample vignette reads as follows: “Lisa is a *divorced, white mother of two children ages one and four. She was working last year and is still working at the same job. The children’s father provides regular child support. Lisa has a physical disability. The family lives in poverty. It is increasingly difficult to find enough money to pay rent, pay for food, pay for clothing for the children, and meet the family’s other expenses. Lisa sometimes skips meals so that her children can eat. Lisa is going to school to improve her job skills. Lisa is looking for a better job.*”***

The specific possible vignette subject variations are provided in Table 1.

* African-American and Latino adults were oversampled so that sub-sample sizes would be large enough to accurately estimate their responses.

** Population weights were applied to the sample so that we could accurately estimate responses for a nationally representative sample of adult Americans.

*** Phrases in italics were randomly altered to portray a range of circumstances that may characterize low-income families.

Table 1: Vignette Characteristics

<p>MARITAL STATUS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Married 2. Never married 3. Divorced 4. [BLANK] <p>RACE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. White 2. African American 3. Hispanic 4. [BLANK] <p>CHILDREN</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Two children ages 1 and 4 2. Two children ages 7 and 10 3. Two children ages 13 and 16 <p>IMMIGRANT STATUS</p> <p>[if Race 1 or 2]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [BLANK] <p>[if Race 3 or 4]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Is a legal immigrant 3. Is an illegal immigrant 4. [BLANK] <p>LABOR FORCE STATUS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Was working last year and is still working at the same job 2. Was working last year and is now on welfare 3. Was on welfare last year and is working now 4. Was on welfare last year and is still on welfare 5. [BLANK] <p>FATHER'S STATUS</p> <p>[if Marital Status 1]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lisa's husband is working 2. Lisa's husband is unemployed 3. [BLANK] <p>[if Marital Status 2, 3, or 4]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. The children's father provides regular child support 5. The children's father doesn't provide any support 6. [BLANK] 	<p>BARRIER</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has a physical disability 2. Has a mental illness 3. Has few job skills 4. Has a drug or alcohol problem 5. [Experiences partner abuse] <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5a) Is being abused by her husband [if marital status 1] 5b) Is being abused by her boyfriend [if marital status 2 or 3] 5c) [BLANK] [if Marital Status 4] 6. Lives in an area with high unemployment 7. Has trouble finding reliable child care 8. [BLANK] 9. [BLANK] 10. [BLANK] 11. [BLANK] <p>POVERTY STATUS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The family lives in poverty 2. [BLANK] <p>SACRIFICE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sometimes skips meals so that her children can eat 2. [BLANK] <p>SELF-IMPROVEMENT—SCHOOL</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Going to school to improve her job skills 2. [BLANK] <p>SELF-IMPROVEMENT—JOB</p> <p>[if Labor Status 1 or 3]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking for a better job 2. [BLANK] <p>[if Labor Status 2 or 4]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Looking for work 4. [BLANK] <p>[if Labor Status 5]</p> <p>[BLANK]</p>
--	--

National Center for Children in Poverty

Mailman School of Public Health

Columbia University

215 West 125th Street, 3rd floor

New York, NY 10027-4426

646-284-9600

www.nccp.org