

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. 1

**Circumstances Dictate Public Views
of Government Assistance**

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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 1

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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.

THE AUTHORS

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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, *Circumstances Dictate Public Views of Government Assistance*, examines how the public responds to specific characteristics of women who face economic struggles. Our subject's characteristics are randomly varied to include her barriers to employment (such as physical disability, mental illness, living in an area with high unemployment, and trouble with reliable child care) and whether she works or receives welfare.

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Katherine McCaskie is a Research Assistant at NCCP where she contributes to social science research.

Executive Summary

Women who experience significant barriers to employment may be unable to either obtain or retain jobs and may require intensive services to help them overcome their problems and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

The National Center for Children in Poverty's innovative Vignette Study tested the opinions of the general public toward governmental assistance by creating a female subject, Lisa, whose description randomly varied 11 characteristics, including her obstacles to employment (physical disability, mental illness, living in an area with high unemployment, and trouble with reliable child care among them) and whether she works or receives welfare. In all cases, she was described as the mother of two children who faces difficulties providing basic necessities for her family.

Support for many forms of assistance is similar regardless of whether a woman who faces economic difficulties is on welfare or is employed.

- There were high levels of support for health insurance (76 percent) and educational assistance (87 percent), regardless of work status or type of barrier.
- Support for cash assistance, psychological counseling, job training, health insurance, and educational assistance are at least as strong when these women are on welfare as when they are employed.

However, support for cash assistance is generally low.

- When there is no barrier to employment, just 39 percent of Americans support cash assistance.
- The highest levels of support for cash assistance are found for women who live in an area with high unemployment (54 percent), have physical disabilities (49 percent), or a mental illness (49 percent).

Tax relief is also endorsed less often overall than most other forms of assistance.

- Without a barrier to employment, support for tax relief is 57 percent.
- Support increases to 70 percent if women live in an area with high unemployment.

Support for job training is generally high.

- When women are not working, 87 percent of the public supports job training.

Introduction

This research report examines public attitudes toward the most vulnerable of the poor—those who experience significant personal or situational problems that can create obstacles to employment. Barriers like physical disability, mental illness, limited job skills, and domestic abuse have gained increased attention in recent years, as welfare-to-work policies and programs have come to replace the former entitlements to cash assistance. Among policymakers and program administrators, there has been growing concern that women who experience significant obstacles to employment may be unable to either obtain or retain jobs and may require intensive services to help them overcome their problems and achieve self-sufficiency.¹

Most research into these barriers has focused on their identification and treatment. However, little is known about how the general public views low-income women who face these obstacles. These women live in families whose income is generally below 200 percent of the poverty line (\$36,800 a year for a family of four in 2003)—the amount that research suggests is needed for most families to be self-sufficient.² Nearly 40 percent of American children live in such families. Knowing what the public thinks is critical to generate public support for government investments in the most vulnerable low-income women and families.

Media coverage of issues facing low-income families receiving cash assistance appears to have improved since the passage of welfare reform legislation in 1996, mirroring a possible softening of negative attitudes toward welfare recipients observed in the general population.³ A recently commissioned review of media coverage⁴ reveals a number of stories about the struggles of low-income families as they move from welfare to work and the plight of the working poor—those who are working but are still having trouble becoming self-sufficient. While barriers to employment and self-sufficiency have received somewhat less coverage than the movement from welfare to work, the media has addressed the tenuous child-care and transportation situations of many families and the need for more job training.⁵ One of the overall messages being presented is that moving people off government cash assistance programs does not necessarily mean moving them out of poverty.⁶

Study Questions

This research report is the first in a series of reports based on analyses of a national survey of public attitudes that was conducted between April and October of 2002, designed by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP). The analyses presented in this report focus on various personal and situational difficulties that poor women and families may face, including physical disability, mental illness, and lack of reliable child care.

It addresses three questions:

- Is public support for government assistance dependent upon whether women are working or on welfare?
- Is the general public more supportive of government assistance for low-income women who experience personal or situational difficulties?

- Is the public more supportive of government assistance for women facing barriers when these women are on welfare or when they are working?

The answers to these questions can help policymakers and policy advocates communicate more effectively about low-income women and about the policies designed to benefit them and their children.

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.⁷

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.

Of relevance to this research report, vignettes varied on whether or not Lisa had a barrier to employment and, if so, which barrier she had. Possibilities included: physical disability, mental illness, few job skills, drug or alcohol problem, abuse by her husband or boy friend, living in an area with high unemployment, and having trouble finding reliable child care. In addition, in some cases, no specific barrier was mentioned. Researchers also randomly varied whether Lisa was currently employed, receiving cash assistance, or had an unspecified current work/welfare status. NCCP is especially interested in the combined effects of barriers and Lisa’s employment or welfare status, expecting that the public may be particularly supportive of a welfare recipient who is facing a significant barrier to employment. This expectation is based on the recent sympathetic media coverage of low-income women and their struggles to move from welfare to work.⁸

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 specific personal or situational barriers that may interfere with Lisa’s ability to become self-sufficient affect the public’s endorsement of various types of government assistance for Lisa—in particular cash assistance, health insurance, child care or after school care, food stamps, housing assistance, transportation assistance, job training, educational assistance, tax

relief, and psychological counseling. These types of assistance were selected because they are either important supports for “making work pay” (e.g., child care, tax relief) or for addressing specific barriers to employment (e.g., educational assistance, psychological counseling). Many, of course, serve both purposes.

Study Results

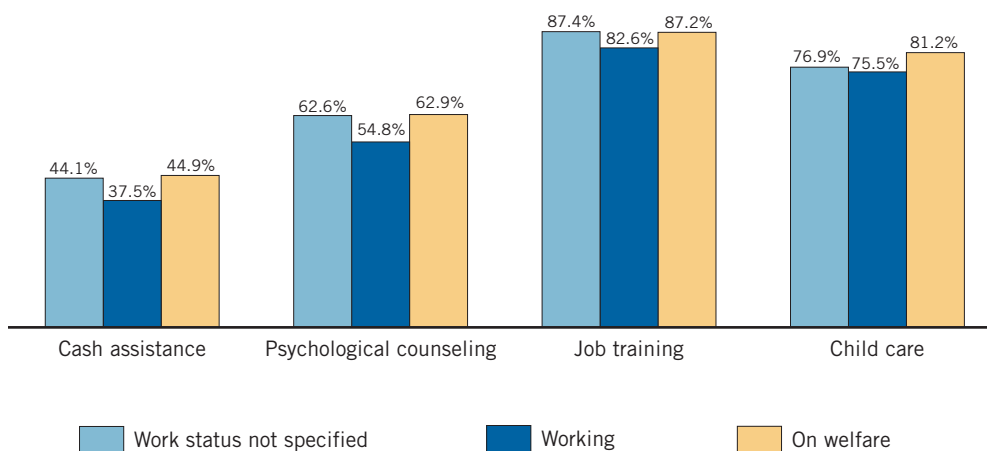
To address the three questions posed above, the report first examines support for various forms of government assistance when Lisa was working, on welfare, and when her work/welfare status was not specified.⁹ Then it examines support when Lisa experienced any of the seven specific barriers described above. Finally, it considers the effects when barriers are combined with working or welfare status.¹⁰

For two of the 10 forms of government assistance, neither barriers nor work/welfare status (nor their combination) affected public endorsement of aid. These are health insurance and educational assistance, which were supported by 76 percent and 87 percent of the general public, respectively. A clear majority of respondents thought that government assistance in the form of health insurance and educational assistance would be appropriate for Lisa’s situation. These high levels of support, regardless of work status or type of barrier, suggest that the general public views health insurance and educational assistance as essential forms of assistance for low-income families.

Work/Welfare Status and Support for Government Assistance

For some forms of assistance (cash assistance, psychological counseling, job training, and child care or after-school care), survey respondents were influenced by Lisa’s work/welfare status. Interestingly, in each case, somewhat higher levels of support were endorsed when Lisa was on welfare or when her work/welfare status was not specified. Figure 1 portrays

Figure 1: Percent of U.S. General Public Sample Supporting Cash Assistance, Psychological Counseling, Job Training, and Child Care by Work/Welfare Status, 2002



these results. While the overall effects of work/welfare status on job training and child care reach only marginal significance levels ($p < .10$), they follow the same pattern as the statistically significant findings for cash assistance and psychological counseling: employed women are seen as somewhat less deserving of these types of government assistance. While these differences are not large (they range between 5 and 8 percentage points), they are fairly consistent in size and direction across the four types of assistance.

These results, together with the general support we found for health insurance and educational assistance, indicate that respondents are at least as supportive of assistance for women on welfare as they are for working low-income women.

Barrier Type and Support for Government Assistance

Support for four out of the 10 types of government assistance was affected by the specific barrier Lisa had: cash assistance, psychological counseling (see Figure 2a), job training, and tax relief (see Figure 2b). While the latter two obtained only marginal levels of statistical significance overall, they displayed some important effects of specific barriers.

Support for cash assistance is generally low, regardless of the barrier that Lisa faced. However, the type of barrier does make a difference. The highest level of public support for cash assistance is found when Lisa is described as living in an area with high unemployment. Just over half of the respondents (54 percent) believe that Lisa should receive cash assistance from the government when she lives in such an area. Support for cash assistance is relatively high as well when Lisa has a physical disability (49 percent) or a mental illness (50 percent). In contrast, the general public is reluctant to support cash assistance when Lisa is portrayed as having a drug or alcohol problem, with only 30 percent of the public supporting this form of assistance.

Figure 2a: Percent of U.S. General Public Sample Supporting Cash Assistance and Psychological Counseling by Barrier Type, 2002

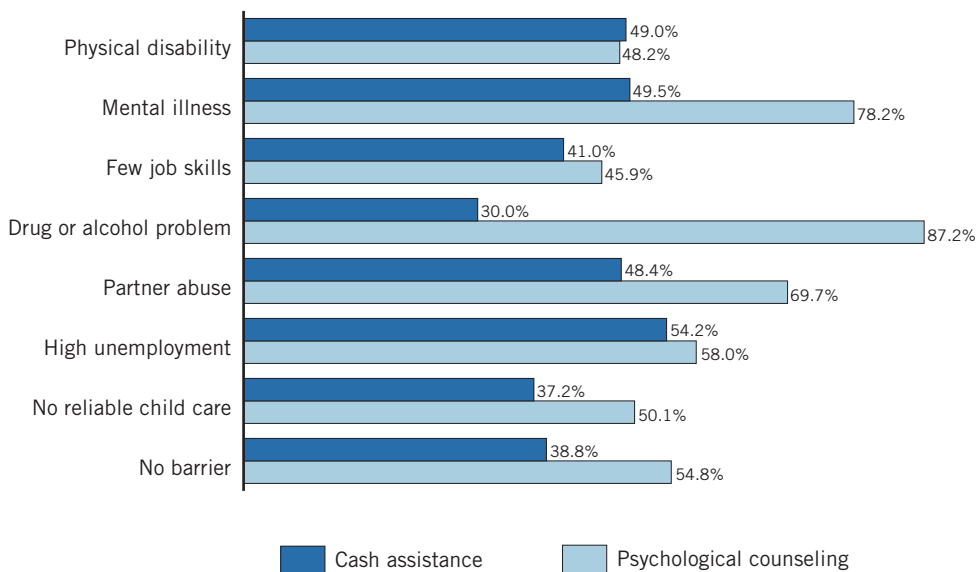
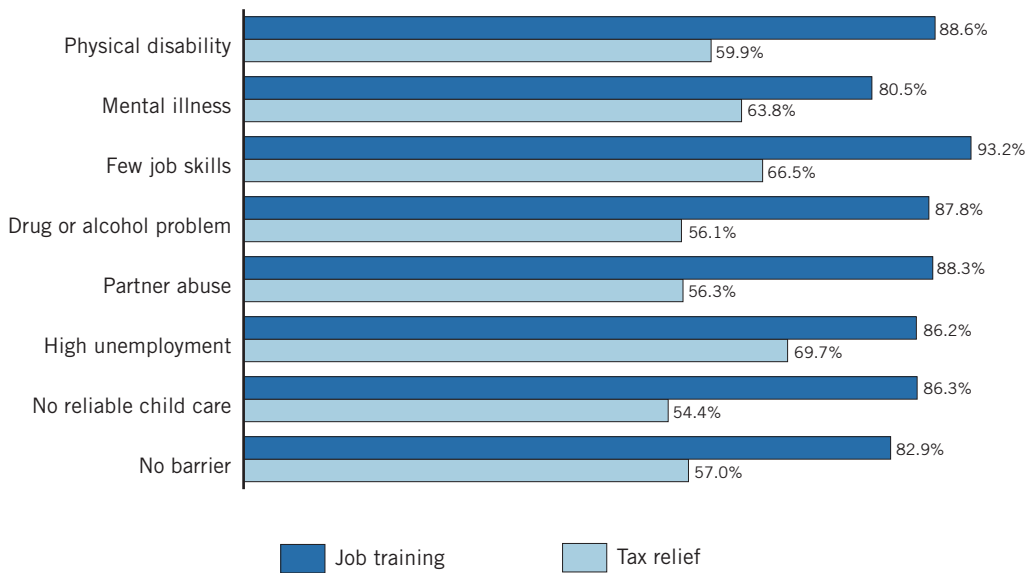


Figure 2b: Percent of U.S. General Public Sample Supporting Job Training and Tax Relief by Barrier Type, 2002



Rates of support for psychological counseling are especially high when Lisa is described as having a drug or alcohol problem (87 percent), mental illness (78 percent), or as abused by her spouse or boyfriend (70 percent). Support for psychological counseling is relatively low when Lisa is described as having few job skills. Nevertheless, nearly half of the respondents (46 percent) endorsed psychological counseling under these circumstances.

Support for job training is generally high, as shown in Figure 2b, regardless of barrier. It is, however, significantly higher when Lisa is described as having few job skills. Similarly, although tax relief is endorsed less often overall than most other forms of government assistance examined here, about two-thirds of the general public support tax relief when Lisa has few job skills or lives in an area with high unemployment.

Combined Effects of Work/Welfare Status and Barrier Type

There were a number of circumstances when differential levels of support for government assistance were found for particular barrier types combined with specific work/welfare statuses. This occurred for three types of assistance: food stamps, housing assistance, and transportation assistance. For each, there were few effects of work/welfare status when no barrier was mentioned. As shown in Figure 3a, support for food stamps and housing assistance was generally similar for working women and those on welfare, with no significantly higher support for food stamps when work/welfare status was not mentioned. Support for transportation assistance was lower than for food stamps or housing and displayed no significant differences by work/welfare status.

These results contrast with those found when Lisa was described as living in an area with high unemployment (Figure 3b). Here, when work or welfare status was not specified, there

Figure 3a: Percent of U.S. General Public Sample Supporting Food Stamps, Housing Assistance, and Transportation Assistance by Work/Welfare Status, with No Barriers, 2002

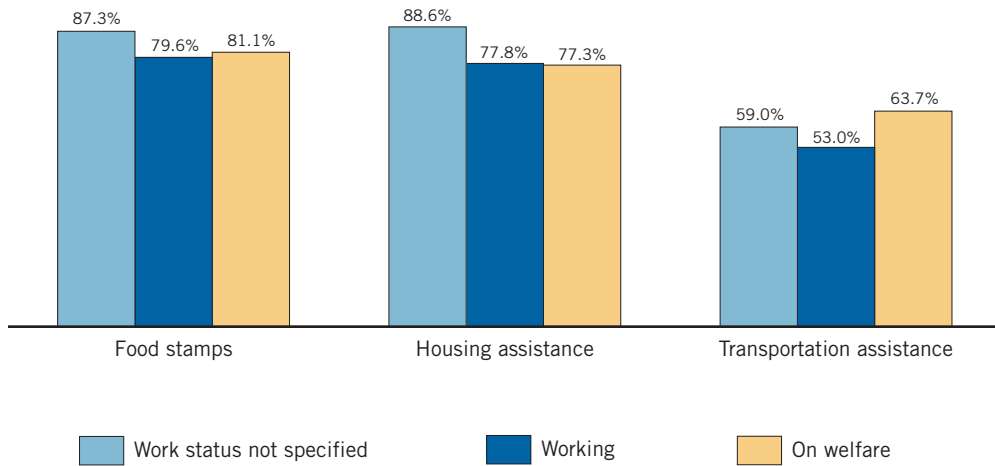
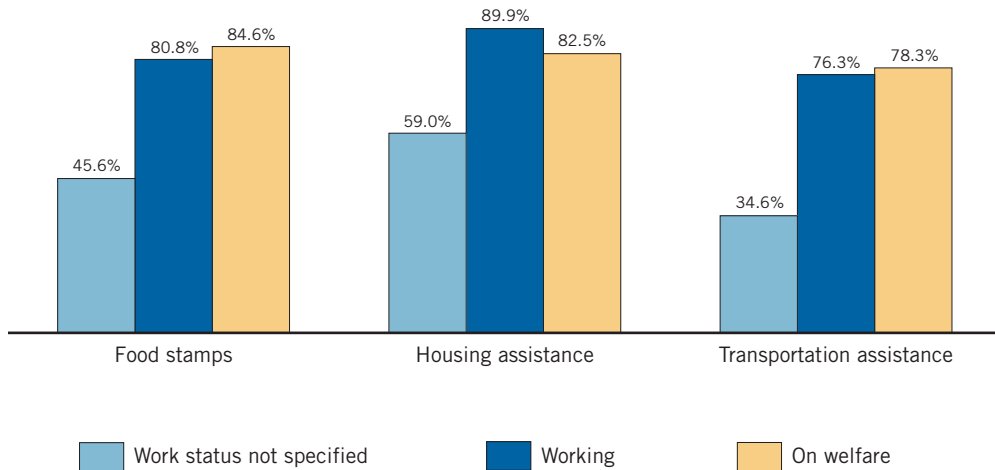
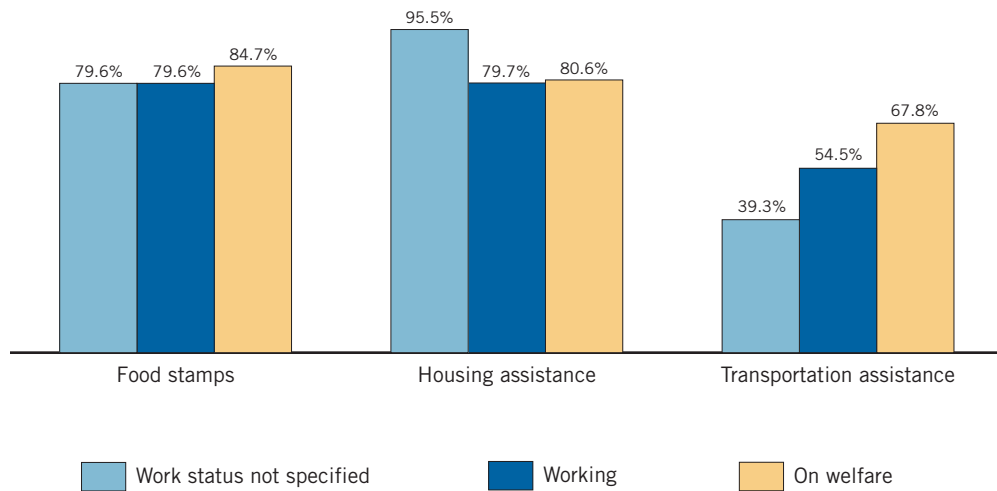


Figure 3b: Percent of U.S. General Public Sample Supporting Food Stamps, Housing Assistance, and Transportation Assistance by Work/Welfare Status, with Barrier of Lives in Area with High Unemployment, 2002



was greatly *reduced* support for food stamps (46 percent), housing assistance (59 percent), and transportation assistance (35 percent) compared to levels of support when Lisa was described as either working or on welfare. Under this barrier, levels of support for food stamps, housing assistance, and transportation are similar for working women and those on welfare. Comparing Figure 3a (no barrier) to Figure 3b (lives in an area with high unemployment), there are similar levels of support for both working women and welfare recipients, with support for transportation assistance being significantly higher when Lisa lives in an area with high unemployment than when no barrier is mentioned. The latter result mirrors earlier findings of higher levels of support for cash assistance and tax relief when women come from areas high in unemployment.

Figure 3c: Percent of U.S. General Public Sample Supporting Food Stamps, Housing Assistance, and Transportation Assistance by Work/Welfare Status, with Barrier of Few Job Skills, 2002



Finally, considering only women who have few job skills (Figure 3c), support for food stamps and housing assistance do not statistically differ by work/welfare status. However, support for transportation assistance is higher when women are on welfare than when their work/welfare status is not indicated. Two-thirds of the survey respondents (68 percent) endorse transportation assistance when Lisa has low job skills and is on welfare, compared to 39 percent when work or welfare status is unspecified. This latter result is similar to that found under high levels of unemployment—not specifying a work or welfare status reduces support for assistance.

Summary and Implications

These results indicate that the general public responds to characteristics of economically challenged families and adjusts their degree of support for various government programs based on these characteristics. The results are complex and, at times, surprising; some require replication using similar methods. This section highlights the most consistent findings and discusses their implications for promoting investments in low-income families.

First, for many types of assistance, support is at least as strong when women who face economic difficulties are on welfare as when they are employed. This is the case for cash assistance, psychological counseling, job training, child care, health insurance, and educational assistance. These findings require further investigation because they run counter to the general assumption among policymakers and communications professionals that the working poor are viewed as more worthy of support.¹¹ Perhaps the general public views these particular types of assistance as basic supports to secure family economic security (e.g., cash assistance and educational assistance) and to encourage employment (e.g., psychological counseling and child care). Additional support for women on welfare is illustrated by the finding

that welfare recipients with few job skills are considered more deserving of transportation assistance than are women with few job skills whose work/welfare status is not specified.

The fact that the general public does see welfare recipients as deserving of many forms of government assistance—as are working women—does suggest that researchers and advocates attempting to secure public investments in low-income families might consider emphasizing the needs of welfare recipients as well as the needs of low-income working families. An almost exclusive focus on the latter risks overlooking the potential public support for government assistance to women on welfare that is suggested by these results.

Secondly, and not surprisingly, specific forms of assistance are often recommended for specific barriers. For example, job training is strongly endorsed when women have few job skills. As another example, there is significant public support for psychological counseling when women experience mental illness, drug or alcohol abuse, or domestic violence. Unless treated, these problems can have disabling consequences for women and their families. These problems, along with low levels of education, are the main barriers to employment of concern to welfare administrators and advocates.¹² Together, these findings suggest that appropriately framed messages, specifying the types of problems low-income families face, will generate greater support for specific types of assistance than will more general portrayals of low-income families.

Thirdly, although overall support for cash assistance, tax relief, and transportation assistance is generally lower than support for other forms of government assistance, support for these is especially strong when families live in areas with high unemployment. Attitudinal research suggests that support for social welfare spending is increased when poverty is framed as having a social, rather than individual, cause.¹³ The public may see a family's economic struggles as arising from forces outside the control of the individual when the family resides in an area with high rates of unemployment. Because many low-income families do live in such areas, it is important that the general public be aware of this fact.

Finally, support for individuals from areas with high unemployment is not universal. Certain forms of government assistance are less strongly endorsed for such individuals when their welfare or work status is not mentioned. Since this result, which was obtained for three types of assistance (food stamps, housing assistance, and transportation assistance), was unexpected, it requires replication in future research. It is clear, however, that when work/welfare status is specified, there is a great deal of support for welfare recipients and working women from areas with high unemployment to have access to cash assistance, tax relief, and transportation assistance.

This research shows that the public response to families who face economic struggles is complex and varies depending upon the specific characteristics and circumstances of the families. Support for various forms of government assistance is generally high, but may be either reduced or strengthened depending on how work or welfare status are portrayed and the specific barriers that families face. Future efforts to increase public support for investments in low-income families are likely to be more successful when particular combinations of personal and situational circumstances faced by poor families are described. Framing issues of low-income families in the context of job market constraints, such as living in areas of high

unemployment, generates greater support for cash assistance, tax relief, and transportation assistance for both welfare recipients and working women. And, describing specific barriers to employment elicits support for appropriate types of interventions. Providing both a ‘face’ and a ‘context’ to problems facing low-income women and families can enhance public support for government assistance to low-income families.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General. (2002). *State strategies for working with hard-to-employ TANF recipients*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
Sweeney, E. (2000). *Recent studies make clear that many parents who are current or former welfare recipients have disabilities and other medical conditions*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Thompson, T. S. & Mikelson, K. S. (2001). *Screening and assessment in TANF/Welfare-to-Work: Ten important questions TANF agencies and their partners should consider*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute
Wilkins, A. (2002). *Strategies for hard-to-serve TANF recipients*. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures.
2. This number is from the federal poverty guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about federal poverty measures, see aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/03poverty.htm.
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3. Shaw, G. & Shapiro, R. Y. (2002). The polls-trends: Poverty and public assistance. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66(1), pp. 105-128.
4. Communications Consortium Media Center. (2003). *National Media Survey*. <http://www.lift.nccp.org/media/media_analysis.pdf>.
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7. Rossi, P. H. & Anderson, A. B. (1982). The factorial survey approach: An introduction. In P. H. Rossi & S. L. Nock (Eds.), *Measuring social judgments: The factorial survey approach*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 15-68.
8. See endnotes 4 and 5.
9. We examined whether respondents would evaluate Lisa differently if she were described as African American and on welfare than if she were described as white and on welfare. Preliminary analyses suggest that any effects of race do not alter the conclusions of this report. A more thorough analysis of the effects of race is underway.
See Gilens, M. J. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
10. Unless otherwise noted, all results are significant at $p < .05$. The overall effect of barriers and work/welfare status were first tested for statistical significance before any individual effect was examined.
11. These endorsements of support for women on welfare may reflect the general softening of attitudes toward women on welfare that others have documented. Future analyses of NCCP’s data will compare evaluations of welfare recipients and working women on other dimensions of public views, such as social rejection and evaluations of moral character. For example, see Shaw & Shapiro in endnote 3.
12. CalWORKS Project. (2002). *Mental health, domestic violence, and substance abuse: Need for and use of services among adult female TANF recipients* (CalWORKS Project Policy and Practice Brief No. 1). Sacramento, CA: CalWORKS Project.
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Midwest Partners. (2001). *Midwest Partners position paper*. <<http://www.midwestpartners.org/endorsem.htm>>
See also Wilkins in endnote 1.
13. Iyengar, S. (1990). Framing responsibility for political issues: The case of poverty. *Political Behavior*, 12(1), pp. 19-40.

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, & Bucavalas 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

MARITAL STATUS	BARRIER
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Married 2. Never married 3. Divorced 4. [BLANK] 	<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]
RACE	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. White 2. African American 3. Hispanic 4. [BLANK] 	
CHILDREN	
<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 	
IMMIGRANT STATUS	POVERTY STATUS
[if Race 1 or 2]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The family lives in poverty 2. [BLANK]
1. [BLANK]	
[if Race 3 or 4]	SACRIFICE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Is a legal immigrant 3. Is an illegal immigrant 4. [BLANK] 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sometimes skips meals so that her children can eat 2. [BLANK]
LABOR FORCE STATUS	SELF-IMPROVEMENT—SCHOOL
<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] 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Going to school to improve her job skills 2. [BLANK]
FATHER'S STATUS	SELF-IMPROVEMENT—JOB
[if Marital Status 1]	[if Labor Status 1 or 3]
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lisa's husband is working 2. Lisa's husband is unemployed 3. [BLANK] 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking for a better job 2. [BLANK]
[if Marital Status 2, 3, or 4]	[if Labor Status 2 or 4]
<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] 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Looking for work 4. [BLANK]
	[if Labor Status 5]
	[BLANK]

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