Issue Brief: Social Welfare and Socioeconomic Status/Class

Key Words
Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Food Stamps, Medicaid, Earned Income Tax Credit, low income, higher education, career, poverty, unemployment, Great Recession

Description
Modern perceptions of welfare recipients often generalize beneficiaries as being of low socioeconomic status. While all recipients are low-income, the recent crisis has created a subset of welfare recipients from higher socioeconomic statuses.

Key Points
• The stereotyping of welfare recipients has been occurring since its inception, and has been especially perpetrated by our nation’s leaders.
• The welfare pool is diverse, in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status.
• Among the newest welfare recipients of higher socioeconomic status are college undergraduates, Ph.Ds, recent graduates, and middle class parents who are unemployed.

Issue Brief
During his 1976 campaign for the presidency, Ronald Reagan cautioned Americans of the indignant recipients of welfare. He claimed, “She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards... She’s got Medicaid, she’s getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names.” Modern perceptions of welfare recipients are often blurred by Reagan’s conception of the welfare queen, a woman who scams the system so meticulously that she ends up richer than us all. This image of the welfare recipient as an impecunious and corrupt scam artist has permeated into current debates surrounding the legitimacy and necessity for welfare programs. However, studies have shown that these caricatures of welfare recipients are baseless. According to a 2002 report by the U.S. Department of Labor, only 1.9% of total unemployment insurance cases were fraudulent. Misconceptions of the welfare recipient are abundant, with anecdotes oftentimes involving the avariciousness of the lower class. In actuality, though, many recent welfare recipients can be classified into a higher socioeconomic status.

It is evident that social welfare programs were designed with an intent to help low-income individuals achieve a basic standard of living. Programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp program) have helped millions of individuals feed and house their families. Eligibility requirements dictate that recipients must be low income earners in order to receive assistance. However, socioeconomic status is composed of more than income alone. The American Psychological Association defines socioeconomic status as “the social standing or class of an individual or group... measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation.” Thus, an individual can have a low income and not belong to a low socioeconomic class (graduate students, for instance).
The Great Recession of the late 2000’s plunged nearly thirty million people into unemployment, and an even greater amount into underemployment. These individuals who once had a sufficient salary to sustain their families now had no salary at all, or a significantly reduced wage in the case of the underemployed. As a result, many middle class families became eligible for unemployment benefits or for wage assistance under the Earned Income Tax Credit, a service that the government promotes as “money in your pocket.” In these cases, recipients receive cash to balance their cut in income.

Education and occupation are two thirds of what comprises an individual’s socioeconomic status. Accordingly, a Ph.D. recipient has a higher social class than a high school dropout working as a fast-food fry cook. Yet, they both qualify for welfare assistance. The number of Ph.D. holders receiving welfare assistance more than tripled during the Great Recession. The recession has produced an economic climate in which people of increasingly higher socioeconomic statuses are in need of financial assistance. There have even been cases of universities encouraging their students to enroll in welfare food assistance programs. Portland State University’s nutrition webpage has information outlining the ease and convenience of using the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program. The university cites advantages for students who participate in SNAP, such as deferment of student loans. Furthermore, Oregon and Massachusetts are two states that have state-wide nonprofit initiatives specifically dedicated to helping college students navigate the SNAP application process.

As reported by the USDA, over 50% of all U.S. citizens benefit from SNAP at some point in their lives. The face of the welfare recipient is changing, especially in the harsh economic climate produced by the Great Recession. Those who have lost their jobs have had trouble finding new ones, and when they do, the positions often come with reduced wages, benefits, and compensation. Individuals with qualities typically associated with higher socioeconomic status (namely students and formerly middle class families) are relying on welfare assistance for food, shelter, and wages in these tough economic times.
This graph shows the unemployment rate for workers age 16 and older, from 1948 to 2013. The Great Recession caused the largest peak in unemployment since the early 1980s, when stagflation caused by high prices drove down the health of the overall economy. It is important to note that the unemployment figures do not account for the high number of underemployed individuals who accepted jobs they were overqualified for, temporary work, or part-time jobs.
Being a college student is hard work! Not just academically, but financially too. As tuition increases, many students struggle to make ends meet. Sometimes grants and loans don’t stretch far enough and students are forced to work low-paying jobs. For some, this still is not enough to get by. Having to choose between buying groceries or a $125 textbook is a tough decision that many students have been forced to make at some point in their college careers. As if taking a full class load wasn’t stressful enough!

Melissa Bruninga-Matteau, a medieval-history Ph.D. and adjunct professor who gets food stamps: “I’ve been able to make enough to live on. Until now.”

Photo taken from Portland State University’s Nutrition webpage. The university promotes SNAP as a means for college students to reduce their financial burdens.

Photo taken from an article in The Chronicle about a number of graduate students, Ph.D. candidates, and recent graduates who rely on food stamps.
Works Cited


General References

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www.urban.org

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org

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www.fns.usda.gov

Department of Health and Human Services
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