



# 50 Years After LBJ's War on Poverty

A Study of American Attitudes About Work,  
Economic Opportunity, and the Social Safety Net

Research sponsored by the Half in Ten Education Fund and the Center for American Progress

Survey design, analysis, and report by John Halpin, Center for American Progress  
Karl Agne, GBA Strategies

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# Introduction and summary

Fifty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared an “unconditional War on Poverty” in his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964. The War on Poverty created a number of important federal and state initiatives that remain in place today—from Head Start to nutrition assistance to Medicare and Medicaid. These initiatives, coupled with the civil rights advances of the era and the overall strong economy in the 1960s, led to a reduction in the number of people living in poverty from around 19 percent to a historic low of 11.1 percent by the early 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

President Johnson described his War on Poverty as a continuation of the basic American bargain that all people should be given a decent shot at achieving their life goals and securing stable lives built on genuine freedom and economic opportunity:

*This budget, and this year’s legislative program, are designed to help each and every American citizen fulfill his basic hopes—his hopes for a fair chance to make good; his hopes for fair play from the law; his hopes for a full-time job on full-time pay; his hopes for a decent home for his family in a decent community; his hopes for a good school for his children with good teachers; and his hopes for security when faced with sickness or unemployment or old age.<sup>2</sup>*

Since the start of the War on Poverty, however, much has changed in our society and our economy; some developments are positive and some negative. Women, people of color, the elderly, and people with disabilities are more strongly protected by law and more integrated into parts of our society and economy than they were in the 1960s. At the same time, many people continue to suffer from ongoing discrimination at work and in terms of wages. What’s more, economic opportunities, such as decent-paying jobs, a secure retirement, affordable health care, and education, have diminished for many Americans in the bottom end of the income distribution as income and wealth have taken off for those at the very top. The financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the subsequent Great Recession further highlighted the breakdown of the U.S. economy and the ongoing struggle many people face finding employment, decent wages, and secure and supportive communities for raising and educating their children.

With this context, we set out to determine what Americans know and believe about poverty and assess their retrospective opinions about the War on Poverty itself and their support or opposition to new proposals for fighting poverty in the future. This report includes results from focus groups and a major survey of more than 2,000 American adults, including significant oversamples of Millennials, African Americans, and Latinos, to assess attitudes among these important constituencies.

The most important findings from the research include:

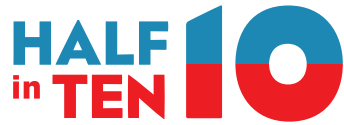
- **One-quarter to one-third of Americans—and even higher percentages of Millennials and people of color—continue to experience direct economic hardship.** Sixty-one percent of Americans say their family’s income is falling behind the cost of living, compared to just 8 percent who feel they are getting ahead and 29 percent who feel they are staying even. Twenty-five percent to 34 percent of Americans report serious problems falling behind in rent, mortgage, or utilities payments or being unable to buy enough food, afford necessary medical care, or keep up with minimum credit card payments. While these numbers have somewhat retreated over the past five years, they are still shockingly high, and the disparities across demographic groups underscore how uneven the current recovery has been.
- **A majority of Americans have a direct personal connection to poverty.** Fifty-four percent of Americans say that someone in their immediate or extended families is poor, a figure that has actually increased 2 percentage points since we conducted our first poll in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Nearly two in three African Americans (65 percent) report a direct connection to poverty, while 59 percent of Hispanics say the same.
- **Americans vastly overestimate the annual income necessary to be officially considered poor.** Perhaps expressing a more realistic understanding of the economy than official government measures currently capture, Americans on average estimate that it takes just more than \$30,000 in annual income for a family of four to be considered officially in poverty—about \$7,000 more than the government’s poverty line of \$23,550 for a household of four.<sup>4</sup> Most respondents in the focus groups were shocked to hear that the official poverty line was as low as it is; many suggested that it represents a disconnect with the reality of rising prices over the past few years. Americans on average also report that it would take more than \$55,000 in annual income to be considered out of poverty and safely in the middle class.

- **Americans now believe that nearly 40 percent of their fellow citizens are living in poverty.** When we conducted our 2008 poll, 13.2 percent of Americans were living below the federal poverty line, but our survey found that Americans guessed the number to be 29 percent. Today, with unemployment closer to pre-financial crisis levels and a recovery ostensibly underway for several years, government statistics tell us that 15 percent of Americans live below the poverty level. The public, however, believes that number is now 39 percent—a stunning 10-percentage-point increase that flies in the face of economic indicators such as the unemployment rate, consumer confidence, the financial markets, and gross domestic product, or GDP.
- **Americans strongly believe that poverty is primarily the result of a failed economy rather than the result of personal decisions and lack of effort.** In a forced choice test of ideas, nearly two in three Americans (64 percent) agree more with a structural argument about the causes of poverty. A majority agree that “Most people who live in poverty are poor because their jobs don’t pay enough, they lack good health care and education, and things cost too much for them to save and get ahead,” underscoring the current economy’s failings in the areas of wages, health care, education, and cost of living. In contrast, only 25 percent of Americans agree more with a personal cause: “Most people who live in poverty are poor because they make bad decisions or act irresponsibly in their own lives.” Even white conservatives and libertarians prefer the structural vision of a failed economy to personal reasons for poverty by a wide margin of 63 percent to 29 percent, respectively.
- **Retrospective evaluations of the War on Poverty are mixed, but Americans across ideological and partisan lines believe the government has a responsibility to use its resources to fight poverty.** Americans do not generally have a favorable impression of the term “the War on Poverty” without additional context about the programs and goals associated with the larger project. But after introducing information to describe the War on Poverty and its impact, an overwhelming percentage of Americans—86 percent—agrees that the government has a responsibility to use some of its resources to combat poverty. Moreover, a majority (61 percent) feels that the War on Poverty has made a difference—albeit not a major difference—in achieving its goals; 41 percent say the War on Poverty has made a minor difference; and 20 percent say it has made a major difference. Retrospective evaluations of the War on Poverty, however, are heavily divided by ideology, partisanship, and race. Nearly 7 in 10 (69 percent) white liberals and progressives believe the War on Poverty has worked, and more than 6 in 10 (64 percent) white conservatives and libertarians believe the opposite.

- **Despite mixed feelings about the original War on Poverty, there is strong support for a more realistic goal of reducing poverty by half over the next 10 years.** Asked whether they would support or oppose “the president and Congress setting a national goal to cut poverty in the United States in half within 10 years,” 7 in 10 Americans said they would support such a goal—40 percent of the public would *strongly* support the goal—and only 22 percent would oppose it. This figure is quite similar to the 74 percent support reported in the first study in 2008. Support for a national goal of cutting poverty in half is very strong among African Americans (87 percent support and 58 percent strongly support) and reaches roughly 80 percent among both Millennials (79 percent) and Latinos (79 percent). Sixty-five percent of whites support this goal, as do a majority of Democrats (89 percent), independents (66 percent), and Republicans (54 percent).
- **The public is clear about its priorities for reducing poverty: jobs, wages, and education.** Asked which two areas they believe are most important for new investments, 40 percent of Americans choose creating jobs and increasing wages; 30 percent choose job training and workplace preparation; 25 percent choose elementary and secondary education; 23 percent choose college access and affordability; and 21 percent choose early childhood education.
- **Americans also express very strong support for a number of policies to help reduce poverty rates with particular intensity around jobs, wages, and education but also on more traditional safety net items.** Of the 11 policy ideas tested, five proposals received 80 percent or higher total support and 50 percent or higher strong support from Americans. These five policy proposals are: help low-wage workers afford quality child care (86 percent total support and 52 percent strong support); expand nutrition assistance to provide families with healthy food and enough to eat (85 percent total support and 50 percent strong support); make universal pre-kindergarten available for all children (84 percent total support and 59 percent strong support); expand publicly funded scholarships to help more families afford college (84 percent total support and 54 percent strong support); and increase the minimum wage and make sure it rises with inflation (80 percent total support and 58 percent strong support). A second tier of anti-poverty proposals includes ideas for expanded tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC, Child Tax Credit, and access to affordable health coverage, as well as proposals for a new national jobs program and more refinancing of mortgages. Roughly three-quarters of those polled support these proposals, and more than 40 percent strongly support them.



Policymakers should feel confident that the American public will support efforts to expand economic opportunity, increase access to good jobs and wages, and maintain a robust social safety net. Harsh negative attitudes about the poor that seemingly defined political discussions throughout the 1980s and 1990s have given way to public recognition that many Americans—poor and middle class alike—are facing many pressures trying to stay afloat and get ahead in the difficult economic environment. Supporters of anti-poverty efforts should not be complacent in their efforts, however, and should recognize that although Americans back government action to reduce poverty, questions remain about the structure and scope of these efforts and how effective they have been over time.



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