

**How Research in the Social Sciences has Influenced American Attitudes about Poverty  
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Recent events in Baltimore have focused the nation's attention not merely on police-community relations, but on the causes, characteristics, and consequences of chronic poverty. As the response of some policymakers and media sources to these events demonstrate, however, long-standing assumptions about poverty persist. The need for research to illuminate these issues and revise long-standing attitudes about poverty and the poor is, therefore, more important than ever.

For millennia, particularly in the West, poverty has been linked to individual moral failure, cultural deficiencies, or the absence of Divine grace. During the past century, social scientists in the U.S. have attempted through their research to revise these persistent myths with limited success. They have demonstrated the actual extent and nature of poverty; identified its environmental causes; analyzed its short and long-term multifaceted effects; established the relationship between poverty and race, and poverty and gender, poverty and health, poverty and life expectancy. This research has also contextualized the lives of people at the margins of society; created alternative solutions to chronic social problems; and, most recently, applied an evidence-based approach to evaluate interventions designed to address the symptoms of poverty.

Although some 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers drew attention to the environmental sources of poverty and its accompanying physical and social ills, the Scientific Charity Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century represented the first systematic effort to identify the causes of poverty through social research. In 1894, in the aftermath of a devastating depression, the COS commissioned a study in New York by Amos Warner which refuted many prevailing judgments about the immigrant poor, even as they reflected late Victorian morality and Social Darwinism.

While the COS used this research to integrate a “scientific approach” into its work with poor individuals and families, researchers in the Settlement House Movement challenged the link between poverty and morality, focused on the environmental causes and effects of poverty, and used research as a tool for policy advocacy. Ten years after Warner’s study, Robert Hunter, a settlement house worker at Hull House in Chicago and University Settlement in New York, completed the first comprehensive scientific study of poverty in the U.S. Contrary to popular opinion, Hunter found that many, if not most, of the poor were in poverty as a result of illness, unemployment, or old age. His research provided new insights into the extent of poverty in the U.S., its impact on immigrants’ cultures, and the limitations of existing social services. It promoted public discussion of poverty and the need for comprehensive reform.

In the next decade, other social work researchers like Mary van Kleeck, a fellow in the College Settlement Association in New York, and later Director of Industrial Studies at the Russell Sage Foundation, and Josephine Goldmark, a resident at the Henry Street Settlement in New York, produced a wide range of reports analyzing such poverty-related issues as child labor, unemployment, and working conditions in factories, mines, and mills, particularly among women and girls. Van Kleeck’s research drew national attention for the first time to the relationship between low wages and poverty – an issue that persists to this day – and to the absence of laws addressing unsafe industrial and social conditions.

Goldmark was an aggressive investigator of these labor conditions, including the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and wrote prolifically about the health effects of industrial work, low wages, and long hours on workers, particularly women and children. In the landmark 1908 case of *Muller v. Oregon*, she helped write the precedent-setting Brandeis Brief which used

social science data in a Supreme Court brief for the first time, something which is now commonplace. Their research led to laws banning child labor and regulating working hours.

During this period, statistical research on juvenile delinquency and tenement housing by Edith and Grace Abbott, the first women admitted to the sociology faculty at the University of Chicago, helped develop strategies to improve urban conditions. Ethnographic and community-based research by African Americans such as W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, and George Edmund Haynes illuminated the stark conditions African Americans endured in both the urban North and the rural South and brought the issues of lynching and chronic unemployment to the public's attention for the first time. Research by social workers at the Children's Bureau on maternal and child health ultimately produced the Sheppard Towner Act, the first federal health care legislation. Throughout the Progressive Era, researchers like Paul Kellogg conducted comprehensive surveys in cities like Pittsburgh that demonstrated the interrelationship between poverty and a variety of other social ills. The combined impact of this social scientific research eventually provided the foundation for many policies that emerged during the New Deal.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the goal of most of this research was to produce reforms that would manage change in an orderly manner, create a society free of class conflict, and restore a lost "organic community." While researchers hoped to enhance awareness of the environmental causes of poverty primarily among elites, they largely regarded adaptation, assimilation, and adjustment, not systemic change, as the solution to these problems and had little overall effect on the attitudes of mainstream Americans until the Great Depression.

By the 1920s, three different approaches to the use of social scientific research emerged. Researchers in the COS shifted from social investigation to individual diagnosis. Their allies in the Child Guidance Movement infused psychodynamic theory into studies such as a delinquency

prevention project supported by the Commonwealth Fund. They used case records and interviews with staff, the earliest example of “intervention research,” in an attempt to transform subjective charity work into objective social casework with families. This created the rational-scientific framework for social work practice which continues to be influential today.

The newly formed Health and Welfare Councils, the research arm of the Community Chest Movement, the forerunner of today’s United Way, developed a complementary approach. They used survey research to promote strategies that could help assimilate millions of new immigrants. Other community researchers, such as Mary Parker Follett in the Cincinnati Social Unit Experiment and Eduard Lindeman, however, used research in low-income communities for different purposes: to create an industrial democracy and a “new state,” characterized by enhanced civic participation. Lindeman’s research reflected “an integrated, holistic, interdisciplinary perspective on human behavior and social problems.” He believed that research must be informed by values and lead to constructive action. During this decade, in which the Ku Klux Klan reached the height of its political power, African American researchers struggled to use research to bring the consequences of racism into the mainstream of social concern.

This split among researchers’ approach to poverty continued during the Great Depression. Helen Hall’s studies of unemployment in the late 1920s and early 1930s, sponsored by the National Federation of Settlements, demonstrated that the roots of unemployment and poverty were systemic, not individual. During the New Deal, university-based scholars and researchers in rapidly growing public welfare departments used more advanced statistical analyses, new qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, and, significantly, innovative forms of dissemination to illuminate the consequences of poverty and to promote a range of alternative solutions, from rural co-operatives to the first federal welfare state policies.

Researchers in private Family Service Agencies, the descendants of the COS, however, took a different approach. They focused on such issues as inter-generational conflict among immigrant families and emphasized the primacy of individual/family relations. By the late 1930s, their research about poverty had primarily become “inquiry into the *techniques used by social workers* in meeting certain human problems, whether these be individual or community-wide.” Ironically, nearly all of these researchers overlooked the conditions of women and racial minorities, the populations most affected by poverty. It was not until a Swedish social scientist, Gunnar Myrdal, published *Race: An American Dilemma* in 1944 that the connection between poverty and race was made explicit to a wide audience.

These different approaches to research underscored three recurrent tensions among social scientists. One was the tension between individual and social causation, reflected in the distinction between a “Problem Focus” and an “Environmental Focus” to poverty. Another involved disputes between proponents of subjective and objective conceptions of research – that is, to what extent advocacy-oriented research violated principles of scientific investigation and the tenets of professionalism. A third area of disagreement was whether social science should provide the knowledge for formulating anti-poverty policies or for only measuring their results.

The devastating effects of World War II led to increased emphasis on research that focused on individual issues of adjustment, especially among low-income and immigrant youth and families, and on studies that evaluated the effectiveness of services designed to address the long-term effects of the war. In Christopher Lasch’s words, social scientists became “doctors to a sick society.” The repressive political climate of McCarthyism led social scientists to adopt a more conservative view of the relationship between social research and social change. They

largely abandoned the study of social and community issues. As a result, “by the end of the 1940s, the connection between research and social policy had largely disappeared.”

Ironically, this focus on individual deviance ultimately produced research that asked why widespread poverty persisted in an era of unprecedented prosperity. This research took several forms. Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin developed “opportunity theory” to revise traditional explanations about the causes of juvenile delinquency. Over 45 years ago, in *Children of the Storm*, Andrew Billingsley analyzed the racial implications of the nation’s child welfare system, a theme that Jonathan Kozol examined in such books as *Rachel and Her Children* and that social work researchers such as Richard Barth have explored for over three decades. Their work led to programs that emphasize strengthening families as a means of protecting children’s well-being.

In the 1950s and 1960s, research by Oscar Lewis and Michael Harrington identified the patterns of cultural adaptation produced by chronic poverty. Their goal was to heighten Americans’ awareness of the extent and consequences of poverty even during the post-war boom. Unfortunately, their “culture of poverty” thesis was inverted by policymakers and the media as a means to explain the causes of poverty rather than its effects. This belief that cultural norms produce poverty continues to influence Americans’ attitudes today.

Since the 1970s, social science research about poverty in the U.S. has largely focused on the conditions of specific marginalized populations – e.g., African Americans, single mothers, children in foster care. William Julius Wilson demonstrated the devastating consequences of deindustrialization on the African American community. Kathy Edin studied the impact of welfare reform and mass incarceration on low-income women and men, and on their ability to form stable families. Public health researchers have revealed the long-term effects of poverty

and physical and mental health. Research reported in yesterday's *NY Times* highlighted the connections between children's poverty and the place where they grow up.

An advantage of this approach is that it emphasizes the significance of racial, gender, and geographic differences in shaping the dimensions and characteristics of poverty and provides the basis for more custom-tailored policy responses. A disadvantage is that it essentializes certain groups and reduces the potential for developing more universal, politically acceptable measures to address poverty. This would be ironic in light of research by Mark Rank which found that a majority of Americans and 91% of African Americans are poor at some point in their lifetime and the work by Isabel Sawhill which concluded that about 100 million Americans would be considered poor if poverty was measured accurately. One can only speculate on the impact on American attitudes about poverty and the poor if such findings were more widely disseminated.

How can social science affect American attitudes towards poverty and shape potential responses to this chronic issue today? How can research be scientific and still serve the goal of social justice? In closing, here are a few suggestions: We should balance research on the effectiveness of interventions that address the symptoms of poverty and analyses of the relationship between these symptoms and the structural changes that are producing greater inequality. These changes include the impact of economic globalization on local economies, the changing character of employment, and the potential roles of government, NGOs, & the private sector in the welfare system of the future. We should create studies that enable marginalized populations to define their own realities by making them full partners in all phases of the research. We should make explicit the politics of the knowledge generation process and the role of power relations in the process of doing research. Finally, we should disseminate our findings

more widely and more creatively to influence public attitudes more effectively and make Americans better able to use them to improve the quality of their lives. Thank you.