

**Measuring Support for Welfare Policies:
Implications for the Effects of Race and Deservingness Stereotypes**

Kirill Zhirkov¹, Kristin Lunz Trujillo^{2,3}, and C. Daniel Myers⁴

¹ University of Virginia

² Harvard University

³ Northeastern University

⁴ University of Minnesota

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Abstract

What are the relative contributions of stereotypes about race and deservingness of welfare recipients to Americans' opinions on welfare policies? A recent study that employs a conjoint-experimental method to measure stereotypes suggests that Americans' stereotypes of welfare recipients as undeserving drive negative attitudes towards welfare, while stereotypes of welfare recipients as Black have little effect on these attitudes (Myers, Zhirkov, and Lunz Trujillo 2022). In this note, we suggest that this finding is produced by the study's measure of welfare attitudes which includes several questions implicating deservingness. We replicate this study using different measures of welfare opinions that directly ask respondents about spending on specific welfare programs. We show that when support for welfare is measured using questions that do not implicate deservingness of welfare recipients, stereotypes about race are at least as strongly associated with opposition to welfare as are stereotypes about deservingness. These results have implications for the debate on the relative importance of racial animus and perceptions of deservingness in Americans' opposition to welfare programs, and for the measurement of policy opinions in surveys that can be useful beyond the case of welfare in the United States.

Keywords: conjoint experiments, public opinion, stereotypes, survey methods, welfare

A rich literature in political science explores Americans' opposition to welfare programs. The most common explanations for such opposition deal with stereotypes about welfare recipients. One prominent body of work argues that opposition to welfare is rooted in the United States' history of racial animus; in other words, Americans oppose welfare because they stereotype welfare recipients as being Black (Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2019; Gilens 1999). But other work argues that opposition to welfare is rooted in a universal tendency to oppose help for free-riders; in other words, Americans oppose welfare because they stereotype welfare recipients as being unwilling to work and thus undeserving of help (Petersen 2012; Aarøe and Petersen 2014). Part of the difficulty in adjudicating between these claims is the difficulty in measuring the content of individuals' stereotypes, and thus their impact on attitudes towards welfare. Importantly, race and deservingness stereotypes are likely intertwined (Gilens 1999), making it difficult to establish how much welfare attitudes are impacted by perceptions of deservingness versus purely racial stereotyping.

In a recent study, Myers, Zhirkov, and Lunz Trujillo (2022; henceforth MZLT) propose using a conjoint experiment to measure the content of stereotypes of welfare recipients. The advantage of this method is its ability to isolate and compare the relative importance of race and deservingness to individuals' stereotypes of welfare recipients. This is achieved by independently randomizing these characteristics in descriptions of hypothetical welfare recipients and then asking respondents to rate how much the person is "typical" of welfare recipients in general. MZLT then use this measure to predict support for welfare. They find that stereotyping welfare recipients as undeserving is strongly associated with opposition to welfare, but also that stereotyping welfare recipients as Black is only weakly and inconsistently related to opposition to welfare. This weak association between stereotyping welfare recipients as Black

and welfare attitudes challenges work in the discipline documenting the association between perceiving welfare recipients as being Black and opposing welfare.

In this note, we suggest that MZLT's finding is an artifact of their measurement of welfare attitudes. MZLT use a common measure of welfare support (Gilens 1999; Levy 2021), which asks about attitudes toward both welfare policies and welfare recipients. However, some of the questions indirectly implicate the deservingness of welfare recipients.¹ We hypothesize that the strong association MZLT find between stereotypes of welfare recipients as undeserving and welfare attitudes is a result of using a dependent variable that is itself partly a measure of perceptions of welfare recipients' deservingness.

In this note, we replicate the MZLT's study using a different measure of welfare opinions that simply asks respondents about their spending preferences generally and on specific welfare programs. We show that with this new measure, which does not implicate attitudes to welfare recipients or perceptions that they are deserving, stereotypes about race are at least as consequential for welfare opinions as stereotypes about deservingness. We also demonstrate that the effects are strongest when respondents are directly asked about their support for spending on "welfare" rather than about specific welfare programs. Our findings have important implications for the long-standing debate about the roots of Americans' opposition to welfare, as well as for the measurement of Americans' opinions on welfare and best practices in survey design.

Research Design

We exactly replicate the design of MZLT's conjoint experiment. Briefly, the experiment presents survey respondents with 30 profiles that describe individuals in terms of seven attributes, including race and "deservingness," operationalized as whether they are employed, unemployed

¹ For instance, "Most people on welfare could get by without it if they really tried."

but seeking a job, or unemployed and not seeking a job.² It asks respondents to rate, on a 1–10 scale, how typical the person described in the profile is of welfare recipients. Since the value of each attribute in each profile is independently drawn, the results can be used to produce a measure of each attribute’s importance to the welfare recipient stereotype. MZLT estimate the content of each individual respondent’s stereotype of welfare recipients as individual marginal component effects (IMCEs; Zhirkov 2022), and then use these individual estimates in a regression model to predict support for welfare. Like MZLT, we recruited a sample of non-Hispanic white U.S. adult respondents on the Lucid platform ($n = 1,317$).³

Table 1. Measures of welfare opinions

Attitudes:

- Most people on welfare could get by without it if they really tried. (*reversed*)
- The high cost of welfare puts too big a burden on the average taxpayer. (*reversed*)
- When people can’t support themselves, the government should help by giving them enough money to meet their basic needs.
- Most people on welfare would rather be working than taking money from the government.

Answers from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*

Policy, 1 item:

- What about spending on welfare?

Answers from 1 = *Decreased substantially* to 7 = *Increased substantially*

Policy, 4 items:

- What about spending on TANF that provides money to low-income families?
- What about spending on Medicaid that subsidizes healthcare for low-income individuals?
- What about spending on SNAP also known as food stamps for low-income individuals?
- What about spending on housing assistance for low-income individuals?

Answers from 1 = *Decreased substantially* to 7 = *Increased substantially*

Note. Policy items included a preamble about “ways of spending tax money” (see Supplementary Material for the full text).

² For the full list of attributes and an example of a conjoint profile as presented to respondents, see respectively Table S1 and Figure S1 in Supplementary Material.

³ Sample demographics are presented in Table S2 in Supplementary Material.

The sole difference between our studies concerned the measurement of support for welfare (Table 1). In the original study, MZLT measure it using respondents' agreement with four statements about welfare recipients and welfare policies (*attitudes measure*); they justify this by noting its use in other prominent studies. Our survey used two different measures. First, we asked respondents a simple question on whether spending on welfare should be decreased or increased (*one-item policy measure*). Second, our survey also included four questions regarding spending on specific welfare programs: TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), Medicaid, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and housing assistance (*four-item policy measure*). Since some respondents could be unfamiliar with names of the programs, the questions also clarified their specific purposes. The four items were combined into an additive index (Cronbach's alpha = .91).

In our regression models, we control for several factors including individualism and racial attitudes (see Supplementary Material for the survey questions), as well as respondent age, gender, income level, education level, and partisanship.

Results

In our analysis, we estimate three OLS regression models that predict welfare opinions using the conjoint measure of individuals' stereotype content and control variables.⁴ In model one, we replicate MZLT's results with the *attitudes measure* using their data. In the other two models, we estimate the same regression specification but use one-item and four-item policy measures.

These two models use our original survey data. Results of the three models are presented in

⁴ We also replicate the standard conjoint analysis that describes overall stereotypes about welfare recipients. Its results are presented in Figure S2 in Supplementary Material. They confirm MZLT's result that employment status is the most important attribute in terms of stereotype content.

Figure 1. For space considerations, we focus on the results for race and deservingness stereotype dimensions. The full regression results can be found in Table S3 in Supplementary Material.

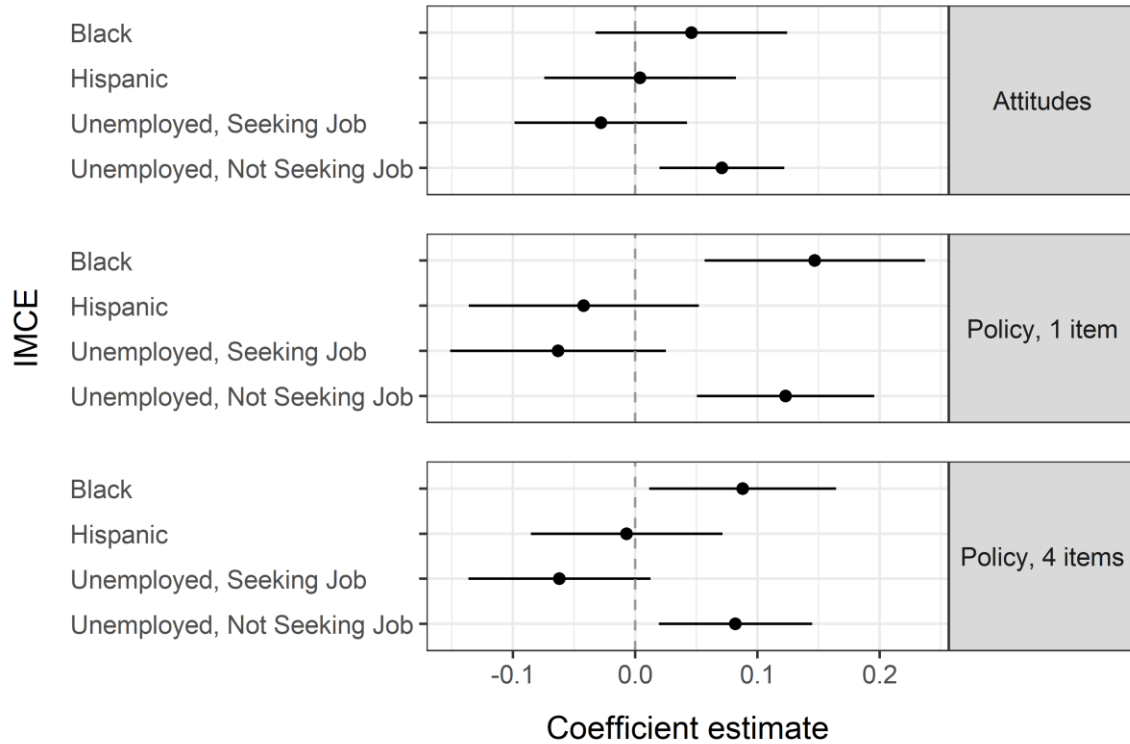


Figure 1. Effects of race and deservingness stereotypes on support for welfare
Note. Controls: other stereotype dimensions (gender, marital status, having children, immigration status, criminal record), demographics, partisanship, racial conservatism, and individualism. 95% confidence intervals shown. For full results, see Table S3 in Supplementary Material.

Results show that, when the attitude measure is used, stereotyping welfare recipients as being non-white does not significantly predict welfare opinions whereas stereotyping welfare recipients as being undeserving (being unemployed and not looking for a job) does. However, models that use the policy measures of welfare support find stereotyping welfare recipients as Black to significantly suppress support for welfare spending among non-Hispanic whites. Interestingly, the effects of both race and deservingness stereotypes are almost 1.5 times stronger when the one-item measure (spending on “welfare”) rather than a four-item measure is used.

Overall, the attitude-based measure seems to underestimate the role of racial stereotypes about welfare recipients in white Americans' opposition to welfare.⁵

Conclusion

In this note, we have replicated the study by MZLT that explores how white Americans' stereotypes about welfare recipients predict policy opinions. In our replication, we use a different outcome measure that directly asks respondents about spending on welfare policies and, importantly, does not include questions that implicate the deservingness of welfare recipients. We demonstrate that, when the direct spending measure is used, the effect of racial stereotypes on opposition to welfare is at least as strong as the effect of deservingness stereotypes.

This result has three important implications. First, using a policy-based measure of welfare attitudes, MZLT's conjoint measure of stereotype content supports both racial-animus-based and deservingness-based explanations of American's opposition to welfare. Second, previous research on the relationship between stereotypes about welfare recipients and welfare policy opinions that use what we refer to as the attitude-based measure may have underestimated the effect of race. In other words, questions directly asking about actions, such as spending, may be a better measure of policy opinions than questions dealing with more ambiguous attitudes, such as general positivity or negativity towards the policy itself or its beneficiaries. This is particularly true in cases where attitudinal measures implicate beliefs that are also used as predictors—such as those about deservingness of policy beneficiaries.

Third, among the two variants of the spending measure, the one-item version exhibits better results than the four-item one. Even though, as expected, the one-item measure shows

⁵ Even though it has not been the main purpose of this replication, we also find that stereotypes about immigration status do not predict support for welfare when spending-based measures are used (see Table S3 in Supplementary Material). MZLT have found a significant negative effect of stereotyping welfare recipients as undocumented immigrants using an attitudes-based measure of welfare support.

lower reliability (and thus greater standard errors), the estimated effects are stronger in magnitude. One likely reason is knowledge: it is easier for respondents to recognize the term “welfare” than to read acronyms and descriptions of specific welfare programs. In addition, “welfare” has been politicized negatively in ways that specific programs have not, making the latter more relevant to political opinions (Gilens 1999). Taken together, face validity seems to be a more important measurement quality than reliability, at least in this specific application. Notably, while our results challenge some of MZLT’s findings, our analysis with a face-valid measure of support for welfare spending provides support for their more general claim that conjoint experiments are a valid measure of stereotype content.

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Supplementary Material

Survey Items

Preamble to spending questions

“We would like to ask you about various programs on which the government spends the public's tax money. In the questions to follow, we would like to get your opinions about some of them. For each, please use the scale provided to indicate whether you think spending should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same.”

Individualism

We measure individualism using the four items from Feldman et al. (2020):

“Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.”

- Even if people try hard, they often cannot reach their goals. (reversed)
- Any person who is willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding.
- Even if people are ambitious, they often cannot succeed. (reversed)
- If people work hard, they almost always get what they want.

The question order was randomized, and answers were coded from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree.”

FIRE

We measure racial attitudes using the FIRE scale by DeSante and Smith (2020):

“Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.”

- I am fearful of people of other races.
- White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin. (reversed)
- Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.
- I am angry that racism exists. (reversed)

The question order was randomized, and answers were coded from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree.”

Table S1. Attributes for profiles in conjoint experiment

Attribute	Values
Race/Ethnicity	White
	Black
	Hispanic
Gender	Male
	Female
Marital Status	Married
	Not Married
Has Children	<i>No: Zero</i>
	<i>Yes: One, Two, Three</i>
Immigration Status	U.S. Citizen
	Green-card holder
	Undocumented/illegal immigrant
Employment Status	Employed
	Unemployed, seeking employment
	Unemployed, not seeking employment
Criminal Record	No criminal record
	<i>Yes, drug-related: DUI, Heroin possession, Drug sales</i>
	<i>Yes, violent: Aggravated assault, Robbery, Threatening with a weapon</i>

Note. Collapsed attribute values are in italics.

Table S2. Respondents' demographics

Mean age	49.6
Male-to-female ratio	50.5 / 49.5
Median income	\$35,000 to \$39,999
College-educated	42.6%
Democrats-to-independents -to-Republicans	30.6 / 34.0 / 35.4

Table S3. Full regression results

	Attitudes	Policy, 1 item	Policy, 4 items
Black	0.05 (0.04)	0.15** (0.05)	0.09* (0.04)
Hispanic	0.00 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)
Female	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)
Not Married	0.04 (0.04)	0.08 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)
Married	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.03)
Green-Card Holder	0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Undocumented/Illegal Immigrant	0.09** (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)
Unemployed, Seeking Employment	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)
Unemployed, Not Seeking Employment	0.07** (0.03)	0.12** (0.04)	0.08** (0.03)
Yes, Drug-related	0.06 (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)
Yes, Violent	-0.01 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Racial conservatism (FIRE)	0.29*** (0.05)	0.17*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.03)
Individualism	0.28*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.03)
Age	0.11*** (0.02)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)
Female	0.00 (0.00)	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.08)
Income	-0.00 (0.09)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Education	0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Partisanship (Republican)	0.02** (0.01)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)

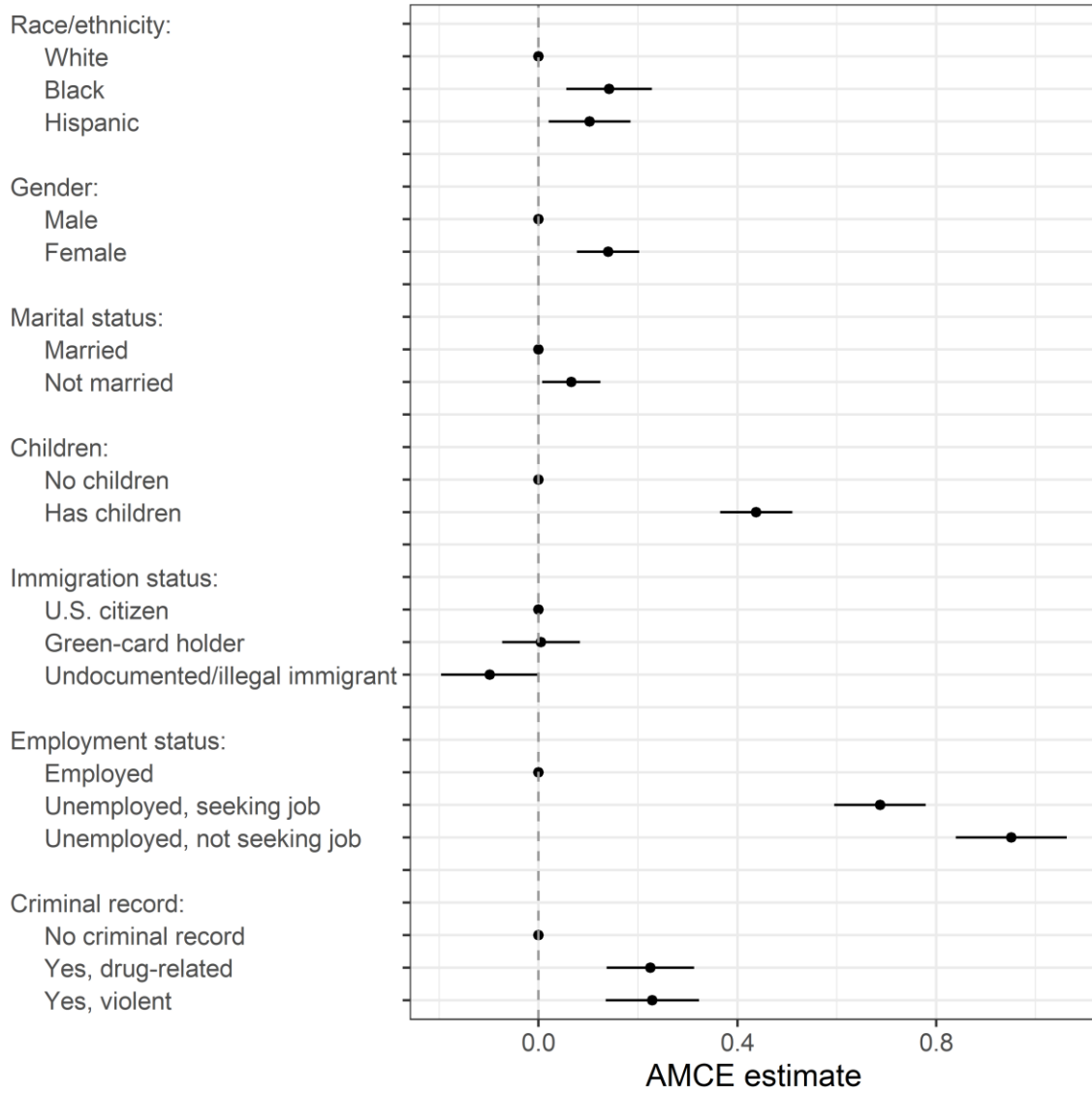


Figure S2. Effects of profile attribute values on stereotype ratings

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