

FAIR STUDY

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The Poor Will Always Be With Us

Just not on the TV news

By Neil deMause & Steve Rendall



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According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data, 37 million Americans—one in eight—lived below the federal poverty line in 2005, defined as an annual income of \$19,971 for a family of four. Yet poverty touches a far greater share of the population over the course of their lives: A 1997 study by University of Michigan economist Rebecca Blank found that one-third of all U.S. residents will experience government-defined poverty within a 13-year period. The poorest age group is children, with more than one in six living in official poverty at any given time.

Moreover, the poverty line itself, which hasn't been changed in almost four decades except to account for inflation, has been widely criticized as an antiquated measure of actual levels of need. Mark Greenberg, director of the Task Force on Poverty at the Center for American Progress, wrote in the **American Prospect** in April 2007:

Studies of a minimally decent standard of living routinely find that the typical cost is twice as high as the poverty line or higher. Ninety million Americans—nearly one-third of the nation—have household incomes below twice the poverty line, a figure far larger than the official number of 37 million in poverty.

And concern about poverty and inequality, of course, goes beyond those directly affected. According to a public opinion survey by Syracuse University, in 2006, after the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe momentarily placed poverty on the national news agenda, 52 percent of poll respondents called income inequality “a serious problem.” Even the year before Katrina, though, 38 percent of those polled found income inequality “a serious problem” (another 43 percent calling it “somewhat of a problem”).

Moreover, books and television programs delving into the lives of the poor have found notable success in recent years. Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, about living as a low-income worker in America, spent over two years on the **New York Times** bestseller list. *Waging a Living*, a documentary about the working poor aired on **PBS's POV** series (8/29/06), sparked dozens of screenings and discussion groups across the country. The film's producer, Roger Weisberg, told **Extra!** that *Waging a Living* generated “more excitement and community engagement than my previous 25 productions.”

Yet despite being an issue that directly or indirectly affects a huge chunk of the U.S. population, poverty and inequality receive astonishingly little coverage on nightly network newscasts. An exhaustive search of weeknight news broadcasts on **CBS, NBC** and **ABC** found that with

rare exceptions, such as the aftermath of Katrina, poverty and the poor seldom even appear on the evening news—and when they do, they are relegated mostly to merely speaking in platitudes about their hardships.

Methodology and findings

FAIR’s study examined the three weeknight network newscasts—**ABC World News**, **CBS Evening News** and **NBC Nightly News**—over a 38-month period (9/11/03– 10/30/06). We considered every story mentioning the words “poverty,” “low income,” “homeless,” “welfare” or “food stamps,” compiling a list of all stories that dealt with issues of poverty in more than a passing manner.

It was a short list. During the more than three years studied, there were just 58 stories about poverty on the three network newscasts, including just 191 quoted sources.

For perspective, a FAIR study of network newscasts (**Extra!**, 5–6/02) found that in just one year (2001), the three networks included a total of 14,632 sources. Assuming that the nightly news still features a like number of sources per year, that would amount to some 46,000 sources over the 38 months of FAIR’s study, making sources appearing in poverty stories just 0.4 percent of overall sources.

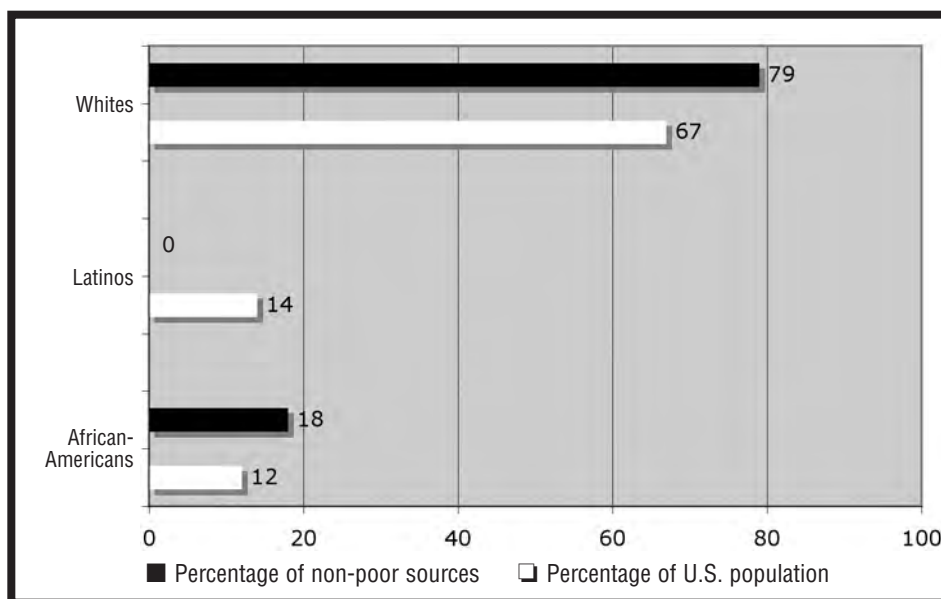
Among individual networks, **NBC** ran the most stories related to poverty, with 25, followed close behind by **CBS** with 22. **ABC** aired only 11 stories addressing poverty in the 38-month study period—a rate of about one every 15 weeks.

Driving home poverty’s low rank as a news priority is the fact that fewer nightly news segments were dedicated to it than to millionaire pop star Michael Jackson. During a study period that saw 58 stories about poverty, the three network programs dedicated 69 stories to Jackson’s legal woes. Of the three networks, only **NBC** aired more stories on poverty than on Michael Jackson (25 to 24). Moreover, in 2005, the year that saw the Katrina disaster and the culmination of Jackson’s rather less consequential trial, the networks deemed the pop star’s legal problems twice as newsworthy as the economic plight of tens of millions of poor citizens, running 44 stories on Michael Jackson to 22 for poverty.

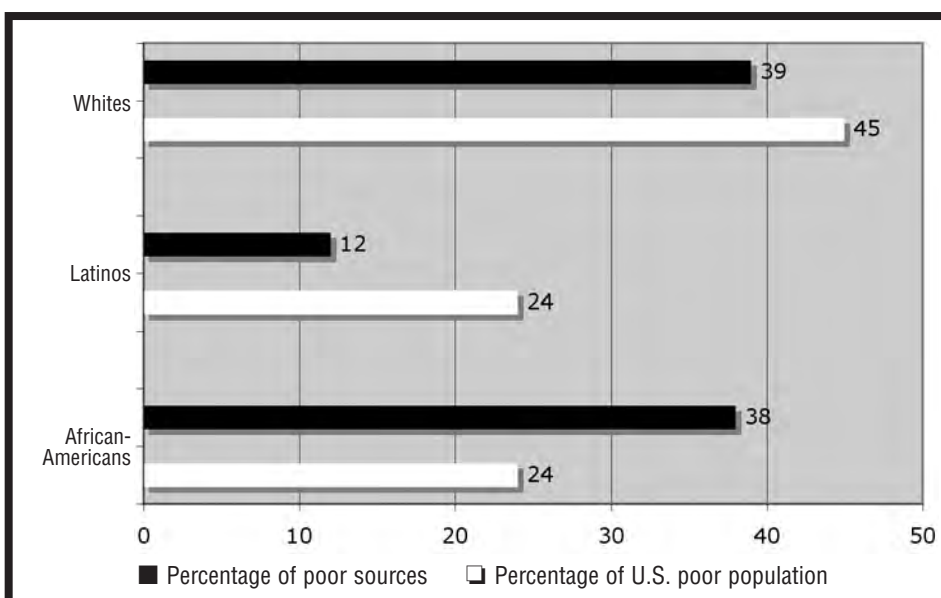
Gender/ethnic breakdown

Non-Latino whites were a majority of the 191 total sources—63 percent, roughly equivalent to their 67 percent share of the population. African-Americans were 26 percent, more than twice their 12 percent of the U.S. population. Latinos were 5 percent of sources, vs. 14 percent of the population, while Native Americans made up 2 percent of sources, vs. 1 percent nationwide. We were unable to identify the gender of three and the race of 10 of the 191 sources (5 percent).

Among the 114 sources who were not people in poverty, non-Latino whites were overrepresented, making up 79 percent of the total; African-Americans also appeared more often than their share of the population, with 18 percent of non-poor sources. No non-poor sources were Latinos, while the single non-poor Native American source accounted for less than 1 percent of the total.



Of the 76 sources who were themselves poor, African-Americans made up 38 percent of the total, though they make up only 24 percent of people in poverty in the U.S. Non-Latino whites were 39 percent of the poor sources, slightly less than their 45 percent share of the U.S. poor. Latinos were only 12 percent of poor sources, half of the 24 percent of the U.S. poor who are Latino.



There was a reasonably even gender balance among all sources, with 54 percent men and 46 percent women—though this looks somewhat less equitable when compared to census figures showing that 57 percent of the poor are female. Among non-poor sources, men were overrepresented, accounting for 72 percent of the total, versus 27 percent of female sources.

Partisan and ideological balance

Partisan sources were relatively balanced between Democrats (19) and Republicans (17). (No partisan sources represented third parties.) It is worth noting that this is the first FAIR study in which Democratic sources have outnumbered Republican sources. Past studies of the networks (**Extra!**, 5–6/02), **NPR (Extra!**, 5–6/04) and other media outlets have shown a sharp bias in favor of Republican sources.

That the Katrina disaster occurred during the study period, with many local and statewide Louisiana politicians being Democrats, may help to explain why the traditional pro-Republican media bias did not bear out in this study. Discounting Katrina-related partisan sources, the partisan balance shifts back to the GOP, with 16 sources to the Democrats' 13.

Think tank sources totaled six, with the small sample evenly distributed: Liberal, centrist and conservative think tanks each provided two sources apiece.

Aggregate numbers can't capture the content of coverage. For example, in nightly news coverage of the 2003 census report showing increased poverty—an annual report that for the only time in the study period received coverage on all three networks—four out of five experts cited were either conservatives or from a corporate background.

How are the poor represented?

In a handful of stories—primarily on **CBS**—poverty issues were discussed solely by experts, with no poor people appearing on-screen at all. A **CBS** story (2/7/05) on George W. Bush's proposed budget cuts to both farm aid and block grants to fight hunger and homelessness quoted solely elected officials, think tankers and executives of food banks. Another **CBS** story on problems with the new Medicare prescription drug plan (1/16/06) cited only the Republican governor of Minnesota (who was concerned) and U.S. Health and Human Services secretary Michael Leavitt (who wasn't); one on the push for an increase in state minimum-wage laws (6/27/06) interviewed several ACORN activists behind the campaign, but no actual minimum-wage workers. (Advocates for the poor, such as ACORN and food bank officials, are an important part of the discussion, but they can't substitute for the perspectives of those who actually live in poverty.)

The flip side of these stories with no poor sources are those that focus on the poor, but avoid any discussion of policy issues at all. **CBS**, again, is the prime culprit, having run segments on

predatory lending (9/5/03), the difficulties of finding child care (11/25/03) and increasing economic polarization (12/8/05) that studiously avoided asking how government policies had helped to cause or failed to alleviate these problems. The last one blamed the “changing economy” for increased economic polarization, with no indication of what changes were made or who made them. (For examples of how government policies have directly fostered inequality, see *The Conservative Nanny State* by Dean Baker.)

This was also true of the stories on hunger that are a staple of newscasts every Thanksgiving and Christmas. In late 2005, both **CBS** (11/24/05) and **NBC** (12/26/05) ran stories on food banks running short of donations, without explaining or asking why. (**CBS**, interestingly, had run a nearly identical story on falling food donations two years earlier—11/27/03—something it never noted in its 2005 story.) Network producers apparently had no interest in going even as deep as **USA Today**, which in an earlier report (11/21/05) had quoted Food Bank for New York City spokesperson Lisa Jakobsberg as saying, “It’s pretty much a direct result of Katrina”—which had drawn off private resources in part to compensate for the lousy government relief effort.

Suffering, not solutions

Generally, though, stories on poverty are expected to include one or more poor people. What they’re allowed to speak about, though, is severely circumscribed. In story after story, poor people were included to tell generic stories of suffering, before turning to “experts” who discussed what policies should be pursued to address the situation. Some examples:

- In a three-minute report on high heating oil prices (2/2/06), **CBS** found time to include this insightful interchange between reporter Lee Cowan and elderly St. Paul resident Josephine Ruiz: “It’s pretty chilly, isn’t it?” “Yes, it is.” While the story noted that “Congress didn’t appropriate a penny more than last year” for low-income heating subsidies, it didn’t find time to discuss who in Congress was to blame for this, or why the subsidies hadn’t been increased.
- In a **CBS** story (6/23/06) on Individual Development Accounts, which help poor people save toward the purchase of a home, Maria Cruz, a single mom who bought a home with the help of the program, was only shown saying: “Like, I can’t believe it. I’m like, ‘This is me. I own this.’” To discuss the goal of IDAs, though, **CBS** correspondent Thalia Assuras immediately turned to Andrea Levere of the banking industry-backed Corporation for Enterprise Development, the organization touting IDAs, who said, “We’ve seen historically in this country that you build wealth by building assets.” A Brookings Institute report the previous year (3/05), however, had found that IDAs did nothing to increase the net worth of the poor—something that **CBS** chose not to mention in its segment.

- In an **NBC** segment (11/18/05) on the House debate on budget cuts, the only poor people visible are a quick clip of New Orleanians after Katrina chanting “Help! Help! Help!” before Bush and two members of Congress (one Democratic, one Republican) trade soundbites.
- In one typical reporting gambit, an **NBC** segment (9/26/03) on the 2003 census findings of increased poverty spoke briefly to a woman at a food pantry who said how tough it was to make ends meet, then turned to Conference Board economist Linda Barrington (identified only as a “labor economist,” though based on her clients “corporate economist” would be more accurate), who helpfully explained, “Whenever there’s a recession, there’s a natural slowdown in employment and earnings.”
- Similarly, an **ABC** story (9/26/03) on the same census report opened with a jobless woman saying, “You can’t get a job and get on your own life if you don’t have a place to live or if you’re living in the streets”—then turned to Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), who called increasing poverty “wrong,” and conservative think-tanker Jason Turner, who called it “a temporary increase.”
- Early in the 2004 presidential campaign, **ABC** reported on poor people marching to Democratic campaign appearances in South Carolina to ask the candidates questions (1/30/04). Only one fragment of a question was included, however—“How would you make sure that Medicaid was available?”—though the story did still find room to include a typical boilerplate quote about how poverty is no fun: “A lot of jobs are closed down, you know? A lot of jobs is closed, you know? And that’s not helping us at all.”

The rare cases when the poor were allowed to describe for themselves the causes of and cures for poverty were all from stories about the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, with **NBC** in particular (12/19/05, 1/12/06) presenting residents who charged that developers were putting off the reconstruction of their neighborhood in order to make a land grab, and that the city was denying the restoration of services to poor neighborhoods. “I see it as plainly taking poor people’s property,” said one low-income homeowner, Margaret Tolliver. Yet **NBC** never asked city officials about the charges, or followed up on the story in later months.

The ‘deserving’ poor

One thing that is clear from coverage is that if you’re poor and want to get on the nightly news, it helps to be either elderly or in the armed forces.

Both **CBS** (10/16/03) and **NBC** (10/17/03) ran pieces mentioning that one-fifth of elderly people raising their grandchildren are below the poverty line. Likewise, the hardships faced by Medicare recipients needing prescription-drug coverage got repeated coverage (**NBC**, 11/18/03; **CBS**, 1/16/06, 7/7/06). Another **ABC** report (7/11/06) noted ominously that “43 percent of American households won’t have enough money to maintain their standard of living in retirement,” adding that “for low-income Americans, that will mean not being able to cover the cost of necessities such as food and shelter.” Yet as **CBS** (3/9/06) itself reported, just 10 percent of the elderly are poor, down from 35 percent in the early 1960s—children are statistically the poorest age group, yet during the study period, there was little reporting on poor children or parents.

All three networks, meanwhile, ran stories on how veterans and their families face hardships as a result of poor pay and limited disability benefits (**CBS**, 10/19/04; **ABC**, 10/14/04; **NBC**, 1/25/05; **CBS**, 10/30/06). In each case, the tone was clear: The U.S. should be ashamed, not that there is poverty in this country, but that *these* people are subjected to it.

- “An Iraq vet with no place to live?” asked **NBC**’s Mike Taibbi (1/25/05) in a segment criticizing the military and Veterans Administration for not making vets aware of available benefits. “Well, it turns out that Varetta Barnes is only one of around 100 veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who quickly tumbled into homelessness.”

- A **CBS** report (10/30/06) quoted an unidentified man saying, “It’s a shame that many of them, many of them are on food stamps. And yet they’re fighting for their country.” To which Katie Couric added: “Most Americans would be so ashamed to know that.”

- In an **ABC** report (10/14/04) on soldiers being denied disability, reporter Brian Ross was even more bald-faced about the reasons why viewers should be concerned, asking a general: “When these wounded soldiers are treated that way, how do you expect to ever recruit anybody?”

The singling out of certain low-income people as the “deserving poor” goes back centuries, and has recently been enshrined in federal welfare policies denying benefits to those who are deemed “employable” and who aren’t in either jobs or government workfare programs. It’s a theme that carried over into several other segments featuring people who aren’t “supposed to be” poor: one on gas prices hurting the working poor (**CBS**, 7/27/06), though the non-working

poor would presumably be hurt as well; a handful of stories (**NBC**, 10/12/05, 12/8/05; **CBS**, 2/2/06) on how high heating oil prices were “forcing families who never thought they’d have to do it to look to the government for help” (**NBC**, 12/8/05).

A **CBS** story (10/15/03) on a worker who’d gone from “welfare roll to payroll” and was subsequently laid off featured reporter Jim Axelrod saying, “Barbara had been a welfare reform success story, moving from welfare to work, she thought, for good”—though in unreported reality, “churning” on and off the welfare rolls has been common for decades.

Special occasions

Overall, both the scarcity and the content of network news coverage conveys the sense that poverty is a problem mostly to be worried about on holidays, when it affects those whose poverty is considered shameful, or during natural disasters. (Twenty-four of the 57 stories in the study period ran during the six months immediately following Hurricane Katrina—during the other 32 months, barely one network news segment a month so much as mentioned poverty or the needy.)

And efforts by the poor themselves to better their lot or affect public policy were almost entirely absent: Three segments of **NBC**’s “Making a Difference” series (11/15/05, 12/2/05, 3/15/06), for example, all focused on charity workers’ efforts on behalf of the poor—profiling a Philadelphia nun who fights homelessness (11/15/05), for example, rather than someone from that city’s 14-year-old Kensington Welfare Rights Union, one of the nation’s longest-running organizations made up of low-income residents.

Our survey also revealed that the TV networks had an abysmal record at following up on stories, even when they implied they would. An **NBC** segment (3/25/05) that mentioned high poverty as a cause of suicides among Native Americans noted “the problems must be taken seriously”—yet **NBC** never revisited the issue of Native American poverty.

Likewise, an **ABC** segment (1/30/04) on the Democratic presidential race focused on “an issue you will hear much more about this year: poverty”—but not on **ABC**, which ran only two other poverty stories in 2004: one on August 26 on the census report showing increased poverty rates, and one on October 14 on soldiers facing poverty. The issue then disappeared from the **ABC** airwaves until Katrina struck the following August.

Neglecting the afflicted

What FAIR’s study cannot do is show why network journalists assign such a low priority to stories that affect so many. For that we must rely on the journalists themselves, many of whom

tell us that the poverty narrative is neither compelling nor good for business, as advertisers aren't fond of negative stories. (See page 8.)

Unlike the powerful sources who are overrepresented on the nightly news, the poor don't have public relations staffs or corporate communications offices. They are left to depend on the increasingly quaint journalistic ideals that once implored journalists to be champions of society's underdogs and to comfort the afflicted.

As news seems to be redefining itself as a service for those in upscale demographics, as network news shows find new reasons to avoid covering the powerless, it's important to remember that the American public is indeed interested in poverty.

Indeed, one "top tier" Democratic presidential contender has built a campaign around poverty, which has caused a flurry of reports suggesting "class warfare" is afoot in the Democratic Party (**New York Times**, 7/16/07; **L. A. Times**, 5/28/07). But as John Edwards has traveled around the country campaigning on the issue, he has answered repeated questions from journalists and others about why he thinks poverty is a winning political issue with a response that seems to stun some reporters in its simplicity: "I don't know that it is. This is not a political strategy. It's a huge moral issue facing America."

Those are words that public-minded nightly news executives, producers and reporters ought to take to heart.

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