



# Moving Away from Racial Stereotypes in Poverty Policy

Trends Suggest a Decline in Race Baiting, Creating Ways to Better Examine Race in Policymaking

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By Joy Moses February 23, 2012

# Introduction and summary

The use of racial code words is a time-honored tradition in American politics. Within our culture, people rightfully react to racially insensitive remarks, especially when they come from our nation's leaders and elected officials. Race baiting to win votes is a disturbing and despicable practice.

But it doesn't begin to reach the level of damage done when racial stereotypes and prejudice influence our public policy decisions. Stereotypes about low-income African Americans and Latinos have a long historical legacy that continues to this day. Negative perceptions about entire groups of people are never good, but when those attitudes contribute to the derailment of efforts to develop effective antipov-erty policies meant to help Americans of all races, it's a tragedy.

Stereotypes undermine public support for much-needed programs and, just as damaging, lead to misguided policies that are aimed at solving false or nonexistent problems while the true causes of poverty fail to receive proper or sufficient atten-tion. Despite earnest and at times noble efforts to rid our country of these harmful stereotypes, the problem still stubbornly persists.

The good news is that there are various factors that point to the declining signifi-cance of this divisive race-baiting strategy—progress that should continue in the decades to come. This suggests there is value in efforts to hasten its decline while tackling the more daunting task of replacing the role of racial stereotypes in the policy world with policies that are built on being sensitive to racial dynamics with-out being stereotypical.

We note some of these signs of hope in this paper, factors that we see as going a long way toward reducing the influence of race baiting, but that may also have some impact on lingering racial stereotypes reflected in American poverty policy:

- The emergence of a younger generation of Americans who welcome diver-sity—67 percent say they think positively of America's demographic changes<sup>1</sup>

- Public opinion polls indicating modest progress in getting Americans to replace stereotypical notions such as laziness with ones that reflect an understanding that not all Americans have equal access to opportunity
- The rise of a more racially diverse America, which by 2050 will see non-Hispanic whites no longer in the majority as 46 percent of the population,<sup>2</sup> making it less and less advantageous to insult growing numbers of people of color by race baiting for political gain, and with effort on the part of progressives, hopefully reducing the success of flawed public policy built on racial stereotypes
- Changes in the media and technology that make it difficult for comments to go unnoticed and without comment, including growth in the number of media and social networking outlets for reporting and commentary

Yet it is not enough to simply wait on change to come. We also must become actively engaged in reducing the influence of racial misconceptions. And then we have to work to transition from using stereotypes to more appropriate considerations of race that help reduce poverty. These efforts should include:

- Fixing the flawed laws that were built on stereotypes
- Instituting a governmental “think tank” that works across agencies, researching the problem of poverty and the effectiveness of governmental responses
- Employing more targeted approaches, tailoring responses to meet the needs of specific demographic groups even while working within general programs that reach everyone
- Effectively measuring progress, including keeping track of how varying groups respond to interventions and experience progress
- Engaging low- and middle-income communities, allowing their views and experiences to inform policy and services

This paper is designed to help point the way toward a more inclusive and culturally enlightened America that understands that poverty has no racial, ethnic, gender, or regional boundaries.

Let’s now take a closer look at the realities underlying racial stereotypes and misconceptions as they relate to the very real issue of poverty.

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