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## Knowledge and Perceptions about Welfare and Welfare Recipients among Minnesota Millennials

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Running Head: KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS

Knowledge and Perceptions about Welfare and Welfare Recipients among Minnesota  
Millennials

by

Kristine Marie Ongstad, B.S.W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

## Abstract

This research sought to examine knowledge and perceptions about welfare and welfare recipients among Minnesota Millennials. Three questions were addressed: What is the Minnesotan Millennials' level of knowledge of the MFIP system and perceptions of MFIP recipients?; Why do Minnesotan Millennials believe people are poor?; and What are the Minnesotan Millennials thoughts about the welfare system? An online survey was created with the survey software Qualtrics and the survey was posted on Facebook pages around the state of Minnesota. The survey had 84 respondents. Thirteen knowledge items were administered. Respondents who answered eight or more questions correctly were deemed knowledgeable; 51.8% of respondents were deemed knowledgeable. Inferential statistics were run to find if a correlation existed between respondents' degree of knowledge and attributions for poverty. As knowledge of welfare and welfare recipients increased, their belief that individuals are the cause of their own poverty decreased. Additionally, as knowledge increased, so did respondents' beliefs in structural causes for poverty. Millennials are becoming a large voting block and it is important to examine their knowledge and views about welfare policy, which influences the lives of many families in the United States. Similar research should be conducted in other states to discover if similar patterns are found around the county.

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### **Introduction**

The welfare system in the United States is a complex intersection of resources, policies, attitudes, and ideologies for eligible families living in poverty. Welfare recipients, especially single mothers, are a stigmatized group in American society, and welfare itself is considered to be the “scourge of public policy” (Seccombe, 2001, p. 10). A highly unpopular program, welfare is not liked by Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals (Seccombe, 2011).

Colloquially referred to as “welfare,” state cash assistance programs are partially funded and controlled by the federal program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In 1996, TANF, a federally funded block grant program, replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which had provided welfare benefits to poor families with children since 1935, under the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program (Covin, 2005). The TANF program was created with the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This legislation ended federal entitlements to welfare and imposed work requirements and program time limits, leaving needy families and children with little or no financial support if they could not fulfill these strict obligations (Reese, 2005).

A total of 1.7 million families comprised of 4.2 million individuals received cash assistance through TANF in December 2014 in the United States. Of these individuals, 3.1 million were children. Additionally, 18% of families receiving assistance had an employed adult, and 36% of all families were “child-only” and had no adult recipient (Falk, 2015).

Minnesota’s implementation of the TANF program created the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). The MFIP program “helps families with children meet their basic needs, while helping parents move to financial stability through work” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015a). In May of 2015, the state of Minnesota reported there were 20,540

open cases with an MFIP grant. This number of cases represents 23,365 parents and 41,474 children (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015b). In addition, there were 10,255 cases open with a “child-only” grant (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015b). Twelve months after enrollment into the MFIP program, 72% were off cash assistance (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2011). The average size of an MFIP family is three, composed of one adult with two children; the median age of the children is four (Regan, 2010). The median age for the parent/caregiver is 31 years (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013). Fifteen percent of people who receive MFIP are married and living with a spouse (Regan, 2010). Eighty-one percent of adults on MFIP are female (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013). Thirty-seven percent of MFIP eligible adults are White, whereas 85% of Minnesotan adults are White. Forty-one percent of MFIP eligible adults are Black (including African Americans and African immigrants), whereas 5% of Minnesota adults are Black (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013). The remaining 22% of welfare recipients is comprised of those who report as American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, or more than one race (Regan, 2010). Sixty-four percent of welfare recipients have a high school diploma or GED (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013).

From these statistics, it is clear that the majority of welfare recipients are children, not adults. Although the majority of recipients are dependent children, 71% of American adults believe that too many people receive welfare that should not be getting it (Rasmussen Reports, 2011). Further, 83% of American adults believe there should be a work requirement to receive welfare benefits (Rasmussen Reports, 2012). It is important to note that, relative to their percentage of the total population, people of color are more likely to be receiving cash

assistance. However, with regard to the entirety of welfare recipients, Whites and Blacks comprise similar percentages. There is clearly a misconception of the typical welfare recipient.

Strict guidelines limit eligibility for welfare. In 2012, the majority of states “required that a single mother caring for two children earn less than \$795 per month” to be eligible for welfare benefits (Falk, 2015, p. 2). This income level was approximately half of the poverty line in 2015. Additionally, cash grants in the majority of states have not changed in size since welfare reform in 1996, and have not been increased for inflation over time, resulting in drastically decreased purchasing power (Falk, 2015).

In Minnesota, cash grant sizes have not increased since 1986. A family with three members is eligible to receive a maximum of \$532 in cash assistance. For families with no other income source, this amount has to cover housing, transportation, and basic living expenses (Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, 2015). The decreased buying power of \$532 can be examined by comparing the increase in housing and gas costs from 1986 to 2015. In 1986, a two-bedroom apartment in Minnesota averaged \$480 a month and a gallon of gas averaged \$.93. In 2015, a two-bedroom apartment averaged \$945 a month and a gallon of gas averaged \$2.03 (Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, 2015). Effective July 1, 2015, Minnesota added a \$110 Housing Assistance Grant, that eligible families can receive in addition to their cash grant (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015c). Even with an additional \$110 a month, a family still would not be able to afford a two-bedroom apartment. The annual cost of basic needs for a single parent with one child in Minnesota is approximately \$38,000, which requires an hourly wage of \$18.25 (Jobs Now Coalition, 2010). Even with public assistance, TANF programs do not come close to lifting eligible families out of poverty. It can be clearly inferred that TANF recipients are living in states of deep poverty. To even be eligible for MFIP, families

have to be at or below 115% of the federal poverty line (University of Minnesota Extension, 2015).

Since welfare reform in 1996, there has been an increase in single mothers who have no cash welfare income and no earned income: there is no denying that they and their children are living in deep poverty. Only 32% of eligible families enroll in MFIP (Children and Family Services, 2015). Additionally, during the Great Recession from December 2007 to June 2009, there were many poor mothers who were eligible for welfare under TANF but were not enrolled in the program (Haskins, 2012). Minnesota has more children living in deep poverty (78,000) than children living in MFIP households (72,377) (Children and Family Services, 2015). The eroded purchasing power of the cash grant and the strict program and eligibility requirements implemented by PRWORA may be a deterrent for eligible needy families to use the program. Another possible deterrent is that of the negative stigma associated with TANF and welfare recipients (Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004).

These attitudes are problematic. Not only do they stigmatize a vulnerable portion of our population, they also may deter families from seeking assistance when parents and their children desperately need the financial help. This is a social problem that needs to be addressed. Our attitudes toward welfare recipients, which influence welfare policy and are often based on opinions and perceptions rather than facts, may be deterring eligible families and children from receiving available government support. Largely, our country's attitude and negative stigma toward welfare may not only be preventing eligible families from obtaining the help they need and deserve, it may lead to such paltry assistance that it results in negative outcomes for children and their caregivers.

The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics positions social workers as advocates for people living in poverty. The Code of Ethics emphasizes the profession's commitment to the poor, the human importance of all individuals, and the importance of relationships among people as a means to promote healthier living. These fundamental beliefs call social workers to advocate for marginalized groups.

As social workers, we have the duty to ensure our social welfare programming is working to provide for and protect individuals who are experiencing poverty. According to the National Association of Social Workers, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW, 1996, p.5). Individuals who are eligible for welfare are far below the poverty line, and often vulnerable and oppressed, which makes them a population of concern for social workers.

A few of the core values of the social work profession include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, and importance of the human relationship (NASW, 1996). Working within the confines of strict federal legislation, it may be difficult for people working within the welfare system to uphold these values. This may be an area for advocacy in the social work profession, where more social workers could enter and improve the social welfare field.

The value of the importance of human relationships is essential in this conversation. "Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change" (NASW, 1999, p.8). By strengthening relationships among people, social workers can "promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities" (NASW, 1999, p.8). So often, the poor are thought of as "other." However, by the time Americans reach the age of 75, 59% will have spent

at least one year below the poverty line during adulthood. By focusing on common human experiences, our relationships and community could be greatly improved.

The lack of knowledge and misperceptions surrounding welfare recipients may result in negative consequences for many families in the United States. By studying and understanding public knowledge and perceptions of welfare recipients, social workers will have a better understanding of larger society's attitudes towards the poor and welfare recipients. This in turn can help determine what the public needs to know to get a clearer understanding of citizens living in poverty. Taking this into consideration, this research aims to test basic knowledge of the welfare system, and to examine some of the common perceptions and beliefs of welfare recipients and the welfare system.

### **Literature Review**

This study will focus on the knowledge and perceptions of welfare recipients among Millennials. Millennials, born between 1982 and 2000, are now the largest age cohort in the United States, representing more than one quarter of the nation's population, and are a more diverse group than previous generations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). They are fast becoming a large voting block. Shifting ideologies among Millennials may influence their political stance. Forty-three percent of Americans under the age of 30 hold favorable views of socialism, while less than one third view capitalism favorably. No other age or demographic group prefers socialism to capitalism (Flynn, 2016). Given their ideologies and diversity, their perceptions about the poor and poverty may be different from earlier generations.

### **History of Public Assistance in the United States**

Federal welfare programming was created as part of the New Deal in 1935 as Title IV of the Social Security Act under President Franklin Roosevelt, as a response to the Great

Depression (Seccombe, 2011). This program was called “Aid to Dependent Children” and by 1939 was providing aid to approximately 700,000 children of single mothers (Gilens, 1999). Although Roosevelt had strong convictions and implemented many successful social welfare programs to solve the national emergency of the Great Depression, he still believed that paid work was more desirable. Roosevelt called welfare “a narcotic” and “a subtle destroyer of the human spirit” and stated that “continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber” (Gilens, 1999, p. 8). From the beginning, then, attitudes towards welfare programs were not positive. During this time, the situation of Black people living in poverty was largely ignored. In 1962, the program was renamed “Aid to Families with Dependent Children” (Gilens, 1999). During the 1960’s, the program shifted from supporting White widows as stay-at-home-mothers to a program supporting women of color who were “divorced, deserted, or never married” (Nadasen, 2007, p.52). A new racially-charged attitude became part of the welfare state.

In 1996, President Clinton signed the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,” also known as the “welfare reform act” (Zucchino, 1997). Under PRWORA, the federal government provides a fixed block grant to each state, for a nationwide total of \$16.5 billion a year. In addition, states are required to contribute a minimum of \$10.4 billion as a maintenance-of-effort (MOE) requirement (Falk, 2015). The states can use this funding towards any of the four goals specified in the federal law: (1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies;

and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” (Covin, 2005). States were given discretion in determining eligibility requirements for TANF benefits, with the federal stipulation that the program provides for families with children under the age of 18 (Covin, 2005). The implementation of TANF ended federal entitlements to welfare (Reese, 2005). The new program increased work and job search requirements by expanding welfare-to-work programming; financial sanctions for program participants who did not meet these requirements; and a maximum five-year time limit, giving states the power to decrease the time limit if desired (Haskins, 2012; Reese, 2005).

### **Attitudes towards the Poor**

A synopsis from four polling sources: Gallup, Pew Research, Rasmussen Reports and NBC/Wall Street Journal in 2013 found that 67% of Americans believe that too many welfare recipients are dependent on government aid. Additionally, 37% of Americans believe that poor people “have it easy” because they get government benefits without doing anything in return for them (Federal Safety Net, 2013). In contrast, this synopsis found that 62% of respondents believed that poor people have hard lives because government benefits do not provide enough to survive on. Americans object to welfare spending, even though they express strong support for universal social programs as well as other spending on the poor. “Americans hate welfare because they view it as a program that rewards the undeserving poor” (Gilens, 1999, p. 3).

The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world, but 14.8% of the population lived in poverty in 2014, representing 46.7 million people. The number of people living in poverty has grown 2.3% since 2007 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Female-headed households, children, and racial minorities are disproportionately represented among the poor (Adeola, 2005). With poverty on the rise, it is important to examine Americans’ attitudes towards the poor, as

attitudes about the poor influence social welfare policy (Robinson, 2011). The majority of beliefs about poor people and the welfare system are negative and stereotypes about the poor are found to be significantly more negative than those about the middle class (Adeola, 2005; Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). These stereotypes may tend to be negative due to issues of racism and the attribution for poverty.

**Race and welfare.** The welfare system should not be examined without including issues of race and racism. The public continues to associate welfare recipients as Black, even though similar percentages of Whites and Blacks receive welfare. In 2010, for example, federal TANF recipients were 31.8% White and 31.9% Black (Office of Family Assistance, 2012).

“Perceptions of blacks continue to play the dominant role in shaping the public’s attitude toward welfare” (Cammett, 2014). In addition to Americans believing that the majority of welfare recipients are Black, they also believe that Black Americans are lazy and less dedicated to working than other Americans (Gilens, 1999). In 2009, the General Social Survey found that 36% of White Americans believed that Black Americans are viewed as lazy compared to hard working, and 57% believed that Black Americans prefer to live off of welfare than to be self-supporting.

Historically, however, Blacks were often excluded from receiving benefits under New Deal legislation. The Social Security Act of 1935 excluded agricultural and domestic workers, a group that was largely Black. The South at this time held disproportionate political power and prevented the New Deal legislation from covering Blacks on equal terms as Whites (Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2003). Rather, this money was reserved for “deserving,” (and usually White) mothers to enable them to stay home with their children. Additionally, as local jurisdictions handled the distribution of welfare rather than the federal government, local biases ruled welfare

law. Some Southern states simply rejected Black women's applications or "disqualified them during the cotton-picking season" (Cammett, 2014). Women of color who may have been eligible for welfare benefits were denied based on their race.

In the 1960's, Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty ended racial restrictions of the New Deal programming. From 1960 to 1970, the number of welfare recipients increased five times. The increase represented a large increase of Black mothers who had always been federally eligible for welfare benefits, but had been locally denied by county welfare boards because of their race (Cammett, 2014). The increase in welfare rolls resulted in a public backlash. The American public blamed the behavior of poor Black women for the growing population of welfare recipients (Gilman, 2014). This stereotype is still perpetuated in today's society.

A large number of stereotypes and beliefs surface in the discussion of welfare recipients. Female welfare recipients are especially stigmatized (Reese, 2005). They are singled out against the more affluent populations and categorized into stereotypical groups.

**Welfare queen.** The "Welfare Queen" is one of the most common perceptions of a welfare recipient, and this term is found across literature about welfare and welfare reform (Cammett, 2014; Gilman 2014; Mehta, 2010; Reese, 2005; Zucchini, 1997). The term became popular during the 1976 presidential election when Ronald Reagan stated, "She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veterans' benefits on four nonexisting deceased husbands...She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free income alone is over \$150,000" (Zucchini, 1997, p. 65). Although Reagan did not name a race, " 'she' was then, and is now, universally understood to be Black" (Cammett, 2014, p. 244). Although similar numbers of Whites and Blacks receive welfare, Americans think of the face of a Black "welfare queen" when they

picture a welfare recipient (Brock, 2009). The welfare queen is a myth; Reagan's character was fictional (Gilman, 2014). However, the "welfare queen" was a concept featured throughout the welfare reform debates in the early 1990s (Reingold & Smith, 2012).

The issue of fraud is also tied to the welfare queen. "We compartmentalize and focus on narrow aspects of their lives such as their checks, their alleged fraud, or whether or not there is a man in the house" (Seccombe, 2011, p. 8). Welfare recipients are often stereotyped as being dishonest (Bullock, 1999). The fictional fraudulent character of the welfare queen still remains behind the argument to decrease government benefits (Gilman, 2014). Further, media exacerbates images of individuals who received welfare, who are often portrayed in media as young, non-White females (Sotirovic, 2001).

**Drug and alcohol use.** The topic of drug and alcohol use among welfare recipients has been explored in many research studies and is the cause of heated discussion. As drug use has been found to be a significant barrier to employment, policy makers have become increasingly concerned with the amount of drug use among welfare recipients (Cheng & McElderry, 2007). This issue of "employability" and mental health has started to be examined in relation to welfare recipients (Jayakody, Danzinger, & Poolack, 2000). Drug use among welfare recipients is often addressed in intense emotional and political debates, and not supported by empirical data. A popular characterization that surfaces in these debates is that of a welfare mother having a drug and/or alcohol problem (Grant & Dawson, 1996). A multitude of studies have been conducted with widely varying results regarding the percentage of drug use among welfare recipients compared to the general population (Cheng & McElderry, 2007; Delva, Neumark, Furr, & Anthony, 2000; Grant & Dawson, 1996; Jayakody et al., 2000; and Lehrer, Crittenden, & Norr, 2002). As a hotly debated topic, drug use among welfare recipients has spurred the conversation

of changing policy to mandate drug testing prior to approving welfare benefits (Delva et al., 2000).

The discussion of drug and alcohol use by welfare recipients has also created restrictions on the use of the electronic balance transfer (EBT) card. Cash benefits are issued on an EBT card with the name of the head of household printed on the card. The card states, "It is unlawful to use this card to purchase tobacco or alcohol products" (Minnesota Statute 256.987). Any person found guilty of purchasing alcohol or tobacco products will result in disqualification from the program for one year after the first offence, two years after the second offense, and permanently after the third offense (Minnesota Statute 256.987).

**Reproductive habits.** Reproductive habits of poor women were a central focus of welfare reform. A common conception is that women on welfare continue having more children with the intent of getting a larger cash grant (Bullock, 1999; Reese, 2005; Seccombe, 2011). Welfare mothers are often inaccurately portrayed to be having more children to obtain a larger welfare grant: they are promiscuous and the cause of their own poverty (Bullock, 1999; Thomas, 1997). However, during welfare reform in 1996, 23 states added a "family cap", a law that denies increased benefits for families who have additional children while receiving welfare. Although Cozzarelli et. al (2002) found that poor women were largely categorized in a positive light, they were still seen as "having too many children (p. 525). These welfare mothers are assumed to stay on welfare for many years, and to pass their values on to their children, who will become "future welfare mothers" (Reese, 2005, p. 27). A common feeling towards welfare recipients is that they must be controlled so they do not multiply. Seccombe (2011) asserts, "This is accomplished in our social welfare system through such mechanisms as inadequate benefit levels, stigmatizing recipients, or cutting them off aid altogether."

The environment of the welfare system, especially for Black mothers, is seemingly very hostile. Conceptions and stereotypes, often fueled by racism, impact welfare policy and often negatively impact poor families.

### **Attributions for Poverty**

There are three main types of attributions for poverty: individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (Weiss-Gal, Benyamini, Ginzburg, Savaya & Peled, 2009). Individualistic explanations for poverty focus on the idea that people are poor due to their own actions, and therefore are responsible for their own poverty. These explanations emphasize areas such as lack of motivation, poor work habits, dependency, laziness, drug and alcohol use, and promiscuity (Bullock, 1999; Weiss-Gal et al., 2009). Structural explanations for poverty include social causes of poverty, such as limited employment opportunities, economic conditions, and discrimination of class, race, gender, or ethnicity (Weiss-Gal et al., 2009). Fatalistic explanations are those that neither the individual or society has control over, and include things such as fate, bad luck, and disability (Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Weiss-Gal et al., 2009). Through the fatalistic lens, poverty is not viewed as anyone's fault, rather, it is a result of events out of anyone's control (Seccombe, 2011).

A common idea in America's social history is that poverty is a result of low moral standards and it is individuals' fault they are poor, rather than a fault in the structures of society (Day & Schiele, 2013). Overall, Americans believe there are many causes for an individual's poverty, but that individualistic causes such as laziness or drug use play a larger role than societal causes such as discrimination or low wages (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Godfrey & Wolf, 2015). Cozzarelli et al. (2001) found that more negative stereotypes about the poor were associated with individualistic attributions for poverty. Godfrey and Wolf (2015)

similarly found that 17 of 19 respondents attributed poverty to individualistic causes. In contrast, a study of social workers' attributions for poverty found that structural explanations for poverty were favored over individual causes (Weiss-Gal et al., 2009). Although some Americans believe there are structural or fatalistic reasons for poverty, it generally does not mitigate the belief that individualistic causes are also present (Robinson, 2011).

A number of studies have examined demographic information and its influence upon individuals' beliefs and attitudes about poverty (Bullock, 1999; Cozzarelli, Tagler & Wilkinson, 2002; Cozzarelli et al, 2001; Weiss-Gal et al 2009). Attitudes regarding the poor and poverty are often studied by taking the respondent's demographics into consideration (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Van Heerde & Hudson, 2010). Research has shown that attributions for poverty are related to the respondent's social class, level of education, political affiliation, belief in the Protestant work ethic, and belief in a just world (Bullock, 1999). Cozzarelli et al. (2001) found that political affiliation was the most consistent predictor of stereotypes and attributions for poverty. In Western societies, research has found that individuals who are young, male, and White are more likely to attribute poverty to individual causes than individuals who are old, female, or from a minority group (Osborne & Weiner, 2015). Although there is some variance in the demographic factors that are examined, demographics play an important role when studying attributions and attitudes towards poverty.

### **Perspectives of the Poor and Reasons for Poverty Influence Policy Preference**

A recurrent theme in American history is that dominant social values in any given time period greatly influence societal and governmental views of social welfare, and influence levels of public support and government funding or lack thereof.

**Race and welfare reform.** The impacts of welfare reform in the 1990s and arguably the reason for welfare reform must also include the discussion of race, especially concerning Black mothers. In relation to their percentage of the actual population, Black women are represented in the welfare rolls in a much higher relative percentage. Additionally, 41% of African Americans will receive welfare for more than five years, compared to 27% of White recipients (Harknett, 2001). Individuals who stay for longer terms on the welfare rolls often have characteristics including: being a young unmarried mother, lower education levels, and less work experience. These circumstances are more heavily concentrated among African Americans (Harknett, 2001). Therefore, the implementation of the five-year time limit under PRWORA would, and did, disproportionately affect the African American population. For example, a study conducted by Brock (2009) examined the new five-year time limit imposed under TANF and sought to find if there was a relationship between a state's time limit policy and the racial environment of the state. The study found that states with a higher population of Blacks were more likely to impose stricter eligibility time limits. Even after welfare reform, it seems that attitudes towards the poor and attributions for poverty, combined with racism, continue to influence social welfare policy.

Research has shown that attributions of poverty are correlated with an individual's view of public assistance. When poverty is associated with individualistic causes, there is more opposition to welfare spending (Bullock, 1999). Poverty attributions influence support for aid contribution, government intervention, and how responsive an individual is to problems of poverty among minorities (Robinson, 2011). "The attitudes of those who hold the majority of the political power in this country are likely to disadvantage the poor" (Cozzarelli et al., 2001, p. 225).

Other demographic identifiers have also been found to influence individuals' beliefs of attributions for poverty, including age and level of education (Bullock, 1999; Osborne & Weiner, 2015). As a demographic group, Millennials are now a larger part of the United States population than Baby Boomers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). As the majority of Millennials are now able to vote and enter the political arena, it is important to discover their feelings towards the welfare system and welfare recipients. Therefore, this research aims to examine three questions: What is the Minnesotan Millennials' level of knowledge of the MFIP system and perceptions of MFIP recipients?; Why do Minnesotan Millennials believe people are poor?; and What are Minnesotan Millennials thoughts about the welfare system?

### **Conceptual Framework**

To understand the social dynamics that influence perceptions of welfare recipients, this study uses two analytic frameworks: social constructionism and critical social work theory. These frameworks allow the reader to examine the issues of socially constructed concepts, to gain insight into these concepts, and to consider options for future changes.

**Social construction theory.** Using the social construction framework, we can examine the way in which knowledge of welfare recipients is constructed rather than created, how this is done through interactions among people using certain language and stereotypes, and the policy implications that result. Social construction theory can be used when assessing the social world, as it promotes the idea of knowledge being constructed rather than logically created or found. Knowledge is viewed as being created by interactions between individuals in a society (Andrews, 2012). An emphasis is placed on everyday interactions between people and the language that is used to construct their reality (Andrews, 2012).

Social construction of a target population refers to “cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334). Social constructions influence policy agendas regarding specific groups, as well as creating rationales that legitimize policy choices. These constructions “become embedded in policy as messages that are absorbed by citizens and affect their orientations and participation” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Focusing on a target population emphasizes that policy “attempts to achieve goals by changing people’s behavior” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Behavioral change may then be a result of coercing a specific group to comply with policy rules and do things they otherwise may not have done. These social constructions and results of policy may then become institutionalized in our day-to-day life (Kessler, 2013).

**Critical social work theory.** To further analyze this situation, critical social work theory will be applied. According to Fook (2003), critical social work is rooted in Marxist analysis, and includes feminist and structural additions. Fook (2003) articulates the following critical social work themes: a structural analysis of problems; “an analysis of the social control functions of social work and welfare; an ongoing social critique, particularly regarding oppressive functions” (p. 124). Critical social work theory is derived from critical social theory. Critical social theory aims to find ways to understand human culture “that would help liberate people from the illusions of ideologies that distort or deny their objective interests” (Klage, 2012, para. 1). Critical theory critiques what is wrong with the current situation, identifies ways to change the situation, and provides practical goals as a means to change the current situation (Bohman, 2015). Critical social theory includes the historical underpinnings of how society got to where it is today, and that understanding will be improved by including all the major social sciences (Crossman, 2004). An aim of critical theory is to analyze how ideologies are generated as a way

to show how they inaccurately represent human interaction, as a means to justify the domination of certain groups (Martin, 1973). Using critical social work theory, based in critical social theory, will allow for the examination of the ideologies that maintain the current welfare state and offer options for changing the current situation.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted utilizing the online survey software Qualtrics. This research was implemented as a cross-sectional quantitative study, with a convenience sample from the state of Minnesota. The purpose of this study was to examine knowledge and perceptions of welfare recipients among Minnesota Millennials. Questions used in this survey focused on factual knowledge of the welfare system and welfare recipients. Additionally, respondents were asked their thoughts on causes of poverty and thoughts about the welfare system. The research included convenience sampling, involving survey respondents who were readily available (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). The survey was posted as a link on Facebook on the researcher's Facebook page, as well as pages for The Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless; the *Duluth News Tribune*; Thief River Falls tourism, Lake of the Woods community organization, and Grand Marais tourism. The survey was posted on pages from around the state in an attempt to gain a broad sample from locations around the state of Minnesota.

### **Sample**

The participants in this study were a quota convenience sample of Millennials born between 1982 and 1997, who currently live in Minnesota. There were 101 survey participants.

Skip logic in Qualtrics was utilized to exit participants from the survey who did not live in Minnesota, or who were not born between the years 1982-1997. This reduced the number of survey participants to 84. Additionally, participants were allowed to skip questions they choose not to answer, which provides an explanation for variance in sample size for each question.

Survey respondents reported the following demographic information. When asked their gender, 81 respondents provided an answer. Sixty-two (77%) of the respondents were female and 19 (23%) were male. No respondents identified as “trans-gender” or “other.”

When asked their race, 80 respondents provided an answer. Seventy-one (89%) respondents identified as White; one (1%) respondent identified as Black; five (6%) identified as Asian; two (3%) identified as Biracial; and one participant (1%) identified as Multiracial. No survey respondents identified as Hispanic, Native American, or Other.

When asked their political philosophy, 79 respondents provided an answer. Ten participants (13%) identified as extremely liberal; 30 (38%) identified as liberal; 26 (33%) identified as moderate; seven (9%) identified as conservative; and one (1%) identified as very conservative. Five survey respondents selected “Other (fill in the blank)” and reported the following political philosophies: “non-binary”, “libertarian”, “socialist”, “none”, and “I don’t know”.

When asked about their education level, 82 respondents provided a response. Two respondents (2%) reported having a high school diploma or GED; five (6%) reported having completed some college; four (5%) reported having a two-year degree; 49 (60%) respondents reported having a Bachelor’s degree; and 22 (27%) reported having a Master’s degree or higher.

When asked about the characteristics of their current residence, 82 people responded. The majority of respondents came from urban areas. Three (4%) respondents reported being

from a rural town with a population of 1,000 or less; 10 (12%) live in a mid-sized town with a population between 1,000-50,000; 17 (21%) live in a mid-sized urban area with a population of 50,000-500,000; 27 (33%) live in a suburban area near a major metropolitan area; and 25 (30%) live in a major metropolitan area with a population of 500,000 or more.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Upon approval from the clinical research project committee, an application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of St Thomas. Once approval was obtained from the IRB, data collection began with the use of an online survey. Data was anonymously collected through Qualtrics, an online survey data collection program. IP address tracking was removed from Qualtrics to provide additional anonymity to survey respondents. The first page of the survey was a letter of informed consent. This page provided potential respondents with information about the purpose of the research, what would be expected of them with regard to participating in the research, that it is an anonymous survey, and information about how to contact the researcher, her chair, or the University of St. Thomas IRB about questions or concerns. By moving forward with the survey, respondents agreed to participate in the research.

### **Data Collection**

To collect data, a survey with 23 questions was developed. It began by asking the year the respondent was born, and if they currently live in Minnesota. If the respondent replied no to either question, skip logic was utilized in the Qualtrics software to exit the participant from the survey. The first set of 13 questions assessed knowledge of the welfare program and welfare recipients. These included items such as: “What is the maximum amount of cash assistance a single mother with one child can receive on welfare in Minnesota each month?” and, “What is

the average age of parents who receive welfare in Minnesota?” Survey respondents were then asked questions that examined the respondent’s beliefs about attributions for poverty. The survey utilized Feagin’s (1972) scale on causes for poverty. The following section examined attitudes about the welfare system and government involvement. The survey concluded by gathering demographic information questions from the Student Attitudes, Attributions, and Responses Regarding Poverty (SAARP) survey, including characteristics of current place of residence; level of education; gender; race; and political philosophy.

### **Data Analysis**

After data from the online survey was collected, data was downloaded from Qualtrics to an SPSS spreadsheet and analyzed through the SPSS program. To analyze the data, the researcher ran descriptive and inferential statistics in order to determine knowledge and perceptions surrounding cash assistance recipients in Minnesota. The researcher ran inferential statistics to see if there were correlations among the respondents based on their degree of knowledge and their perceptions of why people are poor and their opinions on government involvement in the welfare system.

### **Findings**

This research aimed to examine Minnesota Millennials’ knowledge of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), colloquially known as “welfare.” This research also aimed to examine perceptions of MFIP recipients; reasons why Minnesota Millennials believe people are poor; and Minnesota Millennials’ thoughts about government involvement with the welfare system.

## Knowledge

To assess knowledge of the welfare system and welfare participants, 13 knowledge items were administered in the online survey. The first two questions tested knowledge of the amount of cash assistance families are eligible for under MFIP policy. The correct answer in each table is highlighted in bold font.

**Cash grant estimates.** The first survey question asked, “What is the maximum amount of cash assistance a single mother with one child can receive on welfare in Minnesota each month?” The possible response options were: \$327; \$437; \$682; and \$945. The correct response option was \$437 (Children’s Defense Fund Minnesota, 2015). The majority of respondents, 52 (61.9%) selected the correct answer. It is interesting to note that not only did the majority of respondents select the correct answer, but that the second largest proportion of respondents selected \$327, which was the least of all the cash assistance value options listed. This may indicate that survey respondents believe that welfare recipients receive even less cash than the current amount they are eligible for.

Table 1.

*Descriptive Statistics for Maximum Amount of Cash Assistance a Single Mother with One Child can Receive on Welfare in Minnesota each Month*

	Frequency	Percent
\$327	21	25.0
<b>\$437</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>61.9</b>
\$682	10	11.9
\$945	1	1.2
Total	84	100.0

The second question was operationalized with the item, “What is the maximum amount of cash assistance a single mother with two children can receive on welfare in Minnesota each month?” The possible response options were: \$437; \$532; \$782; and \$1,112. The correct

response option was \$532 (Children’s Defense Fund Minnesota, 2015). Thirty-eight respondents (45.2%) chose the correct answer for this question. Thirty-one respondents (36.9%) chose \$782, meaning that a large percentage of respondents (41.7%) believe welfare recipients with two children are receiving more cash assistance than they actually are. This information is shown in Table 2. This response differs from the prior survey question; respondents seemed to overestimate how much having one more child would add to cash assistance per month.

Table 2.  
*Descriptive Statistics for Maximum amount of Cash Assistance a Single Mother with Two Children can Receive on Welfare in Minnesota Each Month*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
\$437	11	13.1
<b>\$532</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>45.2</b>
\$782	31	36.9
\$1,112	4	4.8
Total	84	100.0

**Knowledge of recipient demographics.** The next set of questions examined survey respondents’ knowledge of demographics of MFIP recipients. The third survey question asked, “What is the average number of children in a family on welfare in Minnesota?” The possible response options were: two; three; four; five; and six. The correct response option was two (Regan, 2010). Only 31(36.9%) answered this correctly. Forty-two respondents (50%) chose the response option of three children. The majority of respondents (63.1%) believed that welfare recipients have three or more children, which indicates that respondents believe that families on welfare have more children than they actually do.

Table 3.

*Descriptive Statistics for Average Number of Children in a Family on Welfare in Minnesota*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
<b>2</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>36.9</b>
3	42	50.0
4	10	11.9
5	1	1.2
Total	84	100.0

The fourth survey question asked, “What is the average age of parents who receive welfare in Minnesota?” The possible response options were: 17 years; 19 years; 23 years; and 31 years. The average age for the parent is 31 years (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013). Thirty respondents (35.7%) chose the correct option of 31 years. Forty-five respondents (53.6%) chose the response option 23 years. This shows that survey respondents believe that the average age of parents who receive welfare are much younger than they actually are.

Table 4.

*Descriptive Statistics for Average Age of Parents who Receive Welfare in Minnesota*

Response Options (years)	Frequency	Percent
17	2	2.4
19	7	8.3
23	45	53.6
<b>31</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>35.7</b>
Total	84	100.0

The fifth survey question was, “What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota are married?” The possible response options were: three percent; seven percent; 15%; and 22%. The correct response option was 15% (Regan, 2010). The correct response option, 15%, was the most commonly given answer, with 40 respondents (48.2%) answering correctly. However, this also means that nearly 30% of respondents believed fewer parents were married than actually are.

Table 5.

*Descriptive Statistics for Percentage of Parents on Welfare in Minnesota who are Married*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
3%	6	7.2
7%	19	22.9
<b>15%</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>48.2</b>
22%	18	21.7
Total	83	100.0

The sixth survey question was, “What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota are White?” The possible response options were: five percent; 13%; 25%; and 37%. The correct response was 37% (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013). Forty-four respondents (52.4%), or the majority, chose the correct answer to this question. However, 47.6% of respondents believed that fewer welfare recipients are White than actually are.

Table 6.

*Descriptive Statistics for Percentage of Parents on Welfare in Minnesota who are White*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
5%	7	8.3
13%	12	14.3
25%	21	25.0
<b>37%</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>52.4</b>
Total	84	100.0

The seventh survey question was, “What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota have their high school diploma or GED?” The possible responses were: 23%; 46%; 64%; and 74%. The correct response was that 64% of welfare recipients in Minnesota have their high school diploma or GED (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2013). The most common response option from survey respondents indicated that 46% of welfare recipients have their high school diploma or GED. The majority of survey respondents believed that 46% or fewer have

their diploma or GED. Therefore, the majority of respondents believe fewer people have a high school education or its equivalent than actually have them.

Table 7.

*Descriptive Statistics for Percentage of Parents on Welfare in Minnesota who have their High School Diploma or GED*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
23%	17	20.2
46%	30	35.7
<b>64%</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>31.0</b>
74%	11	13.1
Total	84	100.0

**Knowledge of MFIP requirements.** The next survey question was: “In Minnesota, what are individuals required to do to continue to receive welfare once they apply?” This question allowed participants to check all responses that apply out of five possible response options. The five possible response options were: nothing – there are no requirements after they apply; monthly requirements based on unique situations; to work with an employment counselor; agree to pay back their cash assistance once they find a job; and to job search 25-35 hours each week. These response options account for questions eight through 12. There are three correct options, which include: monthly requirements based on unique situations; to work with an employment counselor; and to job search 25-35 hours each week (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2015a). Of the three correct response options, 59 respondents (70%) selected “monthly requirements based on unique situations”; 52 respondents (62%) selected “to work with an employment counselor”; and 51 respondents (61%) chose “to job search 25-35 hours each week.” Only two (2%) of survey respondents believed that there are no requirements to continue to receive welfare once an applicant applies. Additionally, only two (2%) of respondents believed that welfare recipients agreed to pay back their cash assistance once they found a job.

The majority of survey respondents correctly answered these questions about welfare requirements.

The thirteenth, and final question to assess participants' knowledge was, "In Minnesota, the majority of recipients are off cash assistance welfare after one year." The possible response options were: true or false. The correct answer is true. Twelve months after enrollment into the MFIP program, 72% of participants are off cash assistance (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2011). Forty respondents (48%) answered this correctly. Forty-four (52%) answered incorrectly. The majority of survey respondents believe, incorrectly, that the majority of welfare recipients are on welfare for longer than one year.

**Assessing knowledge of MFIP recipients and programs.** Survey respondents were deemed "knowledgeable" if they correctly answered eight or more of 13 questions related to welfare policy and welfare participants. This required a score of only 62% to be deemed knowledgeable. Respondents were deemed "unknowledgeable" if they answered seven or fewer questions correctly.

Table 8.

*Degree Knowledge: Summation of Correct Answers from 13 Possible Response Options*

	Frequency	Percent
1	1	1.2
2	0	0
3	0	0
4	3	3.6
5	8	9.6
6	18	21.7
7	10	12.0
8	15	18.1
9	16	19.3
10	7	8.4
11	4	4.8
12	1	1.2
13	0	0
Total	83	100

As shown in Table 8, the mean response of correct answers was 7.48. The mode is six, meaning that more respondents got six questions correct than any other amount correct. Forty respondents (48.2%) answered seven or fewer questions correctly and therefore were deemed unknowledgeable. It is interesting to note that the average number of correct responses was 7.48. Forty-three respondents (51.8%) answered eight or more questions correctly and were deemed knowledgeable for purposes of subsequent further analysis.

### **Perceptions of Why People Are Poor**

The subsequent section of the survey sought to understand respondents' perceptions of why people are poor. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of 10 statements that reflected possible causes of poverty. Feagin's (1972) *Poverty Scale* was utilized to assess individual and structural causes for poverty. Response options from the Feagin scale were changed to: not important; somewhat important; important; and very important. Lower ratings indicated less importance placed on individual or structural causes, respectively, for poverty.

The following response options reflected individual causes for poverty: lack of thrift and proper money management; lack of a strong ethic; lack of ability and talent among poor people; and loose morals and drunkenness. The more people agreed with these statements, the more people believed individuals were at fault for their poverty and the higher their overall score. Each of the four items had four possible response options (not important; somewhat important; important; and very important). The minimum possible response option was four; the maximum possible response option was 16. Survey respondents had a minimum response of four, and a maximum response of 13. The mean response was 6.9. The standard deviation was 2.29. On a scale that spans from four to 14, 6.9 is a relatively low average response, meaning that survey respondents placed relatively little importance on individual causes for poverty.

Table 9.  
*Descriptive Statistics for Individual Causes for Poverty*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Individual	80	4.00	13.00	6.86	2.29

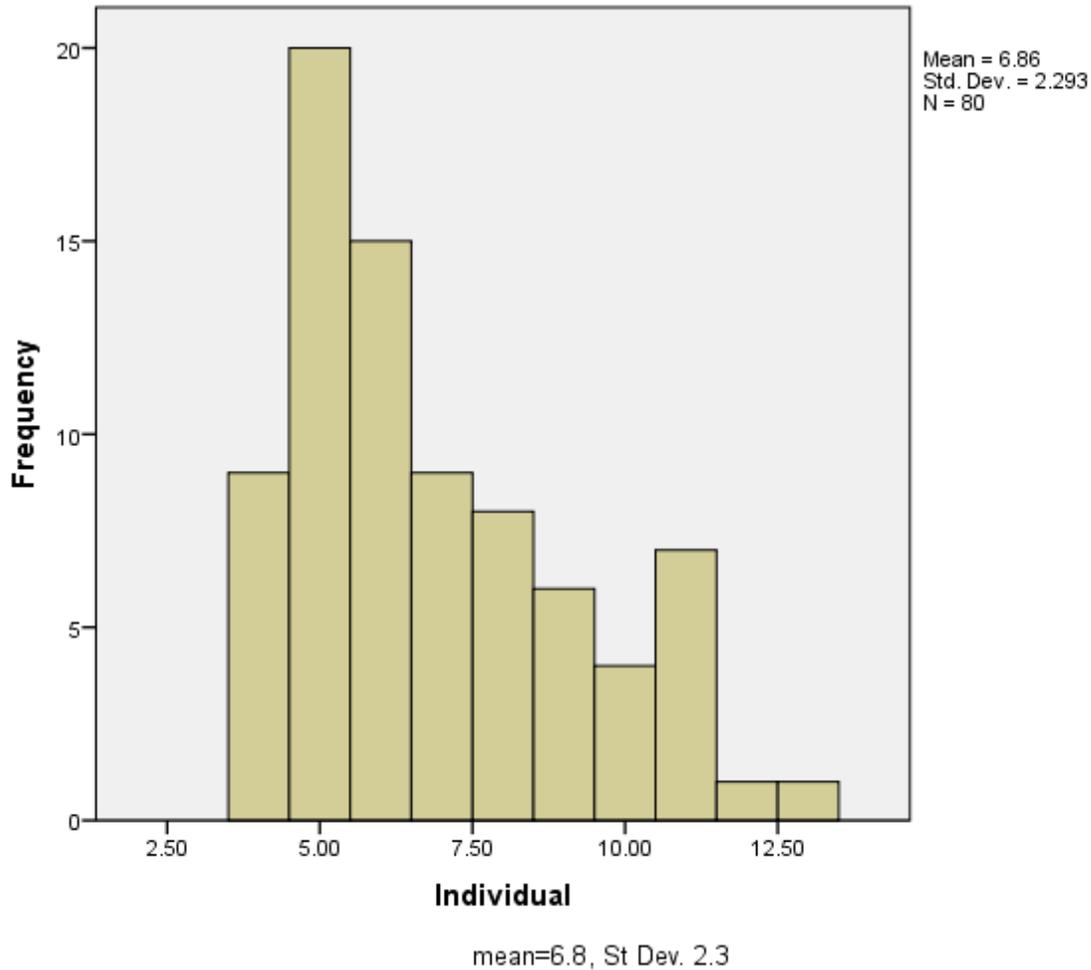


Figure 1. *Histogram for individual causes for poverty*

The following response options reflected structural causes for poverty: low wages in some businesses and industries; failure of society to provide quality education for many Americans; and prejudice and discrimination against people of color. The more people agreed with these statements, the more people believed that society is at fault for an individual's

poverty, and the higher their score. The minimum possible response option was four; the maximum possible response option was 16. Survey respondents had a minimum response of four, and a maximum response of 12. The mean response was 9.33. The standard deviation was 2.02. A mean response of 9.33 indicates that survey respondents placed a relatively high importance on structural causes of poverty.

Table 10.  
*Descriptive Statistics for Structural Causes for Poverty*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Structural	82	4.00	12.00	9.33	2.02

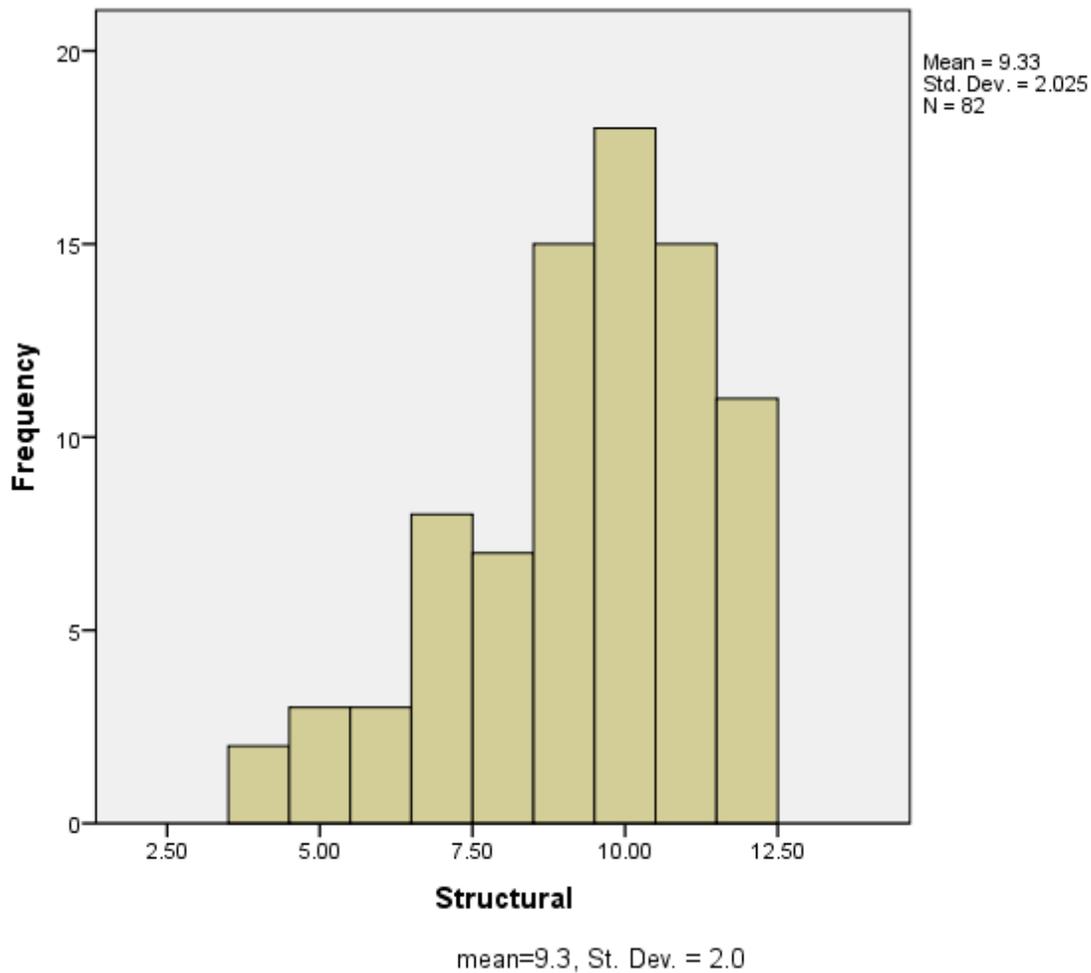


Figure 2. *Histogram for structural causes for poverty*

**Perception of Governmental Role in Addressing Poverty**

Survey respondents were asked a set of three questions to assess their thoughts on the government’s role in addressing poverty. Questions from Gilens’ survey (1999) *Principled Support for Government Help for the Poor* were utilized. The first question was: “The government has a responsibility to take care of the poor.” Response options from the Feagin scale were changed to: strongly disagree; disagree; agree; and strongly agree.

Table 11.  
*Descriptive Statistics for Government Responsibility*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	2	2.5
Disagree	8	9.9
Agree	41	50.6
Strongly agree	30	37.0
Total	81	100.0

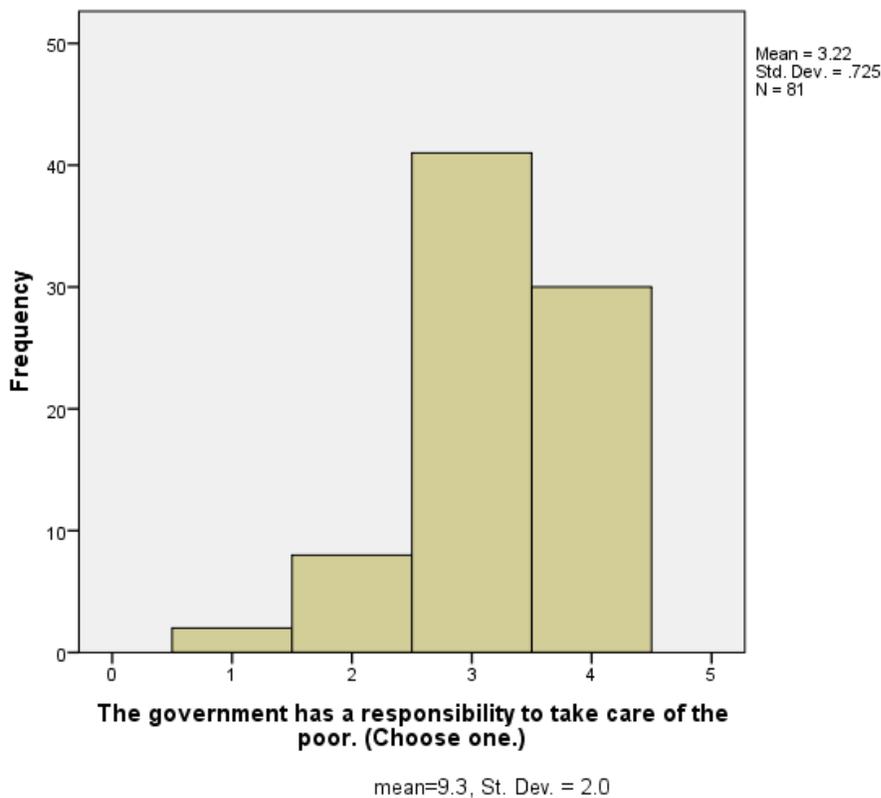


Figure 3. *Histogram for government responsibility*

Forty-one respondents (50.6%) agreed that the government has a responsibility to take care of the poor. Thirty respondents (37.0%) strongly agreed with this statement. Two respondents (2%) strongly disagreed, and eight respondents (9.9%) disagreed with the statement. A large majority (87.6%) of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The government has a responsibility to take care of the poor.” This indicates survey respondents were largely in support of government involvement in taking care of the poor. A small minority (11.9%) of respondents disagreed with government involvement with those identified as poor.

The following two survey items utilized Gilens’ (1999) *Principled Support for Welfare* survey questions. Respondents were provided with the following statement: “The government has a basic responsibility to help families who have no means of support by giving them enough money to meet their minimum needs.” Response options were: strongly disagree; disagree; agree; and strongly agree.

Table 12.

*Descriptive Statistics for Government has a Basic Responsibility to Help Families who Have no Other Means*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	5	6.3
Agree	42	52.5
Strongly agree	33	41.3
Total	80	100.0

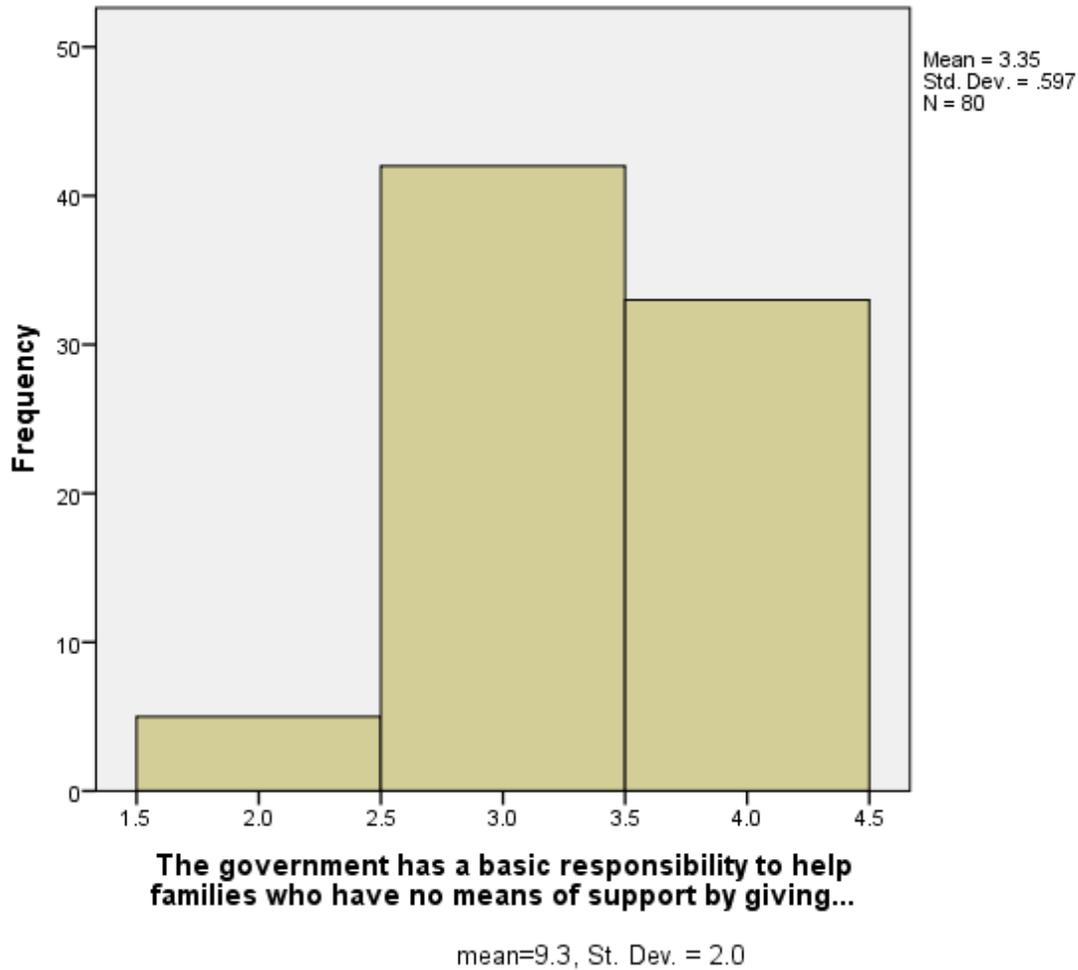


Figure 4. *Histogram for government basic responsibility*

Forty-two respondents (52.5%) agreed with the statement, and 33 respondents (41.3%) strongly agreed. No survey respondents selected the response option “strongly disagree,” and only five respondents (6.3%) selected “disagree.” The large majority (93.8%) of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the government has a basic responsibility to help families who have no means of support by giving them enough money to meet their minimum needs.

The third question asked survey participants to respond to the following statement: “The government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families.” Response options were: strongly disagree; disagree; agree; and strongly agree.

Table 13.  
*Descriptive Statistics for Government Giving too Much Cash Assistance to Poor Families*

Response Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	30	37.0
Disagree	39	48.1
Agree	10	12.3
Strongly agree	2	2.5
Total	81	100.0

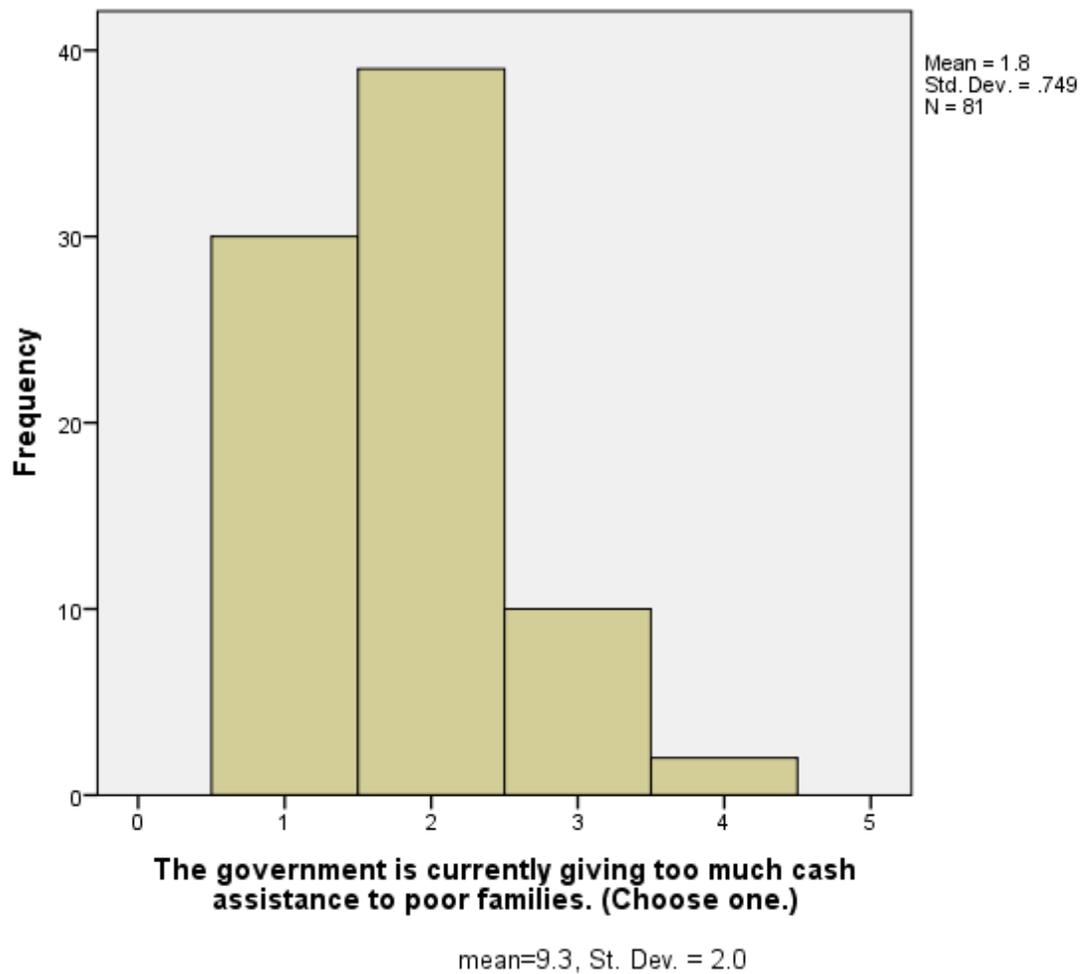


Figure 5. *Histogram for beliefs about government cash assistance*

Ten respondents (12.3%) agreed with the statement, “The government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families,” and two respondents (2.5%) strongly agreed with the statement. Thirty respondents (37.0%) strongly disagreed, and 39(48.1%) disagreed with the statement. A large majority (85.1%) of respondents selected either “disagree” or “strongly disagree,” indicating that the majority of survey respondents disagreed that the government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families. However, 14.8% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the government is giving too much cash assistance to poor families. It is interesting to note that in the previous survey question, 93.8% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the government has a basic responsibility to help families who have no means of support by giving them enough money to meet their minimum needs, yet 14.8% of respondents think that the government is currently providing too much cash assistance. Current MFIP cash assistance is valued at a maximum of \$532 for a single parent with two children.

**Correlations Between Knowledge of Welfare and Attributions for Poverty**

Inferential statistics were run to find if a correlation existed between respondents’ degree of knowledge about welfare and attributions for poverty. The first test sought to discover if there was a correlation between degree of knowledge and beliefs about individual causes of poverty.

Table 14.  
*Correlation Between Degree of Knowledge and Individual Scale Score*

		DegreeKnow	Individual
DegreeKnowledge	Pearson Correlation	1	-.384**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	83	79
Individual	Pearson Correlation	-.384**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	79	80

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 14 shows the inferential statistics of the relationship between the two variables: Degree Knowledge and Individual scale scores. The calculated correlation ( $r = -.384, p < .001$ ) indicates a moderate negative correlation. Therefore, as respondents' degree of knowledge increases, their belief that individuals are the cause of their own poverty decreases.

Table 15.  
*Correlation Between Degree of Knowledge and Structural Scale Score*

		DegreeKnow	Structural
DegreeKnowledge	Pearson Correlation	1	.337**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	83	81
Structural	Pearson Correlation	.337**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	81	82

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The second test sought to discover if there was a correlation between degree of knowledge and structural causes of poverty. Table 15 shows the inferential statistics of the relationship between the two variables: Degree of Knowledge and Structural scale scores. The calculated correlation ( $r = .337, p = .002$ ) indicates a moderate positive correlation. Therefore, as respondents' degree of knowledge increases, so does their belief in structural causes for poverty.

A chi square analysis was run to find if there was an association between the variables “What is the maximum amount of cash assistance a single mother with one child can receive on welfare in Minnesota each month?” and “The government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families.” The purpose of this test was to seek connections between knowledge of the welfare system and attitudes toward government involvement. Fifty out of 81 respondents chose the correct answer of \$437, and of these respondents, 45 either disagreed or

strongly disagreed that the government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families. This test was not statistically significant ( $p = .068$ ). However, there is a trend towards those who picked smaller cash amounts (\$327; \$437) and disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that the government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families. This may imply that respondents' level of knowledge does impact their opinion of government involvement, which may be detected with a larger sample size. This may be an important area for future research.

### **Beliefs about Welfare Abuse**

Respondents were asked the following question: "What percent of people receiving cash assistance do you believe abuse the system?" Respondents were allowed to fill in a blank response option with the percentage of their choice. Responses ranged from .001% all the way to 90%, with a mean of 17.2 and a median of 10.0. The most often response options were 1%; 5%; and 10%, with 11 respondents choosing each of these options. Survey respondents reported beliefs ranging from .001% all the way to 90%, showing a very large discrepancy in the beliefs about welfare fraud.

### **Beliefs About Federal Spending on Welfare**

Respondents were asked the following question: "What percent of the federal budget is spent on public cash assistance?" and instructed to fill in the blank with their response option. Responses ranged from .10% to 56%, with a mean of 10.27% and a median of 5%. The most frequent response option was 2%, with 15 survey respondents providing this answer. It is important to note the wide range of responses.

### **Discussion**

This research sought to examine Minnesota Millennials' knowledge and perceptions of welfare recipients and the welfare system. Research was conducted with the utilization of an online survey in an attempt to gather a range of respondents from across the state of Minnesota. The sample size that was obtained (84 survey respondents) was a largely urban and suburban population. There were only 3 respondents (4%) who lived in a rural town with a population less than 1,000, and only 10 participants (12%) that lived in a mid-sized town with a population between 1,000 – 50,000). Respondents also reported high levels of education, with 49 respondents (60%) holding a bachelor's degree and 22 respondents (27%) holding a master's degree or higher. The majority of respondents (89%) identified as White, and the majority (77%) identified as female. It is important to note that survey respondents were largely urban and suburban, highly educated, mostly White, and mostly female. This demographic information may have greatly influenced respondents' knowledge and perceptions about welfare and welfare recipients. Females are more likely to agree with structural causes for poverty (Osborne & Weiner, 2015). Additionally, respondents' level of education influences beliefs about attributions for poverty (Bullock, 1999). Survey respondents were a highly educated group. Different demographic groups of Millennials may have responded differently.

### **Knowledge**

This research examined participants' knowledge about the welfare system, a topic that is not tended to in the current research or seemingly in popular media. Participants were asked to respond to questions about specific welfare policies, such as the amount of cash a family is eligible for each month. A slightly larger proportion of respondents (51.8%) were deemed knowledgeable than those deemed unknowledgeable (48.1%). Just over half of respondents were

deemed knowledgeable, and being deemed knowledgeable only required respondents to answer eight out of 13 (62%) survey questions correctly. These levels of knowledge may differ when examining other social assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Social Security.

**Race.** Social construction of a target population refers to “cultural characterizations or popular images of the person or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Existing literature highlights the topic of race and welfare recipients, largely focusing on the idea that “Blacks continue to play the dominant role in shaping the public’s attitude toward welfare” (Cammett, 2014). Survey respondents in the current research were asked, “What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota are White?” The correct response option was 37%. In comparison to previous literature, the majority of survey respondents (52.4%) answered this correctly. The survey respondents in the current research had a more accurate understanding of the race of welfare recipients. This may be due to living in a widely diverse urban area, or due to higher levels of education among survey respondents, with possibly more knowledge about welfare recipients.

**Beliefs about reproductive habits.** The reproductive habits of poor women were a central focus of welfare reform, and are a common theme in existing literature. A common societal conception is that women on welfare continue to have more children with the intention of getting a larger welfare check (Bullock, 1999; Reese, 2005; Seccombe, 2011). Survey respondents in the current research were asked, “What is the average number of children in a family on welfare?” The correct response option was two children, but 42 respondents (50.0%) selected the response option: three children. Ten respondents (11.9%) selected the response option: four children. In total, 53 respondents (63.1%) guessed that women on welfare have

more children than the average of two children per family unit. It appears that survey respondents still have misconceptions about the family size of welfare recipients. This belief may be influenced by the stereotype that women on welfare have more children for larger benefit checks (Bullock, 1999; Reese, 2005; Seccombe, 2011).

**Beliefs about age.** Existing literature acknowledges that media exacerbates welfare recipients as young, non-White females (Sotirovic, 2001). Through social construction of a target population, an emphasis is placed on everyday interactions between people and the language that is used to construct their reality (Andrews, 2012). In other words, it may not be the reality of a situation, but rather the ways in which mothers on welfare are portrayed. Survey respondents in the current research were asked to choose the average age of parents who receive welfare in Minnesota, and in this situation, the portrayal, rather than the reality, was still prominent. Forty-five respondents (53.6%) believed the average age is 23. However, the correct response option was 31 years of age. Only 30 respondents (35.7) answered this question correctly; more than 64% of respondents guessed an age less than the mean. This may mean that the media's representation, political portrayals, and common perceptions of young welfare mothers are still very pervasive in today's society. "When we are trying to understand popular opposition to welfare, however, public perceptions are more important than demographic reality" (Gilens, 1999). It is necessary to understand the differences between demographic reality and the way in which welfare recipients are actually perceived.

**Beliefs about fraud.** Although it is seemingly impossible to ascertain solid numbers of welfare abuse, it is estimated that approximately 2% of cases would be deemed as fraudulent (Schnurer, 2013). Rhode (2012) found welfare fraud to be evident in only in approximately half of one percent of cases. Yet another source speculates that welfare fraud may be prominent in up

to 15% of cases (Federal Safety Net, 2015). It is clear that there is some variance in research about welfare fraud. However, it is important to note the large variance in response options reported by survey respondents. Responses ranged from .001% to 90%, meaning that survey respondents hold drastically varying views about the prevalence of welfare abuse.

**Beliefs about federal spending on welfare.** Survey respondents were asked what percent of the federal budget is spent on welfare. It is difficult to find this information in the existing literature. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, approximately 6% of the federal budget is spent on welfare spending. However, this number also includes Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, and it also includes Medicaid. The majority of the 6% goes towards SNAP (Drum, 2012). Therefore, we can assume a much smaller percentage of the budget is allocated for cash assistance programs. Although an exact percent is difficult to find, it is important to note that the actual percent number is very low, and to examine that response options in the current research ranged from .10% to 56%. It seems there is quite a misperception of the range of spending that is allocated to cash assistance programming.

### **Respondents' Perceptions about Poverty**

Attributions for poverty are an important part of the discussion surrounding welfare and welfare recipients. Two of the main types of attributions for poverty are individualistic attributions and structural attributions. Individualistic attributions place the individual at fault for their own poverty, whereas structural attributions emphasize social causes of poverty (Weiss-Gal et al., 2009). Historically, in the United States, individualistic attributions have been emphasized as the cause for poverty (Day & Schiele, 2013).

The current research utilized Feagin's (1972) *Poverty Scale* to assess perceptions of why people are poor. Survey respondents scored relatively low on individual attributions for poverty, meaning that there was little support for placing the reason for poverty on the individual. This seems to run counter to the ideal of Americans as staunchly supportive of hard work and blaming individuals for their lack of financial success, as discussed by Day & Schiele (2013).

Respondents in the current research contrast with another view established in previous research, and place a higher emphasis on societal causes for poverty (Weiss-Gal et al., 2009).

These differing viewpoints may belong to a unique Millennial perspective. Millennials may have a more sympathetic outlook to the struggles of poverty, many of them having graduated college during the Great Recession. Average student loan debt has continued to increase each year, with an average of \$35,051 in 2015 (Berman, 2015). When individuals and families know what it is like to be struggling with debt or to find employment, or are working and still struggling to survive financially, they may exhibit more understanding and support for government intervention for those struggling with poverty. For example, 26% of people ages 18 to 39 have a favorable opinion of socialism, compared to only 15% of people who are older than 65 (NPR, 2015). A similar study conducted by YouGov found that 43% of Americans under 30 held favorable views of socialism, which endorses government social interventions to address poverty, while less than one third viewed capitalism favorably. No other age or demographic group preferred socialism to capitalism (Flynn, 2016). Millennials may be more aware of societal and financial struggles than previous generations, and more empathetic towards individuals facing poverty. This may also lead to a more favorable view for the support of more government interventions to help those in need.

There is an important connection between respondents' levels of knowledge of welfare and those who receive it, and their perceptions of why people are poor. As respondents' degree of knowledge increased, their belief that individuals are the cause of their own poverty decreased. Likewise, as respondents' degree of knowledge increased, their belief in structural causes for poverty also increased. This is an important finding of the current research in Minnesota, and should be researched with other states' populations. It is quite possible that this relationship between knowledge and attributions for poverty holds in other states as well, especially among Millennials. Furthering this research in other states and obtaining more data on this topic may lead to the examination of programming and policy at the federal level. It may also direct advocate groups to focus on educating the public about the realities of TANF benefit levels and program recipients. Additionally, knowledge or lack thereof may influence an individual's opinion on government involvement with addressing poverty and taking care of the poor. Almost half of survey respondents were deemed unknowledgeable, (and those deemed knowledgeable were only required to correctly answer 62% of the survey questions correctly), and held incorrect beliefs about the average age and education level of heads of household and the average number of children in a family on welfare. Almost 15% of survey respondents believed that the government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families, but approximately only half of survey respondents answered correctly the amounts of cash assistance given to family units. This holds similar to previous research by Gilens (1999), in which Americans overwhelmingly believed we are spending too much on welfare, but that spending should be increased for most welfare programs such as Social Security, but also programs that benefit the poor. If this hypothesis holds true, it is unfortunate, as policy decisions about welfare recipients, most of whom are poor children, should not be made without a well-informed

populace. When families' survival depends upon welfare policy, it is not something that can be taken lightly. Education about welfare is of utmost importance as it is an issue that impacts individuals, families, and communities across the United States.

### **Implications for Social Work**

Education around welfare recipients and welfare policy is an essential part of an informed social and political society. For the “wealthiest nation in the world,” 14.8% of our population lived in poverty in 2014. Seventy-six percent of American families are living paycheck to paycheck, with little to no emergency savings (Johnson, 2013). With little to no safety net to rely on in times of need, it is important to educate citizens about welfare programs and options. Our country's attitudes and negative stigma toward welfare and welfare recipients may be preventing eligible families and children from obtaining the help they need to survive.

The current research may indicate that some of these poor-shaming values are beginning to dissipate. The Millennials who participated in this research favored a structural explanation for poverty, rather than placing blame on an individual. The large majority of respondents believed that the government has the basic responsibility to help families who have no other means, regardless of the respondents' degrees of knowledge about welfare. Among Millennials, this may indicate increasing government involvement and support for welfare for poor families.

The large majority (93.8%) of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the government has a basic responsibility to help families who have no means of support by giving them enough money to meet their minimum needs. It is important to realize that current welfare amounts are not large enough to help a family even cover the cost of rent, let alone meet

their other minimum needs. This is a crucial point and highlights an important area for social work advocacy.

Human relationships are an essential part of this conversation. Oftentimes, the voices of those living in poverty are ignored in the political arena, and social workers have the ethical duty to bring their voices forward. “Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change” (NASW, 1999, p.8). By creating dialogue among citizens and politicians, social workers have the opportunity to spread information and knowledge that may impact opinions, subsequent welfare policies, and the lives of families living in poverty.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths of this study include a new perspective of welfare recipients from Millennials. As Millennials now outnumber Baby Boomers in the United States, and will influence the political arena for a long time to come, it is important to understand their knowledge and perceptions surrounding welfare recipients. Findings from this study will contribute to the research base on this population.

Limitations of the study include limitations of population, due to a convenience sample. The sample is largely female, largely liberal, with the majority of respondents holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. As a nonprobability sample, survey results may not be transferrable to all Millennials. Additionally, knowledge items in the survey were created by the current researcher and not validated or from another scale. The extent to which these items measured “knowledge of welfare” may be debatable, as these survey items were not tested for validity.

This research highlights areas to influence potential future research. Conducting similar research with a larger and a more diverse population may yield different results. Although the current research was completed about Minnesota's welfare programming, similar research could be conducted in other states. As Millennials are now the largest demographic age group in the United States, it is essential to examine knowledge and perceptions these individuals hold, as this knowledge and these perceptions may influence welfare policy for years to come.

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## Appendix A

Letter of Informed Consent  
University of St. Thomas

Knowledge and Perceptions Surrounding Welfare and Welfare Recipients among Millennials in Minnesota

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating Minnesotan Millennials' knowledge of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), Minnesota's welfare program. You have been selected to participate in this study because you live in Minnesota, and are a Millennial (born between 1982 and 1997). You must be 18 years of age to participate in this study. This study is being conducted by Kristine Ongstad, a graduate student of the School of Social Work at the Saint Catherine University/University of St. Thomas. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be a participant in the study.

#### Background Information

This survey is designed to assess Minnesotan Millennials' knowledge of the Minnesota Family Investment Program and perceptions of welfare recipients, beliefs about why people are poor, and thoughts about the welfare system. The purposes of this research are to assess Minnesotan Millennials' knowledge of the MFIP system and perceptions of welfare recipients and to disseminate findings and outcomes. This research is a graduation requirement for the School of Social Work at Saint Catherine University/University of St. Thomas.

#### Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey, which will take approximately 20-30 minutes. You will then be provided with a link to begin the survey. You will be presented with a Letter of Informed Consent as the first page of the survey. The survey will verify you live in Minnesota, and the year in which you were born to verify you are part of the Millennial generation (born between 1982-2000). You will then be asked a series of questions, including yes/no questions, fill in the blank, multiple choice, true/false, select all that apply, and scaling questions. You will be then be asked questions about your demographics. You are able to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Once you complete the survey, you will submit it online. There will be no follow up surveys or questions. You can exit the survey without submitting it at any time. This survey is completely voluntary and there are no repercussions if you do not complete the survey. Once the survey has been submitted, you will not be able to retract your data as the data is anonymous.

#### Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

There are no known risks in this research. There are no direct benefits for participation in this research.

#### Confidentiality

The records of this study are anonymous. The survey does ask for demographic information including the year you were born, the size of town you live in, education level, gender, race, and political philosophy. The survey does not ask for any other potentially identifying information.

If you are uncomfortable responding to any of these questions, you may always choose to skip questions or not to participate at all. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable, no one will be presented individually, and only group data will be presented.

The online dataset collected from these surveys will be kept on a passcode locked laptop, and will be destroyed 3 years from completion of research. Only the researcher named in this form will have access to the dataset.

#### Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the School of Social Work, the University of St. Thomas or St. Catherine University. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships. You may also skip questions you don't wish to answer. If you do not wish to participate in this study, there are no repercussions to starting and stopping the survey, or to not taking it at all. Submission of a completed survey implies your consent to participate in this research. Once you have returned a survey, there is no way to exclude your data from the project as surveys and data are anonymous.

You may print a copy of this form for your records.

## Appendix B

Do you live in Minnesota?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

In what year were you born?

The following questions will ask about your knowledge of Minnesota's welfare system and welfare recipients.

How would you rate your knowledge of Minnesota's welfare program? (Choose one.)

- Unknowledgeable (1)
- Fairly unknowledgeable (2)
- Fairly knowledgeable (3)
- Knowledgeable (4)

What is the maximum amount of cash assistance a single mother with one child can receive on welfare in Minnesota each month? (Choose one.)

- \$327 (1)
- \$437 (2)
- \$682 (3)
- \$945 (4)

What is the maximum amount of cash assistance a single mother with two children can receive on welfare in Minnesota each month? (Choose one.)

- \$437 (1)
- \$532 (2)
- \$782 (3)
- \$1,112 (4)

What is the average number of children in a family on welfare in Minnesota? (Choose one.)

- 2 (1)
- 3 (2)
- 4 (3)
- 5 (4)
- 6 (5)

What is the average age of parents who receive welfare in Minnesota? (Choose one.)

- 17 years (1)
- 19 years (2)
- 23 years (3)
- 31 years (4)

What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota are married? (Choose one.)

- 3% (1)
- 7% (2)
- 15% (3)
- 22% (4)

What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota are white? (Choose one.)

- 5% (1)
- 13% (2)
- 25% (3)
- 37% (4)

What percentage of parents on welfare in Minnesota have their high school diploma or GED? (Choose one.)

- 23% (1)
- 46% (2)
- 64% (3)
- 74% (4)

In Minnesota, what are individuals required to do to continue to receive welfare once they apply? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)

- Nothing - there are no requirements after they apply (1)
- Monthly requirements based on unique situations (2)
- To work with an employment counselor (3)
- Agree to pay back their cash assistance once they find a job (4)
- To job search 25-35 hours each week (5)

In Minnesota, the majority of recipients are off cash assistance welfare after one year.

- True (1)
- False (2)

The next question will ask about information on a national level, and is not specific to Minnesota.

What percent of the federal budget is spent on public cash assistance? (Write in the percent number; no percentage sign needed)

The following statements reflect possible causes of poverty. Please indicate how important you think each statement is as a cause of poverty

	Not important (1)	Somewhat important (2)	Important (3)	Very important (4)
Lack of thrift and proper money management (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of a strong ethic (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of ability and talent among poor people (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Loose morals and drunkenness (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sickness and physical disabilities (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Low wages in some businesses and industries (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Failure of society to provide quality education for many Americans (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prejudice and discrimination against people of color (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Growing up in a financially impoverished situation (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Just bad luck (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The next questions will ask about your thoughts about the welfare system in the United States.

What percentage of people receiving cash assistance do you believe abuse the system? (Write in the percent number.)

The government has a responsibility to take care of the poor. (Choose one.)

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

The government has a basic responsibility to help families who have no means of support by giving them enough money to meet their minimum needs. (Choose one.)

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

The government is currently giving too much cash assistance to poor families. (Choose one.)

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

The next questions will ask about your demographics. These questions are asked for analysis purposes only. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

What are the characteristics of your current residence? (Choose one.)

- Rural or small town (less than 1,000) (1)
- Mid-sized town, not a suburb (1,000-fewer than 50,000) (2)
- Mid-sized urban area, not a suburb (50,000 - fewer than 500,000) (3)
- Suburban area near major metropolitan area (4)
- Major metropolitan area (500,000 or more) (5)

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- No diploma (1)
- High school diploma or GED (2)
- Some college (3)
- Two year degree (4)
- Bachelors Degree (5)
- Masters degree or higher (6)

What is your gender? (Choose one.)

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Trans-gender (3)
- Other (4)

What is your race? (Choose one.)

- White (1)
- Black (2)
- Asian (3)
- Hispanic (4)
- Native American (5)
- Biracial (6)
- Multiracial (7)
- Other (fill in the blank) (8) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your political philosophy?

- Extremely liberal (1)
- Liberal (2)
- Moderate (3)
- Conservative (4)
- Very conservative (5)
- Other (fill in the blank) (6) \_\_\_\_\_