



How Belief in a Just World Influences Views of Public Policy (OCTOBER 2003)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the policy debates about how best to assist low-income families, societal attitudes toward these families are important. Policies that are viewed favorably by the public are more likely to be implemented whether or not they are the most effective. This report examines some of the ways that public opinion is shaped.

The Belief in a Just World—the psychological concept used to describe the belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get—influences opinions about how much assistance should be provided to women who have difficulty making ends meet.

The National Center for Children in Poverty's innovative Vignette Study tested public opinion toward government assistance by creating a female subject whose description randomly varied 11 characteristics, including whether she works or receives welfare, whether she attends school, whether she is looking for a job, and whether she sometimes skips a meal so that her family can eat. In all cases, this subject was described as the mother of two children.

Respondents with a strong Belief in a Just World find women less deserving the more they act responsibly or make efforts to improve their situation.

Respondents with a weak Belief in a Just World find women more deserving the more they make an effort to improve their situation.

The results suggest that the belief system is challenged for people with a strong Belief in a Just World when they are presented with women who make efforts to improve their situation but still can't get ahead. In order to protect their belief system, people with a strong Belief in a Just World will devalue and blame the victim.

In our sample, respondents had a range of beliefs about a just world, from strong to weak. For organizations such as the National Center for Children in Poverty, whose mission is to promote strategies to prevent child poverty and improve the lives of low-income children and their families, the need to appeal to both belief systems is crucial. Common descriptions of low-income families would increase support for aid from both groups if the threat to the general Belief in a Just World is reduced. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to highlight the systemic problems that lead to persistent economic struggles, rather than to portray the plight of individuals.

For more information about how the public responds to specific characteristics of women who face economic struggles mediated by a strong or weak belief in a just world and research citations, please refer to Public Attitudes Toward Low-Income Families and Children Research Report 2: *How Belief in a Just World Influences Views of Public Policy*, by Lauren D. Appelbaum, Mary Clare Lennon, and J. Lawrence Aber at www.nccp.org. This research was supported by the Marguerite E. Casey Foundation. NCCP takes *responsibility for the facts and opinions presented therein*.