

**Who Deserves a Helping Hand?:
Attitudes about Government Assistance for the Unemployed
by Race, Incarceration Status, and Worker History**

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Overview: We propose a replication and expansion of a previous TESS project, examining public attitudes about assistance for the unemployed by race, cause of unemployment, and worker history. We seek to (1) replicate the earlier experiment, allowing greater power for testing predictions for black respondents and of higher-order interactions; (2) provide a follow-up question that will allow detection of greater variability in attitudes; (3) examine whether the type of government assistance influences levels of support; and (4) assess the salience of race and incarceration status relative to other characteristics in decisions about public assistance.

Background: Some distressing trends likely explain the surge of recent academic and public interest in the consequences of incarceration (e.g., Travis et al., 2001; Pager 2003). The last two decades have seen a fivefold increase in the number of prison inmates, with over two million individuals currently behind bars. No group has been more affected by this than African-Americans. Nearly 10% of young black men were incarcerated in 2000, compared to just over 1% of young white men (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001). In 2000, more young black high school dropouts were in prison (over 40%) than paid employment (29%) (Pettit & Western, 2001). These trends lend increasing importance to the question of what should be done with ex-offenders once released from prison, invoking questions that are inexorably tied to broader, longstanding debates about government assistance and race.

We seek here to continue an ongoing, multifaceted research program investigating the reintegration of ex-offenders, and how reintegration may be affected by public responses to racial and criminal stigma. This program includes a series of field experiments that examine how real employers react to applicants whose race and incarceration status are experimentally varied, as well as analyses of secondary survey data on consequences of incarceration for the occupational trajectories of young black and white men. We wish to complement this work with a more general examination of public attitudes toward the provision of public assistance for ex-offenders, and how such attitudes may vary depending on the explicit association of such assistance with a black or white face. This topic has

been the subject of an earlier TESS experiment, and, consistent with program guidelines encouraging new experiments that build off old ones, we propose experimental manipulations that address specific issues raised by the results of our previous experiment.

Our experimental design is based on the “laid-off worker” experiment by Sniderman and Piazza (1993). In that experiment, participants were read a vignette in which a man was described as having been recently laid-off from his job; the laid-off person’s race and level of dependability varied experimentally across participants. After hearing the vignette, participants were asked how much government help the person should receive while looking for a job. In our earlier experiment, a similar vignette and question were used (see Appendix A); however, as an additional experimental condition, the prospective recipient was out of work either because he had been “laid-off” (low culpability), “released from prison” (high culpability), or “fired” (high culpability, but not criminally so). We also included a condition in which the race of the vignette subject was left unspecified (instead of either black or white); this provides a baseline for interpreting the race priming effect elicited by the specification of both black and white vignette subjects.

Our experiment produced several provocative results.¹ Given space limitations, we introduce these results as we describe their implications for what we propose here.

Study Design: *1. Enlarging the Pool of Black Respondents.* Much research on American racial attitudes has focused exclusively on white respondents, even though blacks’ attitudes have often provided valuable comparisons when both groups are studied (e.g., Quillian and Pager 2001). Our original proposal thus sought to conduct the experiment with equal numbers of black and white respondents, and reviewers responded favorably to this design.² Given how the TESS surveys were ultimately fielded, however, that aspect of our design could not be implemented. Despite the modest number of black respondents (N=194), we found strong evidence for the importance of race in

¹ Preliminary results have been submitted to the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association. See Appendix B for an overview of our results.

² In fact, reviews of our initial proposal urged us to secure a larger sample to pursue the several hypothesized interactions of our research design.

determining public opinion. In fact, respondents' race was a stronger predictor of support for "a lot" of assistance than political ideology or any other measured individual characteristic (see Figure 1).

Unfortunately, though, given the small sample sizes, many higher-order interactions involving respondents' race produce only suggestive results. For example, we predicted race differences in evaluations of the cause of unemployment condition: Specifically, we predicted that whites would be more supportive of assistance to a laid-off worker (due to its lower culpability) than either someone who had been fired or laid-off. Meanwhile, given higher levels of incarceration among blacks and/or black perceptions of bias in the criminal justice system, we expected that blacks would be more sympathetic toward the plight of those who have been imprisoned—implying that blacks would be more supportive of assistance for the ex-offender than for the fired worker. Results were consistent with these expectations (see Table 1). The relatively small number of black subjects, however, precludes strong confidence in the pattern for blacks. Results were likewise consistent with our hypothesis that greater black sympathy for the formerly incarcerated would be strongest when the prospective recipient was black, but again sample size limits power greatly. In the present proposal, we seek to replicate the same vignette and questions among an additional sample of respondents, thus allowing for pooled statistical tests that may provide more decisive grounds for evaluating our hypotheses.³

2. *Disaggregating Response Categories.* We adopted the same three response categories used in the original "laid-off worker experiment": "a lot," of government assistance "some," and "none at all." Consistent with Sniderman & Piazza (1993), we found evidence that white respondents were more likely to recommend "a lot" of assistance when the vignette subject was black (vs. white). However, in our study, white respondents were *also* more likely to recommend providing *no* support when the respondent was black. This ambivalence was greatest in the "prison" condition, suggesting

³ In order to maximize the power available for these higher-order interaction, we seek to utilize the full sample size available through the TESS special competition. Our preliminary tests indicate that all items can be completed in approximately two minutes, suggesting a final sample of 3000 respondents.

that assistance for the formerly incarcerated might be a domain in which the image of black recipients provokes a particularly divisive reaction among whites.

We wish to further explore this unanticipated result. We seek not only to determine if these polarized responses are replicated, but also if a similar pattern is observed among the respondents who give moderate responses. In our earlier experiment, fully two-thirds of white respondents recommended “some” assistance. We wish to ask a follow-up item of respondents who answer “some” to allow for discrimination within this category (see Appendix A); consistent with our initial results, we predict that variation in response to this follow-up question will be greater when the vignette subject is black rather than white. By implementing this item as a follow-up to the original question, the change does not compromise the status of the original vignette and question as a full replication of the earlier experiment.

3. *Type of Government Assistance.* The finding that white respondents, even political conservatives, were more likely to support “a lot” of government assistance when the worker was black challenges research demonstrating substantial white opposition to race-targeted social programs (Gilens 1999). While perhaps whites are indeed generally more inclined to support assistance for prospective black recipients than otherwise identical white ones, an alternative hypothesis is that this finding is specific to the type of aid. We asked about “job training and placement” programs, which may be regarded as “human capital building” rather than any kind of direct government “handout.” One could argue that even respondents who endorse negative stereotypes of “lazy” blacks may be more supportive of programs for blacks when they are perceived as helpful only to those who “really want to work.”

We propose to add a question that asks about support for a direct payment program in addition to the job training program. We will randomly order the two questions (meaning that the half that gets the job training question first still fully replicates the earlier experiment).⁴ We hypothesize that we

⁴ We propose the random ordering of conditions for white respondents only; among black respondents, in order to maximize the sample size of the replication, the “job training and placement” condition will always occur first. Racial

will replicate the higher rates of “a lot” of support for black recipients than white recipients for the job training question, but that this effect will either be eliminated or reversed for the direct payment question.

4. *Recall as a Measure of Issue Salience.* Laboratory studies suggest that information consistent with a stereotype is more likely to be noticed and remembered than information that is not (Rothbart, Evans, and Fulero 1979). In general, stereotypes tend to be reinforced when an individual matches on more than one dimension of the stereotype (Quillian & Pager 2001). In a final component of this study, we wish to investigate the extent to which certain characteristics cluster in ways that encourage or inhibit recall. We propose a recall test in which, some time following the initial vignette, respondents will be asked to recall key characteristics of the vignette subjects, including items that make up racial stereotypes (race; incarceration status), neutral items (age; education level), and false items (race for race-unspecified condition; marital status). Because of strong associations between race and crime, we predict respondents will demonstrate better recall when vignette subjects are presented as both black and recently incarcerated; conversely, we predict that respondents will make more frequent recall errors when the vignette subject is white or race-unspecified and recently incarcerated. Overall, we predict elements of stereotypes to be more salient in recall relative to neutral characteristics, and that the clustering of consistent characteristics will further promote recall further.

Conclusion: As part of a larger research program to investigate the effects of race and crime on the stratification outcomes of young men, we seek here to examine how public opinion about government assistance to the unemployed is affected by race, incarceration status, and work history. The issues explored in this study cross-cut the work of political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists with an interest in racial attitudes, incarceration, stereotypes, public opinion, and policy research. By enlarging our sample size and extending our design, we hope to contribute to the scientific understanding of opinion formation on these critical and timely issues of social policy.

comparisons of this new item will be made between black respondents and the half of white respondents who receive the new item second. See Appendix C for schematic diagram of our proposed design.

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Appendix A. Proposed survey items.

A-1 Proposed vignette text and questions

Capitalized text indicates the different wordings of the race, cause of employment, and worker dependability conditions of the experiment.

Next I'm going to describe a person, let's call him Michael.

Michael is a twenty-six year old [BLACK / WHITE] male with a high school degree. About two years ago, Michael was [LAID OFF AT WORK / FIRED FROM HIS JOB / SENT TO PRISON FOR A FELONY CONVICTION]. Prior to [GETTING LAID OFF / BEING FIRED / GOING TO PRISON], Michael [HAD HELD DOWN A STEADY JOB FOR A FEW YEARS / HAD TROUBLE HOLDING DOWN A JOB FOR MORE THAN A FEW MONTHS]. Since he [LOST HIS JOB / WAS RELEASED] Michael has been actively seeking employment, but has had great difficulty landing a job.

Job training and cash assistance question (capitalized text indicates alternate wordings):

The government often proposes [CASH ASSISTANCE / JOB TRAINING AND PLACEMENT PROGRAMS] to help persons [AS THEY SEARCH FOR / FIND] work. How much government help, if any, should Michael be eligible to receive while looking for a job?—a lot, some, or none at all.

If respondent answers “some” to either job training or cash assistance question:

On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “a lot” of government help, how much [CASH ASSISTANCE/JOB TRAINING} help would you say that you think Michael should be eligible to receive?

A-2 Proposed memory question

These items would preferably be placed near the end of the interview, perhaps just in front of the closing sociodemographic questions. We plan to use a counterbalanced ordering of the questions A-E in order to determine whether their order has any affect on the proficiency of recall.

Our plan is for the questions to be open-ended (that is, to not have specific response categories). We think it important to do this because otherwise one would expect the listed categories (especially in the “cause of unemployment” condition) to have a priming effect. We would like for the most likely potential answers to be listed on the interviewer's screen with the telephone interviewer being instructed to code the answer if the answer is given. However, as survey centers presently vary in their policies about interview coding of open-ended questions like this, we have not listed such categories here.

A different topic that researchers are interested in is memory. We would like to see how well you remember some information that was presented earlier in the interview. Earlier we told you about a man named Michael who was unemployed and having trouble finding work. We asked you what you how much government help you thought Michael should be eligible to receive.

1. What was Michael's marital status? [*Marital status is not mentioned in the vignette, and so the correct answer always would always be to volunteer that it had not been mentioned.*]
2. How old was Michael? [*The correct answer to this question is always "twenty-six."*]
3. What was Michael's race? [In the white and black conditions of the experiment, this question has a specific correct answer; in the "no race specified" question, the correct answer would be that no race was indicated.]
4. How much education did Michael have? [*The correct answer to this question is always "a high school degree"*]
5. What was the reason that Michael was unemployed? [*This question always has a specific correct answer, although it varies according to the "cause of unemployment" condition of the experiment.*]

A-3 Proposed political orientation question

If the TESS instrument does not already include a political orientation question, these item need to be added earlier in the telephone interview (it is the same question format used in Sneiderman and Piazza 1993):

In general, when it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, a conservative, a moderate, or what?

If subject answers *liberal*: Do you think of yourself as a strong liberal or not a very strong liberal?

If subject answers *conservative*: Do you think of yourself as a strong conservative or not a very strong conservative?

If subject answers *moderate*: Do you think of yourself as more like a liberal or more like a conservative?

Appendix B. Tables and Figures.

Table 1. % answering that prospective recipient should receive “a lot” of assistance, by characteristics of recipient

		all	white respondents	black respondents
race	Black	30.4	27.8	52.8
	White	23.8	20.8	36.4
	Unspecified	26.3	24.5	38.2
cause of unemployment	Prison	24.8	21.5	44.4
	Fired	25.1	22.5	33.7
	Laid off	30.8	29.4	48.9
work history	Steady	30.6	27.2	46.9
	Unsteady	23.4	21.7	38.0
N		2009	1538	194

Figure 1: Support for assistance by race and political orientation of respondent.

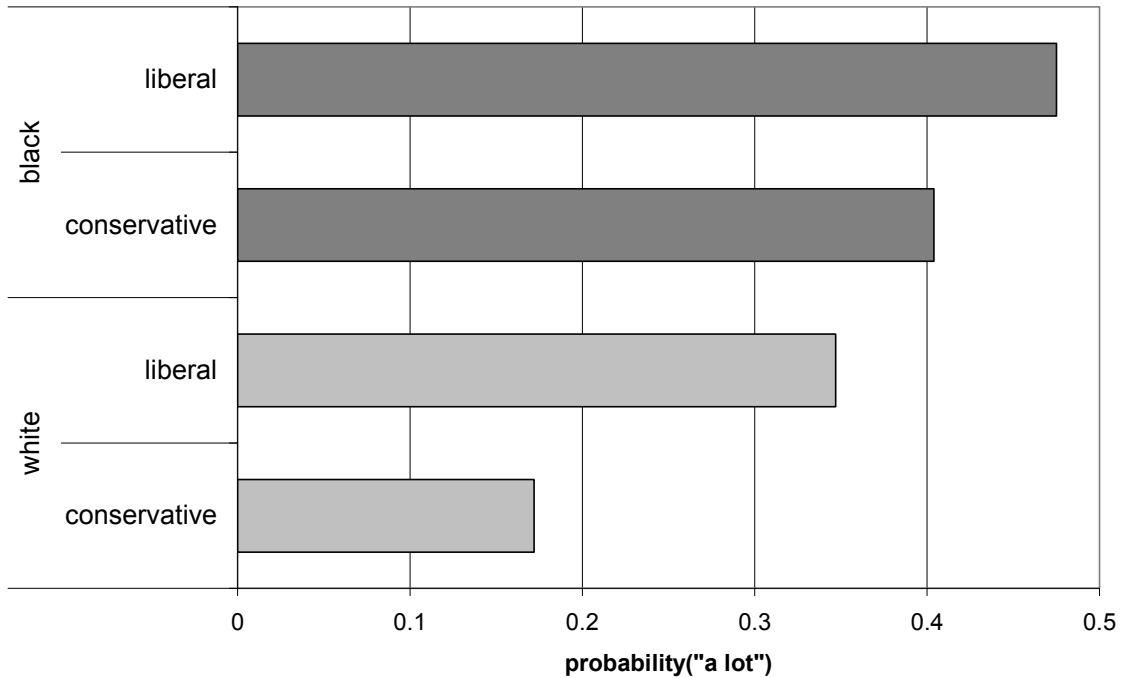
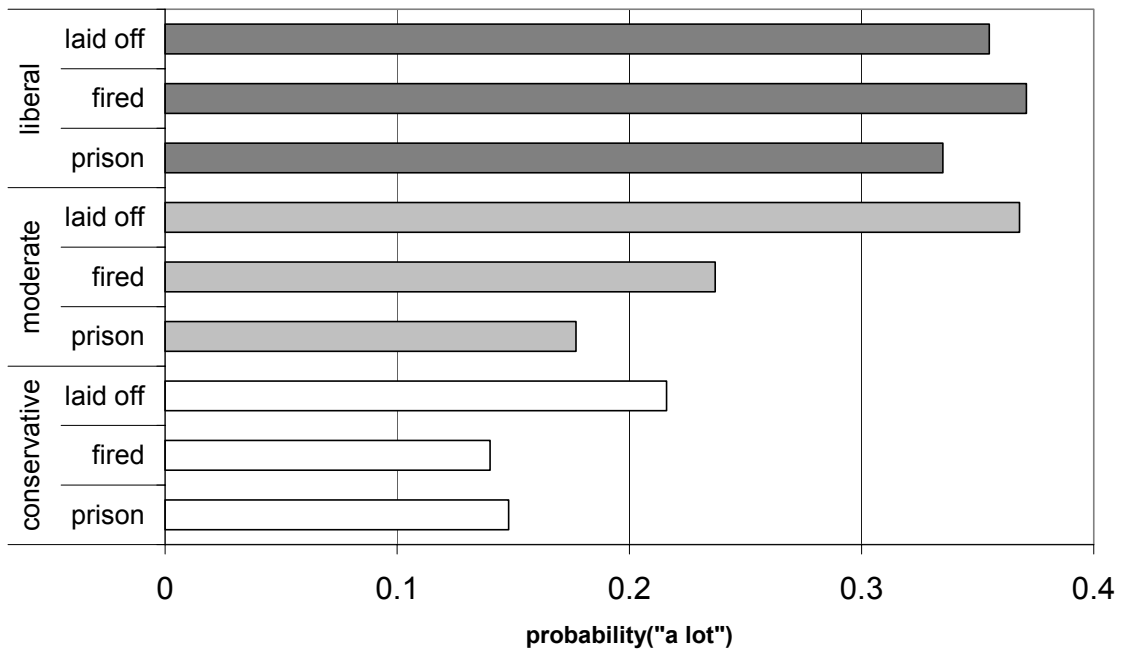


Figure 2. White respondents' support for government assistance to unemployed, by political orientation and cause of unemployment



Appendix C. Schematic rendition of original and proposed experiment.

ORIGINAL EXPERIMENT

PROPOSED EXPERIMENT

