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from the alabama poverty project
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Myths and Facts about Poverty and Welfare

Myths

- Most people who are poor are lazy and don't want to work.
 - Most people who are poor get welfare, so they aren't really suffering.
 - Most people who are poor are better off than the rest of us because the government pays them to lie around and have more babies. But we ordinary taxpayers can't afford to have more kids because the government won't subsidize us like they do the "welfare queens."
 - Families on welfare eat better than those of us who work for a living. If they didn't buy all the junk food and steaks they do and managed their money better, they wouldn't be poor.
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Facts

- In 2008, 64% of people who are poor in the U.S. were not able to work due to their age (too young or too old), disability, or the lack of jobs.^{1,2} All of these are circumstances are beyond the control of the individual.
 - Most people who are poor do not receive aid from the government, either because they are not eligible, not willing to apply, or do not know that they are eligible.
 - In Alabama, only a minority of welfare recipients receive ANY cash aid at all. Those who do receive TANF payments were paid a maximum of \$215/month and \$2580/year for a family of three.³ Compared to the income tax deduction of \$4150 per child, middle class families may have more government-supplied incentive to have kids than the poor do.^{4,5} In fact, the total number of children women on public assistance have is significantly less than the total number of children all US women of child bearing age have each year.⁶
 - The average food stamp allotment in 2002 was 83 cents a meal per person.⁷ For a poor person, no amount of "good management" can result in sufficient nutritious meals throughout the month while on Food Stamps. We imagine what we see someone buy on food stamps is what they buy every week, but most food stamp recipients do one big shopping trip a month and try to make it last through the month.
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Why Do Myths Persist?

- The media perpetuate mythic images of "welfare queens" by running the same tired stories, and presenting as the norm a black family with four kids, all conceived by different fathers and all of them born while the mother was on welfare. The next time you see a welfare story in the newspaper or on TV, look critically at the images they are presenting to you. Absent are the laid-off workers, the sick and disabled, and the unemployed workers who are poor and need help.

- We want to believe myths. We are not mean-spirited people, but we all fear the possibility of being poor. By demonizing the poor, it allows us to believe that “We will never be poor, because we are NOT like THOSE people.” But in fact, we are. In a 25-year study of the American families done by the University of Michigan, at some moment in those years fully one-quarter of all families experienced poverty.⁸
- Politicians profit from encouraging myths. When is the last time a politician got elected for telling a truth we did not want to hear? In the case of welfare myths, politicians can balance the budget on the backs of the poor, and we will support this.

More Facts on Poverty

- Most recipients of welfare are NOT black, contrary to our myths. While people of color are disproportionately poor in the U.S., they are not the majority of the poor, nor are they the majority of welfare recipients.
- Most people are poor because they have experienced the loss of a job, reduced wages, or the loss of a wage earner in the family. Divorce, desertion, health crisis, job loss, and unemployment are the most common reasons people in the U.S. are poor.
- Most welfare spending in the U.S. has been health care assistance to the aged poor and disabled (the majority of Medicaid spending), and not to poor families in general.
- Getting a job will not end poverty for most people in the U.S. because many of them already work. They just don’t earn enough to stop being poor. Workfare is not a solution to the problem of part-time, low-wage jobs that do not pay enough to support the families of their workers. When workfare stops subsidizing childcare after the first year on the program, not many moms will be able to keep those low-wage jobs without the subsidized childcare.
- Most welfare recipients are not teenage moms, as the media hype and myth-driven welfare reforms tend to indicate. In fact, no more than 6.4% of the Alabama welfare families are headed by a teen mom.⁹

References

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, 2009 Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, September 2009, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/pov/new24_001_01.htm.
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2008*, September 2009, p. 14, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p60-236.pdf>
- 3 National Center for Children in Poverty, *Alabama Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Cash Assistance*, http://www.nccp.org/profiles/AL_profile_36.html.
- 4 Internal Revenue Service, *Publication 501 (2009), Exemptions, Standard Deduction, and Filing Information*, <http://www.irs.gov/publications/p501/ar01.html>
- 5 United States Department of Agriculture: National Finance Center, *Alabama State Income Tax Information*, http://i2i.nfc.usda.gov/Publications/Tax_Formulas/State_City_County/taxal.html.
- 6 U.S. Census Bureau, *Fertility of American Women Current Population Survey – June 2006 Detailed Tables*, Table 12, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/fertility/cps2006.html>.
- 7 Food Research and Action Center, *Food Stamps for Working Families: Issues and Options*, p 5, <http://www.frac.org/html/publications/workingFamilies040402.PDF>.
- 8 Greg J. Duncan et al, *Years of Poverty. Years of Plenty*, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 1984.
- 9 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families, *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families - Active Cases Percent Distribution of TANF Teen Recipients with Teen Parent Status October 2000-September 2001*, Table 10, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/character/FY2001/1010.htm>