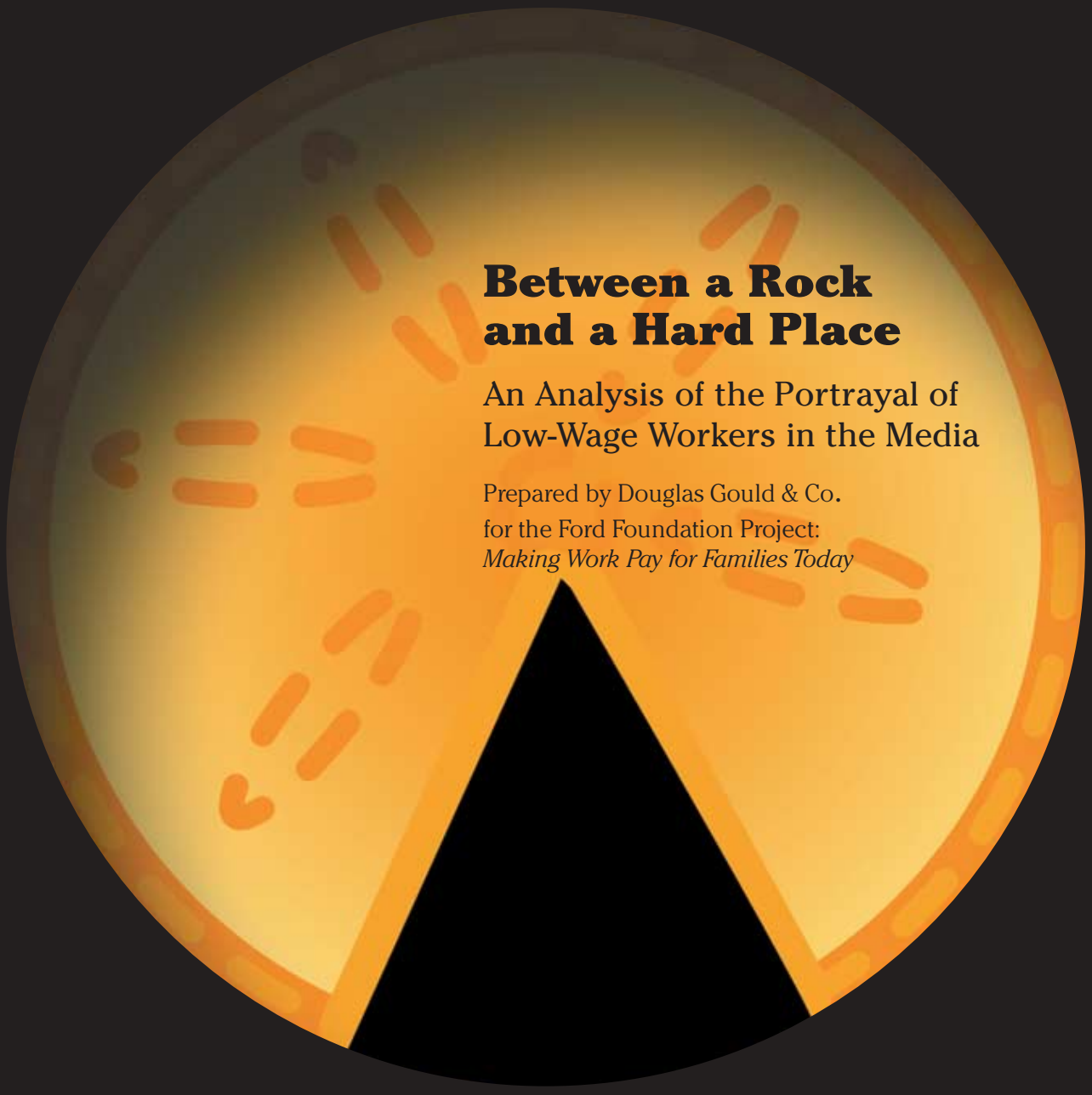

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

An Analysis of the Portrayal of Low-Wage Workers in the Media

Prepared by Douglas Gould & Co.

for the Ford Foundation Project:
Making Work Pay for Families Today

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Executive Summary

Overview

According to U.S. Department of Labor estimates, over six million people in the United States can be counted among the ranks of the working poor—individuals who spend at least 27 weeks per year in the American work force, but whose incomes still fall below the federal poverty level. These workers need a wide variety of support systems, as well as higher wages, to meet basic human needs such as food, health care and shelter for themselves and their families.

A decade of unprecedented economic prosperity, coupled with efforts to reform the federal welfare system, has had some unintended effects on this vulnerable population: a wide and growing gap between the rich and poor, and fewer supports available for low-wage workers. Yet little or no attention is being paid to the needs of these workers. In fact, according to a recent poll conducted jointly by *National Public Radio*, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, only about one percent of Americans rank poverty as one of the top issues that needs to be addressed by government.

The Ford Foundation wants to help place these workers and their needs back into the national spotlight. The first aim of the project, *Making Work Pay for Families Today*, is to identify and measure American perceptions about the working poor—perceptions that are largely determined by the media. Along these lines, Douglas Gould & Co. conducted a media analysis of news coverage of low-wage workers. This document is a crucial first step in building a communications strategy to enhance the visibility of low-wage workers and the obstacles they face in pursuing the so-called "American dream."

In sum, we have undertaken this analysis to determine the following:

- The extent of media coverage of low-wage workers;
- How the issues are being framed;
- Which messages are being communicated through the media coverage;
- Which spokespeople are identified and quoted in the stories; and
- Which reporters and outlets are covering the issue.

To these ends, the media analysis will be used to:

- Specify how existing media coverage could be improved or expanded.
- Identify which messages, if any, are being missed by the media.

Major findings and themes

- The media has found that the system—government and society at large—has failed low-wage workers. The themes used by reporters emphasize government incompetence in failing to effectively implement programs that would improve the lives of the working poor.
- The media is largely sympathetic to the plight of the working poor in the United States. Reporters seemed to care about the obstacles and challenges that low-wage workers regularly face. There is no hostility or scapegoating of low-income workers present in their coverage.
- According to media depictions, low-wage workers are continually caught between a rock and a hard place—with no place left to turn. Welfare reform laws and other legislation designed to help low-wage workers have instead forced them to confront a multitude of other social problems, including a lack of affordable housing, health care and child care facilities where they live and work.
- Living wage laws, and the campaigns behind them, are drawing local attention to the needs and obstacles facing low-wage workers. Living wage campaigns and legislation accounted for 11 percent of the story sample.
- Radio and television outlets have tuned out low-wage workers. Broadcast (radio and TV) outlets simply aren't covering low-wage workers, as they accounted for 10 percent of the story sample, compared to newspapers, which represented 84 percent.
- Unless you live in Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Washington or Chicago—communities where low-wage workers are covered extensively—the working poor may be invisible to you. The top five city-based daily newspapers in the country—the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*—represent almost two-thirds (65%) of the coverage
- Low-income workers are missing from the pages of the major national daily newspapers. *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* —the two largest circulation newspapers in the United States—accounted for just 3 percent of the story sample.
- Low-wage workers and the obstacles they face are viewed as a local, not a national, news story. Over one-third (35%) of the stories in the sample appeared in the Metro/Local section of a newspaper, compared to 14 percent that appeared in the National news section.
- There is almost no mention of the corporate role in solving the problems facing low-wage workers. Stories that mentioned corporate or business-related solutions to the barriers that low-wage workers face only mentioned them in connection with government mandates and incentive programs. Business stories (9% of the story sample) focused on how government policies such as living wage and minimum wage ordinances affected companies, as well as larger issues, such as how an economic downturn would hit low-wage workers the hardest.
- Low-wage workers depicted in the stories were almost uniformly single parents with children. The problems and perspectives of teen and elderly low-wage workers were missing entirely from the media coverage.
- Low-wage workers hardly ever made front page news. They were most often a local or metro section story, as over one-third (35%) of our sample attests. Only 3 percent of the stories analyzed appeared on the front page of a newspaper.
- Crisis management issues were the most popular topics of stories concerning low-wage workers, while systemic solutions received scant attention. Stories on the affordable housing crisis and health insurance accounted for over one quarter (26%) of the story sample. Job training and education—two keys to developing the workforce over the long-term—were the focus of only 6 percent of the stories.
- Reporters still turn more to public officials and advocates than to low-wage workers in writing stories about the working poor. Public officials represented 30 percent of all people quoted in the stories, compared to 22 percent who were advocates and 19 percent who were low-wage workers.
- The role of unions as potential problem solvers and advocates for low-wage workers has not been explored by the media. Union representatives and leaders represented only 2 percent of those quoted in the stories, and union efforts were only described in three stories (1 percent).
- There are almost as many opinion pieces as hard news stories about low-wage workers. Opinion pieces, which usually account for between 15 and 16 percent of stories in a media sample, represented 35 percent of the low-wage worker story universe. News stories, which usually represent 75 percent of a media sample, accounted for just 39 percent—four percent more of the stories than the opinion pieces.

Methodology

To conduct this analysis, we researched media coverage about low-wage workers by performing an electronic search using Nexis.com. We searched a total of 24 media outlets for a six month period: February 1, 2001 to July 31, 2001. Our sample consisted of the top ten daily newspapers in the country, the top two circulated national newspapers, three national news magazines, six broadcast news outlets, two wire services and one Internet news source.

- The story had to appear between February 1, 2001 and July 31, 2001.
- Combinations of the terms listed on page 7 needed to appear in the story.

Initially, we retrieved 524 articles from the 24 press outlets that contained the words "low wage workers" and appeared during the time period outlined above. But a quick look at the retrieved stories showed that while some of the stories focused on low-wage workers, many just mentioned them in a laundry list of interest groups and had nothing to do with their experience.

The press outlets that we looked at in the analysis are:

The New York Times	*The Wall Street Journal*	*National Public Radio*
The Los Angeles Times	*USA Today*	*CNN*
The Boston Globe	*Newsweek*	*Fox News Channel*
The Washington Post	*Time*	*NBC News*
The Chicago Tribune	*U.S. News & World Report*	*ABC News*
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	*Associated Press*	*CBS News*
The San Francisco Chronicle	*Reuters*	*Salon.com*
The Philadelphia Inquirer		
The Dallas Morning News		
The Detroit Free Press		

Parameters of the search

Using the electronic search engine, the following criteria were used as the parameters of the search:

- The story needed to focus on low-wage workers.
- The story had to be 500 words or more, unless it was an opinion piece.

As a result, we crafted a list of topics that would help us zero in on articles that focused on the experience and perspective of low-wage workers. These topics corresponded to the issues outlined by the Ford Foundation Advisory Group on the Low-Wage

Classifying the Coverage

Worker Communication Strategy, and reflected the challenges and obstacles that these workers face in their everyday lives. By including these topics in our search, we ensured that stories that focused on other topics and only mentioned low-wage workers casually would be excluded from our results (see topic list below).

We also realized that reporters may use a variety of different labels in referring to low-wage workers, and that the stories in which these alternative labels were employed were not showing up in our retrieved sample. We then crafted a list of six different labels most commonly used in reference to low-wage workers (see label list below).

Labels	Topics
· Former welfare recipient	· Affordable housing
· Low-income worker	· Health insurance
· Low-wage worker	· Benefits
· Welfare leavers	· Hunger
· Welfare to work	· Child care
· Working poor	· Job training
	· Earned income tax credit
	· Living wage
	· Education
	· Minimum wage
	· Family medical leave
	· Social security
	· Food Stamps
	· Taxes

Armed with these two lists, we then electronically searched for stories that contained at least one of the labels listed above coupled with at least one of the topics listed above. This netted 764 articles.

Still, the vast majority of these stories did not match what we were looking for. Sometimes, the topic that the search service found (i.e. affordable housing) was not in any way connected to the section of the story that may have contained the label (i.e. working poor). As a result, we went through the retrieved story list, publication by publication. When we finished cutting out all the ones that did not match our criteria outlined above, we were left with a mere 277 articles that appeared in the six-month period—36 percent of the unedited sample.

While 36 percent may seem like a small percentage of stories that both contained our search terms and actually focused on low-wage workers, our experience with previous media analysis searches has shown that generally only 40 percent of retrieved stories actually focus on targeted topics. This number can also vary widely—from 13 percent in one analysis to 94 percent in another—and depends largely on whether the terms used in the search are generic words used often by reporters.

Since our goal was to read and analyze between 200 and 300 stories, we decided to include all of the 277 stories in our final sample.

Hard news accounts were the most common stories about low-wage workers. But low-wage workers and the difficulties they face did not make headline news and were almost as likely to be mentioned on opinion pages as they were in news sections.

Article Type

Type	No. of stories	% of total
News	109	39 %
Opinion	96	35 %
Feature	72	26 %
TOTAL	277 stories	

One of the most startling findings in our research was the almost even split between the percentage of hard news stories and opinion pieces. Opinion pieces usually account for between 15 and 16 percent of a typical media analysis sample. In our sample, they accounted for more than twice that percentage. News accounts were notably under-represented in our sample. In typical media analysis findings, news stories usually represent three-quarters (75%) of the stories found. Among our stories, they accounted for almost half that number.

What explains the lack of hard news coverage? There simply weren't many news hooks—such as the effect of a particular government policy, a policy debate over a proposed living wage law, or the release of a report by a national organization outlining some of the problems that low-wage workers face—available to reporters over the six-month period. For example, there was only one national debate that incorporated discussion of low-wage workers among policy makers: the battle over the Bush tax cut.

Another reason may be that a great deal of news coverage about low-wage workers is issue-oriented. Quite often, reporters "back into" covering low-wage workers by writing about universal problems that all citizens face—such as the souring of the economy, or a lack of affordable housing or health insurance—but may hit low-wage workers the hardest. But even though these issues provided a timely connection to low-wage workers, reporters often chose to focus on these problems through other lenses, neglecting the perspective or experience of low-wage workers entirely. For example, many of the stories we cut from our sample mentioned low-wage workers in passing, but chose to focus on developments such as joblessness in the technology sector.

Among the news stories that were included in our sample, 28 percent focused on local policies such as proposed or enacted living wage ordinances. One-quarter of the hard news sample dealt with national policy, such as the proposed Bush tax cut or federal programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and food stamps. Eighteen stories, or 17 percent of the hard news sample, focused on state policies related to health care, the minimum wage and TANF implementation. National studies released by government agencies and advocacy groups were the focus of 10 percent of the news sample, or 11 stories total.

Unlike in the hard news sample, national policies like the Bush tax cut and other federal programs dominated the opinion pieces that we read and analyzed. National policy debates prompted 44 percent of the opinion pieces, or 42 pieces total. Thirteen percent of the opinion pieces focused on local policy, while 10 percent dealt with state policy. Other opinion topics included the need to take notice of the working poor (7 percent); the Harvard University living-wage sit-in (7 percent); national studies (6 percent); and local advocacy efforts on behalf of low-wage workers (4 percent).

The 72 stories that composed our feature sample covered a wide range of topics:

- 19 percent were profiles of low-wage workers and detailed depictions of their daily struggles.
- 14 percent focused on national policy.
- 14 percent dealt with local policy.
- 11 percent focused on people who were in the transition from welfare to work.
- 8 percent focused on the effect of the economy on low-wage workers.

Where did the stories run?

A closer look at the location of the stories in our sample reveals even more about how the media covered issues related to low-wage workers. A look at the location breakdown shows that low-wage workers were largely a local story that hardly ever made it onto the front page of most newspapers, nor were they the lead on any newscasts analyzed.

Breakdown of articles by sections

Section	Stories	Pct.. of sample
Metro/Local	96	35 %
Op-Ed Page	77	28 %
National News	40	14 %
Business	25	9 %
Radio - Feature	17	6 %
Front Page	7	3 %
TV - Newscast	6	2 %
TV - Panel Show	5	2 %
Lifestyles	2	1 %
Health/Science	1	.5 %
Internet	1	.5 %
TOTAL	277	

Reporters largely viewed the challenges that low-wage workers face—housing, health care, benefits, low wages—as local issues and problems. They repeatedly failed to recognize that issues such as affordable housing and the lack of health insurance coverage are widespread, national problems. Accordingly, stories in the metro or local sections of newspapers represented over one-third of all the pieces in our sample. National news stories, which usually dominate media samples on timely topics, accounted for just 14 percent.

The breakdown of story location also reflects the solutions posited by the media to the problems that low-wage workers face. Since they viewed these problems as local, the solutions presented are local ones—usually in the form of local laws or advocacy efforts to help the poor. The corporate

or business role in addressing the problems facing low-wage workers is hardly mentioned at all by reporters, and this is reflected in the low percentage of stories (9%) that appeared in Business sections. Even the business stories focused largely on how policies such as living and minimum wage ordinances affected companies, and how an economic downturn could hurt low-wage workers, rather than on how businesses could help low-wage employees.

The location breakdown also reflects the relative number of opinion pieces in our sample, since over one-quarter (28%) of the pieces appeared on the Op-Ed page of a newspaper.

Low-wage workers barely made it onto television and radio (see next section for details). Six of the 11 television transcripts we analyzed were newscast items, but none of them were the lead story in a newscast. There were also five TV transcripts from panel shows that featured exchanges between participants about low-wage workers. But only one of these TV panel shows—an episode of *CNN's Greenfield at Large with Jeff Greenfield*—focused completely on the working poor. All of the radio transcripts in our sample were news features that appeared within a larger program, such as *National Public Radio's All Things Considered*. None represented the lead story in a radio newscast.

Which outlets ran the most stories?

How much media exposure to the plight of low-wage workers did the average American receive? The answer depends largely on where that average American lives. And while they may have read something about the working poor recently, chances are they saw and heard very little about them on the radio and TV.

Breakdown of stories by newspaper

Outlet	No. of stories	Pct.. of sample
Los Angeles Times	47	17 %
New York Times	41	15 %
Boston Globe	38	14 %
Washington Post	27	10 %
Chicago Tribune	24	9 %
National Public Radio	16	6 %
Dallas Morning News	14	5 %
Associated Press	13	5 %
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	12	4 %
San Francisco Chronicle	12	4 %
Wall Street Journal	10	4 %
CNN	6	2 %
USA Today	4	1 %
Philadelphia Inquirer	2	1 %
Fox News Channel	2	1 %
CBS News	2	1 %
NBC News	1	0.5 %
Newsweek	1	0.5 %
Salon.com	1	0.5 %
Reuters	1	0.5 %
ABC News	1	0.5 %
Detroit Free Press	0	no articles found
Time	0	no articles found
U.S. News & World Report	0	no articles found
TOTAL	277	

As you can see, the top five city-based newspapers in the country—the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*—collectively account for almost two-thirds (65%) of the coverage. But stories about low-wage workers were difficult to find almost everywhere else in the country.

Furthermore, the outlet breakdown reinforces the notion that the media views low-wage workers as a local, and not a national, story. The two largest

...radio and television outlets are simply tuning out low-wage workers and their lives...

circulation newspapers in the United States—*USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal*—ran very few stories on low-wage workers, accounting for just 3 percent of the sample. The two major wire services, *AP* and *Reuters*, accounted for barely over 5 percent.

National news magazines hardly ran anything at all on low-wage workers. *Newsweek* ran one story in the six-month period, whereas *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report* failed to run a single article on the working poor.

But perhaps an even more disturbing finding is that radio and television outlets are simply tuning out low-wage workers and their lives. Broadcast outlets accounted for only 10 percent of the story sample, compared to newspapers, which accounted for 84 percent. Among mass media outlets, only *NPR* ran more than 10 stories on low-wage workers in the six-month period we analyzed.

The lack of broadcast coverage may be explained by the location of stories that ran in newspapers as well. Much of the news seen on television and radio is driven by stories that make the front page of local and major national newspapers. If a story doesn't make the front page, broadcast producers often do not regard it as "big news," and low-wage workers made the front page very rarely.

When did the stories run?

Since there were only a few national news hooks that encouraged media coverage of low-wage workers, there was no discernible pattern found in the month-by-month breakdown of stories.

Breakdown of Stories by Month

Month	No. of stories	Pct. of sample
Feb. 2001	54	19 %
March 2001	28	10 %
April 2001	50	18 %
May 2001	60	22 %
June 2001	41	15 %
July 2001	44	16 %
TOTAL	277	

The glut of stories (40 percent) that ran in either April or May, 2001 corresponds to the climax of debate (in April) and the ultimate passage (in May) of the Bush tax cut package. The debate and passage of the plan often included a discussion on how it would impact low-wage workers and their lives, so it may account for the coverage peaking in May and tailing off a bit afterward.

But overall, the story distribution indicated no seismic shifts in coverage that may have been dictated by certain events in the months we analyzed. Even the coverage peak, at 22 percent in May, was not dramatic.

What were the stories behind the stories?

Looking at the breakdown by story type, location and outlet tells you a great deal about media coverage, but fails to convey how low-wage workers themselves were portrayed in the stories. To get a better grasp on this portrayal, we decided to dig deeper and take a look at the story themes that were used by reporters—the so-called "stories behind the story."

Our analysis of these themes was to determine how the stories in our sample connected to the archetypes and stories that already exist within people's minds. We were able to identify seven of these different themes used repeatedly by reporters and the spokespeople they quote in covering low-wage workers. By identifying these themes, we were able to determine some of the underlying messages about low-wage workers that the media was sending.

These themes seemed to surface over and over again in our story samples, and many times a reporter employed more than one theme in a story. For example, the two most popular themes—government incompetence and rock and a hard place—were often used in tandem by reporters. Stories would focus on how the government screwed up in dealing with the needs of low-wage workers, then go on to describe some of the unintended social effects on the workers themselves. Collectively, these two themes were used in almost two-thirds (65%) of the stories we read and analyzed.

Government...reform programs designed to help the working poor... have actually made things worse for low-wage workers

Government incompetence 33% of stories

One of the popular themes used by reporters—employed in one-third of the stories in our sample—was the notion of government incompetence. The inadequacy of government agencies and programs in addressing the needs of low-wage workers was the underlying theme. Government officials may have tried to reform programs designed to help the working poor, but poor planning and implementation have actually made things worse for low-wage workers. In using this theme, reporters sometimes referred to a tangled web of bureaucracy, which often trapped and debilitated services and benefits.

A prime example of the government incompetence theme appeared in a June 13 article by Stephanie Flanders in the *New York Times*. Flanders conveyed the concern of many advocates for poor working students in New York City, who often meet resistance when trying to use work-study jobs and internships to satisfy their work requirements under a new welfare-to-work law. The law actually permits the students to apply these experiences to fulfill the requirement, but many city caseworkers were unaware of the provision. As a result, students have to fight to keep their benefits and stay in school.

Flanders wrote, "People on both sides of the debate agree that most caseworkers are already overburdened and that it is probably too soon to judge whether the new law will succeed. What is also troubling, advocates say, is that some students may have dropped out of school as a result of being given wrong information."[1]

A subsequent quote by Wendy Bach of the Brooklyn Legal Aid Society reinforces the government incompetence message. "When everybody agrees that going to school is a good thing for people on public assistance to do, and when people on public assistance are having to drop out of school because they have to do a [work-study project] at the same time, it seems to me incredibly important that the bill is implemented quickly and effectively, and the agency has a responsibility to ensure that it is."[2]

Reporters used the government incompetence theme to depict a system that is flawed and broken. The message and theme of government incompetence also naturally lends itself to the call of advocates—the idea that something more needs to be done to address the needs of people because existing government programs simply aren't working.

A Rock and a Hard Place 32% of stories

The notion that low-wage workers are often trapped between a rock and a hard place was the second most popular theme used by reporters, appearing in almost one-third of the story sample. The underlying theme was the prevalence of unintended social consequences from reform efforts such as TANF, which have placed low-wage workers in a bind.

The focus of this theme was not the ineffectiveness of such policy efforts, but the effect of such reform efforts on low-wage workers themselves. To tell this story, reporters would turn to workers who faced additional burdens as a result of legislative requirements. For example, single mothers who were forced to take a full-time job under TANF now struggle to find appropriate child care for their children, or workers who must quit their full-time jobs to go back on public assistance in order to receive benefits like health insurance and child care.

A prime example of the rock and a hard place theme appeared in a March 19 piece by Louis Jacobson in the *Wall Street Journal*. The article focused on a study conducted by the University of Missouri-Kansas City that showed that while small business owners generally welcomed the idea of hiring former welfare recipients, many found the actual experience daunting because of workers that faced unintended social consequences of the welfare reform law. Jacobson described one such woman hired by a firm in Nashville.

"By last September, the woman left the company—not in acrimony or tragedy, but as a result of quiet collapse," Jacobson wrote. "Her car was 'terribly unreliable,' leading to absences. She faced a hassle when her subsidized housing lease ended five months after she began working [full-time]…. Housing officials told her that her rent would be raised—retroactively, to the day she started her job…"[3]

Eventually, the woman calculated that she would gross only $25,800 after two years experience on the job, compared to the $30,000 including housing credits, food stamps, health care and day care for her two children that she would receive on welfare. She left the company and wound up back on public assistance.

The economic ladder 17% of articles

Reporters used the rock and a hard place theme to humanize the struggles of low-wage workers, conveying the struggles to get by and "make it" that are often emphasized by advocates.

Reporters that focused on the economic angle of issues related to low-wage workers often used the economic ladder theme. The underlying theme is the allusion itself: our economic system is a ladder, with lower wage people at the bottom and higher wage people near the top. This allusion suggests, of course, a notion that still resonates with many Americans: that hard work and toil has a lot to do with how high you climb on the ladder, and through hard work, you, too, can make it to the top.

An example can be found in an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article from February 9, wherein two progressive advocacy groups, the Center for Budget & Policy Priorities and the Citizens for Tax Justice both stated that the Bush tax plan would widen the growing gap between America's rich and poor. The "ladder" here was the analysis of how the Bush tax brackets would place people making less than $39,300 per year (more than 60% of the U.S. work force) on its bottom rung by providing only 12.7 percent of the benefits through tax cuts averaging less than $500 per year. The economic ladder theme is invoked by President Bush as justification for the cuts: the wealthiest upper rung of Americans shoulder the burden of paying the most taxes and, therefore, should be rewarded for their profligate ways.[4]

In a February 25 *Boston Globe* column, *American Prospect* co-editor Robert Kuttner argued against the Bush tax cut, proposing, instead, that we change the formulas by which states receive and allocate federal monies to the poor for worker training and support programs, "…so that ex-welfare recipients could get on career ladders and not just rotate in and out of dead-end jobs."[5]

The economic ladder theme was used by reporters and others to place low-wage workers within a simplified representation of our economic system. As such, reporters and others who used the economic ladder were not likely to explore the many forces that can influence a person's climb or descent in the ladder scheme.

Falling behind—17% of articles

The notion that low wage workers are somehow "falling behind" the rest of society in terms of economic and social gains was another common theme, similar in nature to the previously mentioned economic ladder theme. There was a sense in the majority of uses of this theme that the world is rapidly moving forward and won't slow down for those who cannot keep up the pace.

Timothy Ryan, a reader whose letter appeared in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, summed up the theme when he wrote about the economic boom of the 1990s. "The country prospered in unprecedented growth," wrote Ryan. "Millions moved from poverty to prosperity. Millions of their children moved on to the affluent class. Even so, millions more were left behind. Many of their jobs, such as domestic and farm labor, no longer exist."[6]

The "falling behind" theme was generally used by advocates, quoted in worker testimonials, and substantiated in statistical evidence. The theme implied that, as a democratic society, we cannot allow our poorest to fall behind if the country is to compete in the global marketplace.

Welfare myths—15% of articles

Long-standing myths about welfare and people on public assistance appeared as the background story in 15 percent of our sample. These myths revolved around three separate, but related themes: the notion that people on public assistance are "freeloaders," the notion of welfare as prison, and the myth of the undeserving or unappreciative worker.

The "freeloader" myth, promoted to its current notoriety under President Ronald Reagan in the early eighties, posited that those who receive public assistance are "freeloaders." Stereotypically, they are single mothers with more than two children who continue to have children and live off one or multiple welfare checks, while the rest of working America's taxes support their leisure. Despite the reform of the welfare system in 1994–96 and the enforcement of benefit time-limits on welfare recipients, this theme still has a strong effect on the American psyche. Opinion articles by opponents to increasing federal subsidies for programs like child care displayed a sad contempt toward even working poor Americans who have never been on welfare. In sum, the "freeloader" myth is an unfounded, ethical judgment of poor women's moral character.

Sometimes, the "freeloader" theme was used by low-wage workers themselves, commenting on the transition from welfare to full-time employment. In a May 6 *Dallas Morning News* syndicated feature, Pat Jennings is presented as a woman who left welfare three years ago, was hired full-time by a local pharmacy, fired in a round of layoffs this spring and now struggles to provide for her children on part-time work. Referring to her months on public assistance as a single mother, she says that the welfare payments provided "an easy out if you don't want to get up at 6

Poor women and... their children are somehow [seen as] parasites by virtue of their having been on public assistance or merely because they are unable to find a way out of low-wage poverty.

in the morning and put your feet out and go to work."[7]

The "freeloader" myth condemns the working poor for being poor. Women were at the center of this long-standing prejudice in the sample. Poor women and, by extension, their children are somehow parasites by virtue of their having been on public assistance or merely because they are unable to find a way out of low-wage poverty.

As one of a number of public assistance-related themes, "welfare as prison" imagines the public welfare system as a dungeon whose recipients have sunk themselves into its inescapable gloom and are condemned to a lifetime of being a burden to the state. Some do "break out" of this prison, and it is their stories that fueled the topics reporters wove around them.

National Public Radio's Linda Wertheimer and Robert Siegel broadcasted a profile of Maria Lopez, a low-wage worker who was just scraping by but trying to get an education so she could get a good job. Wertheimer reported, "In her eyes, the welfare-to-work plan would send her right back into the pit she has only now managed to dig herself out of."[8]

As prisoners, low-wage workers and welfare leavers are not granted the full rights of a citizen in this theme. And much like ex-convicts who will always be tied to the crimes they commit, these workers will always be associated with welfare, which is, by definition, a pejorative. It is routinely referred to by both those condemning poverty in the U.S. and by those passing judgments on the supposedly inevitable, immoral behavior of America's low-wage earners. Overall, the theme presents an image of low-wage workers that is negative—despite its evocative use by some low-wage advocates.

The "undeserving or unappreciative worker" myth is another moral condemnation of low-income workers. According to this myth, those leaving welfare to take on low-wage work should be "grateful" for all the opportunities provided them by their employers. Furthermore the myth says that somehow being on welfare before has made them "spoiled" and "unappreciative" of a chance to work. The "undeserving worker" theme does not acknowledge the many work-life conflicts that welfare-leavers must endure to hold down a job, especially when supportive services like child care are months to years away on long waiting lists. Also, a low wage worker/welfare leaver could be undeserving because he or she has never had to "earn" anything before, according to this myth. It was most often tainting the comments of business people who have attempted to employ welfare leavers with mixed success. Use of the theme portrays poor people as shiftless and unmotivated to be anything better than who they are, which is not much.

The interviewed small business owner who employed a former welfare recipient in the previously cited March 19 *Wall Street Journal* article was fearful that she had been wasting her time training welfare leavers at her company, as they are so quick to leave, often back to the subsidized benefits of welfare.[9] The low-wage worker's work-life conflicts quoted earlier in the "rock and a hard place" theme become reasoning for the employer's complaints.

The "unappreciative or undeserving worker" reinforces the false, but pervasive notion that morality increases with income, that the poor are inherently corrupt and that their behavior is to blame for their low position. In reality, working poor people "get" jobs (and "earn" promotions) that some claim are "given" to them, but this theme perpetuated the insidious idea—like the prison theme—that poverty is a moral affliction of a group of people who are somehow powerless and, simultaneously, unwilling to rectify it.

The big guy always crushes the little guy—8% of articles

Essentially an economic argument, "the big guy always crushes the little guy" theme referred to the notion that large companies and corporations providing services always succeed in driving smaller "mom and pop" neighborhood operations out of business. Home Depot causing Main Street Hardware to shut down and go out of business could be seen as an archetype associated with the theme. This theme was commonly found in articles on benefits not being afforded low-wage workers. It was particularly pronounced in articles about health insurance, the living wage and the minimum wage, as these are topics that all affect businesses' bottom line. Larger employers can carry the weight of nationally mandated or union-negotiated changes or increases in benefits for their low-wage workers, while small businesses cannot afford to provide such benefits as a $10 hourly wage or partial to full health insurance coverage and medical benefits to its workers. As a result, the larger companies end up swallowing up those smaller companies.

Tom Larmore, a lawyer with the Santa Monica Chamber of Commerce Living Wage Committee, articulated this theme in a May 29 piece in the *New York Times*. Larmore said that Santa Monica small business owners feared losing employees to larger companies that were able to pay the higher wages proposed in a new living wage ordinance. "Smaller businesses are very concerned they'll have to match these salaries or start losing their better employees," Larmore was quoted as saying.[10]

Label Analysis

"The big guy always crushes the little guy" was used by business leaders in the sample as a metaphorical argument against the possibility of low-income workers realizing gains such as better health insurance coverage. It can be seen as having an overall negative effect on the portrayal of low-wage conditions and sound, economic solutions to them. There were a few examples where liberal advocates or academics wield figures refuting this "small-business-is-unable-to-afford-it" argument, but it was usually the defense of first resort by local chambers of commerce to push back living wage ordinances and the like.

Working poor as donor/ benefactor—5% of articles

The "working poor as donor/benefactor" theme is a notion put forth by Barbara Ehrenreich, author of the recently released book on the experience of the working poor entitled *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. As quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, Ehrenreich sums this theme up in the book by writing, "To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else."[11] In the case of the working poor, their donations are essentially underpaid labor in doing the work no one else is willing to do, such as guarding properties in unsafe neighborhoods, serving as waitresses and busboys, working as janitors, or cleaning up after elderly people whose family members long ago stopped visiting.

In a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from April 28, welfare leavers who took jobs as home health aides performed in a theatrical group designed to communicate messages of empowerment to colleagues who might experience professional snobbery or mistreatment on the job from higher-qualified health care workers or clients: "Donna Jenkins remembered hating the idea of going into troubled North Philadelphia, only to find a wonderful patient and realize she was needed there. They talked about what it was like to care for a white man who didn't want to be touched by a black hand or for a client who wanted an aide to clean his kitchen floor with a toothbrush. Through it all was the theme that these were women who had discovered that caring is what they're good at. 'I've always been caring for people and I don't get tired of it,' Janie Dixon, 42, told the invited audience. 'It's a gift, something I was born with. A caring heart.'[12]

The notion that the low-wage worker is somehow more virtuous than other workers is, of course, unqualified. But the theme also boosted the image of working poor people as honest people deserving of a better life. More importantly, it counteracted the self-negating aspects of the "welfare as prison" and "welfare myth" themes and offset a temptation to see low-wage workers as somehow being "the others." But the theme may also undermine any efforts on behalf of low-wage workers to gain higher wages. Some may say that if they're doing this work out of a moral obligation, money should not be important.

As a final way to determine how low-wage workers were portrayed in media coverage, we decided to look at the labels that reporters used in describing them.

Among six primary labels that we tracked in our story sample, "working poor" was by far the most used by reporters, who employed it in 149 stories, or 54 percent of our total sample. Perhaps most notably, however, was the association that reporters made between low-wage workers and public assistance programs. The terms "former welfare recipient" and "welfare to work" collectively appeared in 59 stories, or 21 percent of our total sample.

Labels Used by Reporters

Label	No. of stories[1]	% of total
Working poor	149	54 %
Low-wage worker	46	17 %
Low-income worker	34	12 %
Former welfare recipients	31	11 %
Welfare-to-work	28	10 %
Welfare leavers	0	no articles

"Low-wage worker" was another commonly used term, appearing in 46 stories, or 17 percent of our sample, while "low-income worker" was used in 34 stories, or 12 percent. We also searched for stories containing the "welfare leavers" label, but found none.

Our analysis of the labels used by reporters shows that "working poor" seems to be the preferred term of reference, although some reporters still approach and cover low-wage workers

[1]Note that the total number of stories here is greater than the 277 in our sample because reporters sometimes used more than one label in referring to low-wage workers within the same story. Percentages, however, are based on the sample total of 277 stories.

Story Subjects and Detailed Topic Analysis

in the context of welfare and welfare reform. Further opinion testing should be able to determine whether this term has positive or negative connotations among the general public, and how hurtful or helpful it may be in advocacy campaigns.

Story Subjects

The following list is a numerical breakdown of all the stories in the sample by category. While sometimes a story mentioned more than one issue, we broke the stories down into these categories according to the principal subject of each story. A full description and detailed analysis of these categories follows this list.

Topical Breakdown of story subjects

Affordable housing	35	13%
Health insurance	35	13%
Welfare reform	33	12%
Living wage laws	30	11%
Taxes/Tax relief	30	11%
Miscellaneous	23	8%
Benefits	18	6%
Childcare	12	4%
Minimum wage	11	4%
Job training	11	4%
Profiles	11	4%
Earned income tax credit	6	2%
Food stamps	6	2%
Healthcare	4	1%
Education	3	1%
Family Medical leave	3	1%
Hunger	3	1%
Social Security	3	1%
	277 stories	

Affordable Housing—35 stories (13% of total sample)

The national crisis concerning a lack of affordable housing was among the most popular story topics in our sample. Low-income workers are trapped in suburbs, cities and even small towns either in sub-standard housing, as homeless people, or paying unaffordable rents in proportion to their lack of a living wage, thus creating other daily hardships for them. Today's homeless and low-income workers as one article aptly put it, have "no place left to go."

Many of these stories focused on the role of the affordable housing crisis in creating a new breed of working homeless people—families, single mothers, single men, new immigrants in the sprawling suburbs—who would have to work 100-hour weeks at the minimum wage in some cities to afford shelter for themselves and their families. Skyrocketing rents in a decade-long, booming economy and a de-emphasis by city administrations on the construction of low-income housing, have driven many low-income people onto the streets and into the suburbs in search of an affordable rent.

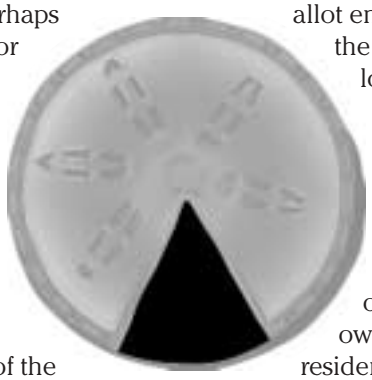
In the sympathetic personal profiles of these newly homeless low-income workers, there emerged a sense, as in a July 23 *Associated Press* story, that low-income workers are just a paycheck away from being evicted from their homes. Advocates for the homeless like Donald Gean, head of the York County Shelter Program in Alfred, Maine, described how the population they serve has changed over the past decade when he said, "Our typical family used to be a single mom with one or two kids and a myriad of problems—abuse, addiction, things like that.' Now they're seeing…families with one and even two employed parents who have, other than a shortage of cash, few of the problems…that homeless parents have traditionally had."[13]

In a Boston homeless shelter, a local sous chef at Bay State College who is living there described the working poor's anxieties about housing: "The assumption is that if you do all the right things you will find housing. It is very frustrating for a lot of guests here, because they are working and have to come to a shelter." According to this June 7 *Boston Globe* article, the disparity between the chef's minimum wage salary of $9.50 per hour and Greater Boston rents is insurmountable. The 2000 Census showed that Boston's rental vacancy rate is less than 2 percent and a shocking 29 percent of its 4,596 homeless were employed.[14]

For the homeless low-income worker, even shelters are hard to come by. A February 11 *Globe* article stated that in New Hampshire last year, both state-funded and privately-funded shelters turned away 9,000 people, while rents in Manchester rose 55 percent in the past few years. While states and cities are beginning to recognize the affordable housing crisis in their municipalities, short-term solutions for those left homeless in the rent wars are few in the media sample. One solution being offered by a few private and public institutions, like Concord, New Hampshire-based Housing Forum, involves extending irregular, so-called

For the homeless low-income worker, even shelters are hard to come by...

"micro-credit" loans of perhaps $100 to those working poor on the verge of eviction because of late rent payment.[15]



Reporters usually portrayed solutions to regional affordable housing crises for low-income people as inadequate to the scope of the problem, whether they were offered by city governments (11%, or 4 stories); state or federal programs (6%, or 2 stories); or private-public partnerships (11%, or 4 stories). Free-market solutions accounted for another 11 percent, or four stories. All but two of all these types of stories were local news, and public advocates are most often quoted, with advocates for affordable housing quoted second-most, criticizing each respective program's shortcomings. An even smaller number of these stories included quotes from low-income housing residents about conditions under existing legislation.

Two articles from the *San Francisco Chronicle* document how a federal program, Section 8, gives about 1.2 million people nationwide checks for as much as two-thirds of their rent. In the San Francisco affordable housing development of La Esperanza, an April 26 *Chronicle* story reported, tenants like Olivia Estrada were getting a chance at home ownership through Section 8 checks. This unique chance at financial stability is not the norm, however, for most low-income workers who can't fathom taking out a number of federal loans to finance homes, as cited in most of the sample's urban and suburban reporting.[16]

More typical were state, county or city funding plans like those passed in Orange County, California or Boston, Massachusetts, which simply do not allot enough money to ensure the construction of enough low and moderate-income housing. There were also actions, as in suburban Howard County, Maryland, placing affordable housing up for sale in order to "promote home ownership" amongst its residents, as one city official stated. A May 9 *Los Angeles Times* story on the Orange County plan to build 4,084 homes for families with incomes of less than $34,800 had advocates warning that the plan is too weak and will do little to add housing where there is the greatest need.

In recognition of the massive rent increases and a lack of affordable housing in newly gentrified cities, three stories on affordable housing document how the migration of working poor in an "urban exodus" has seen a shift in the demographics of low-wage populations from city to suburb. Following the service job sector's flight to the suburbs, these suburban low wage earners are finding few services established for them, little affordable housing or even temporary housing and, sometimes, outright hostility from communities and elected officials in their new environments.

An April 1 *San Francisco Chronicle* feature explored how, in the face of sky-rocketing rents, the working poor were moving to areas with cheaper rentals to make better use of the previously mentioned Section 8 housing vouchers. Typically, a city resident moved away expecting to find a voucher-friendly landlord and affordable rent within the voucher's usable time limit of four to six months. In San Francisco last year, however, two in every three vouchers expired before holders could use them. A suburban landlord quoted in the article said he'd rather not deal with the constraints of Section 8, like annual inspections and delays in getting rent increases approved. No practical solutions were offered by officials in Modesto and other towns in the Central Valley, where low-wage workers were relocating.[17]

Worst of all, when affordable housing is constructed for low-income workers in suburban areas, they face the contempt of surrounding communities concerned about property devaluation, noise, crime and other stereotypical negative behaviors associated with lower-income groups. Three *Los Angeles Times* articles specifically reflected race and/or class discrimination against low or moderate income housing residents. One is an op-ed by an economics professor distinguishing housing price concerns with the plight of the poor and advocating spending government subsidies elsewhere.[18] A news article explained how city officials in Costa Mesa may destroy overcrowded rental units filled with low-income workers because they are simply unwanted immigrant "guests" in the community.[19] There was also a news story about how Anaheim is imposing restrictions on the length of stays in motels, often the housing of last resort to the working poor.[20]

The sum of stories show a collection of geographically distributed cities and suburbs where there is simply not enough housing for low-income workers who often commute long distances to work minimum or slightly above-minimum wage jobs. This housing crisis is also described in a few articles as affecting a portion of middle class Americans seeking to relocate. Meanwhile, social services in their new suburban homes are dwindling or non-existent, leaving many working poor individuals and families only a paycheck away from destitution.

...reporting of health insurance policies unfair or insufficient to low income workers was overwhelmingly sympathetic to their plight

Health Insurance—35 stories (13% of total sample)

Stories about health insurance, like those about affordable housing, accounted for 13 percent of our story sample. When the subject "health insurance" is mentioned in our sample, "poor" describes both the incomes of many workers, the quality and quantity of health care services they receive and, consequently, the long-term degraded health of these workers and their children. The majority of articles (26 stories, or 74% of the category) were focused on either federal (7), state (13), or local (6) government efforts to address the uninsured, including low-income workers. Slightly over a third (13 of 35 stories) were op-eds, editorials or letters to the editor criticizing government policies and advocating alternative policies to provide low-income workers and children with health insurance.

As in other subject categories in this study, the reporting of health insurance policies unfair or insufficient to low income workers was overwhelmingly sympathetic to their plight. Low-income workers, if not represented as those leaving welfare rolls, were portrayed as stuck between having too much money to qualify for Medicaid and not enough to afford employer-subsidized insurance or an independently provided plan. Government incompetence heavily influenced the tone of the reporting and editorials, and reporters' choices of advocates' quotes were usually critical of an existing policy or plan. The negative consequences of these inadequate government plans comprised the remainder of the category's sub-topics, whether it was poor health services in urban hospitals and their funding levels or the high costs associated with health care.

In both New York and Illinois, articles in the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* described state government assistance programs that—despite the desperate need for more health care coverage among their poor—still had surplus federal money in their coffers. In New York, these officials unfairly denied health care coverage to thousands of poor city families, who were wrongly cut from Medicaid when dropped from welfare rolls. Human and computer errors were faulted and a successful lawsuit is redressing the situation.[21] In Illinois, unspent federal monies were at the center of an effort by advocates to have the surplus funding help subsidize FamilyCare, a program by which the low-income parents of children enrolled in the state health plan KidCare would receive health insurance too.[22]

Based on this sample, governors and state administrations seem to be more active and vocal advocates for workable health insurance reform for low-income workers than their federal counterparts, despite recent pronouncements by Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson about the proposed Family Health Plus plan. Popular consensus for state-regulated health insurance initiatives is driven by advocacy organizations and opinion makers quoted in articles and published in several op-eds. A previously mentioned *Chicago Tribune* editorial noted that "Gov. George Ryan now has a good shot at taking a giant whack at that number [50,000 Illinois kids eligible for KidsCare health plan who remain uninsured]. He could use unspent money from what the feds give states under the Child Health Insurance Program to cover the children's parents, too. Covering adults, Illinois should have learned from other states that already do it, encourages work, supports families and makes it easier to sign up more children of working poor parents for KidsCare."[23]

In the absence of a workable federal safety net for their poor and facing the end of five-year welfare subsidies for some residents, states are collaborating and sharing ideas about how to cover rising health costs and provide medical treatment to their most vulnerable residents. There are failures and even some minor successes in this experimental period for states and municipal governments described in the sample. A *San Francisco Chronicle* feature on June 19 focused on a new city law requiring all city contractors and leaseholders to offer health insurance to employees. The article initially approaches the new law's impact from the perspective of a low-wage worker at an airport newsstand who only wants a "tiny piece of the cake" and responds to news of the law by "stamping her foot in delight…" A baggage handler, Ronald Castor explains his predicament, "When you're making $325 a week and you have other bills to pay—for rent and utilities—that $39 a week [for a health insurance premium] is a little bit too much." A local coalition of religious and labor groups, the Bay Area Organizing Committee, fought hard to have the city law passed, and are quoted in the article calling the new standards "responsible and reasonable."[24]

The problems faced by policymakers, health care providers, the working poor and their employers get adequate attention in the overall health insurance category, but, ultimately, workers' voices and concerns get most of the reporters' attentions, as their struggle creates a human element in these stories. In response to the aforementioned San Francisco law, a string of articles and letters-to-the-editor argued whether Mayor Willie Brown's health plan was moving "too fast" for regional employers to compensate employees. Jim Mathias, vice president of public affairs for the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce was quoted in a story as saying " The process was flawed and

...welfare reform is creating unhealthy living conditions for the children of parents now transitioning from welfare to work

rushed. Anything that affects more than 16,000 employees, at a cost of almost $11.7 million over the first three years deserves thoughtful and thorough consideration."[25] Yet, according to one June *Chicago Tribune* letter writer (citing a Center for National Policy study) workers are less likely to be offered health insurance coverage via an employer than 20 years ago—54% in 1998 from 66% in 1979.[26]

A theme woven into several stories and specifically documented in two of them suggested that welfare reform is creating unhealthy living conditions for the children of parents now transitioning from welfare to work. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial from July 21 reports on a Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation study showing how 40% of welfare recipients surveyed in Los Angeles, Miami, Cleveland and Philadelphia had multiple serious health problems or children with severe disorders. The editorial pointed out that barriers to keeping a job, such as little education, no work experience, limited English skills and having a large number of children, contributed to low-wage workers' health maladies.[27] As in other articles proposing a federal or state solution to the uninsured, children are prioritized as the first beneficiaries, as has been reflected in programs like CHIPs or Illinois' KidsCare.

The last resort for many uninsured low-wage workers seeking health care is at a local free clinic or at a regional hospital's emergency room that accepts Medicaid. Health care workers, like homeless shelter workers interviewed about the new face of homelessness, testified in these articles as to the changing face of their low-income patients: full-time employed, parents and their children—including immigrant families—though not exclusively in most areas. Physicians and health care professionals interviewed, especially those in inner-city hospitals, split their comments between apathetic statements and those more attuned to the plight of the uninsured low-wage worker, such as, "Our community's residents may have found a job, but health insurance hasn't been part of that equation. They weren't part of the economic recovery."[28]

In Chicago and, in one of the few *Wall Street Journal* articles to discuss low-wage workers, low-income workers are blamed for destroying the bottom line at these inner-city hospitals. The *Journal* op-ed complains how health care and hospitals in the U.S. are in a fiscal crisis because 43 million Americans without health insurance are "a huge drag [on]…doctors and hospitals…balking at the strains on their bottom lines. Hospitals no longer have piles of cash to spend on free care."[29] An expert at Loyola University School of Law in the April 8, *Tribune* story even warns that "…hospital closures will occur" in Chicago as a result of dispensing so much free care.[30]

While a minority of articles complained about how the uninsured are impacting the bottom lines of hospitals, and in turn, federal budgets, most articles provided reporting that was favorable to the uninsured low-wage worker's health care dilemma. States are lobbying federal offices for changes and improvements in the reauthorization of welfare reform initiatives to embrace broader health protections for children and their working parents, but allocations in the Bush Administration's federal budget do not look very promising to the uninsured low-wage earner.

Welfare reform—33 stories (12% of total sample)

When reporters weren't focusing on the two crisis-oriented topics of affordable housing and health insurance, they often turned their attention to welfare reform to address low-wage worker issues. Welfare reform efforts—policies enacted at the federal level and implemented at the state and local levels mandating the transition from public assistance to paying jobs—accounted for 12 percent of our total story sample.

Nine of these stories, or 27 percent of the welfare reform sample, focused on federal welfare reform policy. Reviews of the policy, as reflected in these pieces, are mixed at best. Only one piece—a Feb. 1st newscast segment that ran on *Fox News Channel*—focused on the success of a former welfare recipient under Maryland's welfare-to-work program.[31] An April 16 article in *USA Today* detailed how the new Bush administration budget would cut funds for worker retraining programs by $541 million, or 10 percent, and grants to state and local governments to help welfare recipients keep jobs would fall 19 percent, and end entirely in 2005.[32]

Four of the federal policy stories on welfare reform were opinion pieces. Aside from a letter advocating the creation of a federal GI bill to help the poor in the welfare-to-work transition and a detailed plan on how President Bush could help the poor, these pieces examined some critical questions that need to be asked before the next round of welfare reform laws can be implemented. A letter to the editor and an op-ed from the *Los Angeles Times*, both written by UCLA professor of public policy Leonard Schneiderman, focused on problems that are keeping welfare parents from work. Schneiderman noted that federal officials never took into account the

...low-wage workers are indeed the most vulnerable to shifts in the economy...

barriers that need to be overcome for people to comply with the demands of the reform laws.

"Welfare reform…has taught us that simply making demands and insisting upon accountability are not enough," Schneiderman wrote. "There are barriers to work that also must be overcome." He then goes on to list these barriers, which include inadequate access to child care, training and education, and an inadequate supply of low-cost housing.[33]

State policy in implementing the federal mandates of welfare reform were the focus of seven stories, or 21 percent of the welfare reform sample. All seven of these pieces, however, are critical of state efforts or state assessments of their own welfare reform success.

One *Los Angeles Times* article notes the link between state and county efforts, saying that proposed state cuts to incentive funds given to counties who trim their welfare rolls in California will result in crucial transportation, child care and job training programs being shut down.[34] This article suggested that legislators often view these crucial benefits as yet another fiscal budget item, as opposed to a vital program that can help the working poor stay afloat—a sentiment also noted by a reporter in an *NPR* piece critical of the Wisconsin welfare-to-work program.

Two *Boston Globe* pieces—an article about a Brandeis University study and an op-ed by the study's authors—were both highly critical of the welfare reform assessment made by the Massachusetts state government. The op-ed pointed out that while state residents who did make the successful transition to full-time work do earn on average three times more than their previous welfare check, the state ignored dramatic increases in the number of people reporting hunger in their families after they went to work. The number reporting hunger, in this case, jumped from 14 to 22 percent.[35]

Seven more welfare reform stories dealt with the economy's effect on low-wage workers who have made the transition from welfare to work. An April 1 piece by Charles Babington that ran in the *Washington Post* and *Dallas Morning News* noted that welfare reform efforts cut off a "safety net" that existed for them, and quoted economists believed that a failing economy could result in many people ending up back on public assistance.[36] All of the economists quoted in these stories agreed with those quoted in the Babington article: low-wage workers are indeed the most vulnerable to shifts in the economy, as their jobs may be the first on the line if it fails.

The negative assessment of government welfare-to-work policies continued in the five stories, or 15 percent of the welfare reform sample, which focused on local policy. A May 19 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* conveyed the uniformly positive experiences of participants in Contra Costa County's welfare-to-work program, in which about half of the county's former welfare recipients are employed or participating in a job training program. But this positive article proved to be the definite exception.

Two articles in the *Washington Post* detailed studies showing that the cities of Washington, D.C. and Baltimore are not preparing enough people to enter the workforce when their welfare subsidies run out in 2002. Another story in the *New York Times* detailed the struggles of New York City students seeking to apply their work-study programs to their welfare-to-work requirement, but meeting resistance from city officials unaware of the new law. And yet another story in the *New York Times* detailed the controversial policy of one largely poor rural county in California, which has decided to pay low-wage workers to relocate to another part of the country. Critics of the program say it's a cop-out to the poverty problem, and that workers need more than a mere relocation stipend and job leads to succeed.[37]

Living Wage Laws 30 stories (11% of total sample)

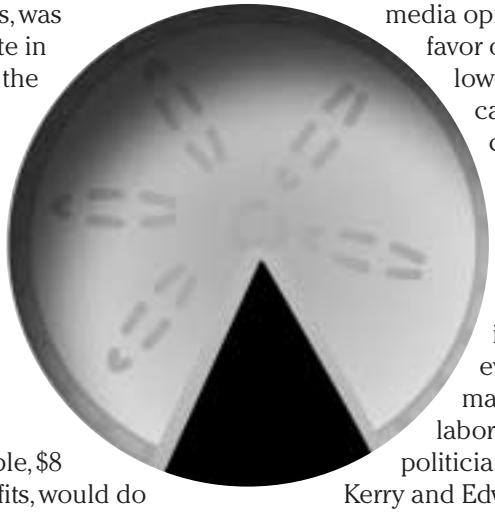
The battle for a living wage, according to our sample, is a war that is being fought in mostly local skirmishes by legislators, local chambers of commerce, advocates for the poor, students and the low wage workers themselves. Popularized recently in such publicized stand-offs as a student sit-in in a Harvard University administration building and the Los Angeles "bread and roses" janitors' strike dramatized by filmmaker Ken Loach, the fight for a living wage is gaining an equal number of friends and enemies, according to these stories and op-eds. These local fights are not yet being viewed as a national movement, however, portraying more progressive towns like San Francisco and Boston as isolated instances.

Measuring the salaries of America's low-wage workers becomes an emotionally laden, politically charged enterprise in the press, as is illustrated by the high percentage of opinion pieces on the subject (47%, or 14 of 30 articles in the category). A third of the stories in the living wage category were concerned with conflict or disagreement over proposed or recently enacted local living wage laws, in cities, counties and states. California provides one example.

In a flurry of articles in the *Los Angeles Times* on Santa Monica's and Ventura County's living wage laws, the advantages to the low-wage worker

The battle for a living wage,... is being fought in mostly local skirmishes... and [include] the low wage workers themselves.

were clearly defined by local advocates. A citizen's group, Santa Monicans Allied for Responsible Tourism, pointed to the positive regional economic impact "…for Santa Monica and for all cities with successful tourism districts that are built on the back of low-wage workers."[38] Business opposition in Santa Monica, in Ventura County and in other profiled cities, was swift and immediate in its efforts to repeal the living wage law or argue against its passage, as was the case in Ventura County. Local businesses in California's living wage law areas contended that raising a minimum starting salary to, for example, $8 an hour with benefits, would do little to address the underlying causes of poverty. Allied elected officials sometimes bolstered their claims by noting the need for more regional improvements in child care, education and health care as the *real* priority for low-income workers, not mandatory wage hikes.[39]



The economic advantages of paying a living wage in Ventura were presented in a *Los Angeles Times* letter from Chauna Brocht of the Economic Policy Institute and in an opinion piece by two members of a local living wage coalition. Ms. Brocht argued, "Without a living wage ordinance, high-road employers—those who would rather have a stable work force and produce a high-quality product—have to compete for contracts with low-road employers, who provide a poorer-quality product at a lower cost. Living wage ordinances encourage businesses to take the high road, leading to higher-quality services for the public and a more highly trained work force."[40]

Another entire third of living wage stories were more narrowly focused on the campaign at Harvard University, an act of civil disobedience by students to publicize the plight of some 1500 school employees who earn little more than the minimum wage. Though the articles and many local and national media opinions expressed in favor of the students' and low-wage workers' cause at Harvard were certainly sympathetic to their predicament, seldom was a low-wage worker interviewed and identified. The eventual sit-in was a magnet for organized labor (AFL-CIO, SEIU) and politicians (Senators John Kerry and Edward Kennedy) to attract support for themselves and the cause. Indeed, one theory proposed in two op-eds is that low-wage workers—including new immigrants—are the single biggest hope for a revitalized labor movement in America, a movement that would lead the fight for a national living wage and better standards of living for low-wage employees.[41]

Foreshadowing the challenges of future living wage campaigns around the country, critics of the low-wage worker victory at Harvard pointed to the cost benefits analysis that Harvard—like all other large employers—conducts quarterly. The critics contended that the University would reduce the number of total new hires as a result of the reallocation of funds lost to paying a higher "living wage" to its existing employees.

Judging by the articles in the living wage category, there is a growing grassroots movement among low-income workers, elected officials and even some employers to pay their employees a living wage.

Taxes and tax relief—30 stories (11% of total sample)

Given that the Bush tax cut was the only national policy debate that fostered a discussion about low-wage workers, it is not surprising that 30 stories, or 11 percent of our sample, dealt with taxes and tax relief. The overwhelming theme of these stories was that the proposed Bush tax cut would do nothing to help low-income workers or families, since they pay so little in income taxes already, and would actually increase the gap between the rich and poor in America.

Eleven of these stories—37 percent of the tax story sample—were opinion pieces that were critical of Bush's tax cut plan. Most of these stories rehashed the same central points about the tax cut aiding wealthier Americans the most, and poorer Americans the least. In addition to making these central points, letter, op-ed and editorial writers also made their own suggestions about potential alternatives to the tax cut plan that would provide assistance to the working poor, most of which were policy-oriented:

- The earned income tax credit should be expanded.
- The tax cut should be recalculated to provide less relief for wealthy, and more relief for working poor.
- The budget surplus should be used to subsidize child care, health care and affordable housing for the poor.
- The minimum wage should be increased to a living wage.

...anyone making less than $25,000 a year was twice as likely to be audited as other taxpayers

- Welfare funding formulas for states should be changed.
- Tax credits for child care should be offered.
- A portion of the payroll tax should be made refundable.
- Citizens should donate their tax rebates to organizations assisting the poor.

Only one opinion piece, a letter that appeared on June 22 in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, defended the Bush tax cut plan. Vince Smith of Chamblee, Georgia wrote that the current tax rebate program was intended to give relief to the "obviously overtaxed people in this country" and was "never intended to be a welfare program."[42]

Six of the articles on taxes (20 percent) are hard news items that echoed the same message that appeared throughout the opinion pieces: the working poor simply won't benefit from the Bush tax cut plan. Three of these articles quoted advocacy groups who came out and criticized the tax cut plan. Two of the articles quoted a June speech by Federal Reserve Bank of New York president William McDonough in Chicago to convey the criticism. As covered by the *Chicago Tribune*, McDonough noted that the tax cut plan unfairly affects people who have recently gone from welfare to work. He advocated giving workers "transfers from general funds in effect" to account for being unfairly penalized through the payroll tax. McDonough made clear he was by no means an advocate for low-wage workers, however, by stating that high drop-out rates among Mexican Americans and ineffective education for the poor presented a looming threat to society by creating a "permanent, restive and dangerous underclass."[43]

Six more tax articles (20 percent) dealt with the debate over the tax cut, rather than focusing on the cut itself. These articles typically quoted Republican and Democratic lawmakers who came up with differing figures to emphasize political points about the fairness or unfairness of their respective tax cut packages. A lawyer quoted in an April 25 *Wall Street Journal* piece basically summed up the tenor of most of these articles when he said, "In effect, Congress has given the poor a tax break with one hand and then taken it away with the other by making it too complex to understand."[44]

An interesting news item from *ABC*'s *World News Tonight* offered a tax-related story that was only covered by one other piece—an editorial in the *New York Times* that focused more on the EITC, and hence was placed in that story category. John Cochran, the *ABC* correspondent, reported that despite the fact that budget cuts have resulted in 50 percent fewer audits being conducted by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), anyone making less than $25,000 a year was twice as likely to be audited as other taxpayers. Cochrane goes on to quote one low-wage worker who applied for the EITC, but the IRS did not believe he had six children, even after he showed them to federal agents. IRS officials are quoted as saying they are merely responding to Congressional mandates to crack down on tax fraud by the poor.[45]

Miscellaneous—23 stories (8% of total sample)

Twenty-three stories that we analyzed—roughly 8 percent of our sample—focused on issues other than the topics that we were looking for. These stories encompassed general feature stories on poverty, advocacy efforts, and other challenges that low-wage workers regularly face—such as a lack of transportation, legal services, and high energy costs.

General features about poverty represented 35 percent of the miscellaneous sample. Reporters addressed the topic from a wide variety of angles. A *New York Times* article focused on child poverty statistics, while a *Boston Globe* article and an *NPR* piece addressed flaws in government determining the so-called "poverty line."

Two interesting *NPR* pieces on poverty focused on the results of an *NPR*/Kaiser/Harvard University study on American views of poverty and welfare. The report concluded that most Americans believe in welfare recipients being required to work and that most former welfare recipients are happy to be part of the workforce. Focus group results, detailed in the second *NPR* piece on May 4, showed that white middle class participants listed upbringing, attitude, laziness, and taking advantage of the system as the principal causes of poverty in the United States. The *NPR* report also noted that the division over the cause of poverty fell along political party lines, with Republicans often concluding that the poor simply aren't working hard enough and Democrats blaming their predicament on the circumstances of their lives.[46]

Five stories, or 22 percent of the miscellaneous sample, focused on advocacy

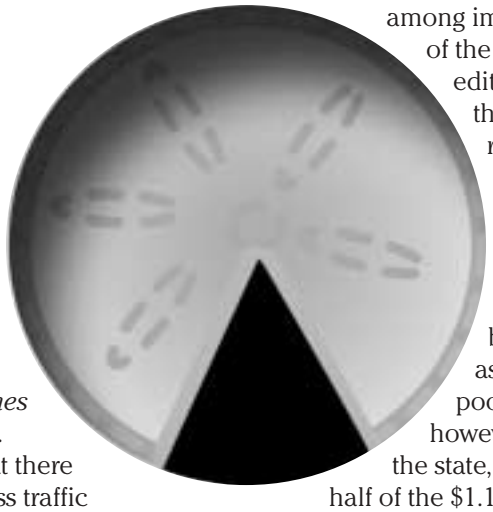
...basic needs [of low-wage workers are] still going unmet—such as the need to find a way to their job every day...

efforts to help low-wage workers. Three *Los Angeles Times* stories focused on organizing and educational efforts around the L.A. metropolitan area: the formation of a National Day Laborer Organizing Network; the creation of a web site portal to help link poor job seekers with training, education and employment services; and the organization of an event to raise awareness about poverty in the Los Angeles community.

Another interesting *NPR* piece focused on the organization of Janitor's Day, whereby protesters across the country demanded permanent residency for undocumented janitors. The protesters argued that the janitors contributed to the U.S. economy because they pay taxes. Critics dismissed the effort, however, saying that employers will simply replace legalized workers with new undocumented employees. But the piece ended with quotes from academics, who noted that the L.A. janitors have helped transform the labor movement in the United States, and that the legalization of these workers would help bring more into the legalization movement, thereby improving conditions for all low-wage workers.[47]

But while low-wage workers certainly benefit from such grass-roots political advocacy, other miscellaneous stories show that they also have basic needs still going unmet—such as the need to find a way to their job every day, pay their heating bill, and get effective legal representation.

Four stories (17 percent of the miscellaneous sample) dealt with the need for transportation services among the working poor. Notably, all four stories focused on solutions to the problem. The "Driven to Succeed" program based in Marlborough, Massachusetts, for example, allowed suburbanites to donate their used vehicles to a non-profit agency, which repaired the cars and re-sold them at bargain rates to low-wage workers. An advocate summed up an effective argument for providing and expanding transportation services in an April 29 *Boston Globe* article, saying, "People always seem to think that if you want to work, you can get a job. They don't really see the big picture. They don't see the support systems we take for granted."[48]



One creative solution to this problem was offered by Don Harvey, executive director of the Orange County Bicycle Coalition in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed on July 8. Harvey said that there would be far less traffic congestion if low-wage workers simply used bicycles to get to work as opposed to public transportation. The op-ed was a bit condescending and negative in tone, however, suggesting his true concern may indeed be the traffic congestion and not the problems of the working poor.[49]

Benefits—18 stories (6 % of total sample)

Benefits are key to any job seeker or holder, but can be crucial elements in the lives of low-wage workers, as six percent of our story sample attests. Most of these stories focused on many of the same issues that appeared in the welfare reform and miscellaneous categories, but these pieces dealt principally with benefits accorded to workers—usually not directly from their employers, but through government programs.

Seven articles, or 38 percent of the benefits stories, focus on state programs that provide benefits to low-wage workers. New York provided the background for four of these stories. Two pieces in the *New York Times*, for example, detailed a flurry of bills passed by the New York State Assembly designed to help poor workers with child care, save money to buy a car, and increase eligibility for food stamps among immigrant workers. One of the *Times* pieces, an editorial, noted that while the state has been responsive to the needs of low-wage workers, the City of New York is calling for assessments of individuals' progress toward self-sufficiency before extending assistance to the working poor.[50] Another *Times* story, however, was more critical of the state, noting that more than half of the $1.19 billion that state lawmakers set aside in unused federal welfare funds to help poor New Yorkers had not been spent.[51]

Three more articles in the *New York Times*, or 17 percent of the benefits stories, focused on how the federal government could better provide benefits to low-income workers. Two of the articles are opinion pieces urging Congress to consider redirecting the budget surplus to job training, child care, and health care benefits for the working poor. One article focused on a controversial new federal law that could potentially deny federal housing benefits and evict residents who fail to do eight hours of unpaid community service or training every month. One resident described the forced service and potential denial of benefits as a "form of slavery."[52]

Child care, a major issue and concern in the lives of low-wage workers, only accounted for 4 percent of the total sample, or 12 stories

Surprisingly, only two articles, or 11 percent of the benefits sample, focused on the efforts of unions in fighting for benefits on behalf of low-wage workers. Only a piece in the *Los Angeles Times* about protesting workers at Los Angeles International Airport, and a story in the *Boston Globe* about a power plant closing detailed union involvement in the battle for benefits. These pieces underscored the need for unions to emerge as a greater role player in advocacy efforts for low-wage workers.

Child care—12 stories (4% of total sample)

Child care, a major issue and concern in the lives of low-wage workers, only accounted for 4 percent of the total sample, or 12 stories. Five stories detailed the shortage of affordable child care, while four others were focused on federal policy. Three more stories focused on a study of the effect of welfare-to-work programs on adolescent children.

The majority of stories on child care focused on the shortage of affordable services and facilities. The lead of a July 29 story in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* summed up the theme of all these stories: "When Frances Starr of Stone Mountain went looking for day care for her infant son two years ago, she quickly came down with a severe case of sticker shock."[53] The reporter noted that the escalating cost of child care is a crisis that has "evolved quietly over the last several years" and quoted the executive director of a Georgia nonprofit child care agency. "There are plenty of families who are spending almost all their income on child care if they have more than one child," said the director.[54]

Stories on the shortage of affordable child care all had a regional focus: an *Associated Press* story detailed the shortage of affordable child care in Texas border towns, while two *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* stories related the escalating costs of child care in the Atlanta-metro area. The *Washington Post* focused both on the shortage of affordable childcare in the DC area and legislation to help low-income employees pay for child care.

One of the four stories on federal policies was a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed advocating strong fiscal incentives for states to equalize access to quality child care centers and preschools.[55] A *New York Times* piece focused on how President Bush's budget will propose cuts in programs to provide child care for low-income families. Robert Pear, the *Times* reporter, pointed out a connection that would strike child care advocates as obvious: stable child care is a major ingredient of successful programs to move people from welfare to work.[56] A reader, Susan Munro, blasted President George W. Bush for these policy decisions in the March 28 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. Munro wrote that Bush is hypocritical for offering tax cuts while cutting programs that offer welfare-to-work mothers quality childcare.[57]

Three stories focused on a child care study showing that teens whose mothers participated in welfare-to-work programs appeared to do worse in school and have more behavior problems than teens from other welfare families. One reason might be that parents have shifted some of the household burdens, including care for younger children, onto their teenagers upon getting full-time jobs. Another reason cited is that parents might have less time and energy to monitor adolescent behavior once employed, or might adopt harsher parenting styles under the stress of working.

Minimum Wage—11 stories (4% of total sample)

Of the 11 stories that focused on the minimum wage in our sample, more than half, or six stories, were about raising the wage, and three stories focused on individuals who related their own experience with the minimum wage.

The three stories that focused on individuals included two stories in the *New York Times*. One focused on a union representative who organizes waste management workers and is a key player in the minimum wage battle, and the other focused on individual minimum wage workers who are just scraping by. The third story, which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, detailed a Louisiana woman's struggle to overcome poverty and raise her two children while working two full-time jobs.

Job Training—11 stories (4% of total sample)

The job training category includes stories profiling state, city, government-contracted and employer-based workforce development initiatives for those leaving welfare for a first job. In some cases, the stories dealt with low-wage workers who are simply trying to advance themselves professionally. Job training stories also discussed federal budgets for job training programs as part of welfare reform block grants to states, how these programs are under-funded, and how the Bush Administration's tax cut would siphon money from job training programs for years to come.

A positive face is put on one welfare-to-work effort operating in San Francisco, where a county-funded program is allowing welfare leavers the chance to tell their stories via *Poor* magazine and

a website, www.poornewsnetwork.org. The founding editors, Tiny and Dee, who described themselves as "formerly homeless, currently at risk," wanted to change how the mainstream media portray poor and homeless people among other goals. Articles by the reporters in their welfare-to-work program have already graced the op-ed pages of San Francisco's two mainstream newspapers, and their star graduate now writes regularly for the *San Francisco Bay View*.[58]

Such optimism about job training cannot be said to apply to all government agencies. Diane Lewis in the *Boston Globe* targeted the Bush Administration's budget as hostile to working families, claiming "compassionate conservatism" is hypocritical when $440 million is cut from worker relocation/training programs and $420 million is cut from youth and adult workers' job training programs.[59] In another piece, the columnist, described the ironic situation for low-wage workers seeking job-training in Massachusetts; because the state equivalent to such job training programs are linked and gauged according to the unemployment rate. Quite literally, the good times are killing the working poor in Massachusetts and other prosperous states of the past decade by denying them free job training and a chance out of abject poverty.[60]

When not criticizing the managers and funders of these job-training programs, reporters let workers talk about the tremendous advantages of having access to them. One nearly hidden fact in this category is the role that job-training programs play in giving hope to the low-wage worker that he or she will not always be the bottom rung on the ladder through education and effort. As one low-wage worker in Massachusetts, Elvis Doda, testified, job-training programs—subsidized or not—are precious to the working poor. "It was very important to me," he said, "It changed my life."[61] The psychological toll of not receiving training is seen in other bleak testimonies and in the growing numbers of poor and homeless Americans concerned that their society has, indeed, abandoned hope for them.

Profiles of low wage workers 11 stories (4% of total sample)

Portraits of individuals or communities acquainted with the low-wage worker experience made up only 4% of the total sample, or 11 stories. Four of these stories (36%) focused on Barbara Ehrenreich and her book *Nickel and Dimed*. Four other stories were community profile pieces, while three stories (27%) focused on local advocacy.

The stories on Barbara Ehrenreich and her experience included a column and business section feature in the *Los Angeles Times* and two *National Public Radio* interviews.

The community profile pieces included three feature profiles from the *New York Times* about life on 129th Street in Harlem. In these stories, residents were quoted extensively and the reporter detailed the challenges people in these neighborhoods face, including drug dealers, developers, and gentrification.

The local advocacy stories, meanwhile, focused on community actions to help the working poor. Two articles in the *Dallas Morning News* were about a nonprofit organization's community-wide baby shower for a local public hospital, while another article was about the reopening of a local Good Samaritans center.

Earned Income Tax Credit 6 stories (2% of total sample)

Reporters did not often approach the experience of low-wage workers through federal tax policy that preceded the Bush administration. Stories about the Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC, made up only 2 percent of the total sample, or 7 stories. Two of the stories compared the experiences of the wealthy with the experiences of the working poor with regards to auditing in one article and the marriage penalty in another.

The article on auditing was a *New York Times* editorial urging President Bush to do something about inequity in the process: the IRS audits the working poor more often than the affluent. Interestingly enough, this article was one of only two in our sample that dealt with the inequity of tax audits, as noted earlier. "Everyone acknowledges that out of confusion or dishonesty, many recipients of the tax credit claimed more than they were due," wrote the *Times* editorial board. "But such shortfalls are not nearly as important a tax collection issue as, say, the explosion in recent years of clever tax strategies designed by corporations."[62]

The other article in this subcategory was from the *Associated Press*. The *AP* story notes that working poor Americans are often at a tax disadvantage when they get married. When two low-income workers benefiting from the EITC are wed, their total earnings are often large enough to push them out of the EITC program.[63]

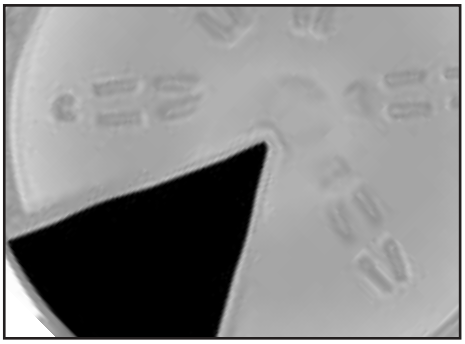
Food Stamps—6 stories (2% of total sample)

Another social program designed to help the working poor, the federal food stamps initiative, accounted for only 2 percent of the total sample, or 6 stories. All of the stories were similar in theme, discussing the fact that eligible people are missing out on receiving food stamps.

Two *Los Angeles Times* articles and one *San Francisco Chronicle* article focused on how many people who qualify for food stamps are not receiving them or are receiving the wrong number of food stamps. These articles emphasized numbers—the fact that 1.8 million eligible Californians are not receiving adequate food stamps, or taking advantage of the program at all.

Stories from the *New York Times* and *Associated Press* dug deeper, detailing some of the reasons why states are not implementing the program, and why millions of people who are eligible for food stamps are not applying. Among the reasons enumerated:

- Workers cannot take the day off to visit the welfare office
- States fear federal government will penalize them for distributing too much or too little to food stamp recipients
- Application forms have become long and complicated—sometimes up to 27 pages in length.



Health Care—4 stories (1% of total sample)

Surprisingly, stories about health care that didn't focus on health insurance made up only one percent of the total sample, or four stories. Two of these stories were about state or regional health care while the other two focused on health care clinics.

The lack of stories on health care represents a huge opportunity for coverage of low-income workers around this important issue. Studies have shown that low-wage workers are much more likely to have health problems and much less likely to have health insurance. As a result, workers are often not healthy enough to remain in the workforce for long periods of time.

Education—3 stories (1% of total sample)

One of the most startling results of our analysis was that there were only three pieces that focused on education during the six-month period we analyzed. The first story was an op-ed from the April 12 edition of the *Boston Globe* commenting on the social implications of a recent survey which showed that gaps in reading test scores followed income lines, with students from poorer families scoring lower. The article advocated teaching better parenting skills to those workers in the welfare-to-work transition and it also called for more child care programs and early childhood education investments in the poor to provide a more level playing field.[64]

A May 20 *Chicago Tribune* article focused on the mission of the Head Start program. Ray Quintanilla, the *Tribune* education reporter, explored the question of how much of the day should be spent on literacy and how much should be spent on meeting children's basic medical and nutritional needs and checking for signs of abuse and neglect.[65]

Family Medical Leave 3 stories (1% of total sample)

The three articles on family medical leave are all opinion pieces with a similar theme: despite the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), the working poor are heavily burdened and cannot afford to take unpaid leave from their jobs.

Their right to unpaid leave essentially doesn't exist, according to the opinion writers. An op-ed by a Harvard public health professor in the *Boston Globe* concluded that "the burden of not having a national or state-by-state family paid leave policy falls heaviest on the middle class and the working poor."[66] The professor noted that 42 percent of American workers are not part of even the unpaid federal leave policy because the act only covers workers at firms of 50 employees or more.

A Feb. 22 editorial from the *Boston Globe* offered a compelling argument for increasing federal spending on FMLA, noting that 3.5 million people needed to take medical leave, but didn't, according to the Labor Department.[67] Similarly, a column in the *Wall Street Journal* argued that working poor families cannot afford to take advantage of the FMLA because they don't earn enough to do so.

Spokesperson Analysis

Hunger—3 articles (1% of total sample)

Much like the paltry sample of health care and education stories, only three articles in our overall story universe focused on hunger. All articles were local in scope. One appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* and focused on a new "Kids Café" where children from low-income families can get food after school.

The other two articles were letters that appeared in the financial section of the *Washington Post* about the local town council's decision to raise the rent of storefront space, thereby tripling the rent of the nonprofit Coalition Against Hunger.

Social Security—3 stories (1% of entire sample)

The three pieces in our sample on social security were all opinion pieces that addressed the timely political question of privatization:

- A July 29th *Dallas Morning News* piece argued against privatizing social security because of its effects on women—their traditional role as caregiver makes them more susceptible to poverty.[68]
- A *Washington Post* letter writer wanted the current system to be left alone, but for different reasons. He pointed out that the system redistributes money to the low-income elderly and has a profound effect on keeping 11 million Americans out of poverty[69]
- In his op-ed in *USA Today*, Republican House member Jim Kolbe argued the other side. He supported privatizing social security so that "we don't foist the burden upon our grandchildren."[70]

In any communications effort, the messenger is as important as the message. Whoever is quoted about a particular issue within a story has a huge impact on how that issue is covered and portrayed. In order to get a better idea of who was quoted in our sample and what they said, we tallied the quotes from the stories, yielding the following results (see page 27).

Public Officials (30% of quoted people; 31% of total quotes)

Public officials are among the most important groups of people that can be quoted in stories. Quotes from public officials reinforce that the topic of the article is a public policy issue, and officials yield significant agenda-setting power that cannot be overstated.

As you can see, more public officials were quoted in our sample of 277 analyzed stories than people in any other group. They represented nearly one-third (30%) of all the people that were quoted. They also accounted for the most quotes per story in our sample, as they were responsible for just over one-third (31%) of the total quotes in the stories.

Public officials were quoted broadly across the story categories. But rather than public officials setting an agenda or galvanizing public support behind low-wage workers, they often only played defense—defending, praising, or attacking existing public policies.

Often public officials weighed in on policies by other public officials to criticize or praise them. For example, in a *Washington Post* article, DC Council member Jack Evan was quoted as saying he is particularly glad that the mayor is funding the expansion of the income tax credit for the working poor. He said, "Overall, I think it's a good budget."[71] Another example of a public official commenting on other political figures' policies can be found in a *Los Angeles Times* article in which two assemblymen were quoted, with each blaming the other man's party for leaving funding for health clinics in limbo by stalling on the budget.[72]

Public officials were also often quoted defending policies. For example, in the *Washington Post* article referred to above, the DC Mayor is quoted defending his budget. He said, "It really is a consensus budget. It reflects a reality that we've got some fundamental things we've got to do in our city. It's got everything."[73] Another example is in a *New York Times* article on unspent funds for the poor. In this piece, a spokesman for the Division of Budget is quoted as saying that the funds have not been spent yet because establishing programs is very time-consuming. He said, "Service providers needed time to start up their new programs—programs that had never been undertaken on this magnitude."[74]

Public officials did occasionally use their platforms to advocate on behalf of low-wage workers or the homeless. For example, in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article, the local Assemblywoman is quoted as saying "the majority of homeless in this state are working poor unable to afford a fair-market-rate apartment on minimum wage."[75]

Interestingly, there was no one public official who is distinguished as the "most quoted." Three public officials were quoted in three different stories: Bill Perkins, New York City Councilman; Nina Goldman of the Contra Costa County Service Intervention Program; and Trent Rhorer, Director of the San Francisco Department of Human Services. The remaining public officials in our sample were quoted once or twice.

Spokesperson analysis

Spokespeople	No. ppl quoted	Stories quoted in	Pct. of quoted people	Pct. of total quotes
Public officials	188	209	30%	31%
Advocates	136	154	22%	23%
Low-wage workers	118	126	19%	18%
Others	61	64	10%	9%
Academics	50	54	8%	8%
Corporate/business	38	40	6%	6%
Economists	27	35	4%	5%
Union reps (integrated)	12	12	2%	2%
Totals	618	694		

Advocates (22% of quoted people; 23% of total quotes)

After public officials, advocates were most often quoted in the stories analyzed. They represented more than one in five (22%) of quoted people and nearly one quarter (23%) of total quotes.

Advocates were quoted speaking out in favor of subsidized child-care, affordable housing, job training, and other measures to help low-income workers.

The three advocates quoted most often reflect the diversity of viewpoints and causes they represented in our story sample. Beth Chiaro, coordinator of student support with the North Orange County Regional Occupational Program, was on the frontlines of the welfare-to-work transition system in Los Angeles, and was quoted in four stories. Aaron Bartley, a protester at Harvard University who initiated the living-wage campaign on the Cambridge campus, helped create one of the most significant media events and news hooks for reporters. Bartley, too, was quoted in four different stories. Meanwhile, Arnold Cohen, the president of the Partnership for the Homeless in New York City, was quoted about the changing face of homelessness in three stories.

During the analysis period, one of the hot button issues that shed light on the plight of the low-wage worker was the Harvard living-wage sit-in, whereby students took over the building housing the president's office. Bartley, the student who initiated the campaign, is quoted in a *CNN* interview as saying "We're trying to raise consciousness about the poverty level wages paid to the 1500 workers on [the] Harvard campus. We're asking for a very simple commitment to pay a living wage."[76]

Low-wage workers (19% of quoted people; 18% of total quotes)

Low-wage workers represented nearly one in five (19%) of quoted people and 18% of total quotes.

The workers were quoted as people who are scraping by to make ends meet, holding a wide variety of positions. They are receptionists, factory workers, secretaries, housekeepers, home health aides, security guards, waiters and waitresses, janitors, and bus drivers. Many are single mothers. Some are on the verge of losing their welfare benefits. Others left welfare for low-wage jobs, only to lose those jobs as the economy soured.

Because their individual stories were local and specific to the topic(s) a reporter was writing about, low-wage workers seldom receive more than one quote in any given article. Even in a series of stories on low-wage or welfare leaver hardships, reporters rarely tracked a single low-wage earner or family over time to report on their progress, or lack thereof. This fact does not diminish the impact of their sympathetically described stories of struggle, but does sometimes create an episodic mood that does not suggest that low-income problems are based in widespread and long-term economic inequalities.

Academics (8% of quoted people; 8% of total quotes)

Academics represented less than one in ten (8%) of quoted people and of total quotes. These professors and think tank employees commented on the range of issues affecting low-wage workers.

The most often quoted spokesperson is Rebecca Blank. This economist and dean of public policy at the University of Michigan is quoted in four stories. She is quoted as saying that, "There are an awful lot of people who may lose their job and go back and knock on the doors of a public assistance office. You know, the program simply may not admit them. They may say, 'You've been sectioned off. You've hit time limits. You know, for whatever set of reasons, you know, we don't have cash assistance for you.'"[77] Other well-known experts on poverty, like William Julius Wilson at the Kennedy School of Government, are quoted in two articles each.

Academics are typically interviewed by reporters in the sample to provide statistics or empirical evidence that criticizes a federal, state or local policy's effect on the working poor and those leaving welfare for work. Academic opinions hostile to low-wage earners' concerns are occasionally represented in op-eds and letters. But the vast majority of stories present the social scientist's or policy expert's quote dissecting a public official's claim of benevolent interest in the plight of the working poor, and then refuting the public official with other research.

Corporate/business (6% of quoted people; 6% of total quotes)

Corporate leaders, usually small business owners, were quoted in only 6 percent of the stories. For a welfare reform plan in 1996 that boldly touted private enterprise's role in employing welfare leavers, embarrassingly few business owners are quoted and far fewer offered solutions or programs that assist the working poor now on their payroll. Businesspeople are often quoted arguing why a proposed public policy such as raising the minimum wage or implementing a living wage will harm their business and the economy.

In Ventura County, California, contractor Mike McBain questioned wage supporters' assertion that the county would save money in the long run by reducing the need for social services.[78] In another article about the Ventura County law, Zoe Taylor, president and executive officer of the Ventura Chamber of Commerce further defines business members' position stating, "With the economy struggling and this energy situation, I think they should have waited to find out exactly what kind of money the county is going to have and then set priorities. We're looking at it from the standpoint of fiscal responsibility and the impacts to businesses."[79]

From these examples, it is clear that business leaders' comments usually opposed assistance to low-wage workers when it affected their bottom line. They see such legislation as a gift to workers and fail to recognize that it may be in their own self-interest to build and maintain a strong workforce.

Economists (4% of quoted people; 5% of total quotes)

As academic experts, economists are quoted in the same ways as their social science counterparts. Their comments, judging from the range of their affiliations (Deloitte and Touche, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, Center on Budget & Policy Priorities) tend to be more divided, however, between liberals interested in aiding low-wage workers and conservatives more concerned with preserving a high-tide economy that would "raise all boats." Of those quoted, Stephen Moore, senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, appeared more often (3 quotes) than his more liberal contemporaries, like Shawn Fremstead and Stacy Dean (2 times each, Center for Budget & Policy Priorities) or Jared Bernstein (2 quotes, Economic Policy Institute).

Mr. Moore explains some economists' perspectives in an April 16 *Washington Post* article about the Earned Income Tax Credit and other ways that working poor families may seek some fiscal relief through the IRS, since the Bush Administration's tax cut is not expected to benefit them. "Moore…is also critical of the tax code as welfare helper, though for different reasons. 'There's no doubt that this impulse to use the IRS and the tax code for social welfare and social engineering is as strong now as it's been in 20 years. Social conservatives love all this tinkering and economic conservatives think it's kind of silly.'"[80]

Economists like Mr. Moore phrase their comments in economic, not human, terms with regards to welfare reform's successes and challenges and the problems of low-wage workers. Liberal economists often address shortfalls in a budget or a policy in human terms. Because of this even division in

opinions, it could be said that economists' comments are neither especially harmful nor helpful to the low-income worker's cause and that their interpretation is subject to each news article's overall tone.

Union reps (2% of quoted people; 2% of total quotes)

Union representatives, when rarely cited, are presented as the Great Hope for low-wage earners' future. Otherwise, they are not a significant factor in most worker profiles or discussions of policies affecting these workers. Leadership at the AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) locals have begun to recognize the revitalizing force that immigrant and low-wage workers can play for unions in the new millennium and supported their strikes—both at Harvard University's student action and other less high-profile locations.

For example, a union representative is quoted in a *Boston Globe* article about a power plant closing. The organizer says, "A union cannot prevent a closure, but people understand that it can help them get severance pay and negotiate the terms of closure in a way that is fair."[81]

The *Globe* also quotes union representative John Ronches, leader of SEIU's local 254, on the Harvard student strike on behalf of the University's low-wage workers: "This is the most significant victory on a college campus for doing something about the gap between the wealthy and wage workers. We believe this will be a model for the rest of the country."[82]

With declining rolls in the past three decades, union representatives are now seeking rebirth for organized labor's social and political influence via recruitment of low-wage and immigrant workers. Union presence in these articles is certainly a positive sign to the low-wage earner, although their relative absence from these stories reflects that unions might not be viewed as part of the solution by the media.

Others (10% of quoted people, 9% of total quotes)

A quick glance at the positions of those quoted in categories outside these identified groups reveals that the majority are persons involved in services that aid low-income Americans, such as legal aid lawyers, clergy, civic volunteers, social workers, job trainers and health care professionals. The most visible and oft-quoted among this collection of individuals is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Anne Taylor, lead attorney for Harvard University during the student's attention-grabbing strike for low-wage workers there. Taylor was quoted three times in our sample.

Because the majority of "others" quoted in the sample work directly with working poor people, reporters turned to them for anecdotal evidence later substantiated by an academic's or an economist's empirical data. Their comments were generally sympathetic to the working poor, whose situations they were often assisting.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Low-wage workers need to be made into a national news story.** Efforts should be made at getting low-income workers and their stories into more publications with more widespread geographic distribution.
- **News about low-wage worker problems should be systemic, rather than episodic local stories about crisis management issues, as appeared more often in our sample**. In such topics as affordable housing and the new face of homelessness, these regional crises must be holistically presented as a full-blown, national crisis.
- **Stories emphasize that our economic work/reward system is broken, but offer no solutions to the problem.** The prevalent themes of government incompetence and "rock and a hard place" emphasize that policymakers have exacerbated problems facing the working poor. Moreover, reporters focus on the failings of government programs rather than potential solutions. By shifting their focus to potential solutions, reporters could emphasize that the nature of the problems facing the working poor are systemic, and overcome the prevailing notion among many Americans that the system cannot possibly be fixed.
- **Media coverage of low-wage workers should extend beyond welfare reform.** With the reauthorization of federal TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) legislation in 2002 and nearly simultaneous termination of people in some states from temporary assistance, media opportunities abound for linking the national effects of welfare reform with the struggles of low-income workers. However, a clear distinction should also be made between those on temporary assistance and welfare leavers/low-wage workers. Welfare reform-related articles often blurred characterizations of these two groups, mingling stereotypes of welfare recipients in their profiles of the working poor. To correct these long-standing biases against poor people in the media and in society, an emphasis must be placed on the fact that today's welfare leavers are also low-wage workers facing sometimes more difficult obstacles to self-sufficiency, but definitely sharing in the same economic hardships.
- **There is currently no national campaign or organized effort to put low-wage workers on the map.** The wide variety of advocates quoted also reflects the lack of a national, coordinated effort. A national campaign must be started with credible and visible spokespeople.
- **There must be more national unity and standards in many living wage campaigns, if they are to succeed.** As must be done with the presentation of crisis services for low-income workers to the media, local campaigns for "living wage" laws must present a more unified, national picture of their efforts to date. Myriad city and country-wide victories for such legislation, as one reporter noted, cause great variations in the amount of living wages in certain regions. These variations may create unintended social consequences for low-wage workers in areas that either don't have a living wage law or whose living wage law mandates a wage lower than that of adjacent areas.
- **Radio and television coverage of low-wage workers needs to be sought out and encouraged**. As only 10% of our stories were television or radio reports/talk show transcripts, it is obvious that advocates for the working poor must make greater efforts to reach the newsmakers most Americans rely upon for information.
- **Themes that favor low-wage workers should be tested.** These themes must be a central part of any communications initiative. Opinion research should help determine which themes are most effective at mobilizing people around low-wage workers and their needs.
- **Major national newspapers and newsmagazines should be targeted for coverage of low-wage workers.** Publications like *USA Today*—along with *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*—have far greater circulations than any other newspapers within the United States. They should be part of any targeted media outreach effort since they are read by so many people.
- **Suburban papers and broadcast outlets in the suburbs need to be explored as a possible venue for stories on low-wage workers.** Statistics and anecdotal evidence from stories about homelessness and the need for health care services among the working poor reveal rapidly rising needs in the suburbs, as low-income workers flee gentrifying inner cities. The new center of homelessness for working poor Americans is less likely to be a cardboard box on a subway grate than it is to be a Motel 6 or the backseat of a station wagon off an interstate highway.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Advocates should test messages about how in our weakening economy, low-wage workers will be even more vulnerable and that services such as education, health care and hunger abatement programs are absolutely essential to helping them live fuller, more productive lives.** These three service topics received hardly any attention from the press. As services and issues that the working poor and those leaving temporary assistance must face, these topics—in relation to low-wage workers—could receive far greater coverage.
- **Business reporters should also be tested as a possible receptive media source to stories on how the problems facing the working poor impact local and national economies.** For example, a lack of affordable housing or the absence of living wage laws were cited in only a few business or local stories as serious disincentives to regional economic growth. These facts, explained in strictly bottom-line terms, might be of interest to more business reporters if presented to them in their own language, and could help emphasize that corporations and businesses can definitely play a role in helping the working poor without sacrificing the bottom line.
- **Low-wage workers as a positive business story should be further explored.** The positive contributions that businesses can help make in the lives of low-wage workers could be profiled. Such positive examples helped to make the "job training" category more optimistic than other stories about services. When coupled with economic data on low-wage workers, this combination of "hard" and "soft" news could prove very attractive to business feature writers and producers.
- **More attention on elderly low-wage workers could be explored.** The absence of any stories on elderly low-wage workers is puzzling given the growing population of seniors. Topics like the future of Social Security and rising prescription drug costs can present definite opportunities for advocates to convey the struggles of the elderly working poor and then universalize these struggles to low-income, non-retirees for the media.
- **Organized labor could possibly become a powerful advocate for the working poor.** Strong messages—hinted at in only three stories—about union efforts to support low-wage and immigrant worker job actions, can be more effectively communicated to media with descriptions of this new alliance as a revitalizing force in democratic, American values of truth, justice and equality for all. The theme that all hard-working people deserve a fair chance in America could also accompany stories about work/life conflicts (i.e., "rock and a hard place" theme).

Appendix A

List of Reporters covering low-wage workers

Los Angeles Times

Antonio Olivo
Carla Rivera
Catherine Saillant
Dan Gordon
Daniel Yi
David Pierson
David Ulin
Evan Halper
Evelyn Larrubia
Fred Alvarez
Fred Bruning
Henry Weinstein
Jennifer Mena
Jennifer Oldham
Jonathan Peterson
Kimi Yoshino
Lee Romney
Margaret Talev
Maria L. LaGanga
Nancy Cleeland
Oscar Johnson
Richard Simon
Richard Winton
Ronald Brownstein
Scott Martelle
Stephanie Chavez
Tina Dirmann

New York Times

Adam Fifield
Amy Waldman
Barbara Whitaker
Bob Herbert
Bruce Lambert
David Koeppel
Elissa Gootman
Elizabeth Becker
Evelyn Nieves
Francis X. Clines
Jennifer Steinhauer
Nina Bernstein
Peter T. Kilborn
Richard Perez-Pena
Robert Pear
Somini Sengupta
Stephanie Flanders
Tamar Lewin

Boston Globe

Charles Shannon
Jarrett Barrios
Diane Lewis
N. Gregory Mankiw
Rachel Collins
Diana Raschke
Sue Kirchhoff
Mary Leonard
Derrick Jackson
Eli J. Segal
Bruce Katz
Steve Bailey
Scott Helman
Robert Kuttner
Ralph Ranalli
David Abel
Thomas Oliphant
Joan Fitzgerald
Stephanie Ebbert
John Laidler
Ralph Jimenez
Eileen Boris
Tom Jehn
Sue Kirchhoff
Eileen McNamara
Jorge Santiago
James Jennings

Washington Post

Laura Sessions Stepp
Christian Davenport
Sewell Chan
David Broder
Avram Goldstein
Sylvia Moreno
Dan Morgan
Albert Crenshaw
Mary Otto
Robert Pierre
Jo Becker
Stephen Barr
Brooke A. Masters
Frederick Kunkle
Craig Timberg

Chicago Tribune

T. Shawn Tayor
Bill Barnhart
V. Dion Haynes
Ray Long
Jeff Zeleny
Ray Quintanilla
William Grady
Bruce Japsen
John Flink
Nancy Ryan
Mary Schmich
Dawn Truner Trice
Jeff Long
Gary Washburn
Courtney Challos
Ginger Orr
Stephen Franklin

National Public Radio

Juan Williams
Linda Wertheimer
Mandalit Del Barco
John Ydstie
Brian Naylor
Robert Smith
Jackie Northam
Robert Siegel
Megan Twohey
Philip Martin
Andrea Dukakis
Barbara Mantel
David Rabin

List of Reporters covering low-wage workers

Dallas Morning News

Beverly Tobian
Ronald Sider
Sharon Egiebor
Jonathan Peterson
Nancy San Martin
Toya Lynn Stewart
Charles Babington
Louise Applebome

Associated Press

Anjetta McQueen
Anne Gearan
Brad Cain
Geralda Miller
Laura Meckler
Lynn Brezosky
Martha Irvine
Philip Brasher
Shannon McCaffrey

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Ron Martz
Melanie Eversley
Jennifer Brett
Bob Deans
Tammy Joyner

San Francisco Chronicle

Bob Deans
Chip Johnson
Ilene Lelchuk
Janine DeFao
Jason Johnson
Jennifer Brett
Kathleen Pender
Kathleen Sullivan
Pia Sarkar
Tammy Joyner

Wall Street Journal

Albert Hunt
Rick Wartzman
Sue Shellenbarger
Clare Ansberry
Louis Jacobson
Carlos Tejada
Tom Herman
Shailagh Murray
Greg Hitt
Jackie Calmes
Rhonda L. Rundle

CNN

Bill Delaney
Jeff Greenfield
Leon Harris
Vivian Wian

USA Today

Del Jones
Jim Kolbe
Kathy Kiely
Jonathan Weisman

Philadelphia Inquirer

Suzette Parmley
Stacey Burling
Julie Stoiber
Andrew Cassel

Fox News Network

David Shuster
Paula Zahn

CBS News

John Roberts
Charles Osgood

NBC News

Bob Dotson

Newsweek

Anna Quindlen

ABC News

John Cochran

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