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## Constructing Deservingness: Federal Welfare Reform, Supplemental Security Income, and Elderly Immigrants

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**ABSTRACT.** On August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed the welfare reform law that ended eligibility for all immigrants to federal means tested entitlements. Poor elderly immigrants on Supplemental Security Income were specifically targeted. This article documents how the print media responded to these policy changes. The following are the major research questions: (1) How were older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income portrayed in the print media before and after federal welfare reform? (2) Who was involved in the print media coverage of older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income before and after federal welfare reform? (3) What types of statements were made by those involved in the print media coverage of older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income, before and after federal welfare reform? The approach

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used was an in-depth content analysis of newspaper articles from major U.S. newspapers. The findings demonstrate that older immigrants were constructed as "undeserving" in news articles prior to the passage of the federal welfare reform bill. However, after the passage of the federal welfare reform bill the coverage of older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income started to change, and older immigrants were portrayed as "deserving." In advancing aging policy for poor, vulnerable elderly, such as elderly immigrants, advocates, health and social service providers can play an influential role in bringing their voices to the print media. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Federal welfare reform, elderly immigrants, Supplemental Security Income

## INTRODUCTION

On August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed the federal welfare reform law that ended legal immigrants' eligibility for federal means-tested entitlements. Because of federal welfare reform, immigrants were no longer eligible for federal cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. The context for the passage of federal welfare reform was ripe. During President Clinton's 1992 and 1996 campaigns for the presidency, he pledged to the nation to "end welfare as we know it." While the Republicans in 1994 gained a majority in Congress, the focus became limiting single mothers on AFDC and eliminating eligibility for public assistance to legal immigrants and those considered "undeserving." Politicians from moderate and conservative persuasions agreed that legal immigrants were not entitled and worked to end their eligibility.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 dramatically altered America's welfare programs. Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC), the focus of this legislation, no longer became an entitlement program for the poor, but a block grant—TANF—to states that had two-year time limits and work requirements. Anti-immigrant sentiments in states with large immigrant populations had also increased during this period. In California, the passage of Proposition 187 by the majority of voters banned undocumented immigrants from most social services. Although PRWORA

focused on single mothers, legal immigrants also became part of the spotlight, and as a result became no longer entitled to means-tested entitlements, in particular federal cash assistance programs. The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, an entitlement program that provides monthly cash assistance to low-income older adults and disabled individuals, was particularly targeted because of the high number of elderly immigrants who were recipients. From 1986 to 1994, the number of immigrant SSI recipients grew by about 15% annually, and in 1994, legal immigrants represented 12% of all recipients (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). Approximately 70% of these legal immigrants on SSI were elderly people. Cuts to legal immigrants accounted for \$13.5 billion of the law's \$55 billion in long-term savings. Although anti-immigration sentiments helped push this legislation, legislators failed to realize the impact of this law on the daily needs of disabled and elderly immigrants, and the impact on local and state governments in trying to meet these needs. Rather, the overwhelming picture that Congress received was that these elderly immigrants were quite able and not in need of assistance.

This article is derived from a larger study that examined how older immigrants became constructed as "undeserving" of federal means-tested entitlements. This particular article focuses on the tone and coverage of the print media before, after, and during the debate of this particular law and examines how older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income became constructed as "undeserving." Specifically, this article asks the following questions:

1. How were older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income portrayed in the print media before and after federal welfare reform?
2. Who was involved in the print media coverage of older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income before and after federal welfare reform?
3. What types of statements were made by those involved in the print media coverage of older immigrants on Supplemental Security Income, before and after federal welfare reform?

## CONTEXT:

### 1996 FEDERAL WELFARE REFORM ACT AND ELDERLY IMMIGRANTS

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, H.R. 3734, was passed by the House of Representatives on July 31, 1996, and by the Senate on August 1. President Clinton signed

the bill on August 22, 1996, thus "ending welfare as we know it." The bill was a comprehensive piece of legislation with far-reaching implications for a number of programs including AFDC, SSI, and Food Stamps. The legislation was estimated to save \$54.5 billion over six years, with most of the savings due to changes in the Food Stamp Program and reductions in benefits for legal immigrants.

This bill had major implications for older immigrants. At the time, 500,000 legal immigrants who were aged or disabled would have been affected by the impending cuts to their cash and health assistance. Prior to federal welfare reform, SSI provided a monthly check of about \$530 per month (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998) to low-income aged or disabled individuals, regardless of citizenship status. Over the last five years, Congress and the Clinton Administration moved to restore many of the vital safety net benefits that the 1996 welfare reform law took from immigrant families, including food stamps, Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income.<sup>1</sup> However, the damage of federal welfare reform is that many older and young immigrants now feel uncertain of their rights and fear penalties associated with applying for assistance, including denial of citizenship, so many immigrants forego benefits to which they are legally entitled (Park et al., 2000; Yoo, 1998).

In defending the cuts targeted at immigrants in the federal welfare bill, federal lawmakers have contended that immigrants should depend on their families, not the government, for support. Sponsored immigrants come to the United States under the category of family reunification programs, designed to unite separated families. Many elderly immigrants arrive because their adult children sponsor them. Because of federal welfare reform, the law now requires that immigrants sponsoring family members make at least 125% of the poverty level, or \$19,500, for a family of four (Dugger, 1997). The law also states that sponsors must provide basic support to new immigrants, or sponsors may be sued by the sponsored immigrants and by the agencies for the amount of benefits provided to sponsored immigrants (INS, 1997). However, 40% of immigrant families and 26% of American families do not make enough to sponsor an immigrant under the criteria (Dugger, 1997).

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: FRAMING RECIPIENTS IN SOCIAL WELFARE POLICYMAKING**

When analyzing the construction of social policy, the concept of framing may provide a useful explanation about why welfare state cut-

backs may be targeted to particular groups. Rooted in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, framing is a discussion of "what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Framing is about how individuals organize information that influences their perceptions and interpretations, and part of the analysis is to determine its ideological sources and effects. The process by which perceptions enter the policy debate is through framing. Welfare state backlashes happen because of the interpretative packaging of policies.

Past studies on policymaking suggest that the way in which recipients are framed influences policy decision-making (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). Cook and Barrett (1992) note that public support for certain recipients is contingent on whether these recipients are seen as worthy of help and lacking in all other resources. Recipients must be perceived as being in their situation because of forces beyond their own control and must possess the will to be independent. In policy formation, eligibility for certain kinds of federal or state programs involves this kind of labeling and stigmatization (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Policy debates deciding eligibility for cash assistance programs and other government assistance involve images and symbolic representation of recipients (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

The media are quite influential in the decision-making process because policymakers interpret news stories for decision-making purposes and rely on the lay public's perceptions and interpretations of the news stories (Edelman, 1988). One area is the influence of the press on agenda setting: the media's ability to shape public opinion on key policy issues. McCombs and Shaw (1972) first theorized that the mass media coverage of a political issue had agenda-setting capabilities. Subsequent studies have found similar results. Fan and Norem (1992) focused on the Medicare Catastrophic Extension Act of 1988 and examined a representative sample of news stories from major U.S. newspapers. Their study was consistent with previous studies that showed that trends of opinion were shaped by the mass media. Hertog and Fan (1995) applied their theory to a study of newspaper and newsmagazine coverage of AIDS from 1987 to 1991 and found that news content affected public opinion and attitudes on HIV transmission. On the other hand, Kingdon (1995) suggests that the media do not necessarily impact public opinion and agenda setting. Rather, the media provide a role in policy development by communicating information to policymakers,

bringing attention to mass movements, and accelerating its development and impact.

Gans (1995) suggests that news stories on welfare rely on researchers, policymakers, or individuals with expertise on the subject. Academic social scientists and funded think tanks are examples of researchers, individuals, and entities that are used to construct welfare news stories. Journalists often quote these researchers in news articles. Gans writes about how researchers have taken on roles as either the alarmists or the counters (i.e., those who provide counts of the phenomenon). "A good deal of social scientific counting is alarmist in nature, because social scientists are rarely asked to count anything unproblematic" (Gans, 1995, p. 49). Policy experts are also powerful because they establish the initial framework from which all policy discussion flows (Brint, 1994). Those who define the problem are those with power and prestige. Policy experts have power because of their specialized knowledge; their roles are more supportive of the agenda of top political officials. They provide knowledge, data, or analysis to a particular framework.

On the other hand, advocacy organizations can be influential on how welfare recipients are portrayed in the press. Through their advocacy work, advocacy workers can reframe issues and get media to highlight other competing frames not voiced by politicians. In other words, they have the potential to change the direction of political debate. Snow and Benford (1988), in their work on social movement organizations, suggest that organizations are active participants in the packaging of frames. Through their active production of meaning, organizations can not only change the direction of a political debate; they can also mobilize and organize supporters that again can deter and "demobilize antagonists."

### METHODOLOGY

The article focuses on print media coverage in terms of two elements: volume and themes. Volume is the length and amount of coverage by year, while themes focus on the content and context of the coverage. This article uncovers themes that emerge from these articles, but also documents "who speaks" and "who constructs" these themes. Ultimately, this analysis aims to:

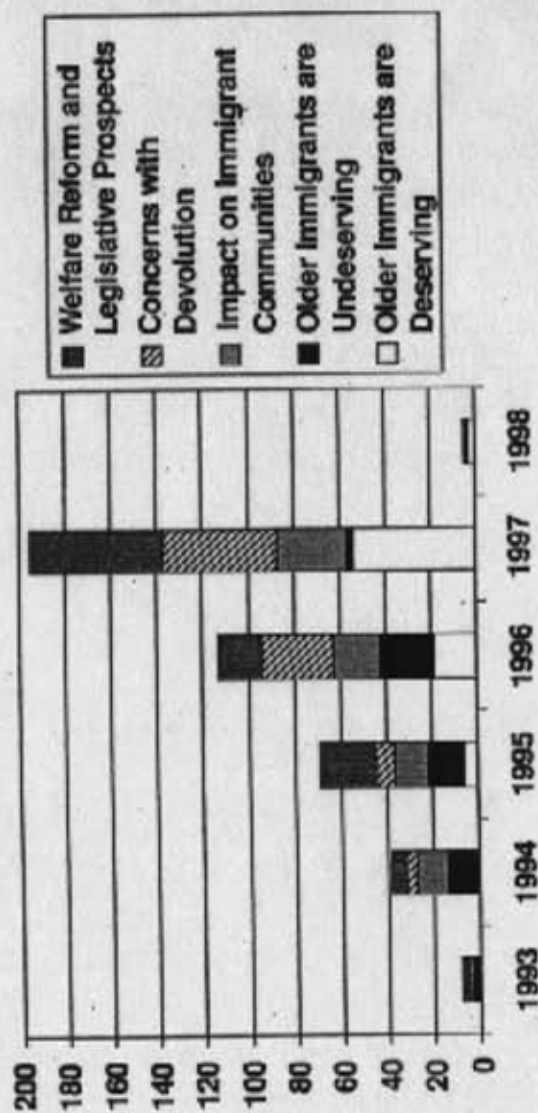
1. provide a picture of the frames used in the debate on Supplemental Security Income and older immigrants through the analyses of themes in the feature news articles,
2. examine who is involved in these constructions.

A content analysis of news coverage was used to examine how and who was involved in the framing of print coverage of older immigrant on SSI. Past studies examining the formation of policy issues have used a content analysis to understand how the mass media (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) and policy makers (Burstein, 1991; Burstein, Bricher & Einwohner, 1995) frame policy debates. Content analysis is a nonreactive measurement that is most useful when studying a topic from a distance because it can reveal messages that are difficult to see in text (Neuman 1991).

The Lexis/Nexis online news service was used for data collection in March 1999 to provide data from major U.S. newspapers. The Major Newspaper database was used, and searches focused on articles from the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. These newspapers were used because they are listed as the top five most highly circulated newspapers in the United States, based on figures compiled by the *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook*. The time period in which newspapers were examined was from 1993 to 1998 because this time period reflects the highest incidence of newspaper articles on immigrants and welfare use (see Figure 1). This time period also reflects key events in the development of federal welfare reform. Using the Lexis/Nexis database, purposive sample stories with the words "Supplemental Security Income" or "SSI" and "Immigrants" or "Refugees" or "Noncitizens" were downloaded. The search was filtered by identifying articles with at least two mentions of "Supplemental Security Income" or "SSI" and "Immigrants, Refugees or Noncitizens." Similar filtering methods have been used by previous studies on content analyses (Fan & Norem, 1992; Mehane, 2001). A total of 541 articles were identified.

To get the subset of news articles, each text had to be reviewed. Op-eds, letters to the editor, and editorials were discarded from the analysis. Moreover, if a feature article did not mention "Supplemental Security Income" or "Immigrants" or "Refugees" or "Non-citizens," it was also eliminated from the analysis. In this way, the sample of 145 feature articles was selected, or 27% of the total universe of articles on SSI and immigrants.

24 **FIGURE 1.** Number and Types of Themes in Feature Newspaper Articles on Supplemental Security Income and Immigrants by Year: 1993-1998



The full articles were read in their entirety and analyzed using standard content analysis procedure (Weber, 1990). For each entry, a coding sheet was constructed, which included cells for identification number, date, word count, and codes for newspaper, individuals quoted and themes. A codebook was developed for the types of individual quoted and the themes found within each article. Themes from within the article were coded. At times, multiple themes were coded within one article (N = 412). In addition, each article was coded for persons quoted by their titles. Again, multiple individuals were quoted within one article (N = 430). Data were then entered into SPSS for conducting descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. In terms of the themes for the new features, the inter-rater reliability score was 75%.

### FINDINGS

#### *Changes in Media Coverage of Federal Welfare Reform and Immigrants over Time*

The coverage on this particular topic is most prominent between 1993 and 1998. The *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* carried the greatest number of stories related to Supplemental Security Income and immigrants, and most of this coverage was after the passage of the bill. The bulk of the coverage occurred in newspapers located in areas with high immigrant populations. A majority (89%, n = 129) of the articles appeared between 1995 and 1997 (See Figure 1). The year with the greatest number of articles was 1997, with 44.1% (n = 64) of the articles appearing at that time. This is interesting since much of the debate was featured in these papers *after* the passage of the federal welfare reform bill: The public was more informed through national newspaper coverage after the fact.

A majority (63.8%) of the coverage on Supplemental Security Income and immigrants occurred in 1996 and, subsequently, after the passage of the 1996 federal welfare reform bill. *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* had more coverage of the topic prior to the passing of the federal welfare reform law. However, both *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* had more coverage of the stories after the bill had become law. A majority (81.4%) of the stories were located in the first section of the newspaper.

#### *Dominant Topics*

In addition to volume, this researcher found key dimensions of news about immigrants' use of Supplemental Security Income (see Figure 1).

For the years 1993 to 1998, almost one-fifth (18.6%) of the features focused on the impact of welfare reform on immigrant communities. This included how immigrant communities viewed welfare reform and how advocacy organizations were working together to deal with the impact. Moreover, the theme included how welfare reform prevents low-income immigrants from sponsoring family members to immigrate, and how more and more immigrants feel the pressure to become citizens.

Approximately one-fourth (26%) of the articles focused on the welfare reform law and legislative prospects in terms of information, but the articles also contained discussions regarding constitutionality and the possibility of restorations for certain immigrants. Almost one-fourth (22%) of the news articles were concerned with devolution and the increasing pressures on local and state governments and on health and social service providers to meet the needs of immigrants without a federal safety net.

Less than one-fifth (19.3%) of the news articles contended that older immigrants are deserving of federal assistance through several kinds of portrayals of older immigrants. One illustration is of low-income older immigrants as vulnerable or disabled, and unable to pass the citizenship exam. Other depictions are of older immigrants who had played by the rules and worked in this country, only to fall on hard times, and to then rely on assistance. Others are of older immigrants who became ill or sick and became in need of health care, and who qualified for Medicaid through attaining Supplemental Security Income.

Approximately 14% of the news articles focused on older immigrants as not deserving of Supplemental Security Income. The main theme that demonstrated this was that they have not earned this entitlement by contributing through taxes, and that they immigrate late in life to take advantage of the U.S. welfare system. Depictions were of increasing numbers of older immigrants migrating for the sole purpose of retiring on SSI and becoming a burden to U.S. taxpayers. Another illustration was of adult children who sponsor their aging relatives and then abdicate their responsibility to the U.S. taxpayer; yet these adult children are financially wealthy.

When looking at themes before and after the passage of federal welfare reform, there are interesting findings (See Figure 1). Less than 15% of the articles prior to the passage of the bill were concerned with immigrants as deserving Supplemental Security Income. On the other hand, after the passage, a majority (83.1%) of the coverage was about immigrants deserving federal assistance. Almost all (94.8%) of the coverage of immigrants as undeserving of Supplemental Security Income occurred prior to the passage of the federal welfare reform bill.

### Who Speaks?

A major research question was concerned with identifying the type of individuals who had the most influence in shaping and defining policy on Supplemental Security Income. This necessitated an analysis of the media coverage for the names of individuals that journalists quoted and cited as experts to provide a perspective to the problem (Herman Chomsky, 1988). The names of individuals were open-coded, based on affiliations, and were mutually exclusive. Of the types of individuals quoted most often, politicians were quoted in approximately one-third (34%) of the articles, followed by immigrants in approximately one-fourth (25%) of the articles, and then by health and social service providers (16%). Government bureaucrats representing federal agencies like the INS, SSA, and other such agencies represented about 10% of all quoted individuals in the articles. Immigrants were quoted one-quarter (25%) of the time. The remaining 75% ( $n = 409$ ) of those quoted were not immigrants; they were professionals of some kind, whether a think-tank spokesperson or a health or service provider (see Table 1).

### What Types of Statements?

When examining quoted statements by types of individuals, several interesting themes emerged, including:

1. statements that older immigrants are deserving;
2. statements that older immigrants are not deserving;
3. statements conveying alarmist reactions to the impact at the local level;
4. statements discussing legislative prospects of Supplemental Security Income and immigrants;
5. statements about the citizenship process;
6. statements in support of welfare reform;
7. technical remarks, which were usually legal questions.

These categories were treated as mutually exclusive even though some of the quotes included several different statements (see Table 2). Each statement category is discussed below.

*Older Immigrants Are Deserving.* This thematic category includes the largest number of quoted statements, accounting for 29% ( $n = 120$ ) of all quotes ( $N = 412$ ). About 57% ( $n = 68$ ) of these quotes ( $N = 120$ ) were stated by immigrants themselves. By contrast, 16% of these types of statements were made by politicians, who stated that older immigrants were indeed worthy of receiving federal means-tested entitlements.

TABLE 1. Types of Individuals Quoted in Feature Newspaper Articles on Supplemental Security Income and Immigrants from 1993-1998 (N = 412)

Individual	Frequency	Percent
Attorneys/Judges	29	7.0
Politicians	140	34.0
Immigrants	103	25.0
Academicians	10	2.4
Health and Social Service Provider	66	16.0
Government Bureaucrat	39	9.5
Think-Tank	16	3.9
Anti-Immigration Group	9	2.2
Total	412	100.0

TABLE 2. Types of Themes in Quotes by Individuals Cited in News Feature Articles: 1993-1998

Types of Themes in Quotes	Individuals					
	Immigrants		Professionals		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Older Immigrants Are Deserving	68	66.0	52	17.0	120	29.0
Older Immigrants Are Not Deserving	5	5.0	53	17.0	58	14.0
Technical Remarks	0	0.0	24	8.0	24	6.0
Alarmist Reactions to Local Crises	4	4.0	72	23.0	76	18.0
Legislative Prospects	0	0.0	65	21.0	65	16.0
Citizenship Process	25	24.0	29	9.0	54	13.0
Support for Welfare Reform	1	1.0	14	5.0	15	4.0
Total	103	25	309	75	412	100.0

About 59% of the quotes by immigrants were made after the passage of the 1996 federal welfare reform law, while 62% of the quotes by health and social service providers stating immigrants' deservingness of federal safety nets occurred after the passage of the 1996 federal welfare reform law.

The following quoted statements drawn from the sample illustrate how politicians commented on immigrants' deservingness of federal

safety nets, and how immigrants testify to their deservingness of cash assistance:

I think the battle for fairness will be won. Congress has to make sure that the laws are fair and humane and effective. It is wrong and ineffective to throw elderly people, most of them elderly women, on the street. (Representative Sander M. Levin [D-Mich], *The Washington Post*, July 1, 1997, pg. A9)

I never wanted the government to support me, but I have no choice, Hidalgo said. If they take this away, how do I feed and dress myself? How do I pay the rent? This is making me sick and crazy. (Immigrant, *The Washington Post*, March 21, 1997, pg. D1)

For us, coming here was a dream. I never imagined America would leave old people without any help, said a tearful Vereta, who hasn't told her mother that she might be losing her benefits. I try to protect her, I don't tell her what could happen. Even now I do not want to believe it. (Immigrant, April 14, 1997, *The Washington Post*, pg. B5)

*Older Immigrants Are Undeserving.* Fourteen percent of all quotes were about immigrants not deserving a federal safety net. The assumptions behind these statements were that immigrants were purposely immigrating to attain welfare benefits and that older immigrants were using Supplemental Security Income as a retirement benefit, even though they had not worked in the United States. Most of these quotes were mentioned before the passage of the federal welfare reform bill. Fifty percent (n = 29) of all these quotes (N = 58) were stated by politicians, followed by government bureaucrats (15.5%), and anti-immigration groups (12.1%). The following quote was made by an anti-immigration group:

The idea that immigrants can bring in their parents to retire here, to incur expensive medical treatment, is a very troubling trend. We can't allow people to bring their parents here from around the world to live and die at taxpayer expense. (Dan Stein, Executive Director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, March 17, 1994, *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A1)

The following quote is from a politician describing why immigrants are undeserving of Supplemental Security Income:

But there are limits. SSI will be ended as the pension plan for third world countries. We are not giving on that. (Clay Shaw, March 10, 1997, *New York Times*, pg. A1)

*Alarmist Statements About Impact at the Local Level.* Accounting for 18% (n = 76) of all quoted statements (N = 412), this thematic category included the second largest number of individual quotes. Of these 76 alarmist remarks, 35 statements were made by health and/or social service providers, accounting for more than 33% of quoted statements. Politicians made 32.9% (n = 25) of these comments. The following quotes by health and social service providers were coded as alarmist reactions to welfare reform and the local impact:

The impact on states with high populations of legal immigrants will be profound. The immigrants will get health care. But it will be the responsibility of local government or, in the case of private hospitals, it will come out of their charity budgets. (Christine C. Burch, the Executive Director of the National Association of Public Hospitals, July 29, 1996, *New York Times*, pg. A1)

Once the president signs this bill, the real crisis will hit. . . The counties will have virtually no ability to raise tax revenues, but they'll still have to care for these people. It's a real disaster in the making. (Frank Mecca, Executive Director of the California Welfare Directors Association, August 2, 1996, *The Washington Post*, pg. A9)

*Statements About Legislative Prospects.* About 16% (n = 65) of all quotes were about legislative prospects in terms of proposals to restore or dismantle Supplemental Security Income to immigrants. Three-fourths (74% or n = 48) of these quotes were stated by politicians, followed by attorneys and judges at 9%.

*Statements About Naturalization and Citizenship Process on Older Immigrants.* Approximately 13% (n = 54) of all quotes were about naturalization and the citizenship process. Most of these quotes (46%) were made by older immigrants who found the naturalization process difficult and inefficient. Government bureaucrats, most often from the INS, were quoted 24% of the time, followed by health and social service providers (20%). The following statement was made by an immigrant regarding the citizenship process:

I don't know what else to do. I am too old to learn English. But without English, how could I pass the test? (Immigrant, December 1, 1996, *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A3)

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the feature news articles illustrate how press coverage evolved and changed before, during, and after the passage of federal welfare reform. This study helps explain the public's knowledge on Supplemental Security Income and immigrants. As shown, the number of articles published on this topic increases in 1994 and 1995 and reaches its peak (see Figure 1) in 1997 after the passage of federal welfare reform. Supposing that volume of coverage reflects the public's awareness of this issue, the small number of articles published from 1993 to 1995 suggests that the public were not well informed of this issue until the passage of federal welfare reform. In certain situations, a policy cutback can happen with low coverage of the issue and a proper understanding of the impact of the legislation on the targeted recipients. For example, a trend is that stories on older immigrants' undeservingness prevailed from 1993 to 1995 and start to diminish in 1996 and 1997; rather older immigrants' deservingness abounds. Moreover, specific types of individuals were prominent in these feature articles and made statements of the deservingness or undeservingness of elderly immigrant SSI recipients. For example, most of the coverage of immigrants' usage of Supplemental Security Income prior to August 22, 1996 was negative and justified ending eligibility to immigrants. Older immigrants were portrayed as an ever-increasing population undeserving of Supplemental Security Income. Their adult children were depicted as financially able, but irresponsible in the care of their aging parent by leaving the responsibility to U.S. taxpayers.

However, after the passage of the federal welfare reform bill, portrayals started to change, and low-income elderly immigrants were seen as legitimately in need of Supplemental Security Income. A majority of the coverage was about immigrants deserving federal assistance. The images started to change as the realities of federal welfare reform started to sink in. The press portrayed distraught and fearful older immigrants afraid of losing their only form of assistance. Suicides were reported. There were stories of older adults trying to learn English to become naturalized citizens. In the end, the overall picture was that older immigrants on SSI were legitimately poor and had not defrauded

the government. A large percentage of stories that occurred after the passage was concerned with devolution, as local politicians and health and service providers vocalized concerns about the impending crises.

After the passage of federal welfare reform, health and social service providers were instrumental in presenting information about the needs of elderly immigrants: They were indeed deserving of federal safety nets. On the other hand, before the passage of federal welfare reform, politicians, government bureaucrats, and academicians were quoted, stating that older immigrants are not needy and do not need to rely on the federal government for aid. The ability of health and service providers to get the voices and stories of older immigrants to the press made a difference in the tone of news coverage after federal welfare reform. Older immigrants who were quoted were able to bring their voices to the press and ultimately to the public. The imminent impact on elderly immigrants of cuts in cash, food, and medical assistance illustrated the realities of this legislation. National aging advocates have suggested that once older immigrants began to tell their stories, the tone towards ending entitlements to immigrants started to change (Yoo, 1999). The voices of elderly recipients in the print media provided opportunities for all to hear the stories behind the numbers. These voices became pivotal in the reframing of the issue from fraudulent older immigrants to vulnerable low-income elderly immigrants who were truly needy and indeed deserving of a federal safety net.

### IMPLICATIONS

This study has several implications. First, advocates and providers who work with poor, disadvantaged elderly are instrumental in organizing and bringing the voices and pictures of the elderly to the public. Prior to the passage of this particular legislation, the voices of vulnerable elderly immigrant groups were invisible in the pages of the print media. Not until this bill had passed were their voices evident in the media. Whether it be changes to eligibility or a cutback to a particular program, aging advocates and service providers who work with vulnerable elderly groups, such as poor, elderly immigrants, automatically become key individuals who can shed light on a particular issue or problem. As a result, advocates and service providers must also do their best to educate themselves on the issue at hand so they can bring voice to the issue, and at the same time, provide information to clients on the "how-to" of involvement in the policymaking process.

### NOTE

The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 restored Supplemental Security Income to immigrants who were here prior to August 22, 1996. However, immigrants who arrived after August 22, 1996 do not have access to a federal safety net.

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