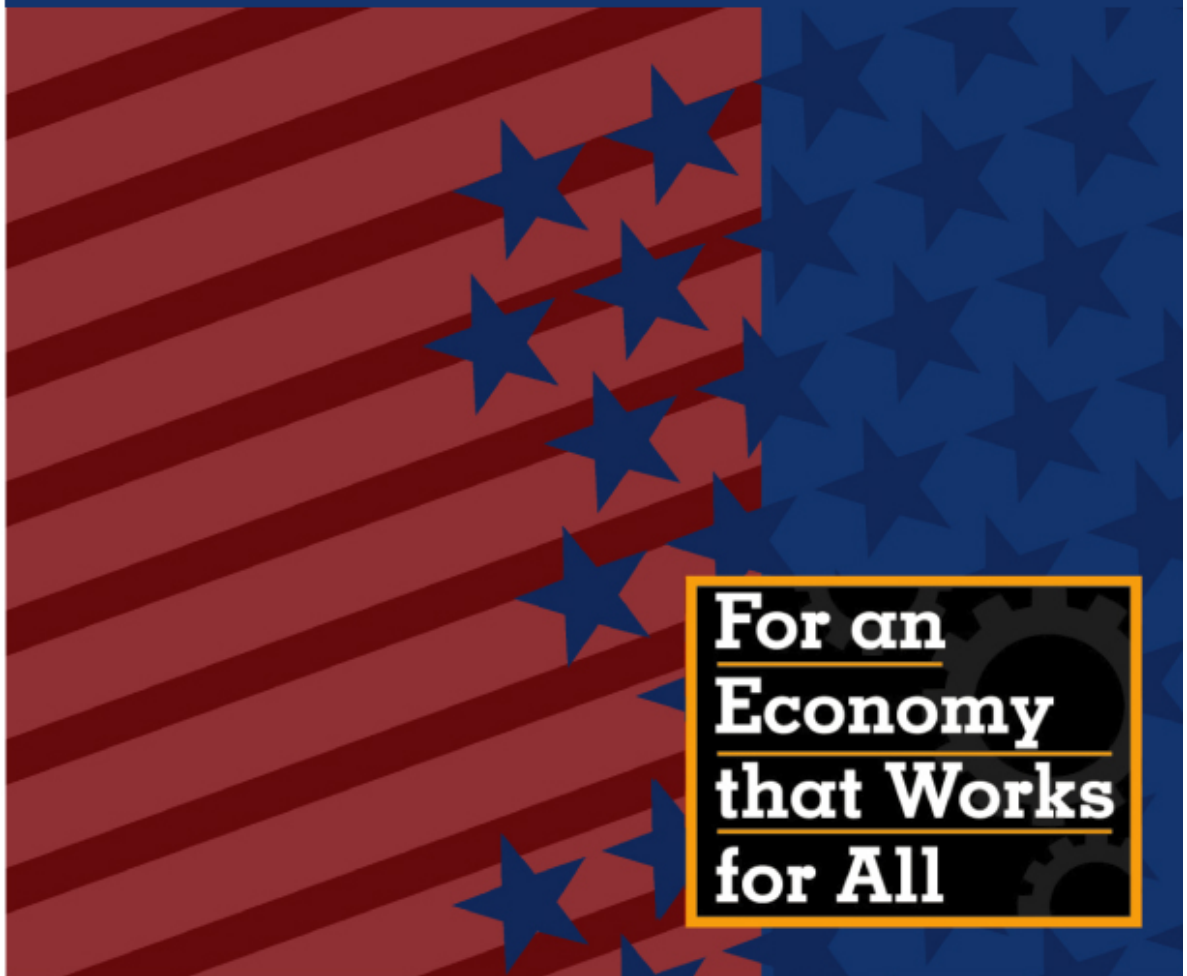


**Working Press**  
**An analysis of media coverage**  
**on low wage work**

July 1, 2005–June 30, 2006



Author: Bonnie McEwan

Research team: Janan Compitello, Joan Grangeniois-Thomas, Sarah Malin, Zachary Posner, Saran Shim

Produced by: Douglas Gould and Company, Inc.  
([www.douglasgould.com](http://www.douglasgould.com))

## For An Economy That Works for All Analysis of Media Coverage of Low Wage Work July 1, 2005 – June 30, 2006

For An Economy That Works for All, a project funded by the Ford Foundation and directed by Douglas Gould and Company, Inc., seeks to raise public awareness about the barriers facing low wage workers in the U.S. and the need for government and corporate policy changes to enable this population to gain equal access to the wealth and promise of the American economy.

Because public perceptions about low wage work are largely determined and reinforced by the media, in 2001 Douglas Gould and Co. conducted a media analysis entitled *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* to identify and measure how low wage work is presented. The 2001 analysis helped build a communications strategy to enhance the visibility of low wage workers and the obstacles they face. We undertook the analysis to determine:

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

To these ends, the media analysis was used to:

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

The complete text of *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* is available for downloading without charge at [www.economythatworks.org](http://www.economythatworks.org).

### **The Current Climate**

Much has changed in the public's perception of the economy since the inception of the low wage project. Recent coverage in the media of the decline in health benefits and the employment practices of highly visible employers like Wal-Mart has undoubtedly had an effect on those perceptions. Media coverage such as this is a favorable development and further illustrates that the public is probably more receptive to our messages today than they were in 2001. Previous research was conducted before the latest wave of concern about the economy and its continuing erosion, tax cuts, and state budget crises.

As a result of these events, in 2006 we decided to see if and how the media coverage of low wage work had changed. We believe that media coverage serves as a proxy to help assess the effectiveness of communications efforts undertaken by Ford Foundation grantees and other groups between 2002 and 2005. Our major findings and recommendations follow.

## **Findings**

All told, we searched 53 US media outlets – 42 newspapers, two wire services, six television or radio broadcasts and three magazines, which yielded 1,143 relevant news stories. A description of the methodology, including a list of all media searched and a brief description of search results appears at the end of this report.

We searched for media coverage about a number of key issues and policies associated with low wage work, including stories about the Earned Income Tax Credit, health insurance, minimum and living wage, job training, child care and family leave. We also searched for stories about Wal-Mart, since that company's practices were challenged by several advocacy organizations over the past few years.

Our methodology changed between 2006 and 2001, when we included fewer media outlets in our searches and analyzed 270 stories as compared to the 1,143 stories we analyzed this year. Whenever relevant, we have included comparison figures for the two years in the charts below, but 2001 numbers do not exist for all outlets or all categories of story topics.

Because formative research for this project showed that the term "low wage work" is generally perceived as more positive than "working poor," the former term is the one that we used in our initial search of the 53 outlets in this 2006 analysis. "Working poor" has negative connotations for many people and is widely misunderstood. The overriding belief among Americans is that if a person works hard s/he will succeed. Thus, the label "working poor" seems contradictory to some. In addition, the word "poor" carries negative associations with subjects such as welfare and for some implies that the person in question has moral failings.

However, since our 2001 analysis was conducted prior to the research on terminology, we used both "low wage work" and "working poor" in that earlier assessment. Therefore, in order to gain an accurate base of comparison between coverage in 2001 and 2006, for this current analysis we searched for references to "working poor" in addition to "low wage work" for the 17 outlets that the two analyses have in common.

When comparing data between the two years, it's important to keep in mind that figures for 2001 were gleaned from a six-month period while those from 2006 were taken over a full 12 months. This difference in time frames undoubtedly played a role in the increased coverage of low wage work by some of the media outlets listed below.

**Table 1.1**

**Breakdown of stories using the label "low wage work" by outlet – 2006 only**

NAME OF OUTLET	12 mo. 2006	NAME OF OUTLET	12 mos. 2006
Associated Press State and Local Wire	118	Daily News (NY)	14
New York Times	41	Oregonian (Portland)	13
Orlando Sentinel	35	Detroit Free Press	12
Boston Globe	33	Kansas City Star	12
Los Angeles Times	29	Baltimore Sun	11
NPR	29	Dallas Morning News	10
Washington Post	27	Denver Post	9
Miami Herald	23	St. Petersburg Times	9
Arizona Republic	22	San Diego Union-Tribune	9
Sacramento Bee	21	Times-Picayune (New Orleans)	9
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)	21	Chicago Sun Times	8
Houston Chronicle	19	Christian Science Monitor	7
Newsday (Long Island, NY)	19	Plain Dealer (Cleveland)	7
Philadelphia Inquirer	19	Washington Times	6
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	19	CNN	6
Sun Sentinel (Ft. Lauderdale)	19	Rocky Mountain News	5
Associated Press Online	17	NBC News	5
Chicago Tribune	16	Orange County Register	3
San Jose Mercury News	16	Wall Street Journal	3
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	16	ABC News	1
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	15	Fox News	1
Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel	15	Indianapolis Star	1
San Francisco Chronicle	15	The Hill	1
USA Today	14	TOTAL	794

**Table 1.2****Comparative breakdown of stories using either “low wage work” or “working poor” by outlet – 2006 and 2001**

NAME OF OUTLET	12 mo. 2006	6 mos. 2001	NAME OF OUTLET	12 mos. 2006	6 mos. 2001
New York Times	96	41	Atlanta Journal- Constitution	34	12
Los Angeles Times	84	47	San Francisco Chronicle	31	12
Boston Globe	71	38	Dallas Morning News	29	14
NPR	57	16	USA Today	28	4
Washington Post	54	27	Fox News	9	2
Chicago Tribune	48	24	NBC News	8	1
Philadelphia Inquirer	45	2	CNN	7	6
Wall Street Journal	37	10	ABC News	4	1
Associated Press Online	36	13	<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>678</b>	<b>270</b>

**Labels and terminology**

In 2006, we found 678 relevant articles that appeared in the 17 outlets that were common to both the 2006 and 2001 analyses (Table 1.2). Of those, 294 articles (43%) used the term “working poor” when discussing low wage workers and 384 (57%) used the term “low wage work” or “low wage worker.”

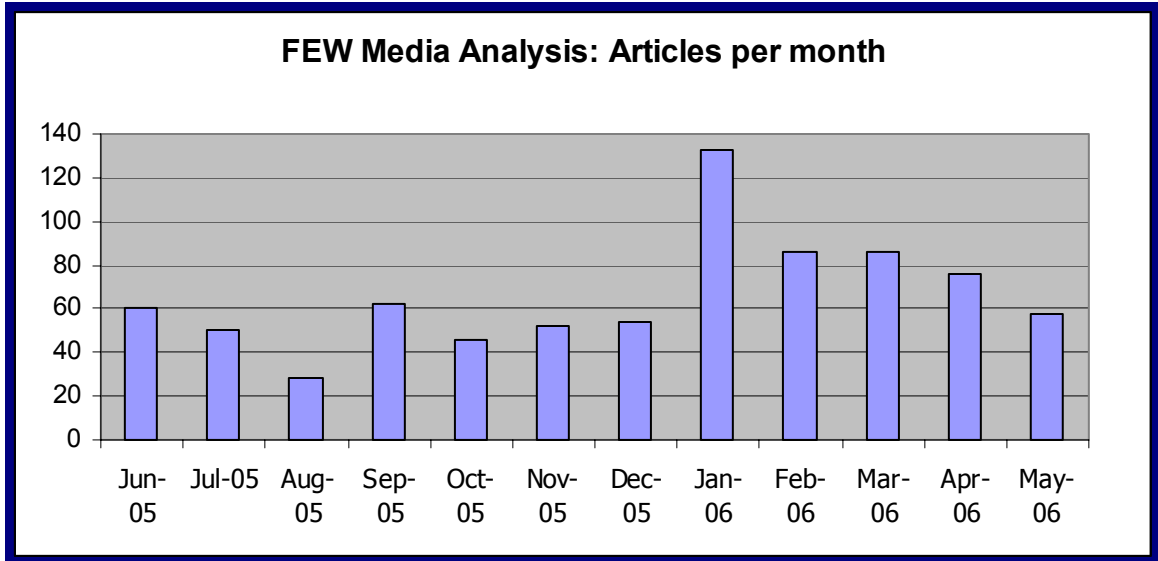
Some outlets, such as the Wall Street Journal, showed a marked preference for the term “working poor.” For instance, the Journal ran only three stories in the 2005-2006 period that used the label, “low wage worker,” but it ran 34 stories using the label “working poor.” Terminology used in stories in the New York Times was less skewed, but articles that used “working poor” (55) still outnumbered articles that used “low wage work” (41). (See tables 1.1 and 1.2.)

We did not identify any consistent correlation between the use of one label or the other in writing about a particular policy issue. Our sense is that the use of one of these terms over the other is a matter of the individual reporter’s choice, although a case could be made that the label “working poor” carries added weight because it is the dominant term used in two of the nation’s most credible news sources, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. It is somewhat encouraging to note, however, that our preferred term, “low

wage work(er)” was used more frequently overall than was “working poor” in the sample from the 17 outlets for which we had comparative data.

### Time of publication – For articles in 2005-2006 using “low wage work” only

**Table 2**



Of the 794 stories in our 2005-2006 sample that used the term “low wage work,” the largest monthly total was found in January 2006 (133). This is more than double the monthly total of each of the previous months (June – December 2005). The months immediately subsequent to January 2006 also showed high results – February and March each had 86 published articles. April had 76. May was more consistent with the first seven months of the analysis, with 58 articles published during that month.

In looking closer at January, there did not appear to be a single issue that was generating the significantly higher percentage of stories on low wage work. There were 28 stories about “Health Insurance” and 33 stories on the “Earned Income Tax Credit,” with smaller numbers written about a range of other issues.

The large appearance of articles in January 2006 may have been due to a few major news stories that broke during the month. There were two big stories on healthcare, as well as an announcement by Karl Rove on the Republican midterm election strategy that spotlighted tax policy and the EITC. President Bush's State of the Union Address featured a pitch for

healthcare savings accounts and the Part D drug benefit became effective for Medicare beneficiaries.

Another point of note depicted in Table 2 is the large increase of articles between August and September. This probably had to do with Hurricane Katrina, as workers were being displaced from their homes and jobs. This situation illustrates how low wage work stories often make their way onto the national policy agenda. As was the case in 2001, low wage work is not consistently part of the national conversation. Rather it often takes important local or regional events to call attention to issues about low wage work and workers.

## Article type and placement

**Table 3.1: 2006 analysis**

Type	No. of stories	% of total
News	787	69%
Op-Ed	143	13%
Editorial	125	11%
Feature	88	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,143</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3.2: 2001 analysis**

Type	No. of stories	% of total
News	102	39%
Opinion (op-ed & editorial)	96	35%
Feature	72	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>100%</b>

The way in which the stories in the 2006 analysis were categorized by the media is typical of the majority of analyses done by Douglas Gould and Company. Stories classified as news, which usually account for three-quarters of those in any given analysis, make up 69% of the articles here. Editorials and op-eds combined usually account for about 15 percent of articles in a typical analysis. Here they accounted for slightly more than average, coming in at 24% of all articles reviewed.

This is far more typical than the way the media classified stories about low wage work in our 2001 analysis (see Table 3.2), when the sample had more than twice the percentage of opinion pieces than usual and news accounts were notably under-represented.

This lack of hard news coverage in 2001 seems to have been corrected by 2005-2006. A likely explanation is that there are now more news hooks than there were in 2001, quite possibly because of the increased media advocacy activities of nonprofit organizations. Examples of news hooks that the media

covered in 2006 that were mostly absent in 2001 include legislative proposals and government policies that triggered news stories and the more frequent release of relevant studies and reports by national nonprofit groups.

## Story Subjects

Table 4 shows a numerical breakdown of all the stories we analyzed according to subject categories. Although some stories mentioned more than one issue, we allocated each story to only one category, based upon its principal subject.

It's interesting to note that many of the same story subjects appeared in both our 2006 and 2001 analyses. Health insurance, for instance, was the most frequent topic in 2006 and tied for second place (with affordable housing) in 2001. While the Earned Income Tax Credit made a showing in 2001, accounting for 2% of the story sample, it boomed in 2006 to comprise 15% of all relevant articles. Affordable housing held second place in 2006, as it did in 2001.

**Table 4**

Story Subjects	No. 2006	% 2006	No. 2001	% 2001
Health insurance	185	16 %	35	13%
Affordable Housing	174	15 %	35	13%
Earned Income Tax Credit	167	15 %	6	2%
Living/minimum wage	164	14 %	41	15%
Healthcare issues (not insurance)	158	14 %	4	1%
Family leave	92	8 %	3	1%
Wal-Mart	79	7 %	na	na
Other	78	7 %	23	8%
Child Care	24	2 %	12	4%
Job training	22	2 %	11	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,143</b>	100%		

The share of stories about job training and child care – never especially large – was reduced by half between 2001 and 2006. It is interesting to note that the representation of both these topics within our samples was nearly



identical relative to each other and for each analysis period. Not surprisingly, stories about Wal-Mart were virtually nonexistent in 2001 but made up about 6% of the sample in 2006.

A detailed analysis of the story categories follows the next section on story frames.

### **Story frames: systemic v. personal**

One of the most important aspects of this analysis is the assessment of whether the articles reviewed were framed from a “systemic” or “personal” perspective. Systemic stories look at problems, issues and solutions in terms of how underlying systems, such as public education or health care provision, contribute to particular situations and outcomes. Personal stories look at issues in terms of individual actions and how those actions contribute to a given situation.

A core finding of the formative research done in 2001 indicated that news stories framed “systemically” are more likely to dispose people toward policy-oriented solutions than are stories framed “personally,” which are more likely to dispose people toward charitable, “fix the person” solutions. Since most of the solutions favored by nonprofit advocates involve improving systems or using systems to deliver services, news stories that approach issues systemically are more supportive of our goals and our overall world view than are stories that are framed personally.

For many years, advocates inadvertently reinforced the “fix the person” view by highlighting clients whose stories, although inspiring, nevertheless led target audiences to view systemic social problems as personal failings. In our original research, we called this approach the “charity/sympathy” frame and encouraged advocates to abandon this frame for one that was more systemic.

Evidently, that advice has been heeded. In a major reversal from the original media analysis of 2001, the vast majority of stories reviewed for this analysis were, in fact, framed systemically. This was the case across all subject categories, as shown in Table 5 below. This is an important shift in the way that low wage work is covered and a major victory for advocates who have spent the past several years working with journalists and organization spokespeople to convey messages systemically.

**Table 5**

Framing of articles by subject area -- 2006				
All topics	Total*	Was this a systemic or personal frame?		
		Systemic	Personal	Unclear
# articles	1,143	924	197	22
% of total	(100%)	(81%)	(17%)	(2%)
<b>Health insurance</b>	185	169	13	3
	16%	91%	7%	2%
<b>Housing</b>	174	151	23	0
	15%	87%	13%	0%
<b>Earned Income Tax Credit</b>	167	136	24	7
	15%	81%	14%	5%
<b>Living or minimum wage</b>	164	136	26	2
	14%	83%	16%	1%
<b>Health care (not insurance)</b>	158	144	14	0
	14%	91%	9%	0%
<b>Family leave</b>	92	51	32	9
	8%	55%	35%	10%
<b>Wal-Mart</b>	79	66	13	0
	7%	84%	16%	0%
<b>Other (taxes, immigration)</b>	78	30	48	0
	7%	39%	61%	0%
<b>Job training</b>	22	18	4	0
	2%	81%	19%	0%
<b>Child or day care; pre-K</b>	24	19	3	1
	2%	81%	13%	5%

## Analysis by subject area

### Health Insurance and Health Care

Of all the articles about low wage work that we reviewed, health insurance was the topic most often written about, comprising 16% (185) of all stories. Health care was not far behind, with 158 stories, or 14% of the total. Taken together, health insurance and health care comprised nearly one-third (30%)

of the total. It is useful to consider these two topics together because they are closely related and both often appeared in a single story.

Nearly all of the articles on health insurance discussed the problems that low wage workers have in gaining access to insurance, and some also mentioned the difficulty that small employers have in finding good programs to offer their employees. We saw this across the full range of media outlets we reviewed.

The health insurance topic had the smallest percentage of articles that were framed from a personal perspective, 7%. The overwhelming majority (91%) were judged to be systemic, demonstrating that the problems low wage workers experience in relation to health insurance are clearly understood as problems with the system, rather than individual failings. *This is a major difference from 2001, when our analysis of health insurance stories revealed that most focused on personal crises of individuals and families rather than on the health insurance system itself.*

Health insurance studies, such as one produced by the Kaiser Family Foundation last year, helped cast the issue as systemic and placed it in the national spotlight. Several articles opened with a discussion of the study, for example:

“As health insurance costs continue to spiral upward, fewer companies are offering health benefits to their employees, according to a national survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation. About 60 percent of companies nationwide offer health benefits to employees, compared to 69 percent in 2000, the survey found. Most of the companies that eliminated health benefits have fewer than 200 employees.” (Jeffrey Krasner, *Fewer companies offering health benefits as costs rise*. Boston Globe, 9-15-05)

Taken together, the health insurance and health care stories comprised by far the largest percentage and number of opinion articles, nearly 28% (95). This indicates that health-related issues are a good starting point for opening broader policy debates about low wage work and its place in the economy.

### **Affordable Housing**

There were 174 articles that dealt with the issue of affordable housing, 15% of all those we reviewed for this analysis. This makes it the second most frequent topic that is written about in relation to low wage workers and the working poor. Forty articles (23%) focused on housing problems related to Hurricane Katrina. Another 38 (22%) referenced hurricanes and ran in just

two Florida newspapers, the Orlando Sentinel and the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel.

Clearly, the bad weather helped put affordable housing for low wage workers on the radar screens of reporters. Also instrumental was a Congressional agreement to “spend \$514 million to help Floridians find homes they can afford, including programs that would benefit low-income workers, attract badly-needed employees and assist hurricane-affected homeowners.”

Eighty-seven percent (151) of the stories in this category were framed from a systemic point of view, with only 13% (23) framed as personal. As many advocates are well aware, the release of reports and studies often encourages the systemic framing of policy issues. This fact was confirmed by several stories that highlighted a report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition called *Out of Reach*, which determined that “there is no place in the country where a full-time worker earning minimum wage can afford to rent even a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent.”

### **Earned Income Tax Credit**

Featured in 167 articles (15% of the total), the Earned Income Tax Credit was the third most frequent topic among the total universe of stories we reviewed, a gigantic increase from the amount of coverage it received in 2001. Primarily approached from a systemic news frame (81% of the stories in this category), a majority of the articles were specifically designed to inform low wage workers about the credit.

Many stories in this category (24%) had public service themes. These articles instructed low wage workers on how to apply for the credit and where to go for help in doing so. Some included tables to help workers calculate how much their credit might be in dollars.

Other stories in this group covered broader tax policy in addition to the EITC. These articles were often news stories about legislative sessions or op/ed and editorial commentary that assessed the pros and cons of various tax policies.

EITC articles appeared in news outlets throughout the United States, often but not exclusively in print media. A prime example of one of these “public service” articles comes from the nationally distributed Associated Press Online.

“For the second year in a row, the IRS has launched a campaign to help taxpayers figure out whether they're eligible for the EITC. The ‘EITC Assistant,’ available at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov), asks a series of questions to determine whether you're eligible for the credit. The IRS has also set up a link to help hurricane victims

figure out whether they're eligible for the earned income tax credit." (Sandra Block, *IRS steps in to help eligible filers get earned income tax credit*. Associated Press, 2-7-06)

Clearly, the EITC is on the radar screens of reporters around the country in a way that it was not previously. It is not a great risk to speculate that this is due in large part to the efforts of advocates who have been conducting initiatives focused on self-sufficiency and prosperity over the past several years.

### **Living Wage or Minimum Wage**

Stories in which the minimum wage or a living wage was featured numbered 164 or 14% of the total. The interesting thing about this group of articles is that they appeared to be concentrated more in media that cover certain areas of the country.

One hundred stories in this category (61%) appeared in newspapers in California, Florida and New York. This is not terribly surprising given that these three states have large populations and robust media. In addition, during the time of our search, living wage ordinances were passed in Ventura and Santa Barbara, California; Miami, Florida; and Albany and Nassau County, New York.

Also significantly represented in this category were media in other areas that were debating living wage laws at the time. These included Massachusetts, New Mexico and Washington, DC. The regional nature of the coverage of minimum wage and living wage stories is consistent with the view of many policy analysts that wage-related legislation is more likely to be passed at the state and local levels rather than at the federal level.

Eighty-three percent of the articles in this category were framed systemically and 15% were personal. This group also included a substantial number of opinion articles, 52 or 32% of all articles in the category. As with the Health Insurance group, a high number of opinion pieces indicates that there is a lively public debate around minimum wage issues. Here's a good example in an editorial from the Los Angeles Times:

EDITORIALS: April 22, 2006 Saturday

RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE by a dollar is lot like embarking on a cross-country road trip with the tank half full, stopping at a gas station and adding just a quarter-tank more. Yes, the new fuel will allow you to travel a little

farther down the road. But it won't be enough to get you to your destination.

So it is for the 1.4 million Californians -- 460,000 in Los Angeles County -- who make the state's \$6.75-an-hour minimum wage or close to it. Raising the wage to \$7.75, as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislators in Sacramento are proposing, won't even pull those who earn it into the middle class. That would require an increase to well above \$10 an hour, and neither the governor nor Democrats in the Legislature are prepared to go that far.

But unlike the minimum wage itself, the debate over it has hardly changed in decades. Advocates argue that it allows the working poor to eke out a living. Opponents say that it pushes up costs for business and forces job cuts.

This year's debate is mostly familiar, but there are a few surprises. First, almost everyone agrees that an increase is long overdue. The last hike went into effect on Jan. 1, 2002, and the governor vetoed increases in 2004 and 2005. But between 2000 and 2005, the price of a gallon of gas went up nearly 50%; the price of a gallon of milk, almost 25%. (And low wage workers can forget about buying a home.) In a November 2005 poll of 800 California voters, 73% supported the higher wage.

Maybe that helps to explain another oddity this year: The increase has some unexpected supporters -- such as the governor and the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce. Some studies suggest that small increases don't have catastrophic consequences on business activity.

So much for what's new. The rest is politics. The two bills that recently passed out of committee in the Assembly and the state Senate include provisions for automatic cost-of-living increases, which are very unpopular with business and the governor. (Businesses say such increases add an unacceptable level of unpredictability to their labor costs.) Perhaps election-year pressure will force a compromise by the end of the summer, when a final version of a bill is likely to land on the governor's desk.

In some ways, the debate over the minimum wage is much ado about nothing -- the very existence of Los Angeles' burgeoning "underground economy," which employs about 300,000 people, all but ensures that businesses will continue to be able to hire people at low wages, albeit illegally. Until employers and policymakers get to the bottom of the forces that allow this to happen -- and yes, that includes the U.S.' misguided immigration policy -- meaningful relief for low wage workers will remain elusive.

## Family Leave

The 92 articles in this category included stories about paid sick leave (15) and leave without pay, such as that covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act (77). What is particularly notable about these articles is that an unusually high number were framed from a personal perspective. In fact, 35% of all stories in this group began with a description of the difficulties of an individual. This is the highest of all the policy-related categories we analyzed. (The "Other" category had a higher number of personally framed articles, but contained many stories that were not related to a specific policy initiative.)

An example of the individual profile approach appeared in a Houston Chronicle article headlined *Compared to rest of world, U.S. mothers get short shrift; Most countries give workers paid maternity leave*. The opening lead read:

"In Santa Fe, N.M., Linda Strauss McIlroy, a first-time mother, is trying to get used to the thought of soon putting her 2-month-old boy in day care so she can get back to work. 'It's hard for me to imagine leaving him,' she says. 'Just not being with him all day, leaving him with a virtual stranger. And then that's it until, you know, I retire. It's kind of crazy to think about it.'" (Peter Svensson, Houston Chronicle, 8-1-05)

Although this article goes on to explain that adequate, paid maternity leave is a national issue, its opening cues readers to understand the issue in terms of the circumstances of one individual, rather than as question of workforce policy.

Compare that approach with this story about child care from the Minneapolis Star Tribune, which was framed from a systemic perspective. The headline read: *State's child-care ranking declines: Budget cuts have left Minnesota in the middle of the pack among states that help low-income workers with child-care costs, as new study says*.

The story opened as follows:

"Minnesota, long a national leader in child care, has been steadily losing ground because of cutbacks in state subsidies for low-income parents, according to a report released Tuesday."

"Minnesota was always a place we looked to as a beacon,' said Helen Blank, public policy director of the National Women's Law Center in Washington, D.C., which conducted the study. 'You've lost your standing.'" (Star Tribune, September 21, 2005)

The fact that there were only 15 stories that specifically focused on paid leave was somewhat surprising, although paid leave was mentioned in some of the broader articles about family leave in general. Several of these 15 specifically discussed the “Take Back Your Time” initiative.

Also worth noting is that many of the articles included in the Family Leave category also touched upon other topics relevant to this analysis, particularly child or day care, as illustrated by the excerpt from the Star Tribune above. This may account for the significant paucity of articles that we judged to be primarily about child care, as many stories that included a discussion of child care may have contained proportionally more information on family leave and thus ended up in this category.

Given this undifferentiated coverage of paid and unpaid leave, and the fact that a majority of family leave stories are framed from a personal perspective that tends not to advance policy change, it appears that efforts should be strengthened to clarify paid leave issues with journalists.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that this and the other topic categories discussed in this analysis are sub-sets of articles drawn from an original pool of articles on low wage work, low wage workers or the working poor. What we are discussing here is not stories about family leave, but stories about family leave *as it relates to low wage work, low wage workers or the working poor*. Had we searched for all stories about family leave that appeared during our search period, the pool might have been larger.

## **Other**

Articles in the Other category covered a variety of topics or discussed low wage work in general terms. Of those that focused on a particular subject, frequent topics were immigration, Food Stamps and hunger, budgets and tax issues (excluding the EITC). There were also a few stories on the union dispute between the SEIU and the AFL-CIO.

Many of the immigration stories discussed low wage jobs as the economic niche filled by new arrivals to the US. The tax stories discussed topics such as the child care tax credit and free income tax preparation for low-income families. Stories on hunger often featured local food pantries and soup kitchens and tended to be framed from a personal perspective.

In fact, most of the articles in this group featured a personal frame (61%). Many of the articles that were judged “personal” opened with stories about



difficulties that individual immigrants experience when they come to the United States, as did this article from USA Today:

Headline: *Alternative credit scores could open door for loans; People with thin credit histories stuck in financial Catch-22 may get options*

Lead: Priscilla Saavedra waited four long years for her husband, Vicente, to earn U.S. resident status. After he finally emigrated from Mexico last year, the couple faced a new challenge: his lack of credit history. (USA Today, May 17, 2006)

## **Job Training**

This was the smallest of all the categories we reviewed. Of the 22 articles we found, a full 81% were framed systemically, although they did not show any clear trends in terms of story angles or themes about job training. A typical example of a systemic frame on job training comes from this article in the San Jose Mercury News:

Headline: *Moving toward an idea economy, Silicon Valley stops the loss of jobs.*

Lead: While Silicon Valley is producing more high-end jobs, the region is not doing enough to prepare residents to seize those opportunities, according to an annual report from a local business organization. (Chris O'Brien, San Jose Mercury News, January 15, 2006)

As was the case with child care stories, there were many more articles that mentioned job training but were not judged to be primarily on that topic. These findings are consistent with the results of the 2001 analysis. In that year, a search over a period of six months produced 11 relevant stories on job training. In 2006, a similar search over a period of a full year produced 22 relevant stories, which is to be expected since the search period for the second analysis was double that for the first analysis.

In seeking a reason for the very small number of stories on this topic, we searched the phrase "job training and community college," in the same publications during the same time frame as the other categories in this analysis. (Note that we did not first narrow the field by searching "low wage work" or "low wage workers" or "working poor" and then searching for "job training and community college" within those initial results.) This alternate, much broader method of searching yielded over 300 articles.

We do not know how many of the 300 stories were relevant to low wage work and we did not pursue this question because it is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, it seems worth reporting here because it may be that the media is currently framing job training in terms of community colleges and the linkages with low wage work are secondary. Further investigation of this idea appears indicated.

### **Child care or day care**

As noted above, there were very few articles about child or day care, just 24 in total, although this topic was sometimes mentioned in stories that were categorized in other areas. As an overall percentage of total stories reviewed, child care dropped by half – from 4% of the sample in 2001 to just 2% of the sample in 2006, but both years showed a relatively small number of articles that were primarily about child care. We believe the small numbers are partly attributable to the fact that child care is most often presented in the context of broader issues about low wage work.

The good news is that the vast majority of child care stories (81%) were framed from a systemic point of view. This is a definite improvement from 2001, when most child care articles were framed in terms of affordability for one or a few individual families. Contrast these two leads from child care stories published in 2001 and 2006:

2001:

*"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."* (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 29, 2001)

2006:

*"Gov. Tim Pawlenty had the right word last week for the 2005 Legislature's decision to stop measuring how ready 5-year-olds are for kindergarten's lessons: "Mistake." Pawlenty is asking the 2006 Legislature to undo that blunder. That's one of the small but smart initiatives the governor launched last week to improve learning for Minnesota preschoolers."* (Minneapolis Star Tribune, March 14, 2006)

Notice also the improved language of the 2006 story, which uses terms such as "lessons" and "learning for...preschoolers," rather than "day care." It would be overly optimistic to say that the terminology about child care has undergone an overall shift, but there is definitely improvement along these lines.

## Sources Quoted

**Table 6**

Spokesperson	No. in 2006	% in 2006	No. in 2001	% in 2001
Gov. official	244	20%	188	30%
Individual	198	16%	118*	19%
Editorials*	195	16%	na	na
NP advocate	182	15%	136	22%
None	154	13%	na	na
Academic	92	8%	50	8%
Business people	91	8%	38	6%
Other	48	4%	61	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,204*</b>			

\*It's important to note three things about the data in Table 6: First, the total number of people quoted in the 2006 analysis exceeds the total number of stories analyzed because some stories quoted more than one person.

Second, the term "editorials" refers to opinion pieces written by the editorial boards of the newspapers we surveyed. While no one was quoted in these articles, we felt it was important to distinguish editorial commentary from routine news stories that did not happen to include quotations. The latter are accounted for in the category labeled "None."

Finally, for the rows labeled "Individual," the 118 people quoted in stories in 2001 were all low wage workers. Of the 198 individuals who were quoted in 2006, some but not all were low wage workers. In 2006, the "Individual" category also included "people on the street," neighbors and friends of those interviewed, etc. These variations, as well as certain categories of data that are not available (na) are due to changes in methodology between 2001 and 2006.

### Government officials

Across all categories, the most frequently quoted sources were government officials, who were cited in 20% (244) of all the stories we reviewed. Elected representatives were included in this group, as were government officials who were appointed or who were employed by various public agencies. This was also the most quoted group in 2001, when public officials comprised 30% of those quoted.

Government officials were heavily represented in articles about transportation (41% of the total articles in that category) and about health insurance (25% of

the category). They often gave good quotes that emphasized systems, as illustrated by this excerpt from an opinion piece authored by Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) for The Hill:

"We need to solve the healthcare problems facing our country. Our current system is unsustainable, and I believe that this innovative and collaborative approach could appeal to state and federal governments. Above all, we need to jump-start this debate and change a failed healthcare system that is letting down so many Americans." (The Hill, May 10, 2006)

Another good example is this candid remark that appeared in Newsday from New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg on the Transit Workers Union strike:

"You've got people making \$50,000 and \$60,000 a year keeping the people who are making \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year from being able to earn a living. That's just not acceptable." (Newsday, December 22, 2005)

### **Individuals**

This group was comprised mostly of low wage workers, "person on the street" types and people who were profiled in stories that were framed from a personal perspective. Many of those profiled appeared to be clients of nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy work. Individuals were the second most quoted group in 2006, showing up in 16% of all the articles reviewed. They appeared in 19% of stories on affordable housing and 11% of stories on health insurance.

Quotes from individuals tended to be fragmented and often did not stand on their own outside of the context of the story. Take for example, this excerpt from a piece in the Orlando Sentinel:

"For the second year, the Campaign for Working Families, a coalition of nonprofits, commercial banks and the Internal Revenue Service, is offering free tax-preparation services for those with little money, so they can receive handsome tax refunds.

"It's beneficial," said Lake Helen resident Brenda Dold, who had her taxes done at the Dickerson Center, one of five free tax-prep sites in Volusia and Flagler counties. "I don't have the knowledge to do it myself." (Orlando Sentinel, January 26, 2006)

### **Nonprofit advocates**

Employees and volunteers of nonprofit organizations and foundations placed third in terms of those most often quoted. They appeared in 15% of the total number of stories we reviewed. They were amply represented in articles on the minimum or living wage (22% of all articles in the category), but less visible in some of the other key categories. This is a major disappointment.

One good quote on health insurance came from the head of the Kaiser Family Foundation:

"It is low wage workers who are being hurt the most by the steady drip, drip, drip of coverage draining out of the employer-based health insurance system," said Drew E. Altman, president of the foundation, a nonprofit that provides information and analysis of healthcare issues but does not take sides in policy debates. "Every year, health insurance becomes less affordable to working people." (Jeffrey Krasner, Fewer companies offering health benefits as costs rise *Boston Globe*, 9-15-05)

### **Business people and academics**

These two groups virtually tied in terms of how frequently they were quoted in the stories we reviewed. Each group appeared in 8% of the stories in our sample.

Quotes from people who represented business were evenly distributed among all categories of stories. An example:

"What they did with the stroke of a pen cost my little business \$17,000 a year in increased payroll," said Joe Peceny of Anglers White River Resort near Mountain View. "Where am I going to cough up \$17,000 to pay these people?"

"Peceny said he employs a lot of high school students to wash dishes and clean tables. He said he'll have to hire four or five fewer people next year because of the higher minimum wage." (Associated Press State and Local Wire – May 7, 2006)

Academics were well represented in family and medical leave articles (18%) and made a good showing in articles about transportation issues (9%). Many of the academics were economists and were often able to highlight the larger, systemic issues that underlie a problem. Take, for instance, this quote from a story in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*:

"The high unemployment that you see among African-Americans has a lot to do with the dysfunction in the low wage labor market," said William Spriggs, an economist at Howard University in Washington, D.C. "These are

jobs that require no skills. How come there's no diversity at a restaurant or a construction site? There is a hidden code that black people are lazy. Our low wage labor market is broken, and it hurts African-Americans." (Journal Sentinel, May 28, 2006)

## **Wal-Mart**

Given the surge of interest in the employment practices of Wal-Mart and the related campaigns being conducted by nonprofit advocacy groups, we felt it was important to assess the media coverage of Wal-Mart separately, rather than group Wal-Mart stories within the issue categories used for the other articles in this analysis.

Of the 1,143 relevant stories we reviewed for the analysis, nearly 7% (79) had Wal-Mart as their main topic. These articles predominantly focused on two subjects, health insurance and minimum or living wages. The New York Times ran the highest number of relevant articles on Wal-Mart (6), followed closely by the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times with 5 articles each. The Minneapolis Star Tribune and National Public Radio each ran 4 relevant articles.

As might be expected, the Wall Street Journal published quite a few stories that discussed Wal-Mart (33), but these were not judged relevant to this analysis because they almost always focused on Wal-Mart's stock price or on the range of products that could be purchased at Wal-Mart. For instance, there were at least 13 stories, often in the Weekend Journal section, that directed readers to Wal-Mart to purchase products for the home or the lawn and garden; another 13 focused on Wal-Mart's stock price.

Of all the Wal-Mart stories we reviewed, 67% dealt with the issue of employee health insurance and 45% talked about wages. The numbers add to more than 100% because some articles discussed both topics.

Sixty-six stories were systemic (84%) and 13 were personal (16%). Forty-six were news articles (58%), 27 were editorial or op/ed pieces (34%) and 6 were feature stories (8%).

A New York Times business story provides a good example of coverage with a strong systemic frame. This positions Wal-Mart as a bellwether of changes in the economy:

"Whose responsibility is this?' said Carolyn Watts, a health professor at the University of Washington. 'Is it the government's responsibility or the employer's?'

"As health care costs continue to soar well above the general rate of inflation, Professor Watts says the United States can no longer rely on employers to provide widespread coverage and needs to grapple with that new reality. 'It's a very different social contract than we have had,' she said.

"The controversy over Wal-Mart's benefits may mask what some experts see as an unraveling of the employer-based system of health coverage. 'These are indications of the gaps in the health care system that are exposed by Wal-Mart,' said Len Nichols, a health economist at the New America Foundation, an independent public policy group in Washington. 'You can't blame Wal-Mart.'" (Reed Abelson, *One giant's struggle is corporate America's too*. The New York Times, 10-29-05)

Interestingly, of the 27 opinion articles written on Wal-Mart, less than half (44%) were negative. Thirty-three percent were judged positive and 22% neutral. Quite a few editorials took a position similar to the New York Times excerpt above. A St. Louis Post Dispatch editorial, for example, called Wal-Mart "the 2-ton canary in the coal mine" (November 3, 2005).

The type of source quoted in the Wal-Mart stories differed slightly from the type quoted in most of the other analysis categories. Individuals, often Wal-Mart shoppers, were the most quoted group, as shown in Table 7. This category was followed very closely by government officials, the group most typically quoted in stories about low wage work, and by nonprofit advocates. Quite a few in the latter group were affiliated with the Wal-Mart Watch coalition.

**Table 7 – Sources quoted in Wal-Mart stories**

Spokesperson	Number	% of total
Individuals	15	19%
Gov. officials	13	17%
NP advocates	13	17%
Business people	7	9%
Academics	5	6%
Wal-Mart worker	5	6%
Wal-Mart exec.	3	4%
Union rep.	3	4%
Clergy	2	2%
Others	13	17%

## Conclusions

From the point of view of advocates who are working to enhance conditions for low wage workers, this analysis points to several positive trends in media coverage:

*Low wage work and issues related to it are receiving more attention in the nation's press than they did five years ago.* Of the 17 media outlets that we reviewed in both 2006 and 2001, there were approximately 20% more stories about low wage work topics in 2006 than there were in 2001. (This figure takes into account the different time periods used in the two analyses.)

*The use of the preferred terms, "low wage work" and "low wage worker" increased significantly between 2001 and 2006.* Seventeen percent of the stories in our 2001 sample used the terms "low wage work" or "low wage worker," while 57% of the stories in our 2006 sample used those terms.

*In 2006, far more stories were framed from a systemic perspective than was the case in 2001, when systemic frames were virtually nonexistent.* A full 81% of the stories in our 2006 sample were framed systemically, while only 17% were framed from a personal perspective. This is a major accomplishment for advocates.

*Campaigns by nonprofit advocacy groups to increase the coverage of the Earned Income Tax Credit are apparently succeeding.* The EITC was featured in only 2% of the stories we reviewed in 2001, but in 15% of the articles in 2006.

*Welfare, along with the topics and terms related to it, virtually disappeared as a subject of media coverage by 2006,* after comprising 12% of the sample in our 2001 analysis. This is highly advantageous, as welfare tends to call forth negative stereotypes about low wage work and workers.

*Family leave as a story topic increased from 1% of the sample in 2001 to 8% of the sample in 2006.* This category also included articles that discussed paid leave, since both paid and unpaid leave were often grouped together in a single story.

There were also a few disappointing findings of this analysis, again from the point of view of low wage workers and those who advocate on their behalf:



*Reporters are still using the label "working poor" to identify low wage workers.* Forty-three percent of the stories in the 2006 sample used this term.

*Only 15% of the articles in the 2006 analysis quoted nonprofit advocates.* This is a decrease from the 23% we found in 2001. One reason for this decrease may be that there is more competition from other sources. In addition, there may be a trend among reporters to quote so-called "real people" or "people on the street." This issue bears further investigation.

## **Methodology**

We searched for media coverage about "low wage work," "low wage workers" and "working poor" using the Nexis.com online data base. For articles appearing in the Wall Street Journal, we searched using the Dow Jones Factiva data base.

The sub-topics related to low wage work, such as health insurance and job training, were based on the issues outlined by the Ford Foundation Advisory Group on Low Wage Worker Communication Strategy. This group of experts was part of the original planning team for the project, *For an Economy That Works for All*.

The sub-topics used for this analysis were closely related, but not identical to, the sub-topics used in the 2001 analysis called *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (available at [www.economythatworks.org](http://www.economythatworks.org)). The sub-topics for 2006 were modified based on our observations of media coverage over the intervening years and the increasing prominence of issues such as paid sick leave, which were not in play five years ago.

We searched all 53 of the selected media outlets for "low wage work" and for "low wage workers." For the term "working poor," we searched only the 17 media outlets that were used in our 2001 analysis. This allowed us to compare changes in coverage between 2001 and 2006.

Here is a summary of the search terms used, the sources searched and the numbers of articles returned from each:

**Searched 53 outlets for the term “Low wage worker” OR Low-income worker.” (This produced 2,131 results.)**

This search included the following newspapers, magazines, television shows and radio broadcasts:

1. ABC News
2. Arizona Republic
3. Associated Press Online
4. Associated Press State & Local Wire
5. Atlanta Journal and Constitution
6. Baltimore Sun
7. Boston Globe
8. Business Week
9. CBS News
10. Chicago Sun-Times
11. Chicago Tribune
12. Christian Science Monitor
13. CNN
14. Daily News (New York)
15. Dallas Morning News
16. Denver Post
17. Detroit Free Press
18. Fox News Network
19. The Hill
20. Houston Chronicle
21. Indianapolis Star
22. Kansas City Star
23. Los Angeles Times
24. Miami Herald
25. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
26. National Public Radio
27. NBC News
28. New York Post
29. New York Times
30. Newsday (Long Island, NY)
31. Orange County Register
32. Oregonian
33. Orlando Sentinel
34. Philadelphia Inquirer
35. The Plain Dealer (Cleveland)
36. Rocky Mountain News
37. Roll Call

38. Sacramento Bee
39. San Jose Mercury News
40. San Francisco Chronicle
41. San Diego Union-Tribune
42. Seattle Post-Intelligencer
43. St. Louis Post-Dispatch
44. St. Petersburg Times
45. Star Tribune (Minneapolis MN)
46. Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale)
47. Time
48. Times-Picayune (New Orleans)
49. USA Today
50. US News & World Report
51. Wall Street Journal
52. Washington Post
53. Washington Times

**We searched 17 outlets for the term “working poor.”  
(This produced 758 results.)**

This search included only the media outlets that were used in our 2001 analysis, which gave us a basis to compare coverage with 2006:

1. ABC News
2. Associated Press Online
3. Atlanta Journal and Constitution
4. Boston Globe
5. Chicago Tribune
6. CNN
7. Dallas Morning News
8. Fox News Network
9. Los Angeles Times
10. National Public Radio
11. NBC News
12. New York Times
13. Philadelphia Inquirer
14. San Francisco Chronicle
15. USA Today
16. Wall Street Journal
17. Washington Post

All terms were searched over a period of 12 months, between the dates 6/1/05 – 5/31/06. A total of 2,889 articles were returned from our searches.

Every article was read for relevance, ultimately leaving 1,143 that were appropriate for analysis. This is approximately 39% of all articles returned. The 39% figure is consistent with our previous experience conducting media analyses and is in synch with the 2001 analysis, where 36% of all articles returned from our searches proved relevant.

If an article was determined to be relevant an evaluator filled out a survey to log the article and its contents. Evaluators answered the following questions:

- What is the date of the article?
- What is the headline?
- Who is the author?
- Which outlet produced this article?
- What type of article is it?
- Which search term yielded this result?
- What is the subject of the article?
- Was there a systemic or personal frame? (A personal frame uses a specific case, usually one person or a group's story to exemplify a larger problem or a trend. A systemic frame focuses on a problem or trend within a system.)
- Was the article's treatment of its subject positive or negative?
- Who was the primarily person quoted (usually the first quote) in the article?
- What was the quote?

Once all articles had been assessed and catalogued we were able to analyze the results and search for trends.