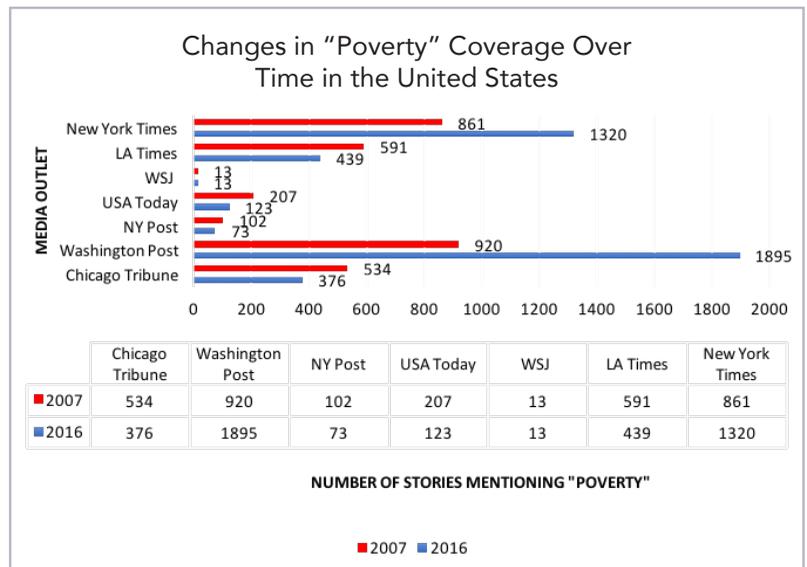


The Uneven State of Poverty Coverage Over the Past Decade

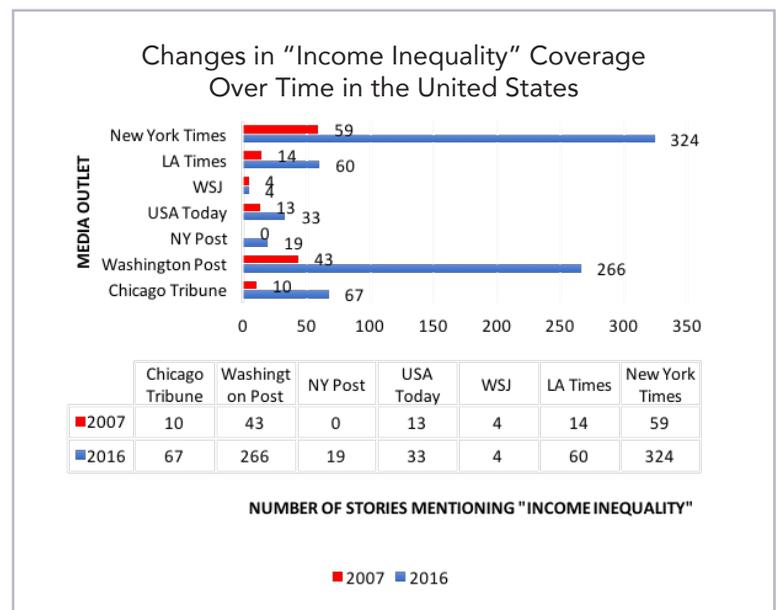
Nearly 41 million Americans were impoverished in 2016,ⁱ and the United States continues to have one of the highest poverty rates of any OECD nation.ⁱⁱ The impacts of the Great Recession are still being felt across the country, and the 2016 presidential election brought a new focus on the rural poor and the so-called “white working class.” Despite the issue’s importance, new research from *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity* shows that the nation’s most prominent newsrooms have not given significantly more attention to poverty since 2007. While poverty coverage has increased for some news outlets over the past ten years, coverage has decreased or remained stagnant for others.

National Media

As we mark our 10th Anniversary, *Spotlight* examined the evolution of domestic poverty coverage over the past decade. We conducted a media scan using the news content database Nexis®, measuring the frequency of the terms “Poverty,” “Low-Income,” and “Income Inequality” in 2007 and 2016 across seven of the largest national media outlets by circulationⁱⁱⁱ: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Post*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. We documented how the coverage of these terms shifted over time.



Overall, the only term that saw an increase in coverage across the board – with the exception of *The Wall Street Journal* – was “Income Inequality,” which saw a surge in usage in 2016, with the most significant increases occurring in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. This finding falls in line with broader trends in the overall awareness and usage of “Income Inequality” across media and academia.^{iv} Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* saw an increase in usage of the other two terms as well; the *Post* continues to employ a dedicated poverty reporter, and the *Times* often runs poverty-related editorials. It should be noted that these numbers still represent a tiny fraction of overall coverage – for instance, *The New York Times* ran a total of 148,206 articles in 2007 and 138,991 articles in 2016 – showing that much work still needs to be done to make poverty a widely-covered issue.

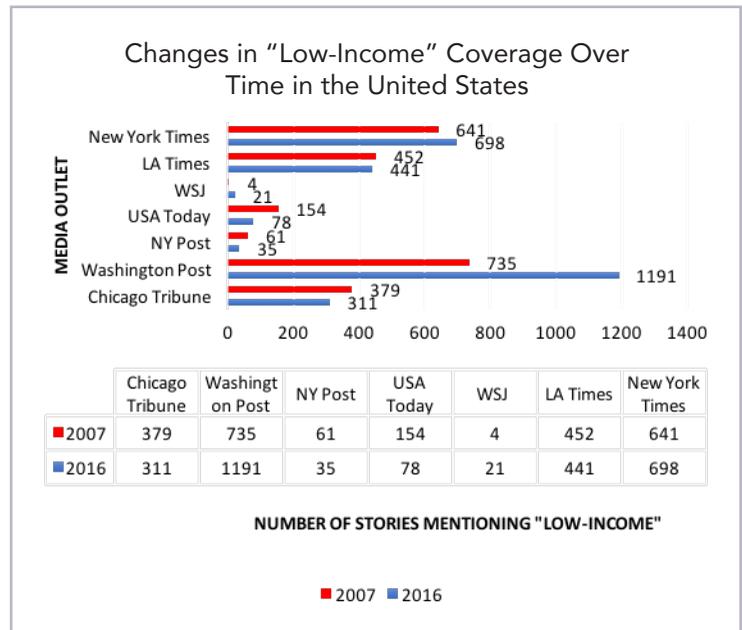


Despite some of these positive trends, however, most other outlets showed a decrease in usage of both “Poverty” and “Low-Income.” The *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, the *New York Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune* all produced fewer stories with references to both of those terms than they did a decade ago.

Local Media

The problem of poverty coverage is particularly acute for local journalism. Where state and local newsrooms once had large shops and significant investigative teams, local media outlets are shrinking in size^v and are ultimately losing out to bigger competitors, who are buying out small and large papers alike^{vi}. With an increase in concentrated ownership and for-profit media outlets and enterprises, local reporting staffs are being cut in half or further^{vii} – threatening high-quality, in-depth coverage of local poverty issues.

We examined the newsrooms at the largest news organizations in each of the ten states with the highest poverty rates in the country (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and West Virginia). Remarkably, none of these outlets have dedicated poverty reporters on-staff.



Despite this decline, there are signs of hope in the form of nonprofit journalism – like *Mississippi Today*, *Report for America*, and *Kaiser Health News* – as well as investigative reporting networks being launched, including one by ProPublica.

Conclusion

Now more than ever, as the nation’s leading platform for bipartisan opinion, news, and research on poverty and economic opportunity, *Spotlight’s* charge rings true – to bring awareness to and to advance the dialogue around poverty in the United States. Our data clearly show that despite the economic upheaval of the past decade, American newsrooms have not turned their attention to poverty, findings consistent with other reports^{viii}. This must change. With the recent launch of our original journalism initiative, *Spotlight* hopes to be part of the solution.

ⁱ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/06/americans-deepest-in-poverty-lost-more-ground-in-2016/>

ⁱⁱ <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cision.com/us/2014/06/top-10-us-daily-newspapers/>

^{iv} [http://bruegel.org/2016/10/income-inequality-through-decades-and-books/?utm_content=buffer3b353&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer+\(bruegel\)](http://bruegel.org/2016/10/income-inequality-through-decades-and-books/?utm_content=buffer3b353&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer+(bruegel))

^v <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/employment-trends-in-newspaper-publishing-and-other-media-1990-2016.htm>

^{vi} <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/employment-trends-in-newspaper-publishing-and-other-media-1990-2016.htm>

^{vii} <http://newspaperownership.com/additional-material/investment-newspaper-owners-timeline/>

^{viii} <http://fair.org/extra/media-not-concerned-about-the-very-poor/>