A Comparative Case Study of Welfare-to-Work Service Delivery in North Carolina and Ohio

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Abstract

This study investigates the development of inequality by race and place through an examination of local welfare-to-work service delivery. We build on existing research on United States welfare-to-work programs in several ways. First, we focus on both rural and urban economic and social issues addressing a gap in the literature in which rural poverty remains understudied. Second, we incorporate the impact of race demographics in a nuanced way in reference to service delivery and place. Third, most of the sociological literature on welfare in the United States focuses on welfare participants coping with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) while less research examines the challenges agencies and organizations face in implementing policies. This study is a state-to-state comparison of welfare-to-work programs, using a telephone survey of Work First Managers in North Carolina (N=100) and Ohio (N=69) counties. We combine telephone survey data with existing secondary data to examine service delivery at the county and state level using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Research Question

How do racial demographics and place interact to affect welfare-to-work social services?

Hypotheses

- H1. Managers will adopt more punitive and restricted service delivery versus more open, supportive delivery in rural places.
- H2. Service delivery will be less effective in more rural places.
- H3. Managers will adopt more punitive and restricted service delivery versus more open, supportive delivery in places with larger proportions of racial minorities in the county.
- H4. Service delivery will be less effective in places with larger proportions of racial minorities in the county.
- H5. Managers will adopt more punitive and restricted service delivery versus more open and supportive delivery in rural counties with smaller proportions of racial minorities.
- H6. Service delivery will be less effective in rural places with larger proportions of racial minorities in the county compared to service delivery in rural counties with smaller proportions of racial minorities.

TANF and Welfare-to-Work

The implementation of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) has resulted in the devolution of welfare-to-work program services from federal, to state, and then to county operations. States vary considerably in their programs, including the amount of time clients can receive cash assistance, the punitiveisness of their sanctions, and the accepted work activities. Additionally, with second-order devolution (Fording et al. 2007), counties vary greatly in the number of services offered to clients, in the forms of inter-organizational collaboration, in the flexibility offered to clients, and in the level of oversight of clients or, for that matter, caseworkers.

Previous Research

The increased reliance of localities on private investment tends to worsen spatial inequality—inequities that are based in where one resides or in the space one uses publicly (Warner 2003; Flora and Flora 2008). Although there is no sharp divide between urban and rural peoples that applies across the board (Flora and Flora 2008), there are a host of circumstances attending to urban and rural localities that can disadvantage particular people in particular places.

Race has continually played a large part in the construction, reform, and implementation of welfare policies. TANF reform of 1996 was motivated by the perception that welfare had become a “Black program” (Seccombe 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram 2006; Monnat and Bunyan 2008). Furthermore, researchers find that in many instances Black clients are more likely to be sanctioned than white participants; however this effect appears to be weakened when Blacks make up a larger concentration of the county population (Schram et al. 2006; Monnat and Bunyan 2008; Monnat 2010). While some quantitative evidence exists for how race affects certain program actions, such as sanctions, less is known about how race affects other aspects of implementation, including how county managers define and measure effectiveness or in even terms of race affecting the number of services or types of referrals offered.

Our previous research (Seale 2013; Seale et al. 2012; Taylor et al. 2011; Taylor and Seale 2012) finds a more race-neutral, classist approach among those program managers who are critical of the poor. That said, Schram (2006) argues convincingly that welfare administration can seem race-neutral, while worsening pre-existing racial disparities. It is possible that program managers in our research have adopted colorblind rhetoric that is deemed more politically correct (Taylor et al. 2011; Seale et al. 2012). The specific implications of these supposedly race-neutral practices for racial minorities and rural residents, particularly when taken together, require clarification.

Works Cited


While the literature suggests several hypotheses to examine, there is a great deal we simply do not know about race, place, and service delivery. Qualitative analyses can be quite informative in examining understudied social phenomena.

Survey Questions

- NC: 100 of 100 counties
- OH: 69 of 88 counties
- While our primary data focuses on managers’ attitudes towards clients and program service delivery, supplementing the data with available secondary data allow us explore state and county contextual factors that might influence or pose particular challenges for service delivery. Secondary data also provides indicators of outcomes for impoverished families.

Data Collection

- North Carolina and Ohio are predominantly rural with high unemployment rates. Rural areas in NC have experienced deindustrialization, but urban areas in OH have also experienced heavy job losses, especially in manufacturing. Urban areas in NC, like Charlotte, are growing at an alarming rate.

- Rural and urban NC counties in the piedmont and coastal regions are experiencing growth. Also, the racial diversity in these two states varies significantly. Rural and urban NC counties in the piedmont and coastal regions are racially diverse, while only urban counties in OH are racially diverse. A comparison of NC and OH allows us to study ruralness, race and service delivery contextualized by other county-level factors.

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