
THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Emma M Carroll

Graduate Program in Sociology

The Ohio State University

2014

Master's Examination Committee:

Korie Edwards, Advisor

Kristi Williams

Steve Lopez
Abstract

Welfare programs are a highly contested social issue and in the current US political climate many people are concerned regarding abuse of the system. This study addresses some of the controversy surrounding welfare by exploring the perspectives of women who are utilizing social welfare programs. The research goals of this project are to understand why women may violate the rules established by welfare programs and to get an insider perspective on how to make the welfare system more effective. I interviewed 23 women about their experiences with the social welfare system in a large Midwestern city. These interviews focused on how women interacted with the welfare bureaucracy, why they received punitive sanctions, and how they felt the welfare system could be reformed. I found that although my respondents desired an individualized relationship with their caseworker and more discretionary sanctioning, theoretically this may only function to deepen racial inequality within the welfare system.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Korie Edwards for her indispensable help in completing this thesis. This project would not have been possible without her consistent insight and support. I would also like to thank Dr. Kristi Williams and Dr. Steve Lopez for serving on my committee and contributing valuable feedback.
Vita

2008..............................................................Grandview Heights High School

2012............................................................B.A. Sociology, Ithaca College

2012-2013 ....................................................University Fellowship, Sociology, The Ohio State University

2013 to present ............................................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Sociology
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................... iii

Vita .................................................................................................................................... iv

List of Tables ................................................................................................................... vi

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1

Review of the Current Literature .................................................................................... 3

Welfare Policy: Food Stamps, Medicaid, and TANF ...................................................... 3

Deviance and Punishment .............................................................................................. 7

Data and Methods .......................................................................................................... 14

Results ............................................................................................................................. 19

Reasons for Sanctions .................................................................................................... 20

Lack of Flexibility ........................................................................................................... 27

Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 31

References ....................................................................................................................... 37
List of Tables

Table 1. Number of Sanctions by Race ................................................................. 19

Table 2. Reasons for Sanction by Race ................................................................. 20
Introduction

Social welfare programs are highly contested terrain in the United States, despite overwhelming public confusion about what welfare entails (Kulinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider, and Rich 2000; Soss, Schram, Vartanian and O’Brien 2003). Welfare programs are designed to provide necessary services for survival, such as cash assistance, food stamps, and medical care, in the most efficient way possible (Myers, Glaser, and MacDonald 1998). One of the ways efficiency is allegedly achieved is through the use of sanctions, a temporary reduction or removal of benefits, to promote program compliance (Rainford 2004; Schram, Fording, Soss and Houser 2009). Sanctions are commonly used to enforce participation in mandatory work related activities such as scheduled job search time and community service (Reichman, Tietler, and Curtis 2005; Schram, Fording, Soss and Houser 2009). State welfare programs are designed with a required quota for work-related activities, and sanctions function to ensure that these quotas are met (Kalil, Seefeldt and Wang 2002; Schram, Fording, Soss and Houser 2009).

This study seeks to understand how the welfare sanctioning process is experienced by the women who are subjected to it. Do they feel that caseworkers are able to operate within this system in a way that accommodates their individual needs? What barriers to organizational compliance do they face? What reforms do they recommend to make the system function better in service of achieving financial independence? I find
that the most common barriers to compliance are related to unmet childcare needs, personal health issues, and errors on the part of the caseworkers. My results highlight the importance of considering the perspectives of people who utilize the welfare system when formulating policy. They have valuable information regarding how welfare policies directly impact the lives of those who are subject to them. Additionally, my results bring into question the practice of analytically/politically using a narrow focus on welfare reform without analyzing how larger systems of racial inequality influence the welfare system. The welfare system is not disconnected from larger patterns of inequality and discrimination, and future policy proposals should critically engage with this point.
Review of Current Literature

Welfare Policy: Food Stamps, Medicaid, and TANF

In the United States, food stamps are administered under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Yen 2010). This program provides in-kind benefits to low-income individuals and families with which to purchase food (2010). For 2014, as of May 9, SNAP has served 46,788,311 people nationally, including 22,769,001 families (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2014). The average benefits for an individual are $126.61, for a household the average is $260.17 (2014). Able bodied working adults can typically only get benefits for three out of 36 months if they do not work or participate in a workfare or job training program. Failure to comply with this mandate can result in case dismissal (2014).

Medicaid is another form of income-tested public assistance available in the US. Eligibility for this health insurance service is determined relative to the federal poverty level guidelines, although states have discretion in expanding eligibility (Medicaid.gov 2014). Mandatory benefits include but are not limited to inpatient and outpatient hospital services, physician services, home health services, and family planning services. States have the option to cover services such as prescription drugs, physical therapy, hospice care, and dental services (2014).
The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program is the current form of cash assistance welfare and was initiated by the US federal government in 1996. This is when welfare was restructured and the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) switched family welfare from Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a federal entitlement program, to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which provides cash benefits for a limited amount of time based on state discretion and requirements (Metsch and Pollack 2005). Colloquially, this process was referred to as “welfare reform.” In 2010, the year from which most recent official data is available, each month there averaged 1,847,155 families on the TANF caseload nationally with average monthly benefits of $392 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). The average size of a TANF family was 2.4, with one in two families only having one child. Racially, the composition of clients was 31.8% white, 31.9% black, and 30.0% Hispanic. Most adult TANF recipients were women; only 14.8% of adults on the rolls were men. Accordingly, 14% of families included married adults who were living together (2012).

As implied by the title of the program, TANF is intended for families, most often families that rely on a female household head (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). Policymakers instituted TANF on the assumption that traditional marriage is the foundation of social life and that in addition to providing financial assistance welfare must promote marriage and prevent childbearing outside of wedlock (Mink 2001; Roberts 2009). Many welfare provisions promote heterosexual marriage and de-legitimize childrearing by single mothers, although the manifest purpose is to
encourage paternal involvement. Some examples of this are strong paternity establishment requirements, mandatory cooperation in establishing and enforcing child support orders, and the requirement of shared parental custody with the father if he so desires (Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998; Mink 2001; Moller 2002). While these provisions are designed to encourage paternal financial responsibility and reduce taxpayer burden, they limit the ability of women on TANF to decide to abstain from contact with their children's biological fathers; even if they believe that it is in the best interest of their children.

In this literature review I am focusing heavily on TANF since cash assistance is publicly viewed as the epitome of social welfare. Additionally, there is much overlap between the utilization of TANF and other forms of assistance such as food stamps and Medicaid. These three services are often used concurrently, and many people who exit TANF rolls maintain reliance on SNAP and Medicaid (Reichman, Teitler, and Curtis 2005). Finally, although the primary focus of the PRWORA was to address the perceived permissiveness of AFDC by replacing it with TANF (Soss, Schram, Vartanian and O’Brien 2003), this replacement also impacted the way food stamps and Medicaid are administered. A benefit limit was placed on food stamps for able bodied adults, and states were given the power to sanction a TANF recipient’s food stamps if TANF policy was violated, further linking the two programs (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. 2001). The PRWORA had the opposite effect on Medicaid. Prior to welfare reform Medicaid and cash assistance were automatically linked. Currently, receipt of TANF does not guarantee access to Medicaid, adding another barrier to healthcare access (Kaushal and Kaestner
2005). The centrality of TANF policy to both food stamps and Medicaid warrants placing it at the center of policy analysis.

Welfare reform shifted the responsibility to implement and provide social services from the federal government to the states, giving states significant discretion in determining eligibility and duration for TANF and other welfare programs such as food stamps and Medicaid (Soss, Schram, Vartanian and O’Brien 2003). For example, states have the power to determine who qualifies for assistance and for how long (2003). This shift from federal to state oversight increases the chance for discriminatory local policies (Moller 2002). Specifically, in her examination of the generosity of states with welfare benefits over a thirty year period, Moller (2002) showed that in states with a larger proportion of black single mothers, benefits were smaller than in those with more white single mothers. This finding was supported by Soss, Schram, Vartanian, and O’Brien (2003) who found that the strictest welfare rules, such as more stringent sanction policies, were adopted in states where there were the most people of color on the rolls.

The PRWORA also instituted a federal limit on the number of years families can receive public assistance, although states have the power to set limits below the 5 year federal standard (Kalil, Seefeldt and Wang 2002; Soss, Schram, Vartanian and O’Brien 2003). Currently 80% of TANF recipients are restricted to a 5 year benefit limit for life regardless of state of residence. The remaining 20% can maintain extended eligibility due to physical disability or other conditions that inhibit workforce participation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). States also have the power to impose sanctions on benefits by reducing or eliminating benefits when rules are violated. These
rules include attending work assignments, turning in paperwork on time, and providing verification information such as birth certificates (Kalil, Seefeldt and Wang 2002). For example, if a welfare recipient misses their work appointment they may have their benefits reduced by 25% for one month or more. As a result, 4.5% of TANF recipients receive reduced benefits each month. (Metsch and Pollack 2005). These sanctions may have far-reaching impacts on the outcomes of welfare recipients. A study by Reichman, Teitler, and Curtis (2005) showed that 42% of people sanctioned experienced hardships such as hunger, homelessness, or having utilities shut off within two years of receiving a sanction, compared to only 7% of the control group who was on welfare but never sanctioned. Women on welfare are aware of this relationship. Receiving a sanction causes recipients to expect future hardship at twice the rate of women who have not been sanctioned (Kalil, Seefeldt and Wang 2002).

Few people exit the welfare rolls because of finding stable employment. More commonly families leave the TANF system because of sanctions or maximizing their lifetime limit for cash assistance receipt (Schmidt, Dohan, Wiley and Zabkiewicz 2002). Seven states have indicated that 20% of case closures can be accounted for by sanctions (Metsch and Pollack 2005). This suggests that TANF is not an effective vehicle for getting people out of poverty. This manifest goal of the program is not being achieved, requiring a deeper analysis of TANF's policies to understand more subtle consequences of the program’s rules and barriers to success.

**Deviance and Punishment**
The TANF program’s intensive reliance on punitive measures to ensure compliance with appointments, paperwork due dates, and work requirements contains embedded assumptions about participants’ deviance and need to be controlled. The use of sanctions implies that women on welfare are not intrinsically motivated to follow the rules. Rather, they are motivated to break them and require the threat of severe consequences to toe the line. Women who receive welfare benefits are perceived as being deviant in a variety of ways. Relying on government aid rather than conforming to the expectation that adults are supposed to actively participate in the labor force marks TANF recipients as deviant. This norm rests on the value of individualism and a belief that everyone has access to equal opportunities in the United States. The dominant ideology is that success is possible with enough hard work (Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998). The inverse implication of this assertion is that the poor are simply lazy or stupid, and not motivated to take advantage of the multitude of opportunities around them (1998). By this logic, those who receive welfare are simply not working hard enough, thus making receipt of TANF a deviant behavior. Empirical evidence supports this conclusion. Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler (2001) found that college students were most likely to attribute poverty to individual factors such as laziness and drug abuse, as opposed to structural explanations. On the contrary, although many poor families have at least one adult in the workforce this employment is often part-time or seasonal, suggesting labor market constraints and not individual failings (Blank 1998). As economic opportunities for unskilled workers are deteriorating, many employed adults cannot earn enough in the labor market to get out of poverty without additional assistance (1998).
Another way in which women who receive welfare are perceived to be deviating from dominant norms is that they violate the ideal of the white heterosexual nuclear family. It is a common misconception that those who receive welfare are primarily young, unmarried, black mothers. This is not the case. Whites utilize TANF services in virtually identical proportions to blacks and Hispanics (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). Additionally, women may opt for female independence due to a host of valid structural and individual factors. Feminine-typed jobs in the service sector are increasing as job opportunities for unskilled young men are decreasing, making some women feel they may be more successful without a marital partner. Also, many low-income women have experienced physical and sexual abuse at the hands of men and may be hesitant to form a heterosexual partnership for the safety of both themselves and their children (Blank 1998). When they opt to be single while raising children, it is commonly perceived the taxpayer is forced to pay the cost of this choice, not them or the fathers (Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998). Therefore, many women on TANF are doubly stigmatized because they are single parents, sometimes by choice, and because they receive welfare (Jarrett 1996).

Moreover, women who receive welfare are also judged for not conforming to proper and acceptable mothering practices. For this reason, it is important to illuminate the cultural context within which “good mothering” is understood. Baker and Carson (1999) stated that, “Notions about mothering in the United States are based on a white, middle-class, heterosexual standard that places the biological mother as the sole parent to deliver constant care and attention to her children” (348; Springer 2010). Such notions
create a hierarchy in which women who live up to the idealized version of intensive mothering, of constant vigilance and self-sacrifice, are exalted as good mothers, while those who deviate in some way are classified as bad mothers (Baker and Carson 1999; Zivi 2000). This “good mother” model is not achievable for women who are struggling to support a family on their own and cannot commit to mothering as a full time job.

Despite these common misperceptions of women who receive welfare assistance, there is ample evidence that poverty is too complicated a phenomenon to be explained by purely individualist factors. Poverty is the result of a complex interaction between individual and structural factors (Blalock, Tiller, and Monroe 2004). For example, there is a consistent correlation between the socioeconomic status of parents and their children. As Corcoran stated in her research on poverty and mobility, “parental economic resources consistently predict children's adult attainments” (1995:261), suggesting that getting out of poverty is not as easy as simply “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” as U.S. cultural ideologies of rugged individualism and meritocracy propose. Due to persistent racial discrimination, being born black significantly limits one's future economic prospects as well and accounts for a larger proportion of the black population being dependent on welfare when compared to the white population (Corcoran 1995; Blank 1998). The labor market is stratified by race and sex, which limits the job opportunities for poor women, particularly poor black women (Thompson 1992). Women are generally more likely than men to work in low-wage service sector jobs that do not provide financial security (Blalock, Tiller, and Monroe 2004). Additionally, emotional and time commitments to children can prevent women from taking advantage of economic
opportunities when they arise, but these realities are often ignored in popular discourses and within policy arenas (Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998).

Limited human capital is another important predictor of poverty (Blalock, Tiller, and Monroe 2004). Without access to financial resources it is difficult to obtain more education to build the skills that can lead to financially sustaining job opportunities. Moreover, women who receive welfare benefits tend to lack the kind of job-related skills needed to obtain the higher paying jobs that would facilitate their rise out of poverty (Corcoran et al. 2000), regardless of their individual abilities or work ethic.

Clearly, the factors that perpetuate poverty among certain segments of our population are complex. Still, a myth that the poor are largely responsible for their status and thus undeserving of assistance undergirds perceptions that the poor are somehow deviant. Despite studies documenting this complexity, many welfare policies contain formal and informal sanctions to punish poor mothers for their (supposed) deviant behaviors by deeming them ineligible for benefits. For example, in Murray's 2000 analysis of the latent consequences of policies requiring finger imaging before receiving welfare benefits, he concluded that this practice and others like it may function as a form of what he calls deniable degradation. Deniable degradation consists of practices that have a stated, supposedly instrumental purpose, such as saving taxpayers money, but that also serve the purpose of stripping people of their dignity. Degradation happens through the evocation of cultural symbols that are linked to disrespect. This includes finger-imaging, which involves taking a digital image of an individual's index fingerprint with the stated purpose of preventing welfare fraud by signing up for benefits under two or
more names. The degradation comes from the connection between fingerprinting and criminality. This can be construed as being necessary and practical, but the practice is degrading because fingerprinting is linked to criminality. Similarly, urinalysis can be perceived as degrading due to the violation of the cultural norm that urination is a private matter (Murray 2000). These practices may appeal to those who believe people are poor because they are lazy and incompetent and thus deserving of punishment, but they do nothing to address the structural issues that lead to this deviance.

Negative cultural perceptions of welfare recipients, like that they are unmotivated, lazy, fiscally incompetent, irresponsible, and immature, are important for understanding the complex system of rules and paternalistic oversight of the welfare system because these are in many ways predicated upon such judgments. The extensive regulations and required documentation instituted by PRWORA suggest that policymakers see welfare recipients as needing guidance in every area of their lives. This ideology has manifested itself in a rigid policy structure intended to micro-manage women during their time on the program. When their lives are different from these institutionalized assumptions regarding their total dependency, the system is not always equipped to handle welfare recipients’ more nuanced realities. Much of the noncompliance to program rules reported by women in this study was due to common concerns faced by people across classes, such as a lack of adequate childcare and failings in personal health. However, the system is structured so that normative personal issues are reframed as deviance and punished. This study looks at welfare recipient’s reactions to this punitive approach and their implications for policy reform.
Once women have been granted access to the welfare system there is a series of complex rules that must be followed to stay in compliance with the program. Failure to adhere to program policies, even if unintentional, is viewed negatively and is responded to punitively with sanctions (Lens 2008). This project explores how women who receive welfare benefits experience the compliance structure and its associated sanctions. It seeks to understand why they sometimes fail to comply with welfare policies, and how they perceive the sanctioning process. I find that the most common barriers to compliance are child responsibilities, personal health issues, and caseworker error. My respondents reported a belief that more flexibility on the part of the caseworkers would lead to more fair sanctioning decisions, and thus this research complicates policy discussions. Additionally, this research challenges commonly held stereotypes about welfare recipients. Many people and media outlets in the United States portray welfare dependent women as lazy, drug addicted, and abusive of the system (Jarrett 1996; Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998). This research gives women on welfare the opportunity to have their subjective experiences understood and represented in a manner that captures the complexity of their lives.
Data and Methods

I collected the data for this study between July and December 2013 in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus is the 15th largest city in the United States with an estimated population of 809,798. The racial composition of the city is 59.3% white, 27.7% black, and 5.6% Latino. No other racial group comprises more than 5% of the population (US Census Bureau). Out of 50 major metropolitan areas in the US Columbus has the 27th highest Isolation Index with a score of 44.1. In terms of racial segregation, this means that the average black person lives in a neighborhood that is 44.1% black, which is roughly equivalent to the national average of 45% (Logan and Stults 2011). Rates of poverty are higher in Columbus than the rest of the state at 22%, compared with a 15.4% statewide average (US Census Bureau), and there is considerable economic segregation. As of 2000, 43% of poor people lived in areas with high poverty concentrations. This statistic is exacerbated by race; 65% of poor black Columbus residents lived in high poverty tracts (Brinegar and Leonard 2008). Nationally, the state of Ohio has the third highest TANF caseload after California and New York, with 103,000 open cases in 2010 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2012). This information provides the context within which this research was conducted.

Through interviews with 23 women on welfare I was able to understand how they make sense of the social and economic contexts in which they were interacting with the
welfare bureaucracy and making decisions regarding their compliance. Collectively, their subjective accounts produced a narrative that speaks to the value and explanatory power of qualitative methods. This is manifested in participants’ understanding of welfare policies. My original focus was women in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, but it gradually became clear that the women themselves are confused about the boundaries between social service programs. Although my recruitment fliers specifically requested that potential participants be on TANF, I sometimes ended up talking to women whose benefits fell under the purview of food stamps or Medicaid instead, which they mistakenly attributed to TANF. Consequently, although many of the women in my sample were on TANF currently or had recent experience with that program, my sample is best described as consisting of female welfare recipients receiving services including TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid, all of which are distributed from the office of Jobs and Family Services.

Women on welfare are a notoriously hard to reach population due to their social and economic marginalization. Without the cooperation of the government welfare office they are difficult to locate en masse. Local non-profits are the next best access point, but obtaining consent to recruit through them is a challenge. Most of the non-profits I contacted were reluctant to allow researcher intrusion for fear that participation in this project could result in a breach of confidentiality, violating their clients’ best interests. This is a fair and respectable stance to take, and despite these obstacles I was able to obtain the cooperation necessary to acquire an adequate sample size for analysis. The three organizations I worked with believed that the potential benefits of research
outweighed the risk to their clients. Nonetheless, one of the limitations of this project is that by focusing on only three non-profit organizations, I can only consider a minority of women on welfare, and many welfare recipients did not have the potential to be included in this study.

I recruited participants from three separate non-profit organizations whose client base frequently utilizes government assistance concurrently with the organization’s services. I obtained access to these organizations through a personal contact. All three organizations are located in racially diverse neighborhoods which helped to organically ensure some stratification within my sample, although unfortunately I still oversampled from the black population. I also attempted to recruit at the government office where benefits are distributed, but after failed phone service navigation attempts and three fruitless personal visits to the office I concluded that the barriers to access were too great to overcome as a sole researcher.

All initial contact was made through either response to a flier or a snowball referral. My flier stated that I was looking to interview women about their experiences with the TANF program with a specific focus on the program rules. I advertised that the interview would take between one and two hours and included a $20 participation incentive. All calls were directed to my personal cell phone. In all three organizations the fliers were placed in a highly visible location along with other fliers so that they could be picked up discreetly as clients visited these agencies. In one organization, fliers were also included in three monthly mailings along with other agency-specific information. Because participants were reluctant to divulge the contact information of others interested
in participating in the study, all snowball referrals were given my information by a previous participant and made initial contact with me themselves.

Because the sample was self-selected and non-randomized there is the potential for selection bias among my participants. Women who conform most to the program rules were perhaps the most likely to respond to my flier as they had the least to hide and thus the risk of participation was lower. This means that the deviance reported by my respondents may be the most benign and thus my sample may fail to adequately capture the range of non-compliance engaged in by women on welfare.

Over the course of five months I talked to 23 women about their experiences with welfare programs and their rules. Their ages ranged from 21 to 67. There were 17 black women and six white women. These were the only two racial categories represented. All of the participants had children, but the number of children ranged from one to seven, and the children’s ages from three weeks to adult, although it is worth noting that eligibility for TANF requires having at least one child under the age of 18 (Moller 2002). Four women were married, seven were in relationships, and 12 were single. All of the women who reported a partner identified the partner as male. Nearly all of the interviews were completed at different public libraries all around the city where private rooms were obtained. One interview was done in my car outside of the participant’s home. These interviews took between 45 minutes and an hour and a half to complete. All participants were informed of their rights, gave informed verbal consent, and received $20 at the onset of the interview. These interviews were then transcribed by me or an undergraduate research assistant, after which the original recordings were deleted to protect participants’
confidentiality. I coded the transcripts for demographic information and thematic repetition. On my first review of the interviews I utilized the interview guide and coded for question-specific themes. On subsequent read-throughs I looked for ways in which themes spanned across the interviews. Since I was the sole coder I relied primarily on themes that could be easily verified, as opposed to abstractions which may be negotiable. What follows is an analysis of the most recurring and significant idea and issues presented by the women included in this study.
Results

My intent was to understand why women on welfare choose to violate the rules of their program at the risk of being sanctioned, but the answer was far more obvious than I could have imagined. For the women I interviewed, non-compliance was not a conscious decision made by weighing the values of following the rules against alternatives; it was a consequence of the constraints of bureaucracy. Over half of my sample, 14 out of 23, reported receiving a sanction at some point (see Table 1). The reasons for these sanctions fell into three broad categories: missing work assignments, failure to turn in paperwork on time, and error on the part of a caseworker or other office worker (See Table 2). The consequences for these sanctions were the same, a temporary reduction or loss of benefits including cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Number of Sanctions by Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Never Sanctioned</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Sample</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Reasons for Sanctions by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Sanction</th>
<th>White Women</th>
<th>Black Women</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missed Work Assignment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Paperwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker Error</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One black woman received 2 sanctions

Reasons for Sanctions

I do not believe that the majority of these women were acting on bad faith when they lapsed in the program requirements. Many women were able to provide logical narratives for why they were in non-compliance, and this was balanced by interviewees who took accountability for their rule violations and accepted sanctioning as a result. The willingness of my respondents to admit when they were in the wrong bolsters their reliability as informants and supports the veracity of their barriers to compliance. Some of their non-compliance was due to obligations to their children, obligations that the program is supposed to be helping them fulfill. When asked about why she was sanctioned, Soraya, a 25 year old black mother of two preschool aged children whose long-term goal of going to college for either business or nursing has taken a back seat to an immediate focus on finding a job said that,

“My son was sick and I had to take him to the hospital for about a week, and all my [work activity requirement] hours didn’t add up, and I had all my excuses- I guess that wasn’t enough for them.”

Kolbie had a similar account. She is a 26 year old black woman who has three young children. She is currently a stay-at-home mom planning to return to work once her
youngest, aged 4, is in school. He is autistic and she is uncomfortable leaving him in daycare. During her interview she expressed frustration that her caseworker did not understand her childcare concerns. Early in her interview she mentioned that she had recently had her benefits reduced, saying,

“I was sanctioned because I missed a work activity due to me having no child-care… They wouldn’t give me childcare when I applied for it”

Candy, a 30 year old white woman, was also sanctioned when she was unable to find a babysitter and attend her work assignment. When I spoke to her she had recently exited the TANF program and was working two jobs, as a hostess and a housekeeper. She has two children ages one and 11.

“It wasn’t that I didn’t follow them [the program rules], it was just like, I think that I had missed like a couple of the employment things or whatever and they had to sanction me. But it wasn’t my fault because like I said I didn’t have a babysitter, you know, so I mean I think that was really inconvenient, you know, that they could’ve like, I don’t know, helped me, somehow.”

These quotes reflect the difficulty in meeting program requirements faced by women on TANF and other welfare programs. State funded childcare is unavailable for women participating in the mandatory work program (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services 2014), and they cannot always rely on friends or family members. These issues are compacted when a child has special needs. For all women with children, even
a trip to the welfare office or another work site can require an extensive time
commitment, especially if the client is reliant on public transportation as many women on
welfare are. Once at the office, women in my sample reported average wait times of an
hour before speaking to a caseworker if they had an appointment. Without an
appointment the wait could take all day. As Donna, 67, and Octavia, 37, reported, these
waiting periods are taking place in a waiting room where there are no toys or other
entertainment provided for children. Octavia is a 37 year old black woman who works as
a full-time mother to her 7 children, 5 of whom are still at home with her and her partner
of eight years. She has fibromyalgia which poses a barrier to working many of the low-
wage service-sector jobs that are available to her, and she wishes TANF had programs to
help her get a college degree. When asked about the wait time at the welfare office she
said,

“You’d think that here you are, you’re here for the public, you know that there’s going to be kids,
there’s not one toy down there for them kids. They’ve got a big vending machine full of stuff that
you’ve gotta pay money for that no one has money to get and kids stand at the vending machine
crying for something that we can’t get out of the vending machine. It’s very frustrating.”

Under these conditions it does not seem practical to bring children to the welfare
office, and at a work requirement children are obviously not permitted. None of my
respondents had success in getting state sponsored childcare while they were at a work
assignment, although Candy pointed out that once she had obtained a job childcare was
forthcoming. Twelve of my respondents were single, precluding the possibility of their
partner caring for the children while they are absent. Fourteen women had the benefit of local extended family that could help, but sometimes these family members had other responsibilities that made their childcare services unavailable. When circumstances arose that prevented access to childcare my respondents did not feel that their caseworker was able to adapt the program’s policies to their circumstances.

Other barriers to compliance were issues with personal health. Some women cited illness or injury as factors that prevented them from attending work activities. Eileen, a 53 year old black woman has five children, four of whom are adults and no longer living at home. She works third shift doing housekeeping, and is receiving food stamps and Medicaid. When reflecting on her previous experience with TANF work assignments she tells the following story about getting sanctioned:

“I was sick. It was in the winter time. I was sick and I was catching the bus to work. They do give you a monthly bus pass. They give a bus pass now. They used to give you like the extra money on your check to get a monthly bus pass but I was sick and I missed two days. Yeah they cut me off for six months”

Jan is a 28 year old white woman with 2 children, one of whom is an adult and no longer dependent on her. She has chronic health problems including fibromyalgia and told the following story about when she tore six ligaments in her ankle and neither she nor her husband were able to make it to a work appointment:
“He had to be there with me to help me to the bathroom. To get my meals—everything. I couldn’t go to the bathroom I couldn’t, you know, nothing, because I couldn’t put weight on my foot so he couldn’t go to them. It was all there in black and white. The doctor even wrote his name and number, “You can call me if there’s any questions,” and nope she didn’t she just sanctioned us and held back our cash for three months. We went we fought it and we ended up winning and got our cash but by that time it was too late we were already out.”

When Jan says, “we were out,” she is referring to her family’s eviction and spell of homelessness that resulted from her sanction. Without cash benefits from TANF, Jan, her husband, and their pre-teen daughter spent 14 months bouncing from hotel to hotel before finally ending up in a homeless shelter. For both Jan and Eileen their caseworkers were unable to adjust the program rules to accommodate their health setbacks, and the consequences were deleterious for them and their children.

I also spoke to three women who had their benefits sanctioned through no fault of their own. There was an error on the part of someone at the welfare office that led to a temporary removal of their benefits. Alisha is a 35 year old black woman who has been working at a daycare center for 13 years and loves her job. Her full-time wages are supplemented with food stamps and Medicaid. She has a fiancé and two teenage sons. When she went to reapply for food stamps after being off them for several years:

“My case worker said I was sanctioned and it wasn’t even me. I was like how can I even be sanctioned and I hadn’t even been in the system for the past four years. I just signed up to get up assistance and you’re telling me I’m sanctioned. I haven’t even been in the system to get food stamps or a check for the past four years ‘cause I’ve been working so I called the director upset,
frustrated. I didn’t get to speak to her right then at that time. She called me back within 24 hours. I
spoke to her. She told me that by the end of the day my case worker was going to call me and
everything was going to be alright. Cause I was highly upset. She told me it was a mix up. It was
something in the numbers that she printed; the caseworker pressed one wrong number. The girl
had my first name. She didn’t even have my last name. We just had the first same name and she
was sanctioned.”

Kiera is a 42 year old black woman who experienced a similar problem at the
welfare office. She is working on completing her GED, but her two teenage sons’
medical needs create barriers to studying effectively. She has a close relationship with her
mother who helps with the kids. When I spoke to her she was in the process of planning a
small celebration in honor of her dog’s fourth birthday. She told the following story when
asked if she had ever been sanctioned:

“She said ‘Oh no you didn’t turn that birth certificate in.’ Yes I did. I got the receipt that I turned it
in. But why when I go to the doctor in the middle of the month my son’s Medicaid is cut off. I’m
not understanding that, and then you didn’t put it back on ‘til the 19th of next month. My son was
out of school eight days [due to not being able to take the medication necessary for him to
function at school]”

Lakisha is a 21 year old black woman whose first and only child was born two
years ago. She finds being a single mother challenging, but negative experiences with her
daughter’s father have made her hesitant to enter another relationship. She went on
TANF when her daughter was born but exited the program almost a year ago when she
got a job as a third shift security guard. Currently she is only receiving food stamps. Right before she found a job she was sanctioned, about which she said,

“I was going to school and I was supposed to be taking their classes at the same time and they said because I didn’t submit the information within three days they were going to sanction me for three months but I did. I faxed it to them but I guess either they entered in the wrong fax number or they just never got it. I don’t know, but I did do it. But somehow it didn’t get to them so I got penalized. I tried to talk to them about it but they never seem to reason with you.”

Alisha and Kiera had their benefits reinstated when the mistake was realized, but Lakisha was not so fortunate. All three of them experienced some form of negative consequence due to the automatic application of a sanction for a perceived rule violation. This is indicative of a program structured around the rigid utilization of sanctions to ensure compliance at the expense of fostering a supportive environment for clients.

Four more women were sanctioned for failing to file necessary paperwork in a timely manner. While this may seem like a clear-cut example of client negligence there are structural barriers to turning in paperwork that help account for these lapses. Across the board my respondents were uncomfortable mailing paperwork to the office, which is the most convenient option. Tammy was particularly emphatic about this point. Tammy had three children, including one with her husband. Her felony conviction, mental health problems, and arthritis made finding a job challenging and contributed to her dependence on TANF. When I spoke with her she said that her husband was abusive and she only stayed with him for financial reasons. Sadly, a few months after our interview her body
was discovered in an abandoned house. Her husband is currently being prosecuted for her murder. Regarding the challenges of turning in paperwork she said,

“You’re dropping off paperwork, which they got a box you can put it in but that’s the same as mailing it in, they’ll just say they didn’t get it. So you have to take the number, and you have to wait and then they scan it in and they give you a receipt. If you don’t got that receipt then that’s what they will say. Because I ain’t got the receipt before and had them say, ‘We didn’t receive that’ and I’m like, ‘No, you received it ‘cause I’ve got the receipt.’”

The necessity of going to the welfare office and waiting to file paperwork and receive a receipt brings about the same transportation and childcare barriers previously mentioned. Despite good intentions to file paperwork, it is realistic to assume that circumstances may arise preventing a trip to the welfare office, especially when a narrow submission timeline is given. Again, the system’s strictly bureaucratic structure is not set up to accommodate these individual circumstances.

**Lack of Flexibility**

Four of the women I interviewed explicitly critiqued this lack of flexibility during their interviews. Leonetta, a 33 year old black mother of two children who works in a factory assembling boxes said when asked about her relationship with her caseworker,

“I think they do everything by the books. It’s their job to give benefits or deny benefits and that’s just what it is. There is no compassion or sympathy nowhere for anybody, not for me.”
Nadia has three children, a two-year-old daughter and three-month-old twin daughters. Her twins were born premature and are still in the hospital, requiring her to balance her job search, her time with twins, and her time at home with her older child. When asked how the welfare system could work better she said,

“Maybe if they did take the time to personally get to know somebody and their situation then they would they would be able to better regulate their rules”

Pauline is a 33 year old black woman who moved to Columbus to escape from domestic violence. At the time of our interview she was looking for housing but believed she had secured a job at a warehouse. When she first went to seek TANF assistance she was scared because her caseworker was persistently asking for information about her child’s father. If he was contacted by JFS her residence in Columbus would be exposed and she would be in danger. She was transferred to another caseworker who was more understanding. Speaking of her reluctance to reveal her child’s father’s identity and the initial opposition she met she said,

“I would just think that it wouldn’t be quite so textbook simply because everybody’s case is different. According to some, people come in there with somebody that is fully capable of going to work but just won’t, but then again you have people that have different situations you know, and I think that every situation should be waivered you know differently you know because nobody’s situation is the same. I realize that that’ll take a long time to get through and everything else but I mean it just has to be another way that they could handle that part of it”

28
In their request for more accommodation for individual circumstances, to not just do everything, “by the books,” these women were identifying the ways in which rigid application of rules and sanctions are limiting their ability to best utilize their benefits in the service of being financially independent. Being hit with sanctions for circumstances that are out of their control puts them in a precarious financial position which only exacerbates the reasons they sought help from welfare in the first place. To confirm that lack of caseworker flexibility was a reality and not a perception I spoke briefly over the phone with a representative from Jobs and Family Services, the center where benefits are distributed. She stated that caseworkers had a clear-cut policy for when to impose sanctions. When a work appointment is missed a client has 10 days to submit appropriate documentation, such as a doctor’s note or obituary, or a sanction will be automatically applied. Similarly, a sanction is received when paperwork has not been turned in by the required date. A system that gave caseworkers more discretion in applying sanctions, as well as more time to get to know their clients as individuals and not just another number in the system, would seem to facilitate a more just application of sanctions that works in service of the manifest goals of the program.

While not all of my respondents explicitly stated that a lack of flexibility was a key issue with the welfare system, there are other indicators that suggest this is a shared sentiment. When asked if their caseworker cared about them 19 women said they did not believe so, often emphatically. When asked to characterize their relationship with their caseworker ten said that they had no relationship on a personal level, with an additional
four characterizing their relationship as negative. Those that did feel like their caseworker
got to know them and cared about the outcome of their case also had previous
experiences when they were treated as just another number. These responses are
implicitly critiquing the welfare bureaucracy and its preordained responses to non-
compliance, particularly when coupled with their claims that they were unfairly
sanctioned for situations that were out of their control. A caseworker who does not take
the time to get to know their clients, or worse, one who appears to harbor negative views
towards them, will not be able to take into account individual reasons for protocol
violation.
Discussion

My results indicate that women on welfare experience legitimate barriers to compliance with program rules including lack of reliable child care, personal health issues, and caseworker error. Part of the reason that so many women fall into non-compliance is that policies do not take into account individual and structural issues that women face in real life like the need for childcare and the prohibitive costs of obtaining it from a private provider. Regardless, the punitive structure of the program assumes that they are violating policies because they are deviants and their actions must be met with swift and negative consequences. Based on the collective of interview responses it seems that welfare programs would better serve their clients if caseworkers had the time and desire to get to know their clients and apply personalized sanctions when it is clear that a good faith effort is not being made to follow program rules. Unfortunately, previous research suggests that such a program adjustment would not benefit all welfare recipients unilaterally.

In 2009, Schram, Fording, Soss and Houser published a study testing the impact of caseworker discretion on the application of welfare sanctions with a particular focus on race. They asked a sample of Florida caseworkers to evaluate two vignettes describing client non-compliance and state whether or not they would recommend a sanction for that hypothetical individual. Each vignette varied only by racially coded names. The
researchers also utilized administrative data to explore real-life rates of sanctions. Florida was an ideal state for analysis due to their exceptionally heavy use of sanctions when compared with other states as well as the high level of diversity among state residents and welfare recipients. The results of this study show that the probability of a black client with no prior sanctions receiving punitive treatment is 14% greater than a white client with no prior sanctions. This discrepancy increases when the client has received a sanction in the past. A black client with a prior sanction has a .97 predicted probability of having non-compliance sanctioned when compared with a .75 predicted probability for previously sanctioned white clients. The authors articulate that,

“Our findings reinforce the conclusion that policy choices not only reflect but also create the elements that underpin racial inequality in the U.S. welfare system. Under cover of a policy that is officially race-neutral, welfare systems operate in ways that reflect racial classifications, reproduce racial inequities, and call out for attention from both scholars and reformers.” (Schram, Fording, Soss and Houser 2009: 416).

Sanctions may be applied more readily to black women due to racial stereotypes that black people are inherently lazy and prefer government assistance to work. When black women are shown to receive more sanctions than white women these stereotypes appear to be confirmed because the discriminatory mechanisms behind them are obscured.

The aforementioned study shows that discrimination is already a problem within the welfare system, and this is under the current welfare bureaucracy that affords
caseworkers only a limited amount of discretion. It is likely that more flexibility on the part of caseworkers would only provide more opportunity for the biases of caseworkers to seep into their practice. Stereotypes that black people are lazy and irresponsible are still a significant part of the US social landscape, which contributes to the construction of blacks as the “undeserving poor” who should be held accountable for their poverty and offered little assistance (Soss, Schram, Vartanian and O’Bien 2003). With more caseworker discretion, white women on welfare may find themselves increasingly being given the benefit of the doubt due to the absence of negative stereotypes labeling them as undeserving of welfare, while black women find themselves subjected to increased scrutiny and unjust sanctions.

The results of my study suggest that women on welfare are often violating the rules of welfare programs due to the inability of the system to accommodate barriers to compliance that arise in their lives. When they engage in deviance that a policy maker has determined to be worthy of sanction their caseworkers are unable or unwilling to accommodate their individual circumstances. Many of my respondents believed that an allowance for more flexibility on the part of caseworkers would allow the programs to function better for them, eventually leading to financial independence. All three of the women quoted above who explicitly asked for more individualized accommodations to be made were black, but their policy recommendations may have been misguided. They believed that if a caseworker understood where they were coming from and was allowed to show compassion in sanctioning they would receive fewer sanctions despite acting in good faith, but the opposite may be true. More flexibility on the part of caseworkers may
have that effect for white women, but black women may be subjected to de facto assumptions of deviance that results in more willingness to sanction. Any layperson who has interacted with a bureaucracy knows that regulations which seem prudent in the abstract can be counterproductive in dealing with the nuance of individual circumstances. The more rigid the bureaucracy the less able it is to adapt to deviations from the norm, sometimes paradoxically leading to inefficiencies.

The bureaucratic emphasis on quota achievement encourages caseworkers to ignore clients’ needs and desires to achieve institutional goals, resulting in sanctions being a clerical process and not one of careful circumstantial evaluation (Lens 2008). Caseworkers are predominantly focused on collecting the required information to process claims and sanctions. They do not have the time or training to individuate between clients and tailor institutional responses to noncompliance to a client’s specific circumstances (Myers, Glaser, and MacDonald 1998). Interactions are highly scripted, operations are routinized (1998). Caseworkers, like the people they serve, are cogs in a bureaucratic machine.

For black women on welfare, removing the iron cage of bureaucracy may not be equivalent to attaining freedom. On the contrary, while bureaucracy is constraining in some ways it is also providing a shield from discrimination. Caseworkers are required to follow strict protocol regarding rule violations, preventing individual racial biases from influencing sanctioning decisions too heavily. The iron cage is paradoxically ameliorating the impact of a larger system which allows persistent racial stereotypes to create a cage of a different sort, limiting the life opportunities for black people in the
United States (Reskin 2012). Within my sample there was no evidence of racial
discrimination in the application of sanctions. Roughly half of both racial demographics
reported receiving sanctions, three out of six white women and 11 out of 17 black
women. This finding does not stand alone, Reichman, Teitler, and Curtis (2005) also
found no racial disparities in current sanctioning practices. The majority of my
respondents thought that they would not be as affected by sanctions if their caseworker
had more discretion, and that this type of welfare reform, harking back to AFDC when
sanctions were rarely used (Schram, Fording, Soss and Houser 2009), would be to their
benefit. In reality, larger systems of discrimination and stereotypes must be addressed
before this type of reform could be implemented to the benefit of all welfare recipients.
This leaves black women on welfare in a double-bind, where they do not perceive the
current system as effectively serving them but the reforms they seek may lead to even
more negative welfare outcomes. These racial implications were not a direct outcome of
my study, but an important one that emerged from my interviewees’ responses. This
study was small in scope, and it would be of benefit to conduct it on a larger scale,
looking at the experiences of more women and ideally with a random sampling scheme.
While it is important to consider the policy recommendations of those on welfare, it is
also important to think critically about those recommendations and place them within a
larger frame. I cannot make a clear policy recommendation at this time, other than to
place the welfare system within a context of larger systems of racial inequality when any
new policy is being considered. It may be most just to eliminate the sanctioning system,
or greatly reduce reliance on it. Further studies would need to be done to assess the
impacts of such a dramatic policy change. Additionally, more research needs to be done examining the welfare system from the inside, looking at the practices and biases of welfare caseworkers. Having articulated some of the barriers to compliance faced by women on welfare, the next step and greater challenge is to figure out how to ameliorate these issues equitably.
References


Characteristics of the Food Stamp Population.” Washington DC: Gleason, Phil,
Carole Trippe, Scott Cody and Jacquie Anderson.


Welfare Provision: Self-Interest or Political Ideology? A Longitudinal Approach.”


Immigrants.” *Health Services Research* 40(3):697-722.

Kissane, Rebecca Joyce. 2012. “Poor Women's Moral Economies of Nonprofit Social
Service Use: Conspicuous Constraint and Empowerment in the Hollow State.”
*Sociological Perspectives* 55(1):189-211.

of Politics* 62(3): 790-816.

Lines.” *Social Service Review* June: 197-222.


Roberts, Dorothy E. 2009. “Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies: A New


