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Theorizing About Poverty and Paternalism in Suburban America: The Case of Welfare Sanctions

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Shifting metropolitan poverty dynamics over the past decade have resulted in a more sprawling material hardship, with the suburban poor now outnumbering central-city counterparts. The rise of suburban poverty is well documented, but the implications for welfare policy administration and client program outcomes remain understudied. This article offers a theoretical treatment of the spatial dimensions of sanction for noncompliance with program rules under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. For a variety of reasons associated with unique spatial barriers, ideological resistance, and underdeveloped social service networks, the theoretical framework predicts that suburban welfare clients, especially minority clients, are more likely to experience punitive sanction outcomes than central-city counterparts.

KEY WORDS: suburban poverty, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, welfare reform, welfare paternalism, welfare implementation

Introduction

Metropolitan America is in the midst of a sprawling material hardship in which the swelling ranks of suburban poor now outnumber their central-city counterparts (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). While urban poverty is popularly conceived as a perpetual "underclass" residing in inner-city enclaves of social and economic isolation (Auletta, 1982; Wilson, 1996, 2012), for various reasons contemporary poverty dynamics are spreading into outlying suburban jurisdictions (Allard, 2009; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). While central-city areas continue to experience concentrated disadvantage in targeted high-poverty neighborhoods, outlying suburban residents are increasingly likely to experience conditions of economic insecurity and penury. The recent rise of suburban poverty is well documented by social observers, but the spatial implications for social service administration meant to address the material hardship of low-income families remain understudied. A growing number of suburban poor are more likely to seek direct relief from the social safety net, perhaps many for the first time, yet little is known regarding how these low-income populations are interacting at the

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street level with redistributive social welfare programs and frontline social service administrators. In turn, this article theorizes about the new metropolitan spatial landscape of welfare reform implementation with regard to client program punishment experienced by the suburban poor.

Background: Suburban Poverty and Welfare Paternalism

The suburbanization of poverty coincides with broader neoliberal shifts in American social welfare policy that have far-reaching consequences for the immediate material circumstances of low-income families. In particular, landmark welfare reform legislation, formally known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), fundamentally altered the benefit eligibility and administrative delivery of cash assistance in the United States. PRWORA and its lead assistance program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), eliminated the entitlement to cash benefits that existed formerly under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) through instituting stringent client work requirements and lifetime caps on assistance, while also replacing generous federal matching funds with block grant financing (Fellowes & Rowe, 2004; Handler, 1995; Soss, Schram, Vartanian, & O'Brien, 2001; Winston, 2002). Over the past two decades, the administration and oversight of cash assistance programs have been decentralized to states and localities coupled with more uniform objectives centering on low-income clients achieving employment and self-sufficiency along with disciplinary penalties for noncompliance with program rules (Gainsborough, 2003; Soss et al., 2001; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011).

The reform movement toward welfare "paternalism" means that low-income program clients must adhere to strict guidelines of state-mandated behaviors in order to remain compliant with TANF rules (Handler, 1995; Mead, 1997; Soss et al., 2011). Most prominently, in conditional exchange for receiving cash benefits, federal rules mandate that able-bodied TANF clients participate full-time in allowable work-related activities—including work preparation, community service, and unsubsidized employment—at least 30 hours per week. States and localities have some flexibility in exempting a fraction of the TANF client pool, but the underlying policy and administrative directives remain abundantly clear. Welfare clients should immediately and doggedly pursue full-time employment and be disciplined when failing to remain compliant with program rules (Handler, 1995; Kalil, Seefeldt, & Wang, 2002; Riccucci, 2005; Soss et al., 2011).

Welfare reform measures center on altering self-defeating behavior through offering "carrots" like targeted employment assistance and modest cash transfers, but also involve punitive "sticks" like sanction penalties for noncompliance to ensure mandated behaviors are properly undertaken (Handler, 1995; Kim & Fording, 2010; Soss et al., 2001). When TANF clients are unsuccessful at fulfilling program rules, such as failing to complete work requirements or submit document certification, they face the possibility of case "sanction," a program

penalty for noncompliance, in which cash benefits are potentially reduced or case closed entirely (Fording, Soss, & Schram, 2007; Kalil, Seefeldt, and Wang, 2002; Kim & Fording, 2010; Pavetti, Derr, & Hesketh, 2003; Wu, Cancian, Meyer, & Wallace, 2006). Modern workfare measures and accompanying program penalties have been instituted in some fashion for two decades, yet we lack clear answers concerning how growing suburban poverty and administration of welfare paternalism play out at the street level.

Through theorizing about TANF sanction outcomes experienced by suburban welfare clients, this work builds upon a modest but emergent literature that investigates the spatial dimensions of welfare policy implementation (see Allard, 2009; Allard & Roth, 2010; Arsneault, 2006), setting the stage for future empirical investigation. Research connecting suburban poverty to social service functioning is gaining traction, but to date no research examines how welfare paternalism—administered through punitive TANF program penalties—is administered among the suburban poor. For a variety of reasons associated with unique spatial barriers, ideological resistance, and unflattering social construction of welfare program clients, the theoretical framework predicts that low-income suburban dwellers, especially minority suburban residents, are potentially more likely to experience TANF case sanction than central-city counterparts.

Placing Suburban Poverty in Context

Prior to theorizing about the spatial dimensions of welfare paternalism, we require a richer understanding of suburban poverty and its movement to prominence on the American landscape. We also require a refined understanding of what "suburbs" are exactly. While no single agreed-upon definition of suburban geography exists, researchers have utilized U.S. Census Bureau classifications of metropolitan areas with some degree of conceptual and operational success. Following this line of research, "suburbs" are broadly defined as non-rural jurisdictions within metropolitan areas that fall outside of "central city" or "primary city" boundaries as designated by the Census Bureau (Gainsborough, 2001; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Put simply, "suburbs make up the remainder of metropolitan areas outside of primary cities" (Kneebone & Berube, 2013, p. 15). Admittedly, there is some contention as to whether "primary city" refers to merely the largest principal jurisdiction named in a metropolitan area classification (e.g., Los Angeles City or St. Louis City), all of the primary cities designated by the official MSA classification name (e.g., Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana), or all principal cities within an MSA as identified by the Census Bureau (e.g., Burbank, Pasadena, Anaheim, Costa Mesa). The debates around what exactly constitutes a "central city" versus "suburban" designation are likely to continue; however, Kneebone and Berube's (2013) recent comprehensive examination of suburban poverty urges researchers to ultimately pursue a "compromise that distinguishes within each metropolitan area between large, broadly recognized jurisdictions and smaller places that are more likely to lack the scale and capacity necessary to address . . . rising poverty" (p. 15).

Irrespective of exact spatial definitions, social researchers have documented the rapid rise of suburban poverty in more recent decades, resulting in a sprawling material hardship across metropolitan America, hereby increasing demand for redistributive human support services (Allard, 2009; Allard & Roth, 2010; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Orfield, 2002). Metropolitan poverty is sprawling beyond traditionally concentrated central-city boundaries for several potential reasons.

Economic Restructuring and Recession

First, dramatic economic restructuring over the past several decades has culminated in an exodus of high-security industrial jobs and resultant proliferation of lower-paying service-sector employment options or permanent job loss (Figura & Wascher, 2008; Reich, 2010; Stiglitz, 2013; Wilson, 1996). Low-wage service and retail occupations continue outpacing higher-paying manufacturing and managerial positions of decades past. Industrial decline represents a more recent structural phenomenon in outlying suburbs, diminishing the once relatively lucrative occupational prospects of many suburban residents—ultimately mirroring the bleak prospects experienced by historically disadvantaged central-city residents. Long-term trends of deindustrialization, underemployment, and declining middle-class wealth already reverberating for decades in central-city areas are similarly reaching into once affluent and advantaged suburban settings (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). More recently, deep recessionary conditions experienced in 2001 and late 2007 have led to widespread unemployment and material hardship among suburban residents. Acute job losses associated with the financial and manufacturing sectors have been centered in suburban communities, only exacerbating broader long-term structural shifts toward depressed wages and economic insecurity (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Responding to a mixture of short, and long-term economic and social forces, millions of suburban families, much like those across the rest of America, are struggling with economic scarcity and increasingly experiencing poverty spells.

Immigration Influx

Declining economic prospects for native suburban workers have been coupled with a residential influx of foreign-born immigrants drawn into once exclusive suburban communities (Slinger, Hardwick, & Brettell, 2008). Attracted by considerations for neighborhood safety, high-quality education, and enhanced employment opportunities, foreign-born populations are booming across much of suburban America (Slinger et al., 2008). Even with a mystique of suburban economic prosperity, foreign-born inhabitants relocating to suburban settings are more likely to work in low-wage positions and experience poverty spells at higher rates than the general population (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). The growth of suburban immigrant populations is admittedly uneven and even declining in some large midwestern and northeastern metropolises, including Philadelphia

and St. Louis, but the shifting locational decisions of relatively vulnerable immigrant populations undoubtedly contribute to higher levels of suburban poverty in contemporary America (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Slinger et al., 2008).

Metropolitan Housing Dynamics

Along with widespread economic distress and immigrant influx, several dimensions of residential housing likely contribute to the sprawling rise of suburban poverty. First, aging post-WWII suburban infrastructure, especially uninspiring single-family tract housing, is becoming less attractive to higher-income earners, who are increasingly flocking to stately, gentrified urban centers or newer, upscale housing units in the outlying exurbs. Thus, less desirable and cheaper suburban housing stock is increasingly available to lower-income families, who are more likely to experience periods of material hardship in newly settled suburban communities (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Next, subsidizing voucher programs such as Housing Choice Vouchers (HVCs) are increasingly motivated by concerns for metropolitan equity, providing suburban options to low-income program participants, who are increasingly likely to choose suburban dwellings outside of city centers (Covington, Freeman, & Stoll, 2011; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). While allowing for expanded residential options and economic prospects, program participants are disproportionately at risk to experience poverty conditions. Lastly, the epicenter of the devastating 2007–2008 housing bust was centered in suburban communities as millions of vulnerable families lost their homes (and home equity) due to foreclosure. Collapsing housing values coupled with anemic job growth in the post-recession period are only further weakening an already shaky structural suburban foundation of promised economic security and prosperity (Kneebone & Berube, 2013).

Administering Program Punishment in Suburbia: The Case of TANF Sanctions

There exists greater economic hardship and subsequent interaction with the social safety net among suburban residents, yet little is known regarding street-level social service functioning, including case manager discretionary decision making and TANF client program outcomes. In the following sections, I argue that the combination of a relatively conservative political environment, coupled with under-resourced provider networks and unique spatial barriers to program success, yields greater probability of experiencing TANF case sanction among low-income suburban clients, especially minority suburban clientele, relative to their central-city counterparts.

Political Environment and Street-Level Punitiveness

Administrative scholars view policy implementation as an "open system" in which program providers and frontline administrators are perpetually interacting with their immediate environment, ultimately shaping internal administrative

priorities, functioning, and client outputs and outcomes (Ingraham & Lynn, 2004; Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2000; Soss & Keiser, 1998; Weissert, 1994). Put another way, the external context of policy implementation exerts influence on internal administrative focus and street-level practices (Lipsky, 2010; Riccucci, 2005; Soss & Keiser, 1998; Weissert, 1994). One contextual variable of theoretical interest to this article involves local political ideology and how conventional "left-right" ideological considerations influence street-level administrative practices and client experiences under welfare paternalism. Local ideology has been found to influence street-level priorities, perspectives, and ultimately use of administrative discretion, including the choices involved when sanctioning TANF cases at the county level (see Fording et al., 2007). It is my contention that the ideological underpinnings of welfare paternalism can extend to our understanding of suburban poverty and discretionary TANF functioning among various spatial environments.

Within metropolitan settings, suburban areas—and assumedly suburban administrators—are generally expected to hold relatively conservative political views vis-à-vis more progressive central-city areas. Urban sprawl, fueled by investments in highway construction and federally subsidized home loans in the post-WWII period, cleared the way for mass suburban residency. However, suburban relocation has historically been selectively available to only whiter, wealthier, more privileged citizens, a phenomenon popularly dubbed "white flight" (Hilfiker, 2002; Kruse, 2007; Sugrue, 2005). It was this selective drift from cities to suburbs that arguably laid the sorted geographic foundations of a coalesced "new right" in American politics, characterized by staunch aversion to taxation, opposition to the redistributive social safety net, and penchant for nativist white identity appeals to racialized "crime" and "welfare" narratives (Kruse, 2007; Lopez, 2014; McGirr, 2002; Sugrue, 2005). Indeed, Gainsborough (2001) argues that in recent decades, suburban America has developed a "distinctive politics" with decidedly right-wing underpinnings. Comprehensive attitudinal evidence demonstrates that suburban residents are significantly more likely to identify with the Republican Party and espouse conservative preferences for reduced government spending, including reducing federal aid for cities and racial minorities (Gainsborough, 2001). Why might heightened suburban conservatism matter to street-level TANF implementation and client outcomes under welfare paternalism?

Modern conservatism tends to view poverty conditions as originating from the behavioral deviance and debilitating life choices of low-income individuals, with less consideration for one's disadvantaged historical or immediate environmental circumstance (Murray, 1984, 2013; Rector & Lauber, 1995). Conversely, modern liberalism places greater onus for poverty on externally derived structural factors, such as economic restructuring, discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of robust occupational opportunity (Krugman, 2009; Wilson, 1996, 2012). Therefore, a conservative ideological framework largely blames poor people for creating their own material hardship, yielding a relatively unsympathetic perception of those in poverty and by extension those participating in

means-tested public assistance programs (Fording et al., 2007). In examining feeling thermometer differentials, suburban respondents were also found to harbor significantly "colder" feelings toward welfare recipients than central-city respondents (Gainsborough, 2001). With regard to administering welfare paternalism, a dim view of self-sabotage among program participants, who are assumed to be lacking proper work ethic or moral providence, should invite a shared perception of "undeservingness" among local elites, frontline managers, and street-level caseworkers in suburban workfare offices particularly.

In describing a similar aspect of street-level bureaucratic discretion, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) argue that "if street-level workers judge citizen-clients as unworthy—as 'bad guys'—then rules are used to withhold or minimize services or at times to punish, even to be brutal" (p. 156). In turn, unflattering perceptions of suburban TANF clientele should be coupled with a greater desire to correct perceived behavioral deviance with adherence to strict program rules and penalties for noncompliance, potentially increasing the incidence of TANF case sanction. In short, ideological considerations shaping frontline managers and caseworker practices in suburban jurisdictions are expected to emphasize and exercise punitiveness in their discretionary administrative behavior vis-à-vis central-city contexts.

Minorities and the Social Construction of Suburban Paternalism. There is a priori reason to suspect that certain clientele groups will receive a disproportionate share of punitive suburban administrative action. In particular, African American clientele and to a lesser extent Hispanic and Native American clientele are overwhelmingly constructed in negative frames that typically involve enduring stereotypes of laziness, criminality, and welfare dependence in need of corrective action by street-level caseworkers (Gilens, 1999; Ingram, Schneider, & DeLeon, 2007; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that the single best determinant of welfare opposition in America is the extent to which one believes African Americans are lazy and therefore undeserving of public benefits (see Gilens, 1999). More recent qualitative evidence reports that some frontline caseworkers in an older, traditionally white suburb construct the newly arriving minority poor as deviant, criminal, and "undeserving" (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). It is my contention that these enduring negative racial connotations motivate punitive administrative practices to a larger degree in suburban areas of metropolitan settings. When political conservatism is elevated, accompanied by an unfavorable construction of the poor, especially the minority poor, we should expect that punitive aspects of welfare reform policy, including TANF case sanction, are emphasized to a greater degree in suburban workfare offices vis-à-vis central cities.

Moreover, as demonstrated by a spatial study of Michigan welfare offices, suburban and rural caseworkers tend to be white, whereas central-city caseworkers are disproportionately of minority ethnicity (Riccucci, 2005). Thus, a racialized suburban punitive tendency toward minority clients could be exacerbated by processes of "descriptive representation" and "representative

bureaucracy" replete with bureaucratic inattention to minority group concerns in suburban settings (Keiser, Mueser, & Choi, 2004; Kennedy, 2014; Riccucci, 2005). Conversely, with dampened social service stigma and increasingly urbanized minority political power (Fording, 1997; Keech, 1968; Keiser et al., 2004), central-city TANF clients are more likely to encounter ideologically and culturally sympathetic street-level administrative actors, whereas the suburban minority poor likely encounter workfare providers within relatively conservative and predictively more punitive and unsympathetic administrative contexts.

Spatial Barriers and Underdeveloped Provider Networks

Beyond unflattering social construction of low-income clients and potentially punitive discretionary tendencies at the street level, there are additional spatial-specific reasons to believe that suburban TANF clients will be less likely to fulfill program obligations and hereby more likely to experience case sanction. Under TANF rules, welfare clients must participate in work activities for a minimum of 30 hours per week and successfully present material evidence of completion to case managers in regular intervals (Handler, 1995; Mead, 1997; Soss et al., 2011; Winston, 2002). When clients fail to properly adhere to strict program rules, such as work activities or document verification, their case becomes at risk of sanction. There is reason to suspect that low-income suburban clients will face magnified metropolitan spatial barriers when adhering to TANF participation rules. In particular, suburban areas lack the transportation and social service infrastructure to effectively undertake welfare reform activities, with potentially negative program consequences for suburban welfare clients vis-à-vis their metropolitan counterparts participating in central cities (Kneebone & Berube, 2013).

While prosperous metropolitan economic opportunity still exists to some degree, it is my contention that many low-income suburban welfare clients, especially those lacking a reliable automobile, might especially struggle to fulfill work requirements, meet caseworker appointments, and complete documentation verification processes. Built around highways and automobile access, suburban areas broadly exhibit a dearth of public transportation networks, relying primarily on dwindling bus lines with few stops and inconsistent service (Gurley-Calvez & Bruce, 2005; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Marshall, 2001). Public transit options in higher-density central-city contexts can also be spotty and inconvenient, but are likely more abundant and accessible relative to less dense, outlying suburban areas. Put another way, "rapid growth in suburban poverty . . . has caught many of these places off guard, exposing significant barriers to social and economic opportunity. Some of the things that many poor city communities have—proximity to jobs, services, and transit—poor suburban communities lack" (Kneebone & Berube, 2013, p. 57). Thus, central-city welfare clients are assumed to have wider transportation options in reaching occupational destinations and mandatory service agency appointments, more readily remaining in TANF program compliance, whereas suburban clients will find it relatively difficult to fulfill critical employment and caseworker obligations and will

therefore more readily face the prospect of TANF program punishment irrespective of local political environment and cultural tendencies toward administrative punitiveness.

Lastly, even as the number of poor continues mounting in suburban areas, social service resources and provider networks remain centrally concentrated in inner cities. Responding to historically magnified social needs in the urban core, social service agencies have deep roots in urban communities, with much less organizational capacity and networked presence in outlying suburbs (Allard, 2009). A perception of concentrated central-city hardship continues to dominate charitable giving patterns, and the overall distribution of social service resources still heavily favors central cities (Allard, 2009; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). The patchwork of under-resourced, low-capacity service providers across geographically sprawling suburbs coupled with spatial isolation of low-income suburban residents from mature and developed service networks should further inhibit TANF program success and increase the incidence of TANF program punishment. Access and equity in the cash assistance safety net is increasingly tenuous, and special attention to the spatial barriers and challenges of the suburban poor is warranted among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Discussion and Conclusion

Metropolitan poverty is spreading into suburban jurisdictions, increasing material hardship and demand for social service provision. The rise of suburban poverty is occurring alongside neoliberal welfare reform that tethers cash benefits to strict workfare rules, yet little is known regarding how paternalistic TANF measures are playing out among impoverished suburban families. There is ample reason to suspect that punitive aspects of welfare paternalism are potentially more pronounced in suburban areas of broader metropolitan settings. The historically disadvantaged inner-city poor continue to contend with discrimination, social isolation, and limited economic opportunity, but are also potentially more likely to encounter administrative social service contexts characterized by minority political power and presumably ideologically and culturally sympathetic central-city workfare providers. It is the new suburban poor who likely encounter relatively conservative, unsympathetic, and punitive administrative workfare contexts. It is the suburban poor, especially the minority suburban poor, who likely bear the brunt of metropolitan sanctioning practices and are thus more often denied access to cash support under a policy regime of welfare paternalism, potentially resulting in magnified insecurity and hardship.

One potential weakness is the monolithic nature in which this article treats American suburbs and lessons for suburban paternalism. Beyond a common spatial definition of outlying areas surrounding primary city boundaries, American suburbs exhibit substantial variation and dynamic alteration in demographic and economic characteristics over time (Gainsborough, 2001; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Indeed, Kneebone and Berube (2013) offer an innovative suburban poverty

typology, differentiating areas based upon changes in local population growth and economic health. It could be the case that "rapid growth" suburbs with higher than average population and job growth might prioritize and practice welfare paternalism differently than "strained" or "distressed" suburbs that exhibit declining job growth and dampened regional economic prospects. For instance, punitive administrative tendencies might be more pronounced within suburban areas of "Rust Belt" metropolises, such as Philadelphia, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, which have experienced both waves of minority in-migration and industrial decline. This mixture of minority influx (regularly accompanied by gradual minority movement into aging suburbs), white flight, and history of exclusionary suburbanization, along with broad economic degradation, could set the stage for relatively punitive administrative responses toward the growing numbers of suburban poor, especially minority and immigrant poor. Indeed, Watkins-Hayes (2009) reports that frontline welfare administrators within a predominantly white suburban area outside of Boston, Massachusetts, overwhelmingly perceive an influx of minority urban poor as unwelcome and problematic. This pattern of unflattering sentiment and subsequent punitive administrative responses under welfare paternalism could be occurring in suburban America more broadly, especially suburban settings facing various combinations of demographic change and economic distress.

Large-N quantitative research originating with comprehensive U.S. Census Bureau datasets, such as the Survey of Income and Program Participants, should be coupled with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) spatial targeting techniques and qualitative thick description from interviews and observation along the lines of groundbreaking research by Watkins-Hayes (2009). Substantial research effort and mixed methodologies are needed to illuminate suburban disciplinary welfare reform implementation and its influence on TANF program outputs and the material circumstances of low-income families.

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