Community Capacity and Food Insecurity in the Era of Welfare Reform

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Community Capacity and Food Insecurity in the Era of Welfare Reform

Executive Summary

Introduction

The general goal of this study was to examine the extent to which changes in welfare policy might have contributed to the decline in the use of Food Stamps (FS). To this end, three objectives were addressed: (1) to determine the strategies used by the state of Mississippi to implement the Food Stamp Program after the passage of the 1996 welfare reform act; (2) to determine community capacity to cope with the new policy requirements and the needs of local low-income populations; and (3) to determine the extent to which the exit of clients from the Food Stamp Program might be related to a disparity between the state's administration and the clients' perceptions of the program.

Methods

The data to address these three objectives were drawn from several sources. For the first objective, the data came from: (1) Mississippi Department of Human Services (DHS) administrative data, (2) the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census, and (3) state-level key informants. For the second objective, data were generated through two case studies in Mississippi (Coahoma County and Lee County). Information from each case study came from: (1) Administrative data from the Mississippi Department of Human Services (DHS), (2) Decennial Census data from 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, and (3) Community-level key informant data. For the third objective, personal interviews with food stamp clients from each of the two case studies were conducted.

Results

Between October 1996 and October 2001, the number of low-income people on Food Stamps in Mississippi declined from 210,343 to 145, 214, accounting for a 31 percent drop. The results indicted that the drop in Food Stamps was linked to the welfare strategy undertaken by Mississippi. In this respect, the implementation of the new welfare policy provided the state with an opportunity to take a punitive stance against both TANF and Food Stamp clients. The results also suggested that the state undertook a *diversion* strategy by conveying to TANF and Food Stamp clients: *"We're going to kick you off, we're going to threaten you, you gotta go to work and you go find your own job, and blah, blah, blah…. So, [we're] really setting them up to drop off of the program, which is what a lot of people did."* Furthermore, the results suggested that the decline in Food Stamps was related to the failure to clearly communicate the changes in public assistance at all levels. In general, the state took a position of less responsibility toward assisting low-income families, creating an uncooperative and unfriendly environment at the "front door" of many local DHS offices.

In addition, the results indicated that decline in Food Stamp use was more pronounced in economically and socially disadvantaged local conditions. Food Stamp clients in poor

economic conditions (Coahoma County) were found to harbor strong negative feelings towards local DHS personnel, which inhibited low-income families from seeking public assistance. In contrast, clients in more advantageous conditions (Lee County) held less negative feelings toward their local DHS office. The main reason for the latter attitude was that in more advantageous social and economic conditions, non-governmental organizations played a major role to help clients seek public assistance by linking them to state and other public agencies.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to address the link between welfare reform and the decline in Food Stamp caseloads. What we have found is that how the state implements its welfare policy and the extent to which communities can cope with the changes imposed by the new legislation directly impacts the use of Food Stamps.

For Mississippi, there has been a strong emphasis on caseload reduction. As soon as clients walk into the front door, they are encouraged, and sometimes threatened, to find work and to leave the welfare system. Clients have also been faced with diversion (both intentional and unintentional) that resulted in discouraging clients from seeking food assistance.

There is no doubt that welfare reform has encouraged many low-income families to leave the TANF and Food Stamp rolls both in Mississippi and nationwide. Although this is often viewed as a sign of success, the experiences of Mississippi suggest that what now needs to be done is to shift the focus of welfare policies from caseload reduction to poverty, inequality, and social injustice. In other words, welfare reform comes with an obligation to assure that those who are in need receive adequate assistance so that they do not fall further behind due to forces beyond their control. Our findings clearly suggest that more emphasis should be placed on developing community capacity for bridging civic/faith-based organizations with governmental agencies to cope more effectively with the needs of low-income people.

Chapter I: Introduction

The healthy economy of the 1990s, coupled with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), have been driving forces behind a substantial decline in the use of food stamp benefits (Gais et al. 2000; Gundersen et al. 1999; Polit et al. 2000). Between1996 and 2000, the nation as a whole experienced a 20 percent drop in food stamp participation (Paris and Gill 2001). Several studies indicate that the improvement of the overall socioeconomic condition accounts for only 50 percent of the total decline, while the remaining 50 percent is attributed to the Act itself (Besharov and Germanis 2000). This means that a comprehensive understanding of the decline in food stamp participation must be based on an analysis of both the impact of the socioeconomic conditions as well as the effects of policy changes.

Mississippi, which is the focus of this project, experienced a 32 percent decline in food stamp participation between 1996 and 2000 (Parisi and Gill 2001). This previous research, sponsored by the Southern Rural Development Center, examined the relationship between exiting from the food stamp program and the economic and social conditions of low-income populations across rural geographic settings. Preliminary econometric models confirm that economic, social, and spatial conditions explain variability in rates of exit (Parisi and Gill 2001). This type of analysis, unfortunately, could not reveal the extent to which exit from the Food Stamp Program was the result of changes in welfare policy. It follows that a full understanding of the decline in food stamp participation in Mississippi requires additional research on the role of welfare policy change.

In this study, we contend that the extent to which changes in welfare policy impacts food stamp participation is dependent upon three interrelated factors: (1) changes in the state's administration of the food stamp program to reflect the requirements and the goals of the 1996 welfare reform act; (2) the ability of a community to respond accordingly to the changes in administration of the program, as well as to the needs of its low income population(s); and (3) clients' perceptions of welfare policy in relation to the Food Stamp Program. In this respect, the overall goal of this study was to accomplish three objectives:

I. To determine if the strategies undertaken by the state of Mississippi to implement the Food Stamp Program after the passage of the 1996 welfare reform act might account for the decline in Food Stamp participation.

II. To determine community capacity to cope with the new policy requirements and the needs of local low-income populations.

III. To determine the extent to which the exit of clients from the Food Stamp Program might be related to a disparity between the state's administration and the clients' perceptions of the program.

Addressing these three objectives is important to make short and long term positive contributions for low-income populations. In the short term, the results of this research can help inform the state and communities about the needs of low-income populations within the goals and requirements of the new welfare policy. In other words, both the state and the community can adjust their organization to better meet the demands of the welfare policy, as well as the needs of low-income populations. In the long term, the result of this research can help provide insights into the implications of changes in welfare policy in relation to food security for low-income populations.

Though existing studies acknowledge the importance of the three factors (the state, the client, and the community) to explain the impact of changes in welfare policy on food stamp participation, they fail to incorporate them into a single conceptual and analytical model. In this study a general conceptual model was developed to integrate each of these three factors. This general model was applied to explain how changes in welfare policies might impact food stamp participation among local low-income populations.

Chapter II: Background

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, we present the link between state welfare policy and Food Stamp participation rates. Second, we describe how policy perceptions among low-income people may influence their Food Stamp participation. Third, we introduce the concept of community as it relates to the capacity of a place to assist the needy. Finally, we integrate each section into a single conceptual framework.

The State

Under the new welfare system, the state must consider the following new conditions for the food stamp program, some of which are mandated and some are options: (1) work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs); (2) cuts for permanent resident aliens; (3) reduction of basic benefits; (4) establishment of new shelter deduction caps; and (5) sanction food stamp benefits for TANF sanctions (in 16 states, such as Mississippi, food stamp benefits can be cut by 25% as a result of TANF sanctions) (Gundersen 1999).

Within this new environment, a state may undertake one of two strategies. One strategy emphasizes work participation ("making work pay"). The second strategy emphasizes the reduction of dependence (Gais et al. 2000). The first strategy is concerned with helping clients obtain employment, and the second strategy focuses exclusively on the reduction of case loads. In the latter case, the food stamp application process contains a new element, *diversion*. Diversion aims to keep applicants from receiving food stamp assistance, regardless of their needs. The underlying message here is often communicated through catch jargons, such as "get a job quickly or exhaust all alternatives to cash assistance" (Gais et al. 2000). Diversion is also encapsulated through

asking simple questions, like "have you looked for a job? " or "can someone else support you (Bersharov and Germanis 2000)?" Another element of diversion is that state and local governments do not make sufficient efforts to educate applicants about the differences in eligibility requirements for food stamps and cash assistance (America 1999). Often, in the perception of low-income individuals, there is no difference between welfare and food stamp eligibility. In general, the working poor believe that earnings may disqualify them for food stamps (Zedlewski and Brauner 1999). These two strategies may lead to different outcomes in food stamp participation.

The Client

A client may leave the food stamp program because of the healthy socioeconomic conditions in which the client is situated (Parisi and Gill 2001). At the same time, the client may leave because of a misperception of the welfare environment. It is common for clients to develop different perspectives from that advocated by a state agency (Tickamyer et al. 2000). Such situations can result in food insecurity, and clients may seek alternative forms of assistance from family and friends or community based organizations (Andrews and Nord 2000; Besharov and Germanis 2000; Beth and Lewis 1998). Harris (1993;1996) has indicated that among the alternatives, using community based organizations is common for individuals who leave public assistance. Another coping mechanism is to ration food, skip meals, or substitute food groups (Gais et al. 2000). Those strategies are generally associated with an increase of food insecurity leading to serious negative consequences on the well-being of low-income populations. Among the most common issues with food insecurity are (1) negative economic consequences for the household (Hamelin et al. 1999), (2) chronic health conditions

(Olson 1999), and (3) psychological implications leading to poor behavioral and academic functioning in low-income children (Murphy et al. 1998).

Community Capacity

Current research emphasizes the ability of communities to help low-income people to overcome hurdles imposed by the present economic and political environment (Duncan 1996; Duncan 1999; Duncan and Lamborghini 1994; Edin and Lein 1996; Hirschl and Rank 1991; Pickering 2000; Wacquant and Wilson 1989; Wilson 1987). The powerful impact of community upon the well-being of local populations has been described using various terms: (1) local capitalism (Tolbert et al. 1998); (2) social capital (Coleman 1988); (3) community agency (Wilkinson 2000); (4) entrepreneurial social infrastructure (Flora and Flora 1993); and (5) problem solving capacity (Young 1999). *Local capitalism* refers to a local economy that is not dominated by a single, large scale industry, but, rather, organized around networks of various businesses embedded in the local social structure. *Social capital* refers to a comprehensive network of social associations (Coleman 1988; Portes and Sesenbrenner 1993; Putnam 1993a; 1993b; 2000). This network is comprised of formal and informal social and economic organizations that influence the extent to which a place can develop local, comprehensive associations necessary to establish channels of communication inside and outside of the place (Flora 1998; Flora and Flora 1995; Granovetter 1985; Tolbert et al. 1998; Sharp 2001). *Community agency* refers to processes of interaction necessary to develop a place-oriented interest. Generally, this process of interaction takes place on two levels. The first level involves social fields: communication processes that enable participants of each group in a place to develop similar interests about local issues (Wilkinson 1970a).

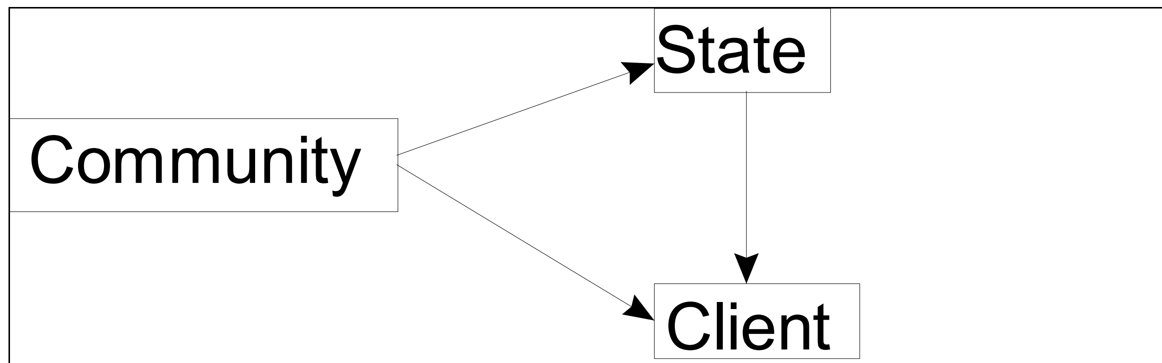
The second level involves community field: communication processes that enable different interests expressed through social fields to converge, overlap, and be coordinated (Wilkinson 1970b; Wilkinson 2000). *Entrepreneurial social infrastructure* (ESI) refers to a social structure with three dimensions: (1) symbolic diversity; (2) wide-spread resource mobilization; and (3) diversity of networks (Flora and Flora 1993). Symbolic diversity focuses on inclusiveness through accepting controversy and alternative means to achieve a particular goal. Resource mobilization calls for equal distribution of surplus and a willingness to invest collectively. Diversity of networks refers to the integration of horizontal and vertical networks to facilitate the flow of internal and external resources into a given place. *Problem solving capacity* refers to the ability of a place to develop structural conditions necessary to solve local problems and to negotiate local interests with the outside world.

The foregoing discussion suggests that community capacity involves three main dimensions: (1) social organization, (2) locally-oriented processes, and (3) locally-oriented collective action. The first dimension functions as a channel of communication across groups in the community. The second functions as a channel of communication within groups and is central to the development of awareness, knowledge, and importance of local issues for the well-being of the community. The third dimension is central to mobilizing human, social, and economic resources essential to tackle issues threatening community well-being. In this view, community capacity is central to the ability of a place to negotiate its interests with the outside world (Parisi et al. 2000).

Theoretical Model

The proposed theoretical model integrates the state, clients, and local communities to explain implications of welfare policy change for food security. The general model is illustrated in Figure 1. This model shows that the strategy undertaken by the state can influence client use of the food stamp program. On the other hand, community capacity provides a link between the state and the client. A place that has a high quality of community capacity can help the state to identify problems and solutions to food insecurity. On the other hand, community capacity helps the clients in two ways. First, it may reduce the disparity between the state's and clients' perceptions of changes in welfare policy. Second, it reaches clients by providing alternative methods of food assistance. In general, community capacity is essential to cope with changes that threaten the food security of low-income populations. Given the present political devolution toward local responsibility, identifying factors that promote or thwart community capacity is a key component of future food security policies that embrace the notion of local responsibility.

Figure 1: Theoretical Model



Chapter III: Methods

A research design was developed to generate data to address each of the objectives of this study:

I. To determine if the strategies undertaken by the state of Mississippi to implement the Food Stamp Program after the passage of the 1996 welfare reform act might account for the decline in Food Stamp participation.

II. To determine community capacity to cope with the new policy requirements and the needs of local low-income populations.

III. To determine the extent to which the exit of clients from the Food Stamp Program might be related to a disparity between the state's administration and the clients' perceptions of the program.

The design entailed the use of secondary and primary data. The former came from multiple sources, and the latter from telephone and face-to-face interviews of key informants and food stamp clients. These data were used to generate information on state, community, and client sociodemographic characteristics. In the paragraphs that follow, we outline the procedure to generate data at state, community, and client levels.

State-level Data

Three sources of data were used to generate general statistics at the state level. First, data from the Mississippi Department of Human Services (DHS) were used to develop statistics on low-income people who participated in the Food Stamp program since October 1996. Second, data from the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census were used to develop indicators on economic and demographic trends. Third, a key informant methodology was developed to gather information on the link between welfare reform and Food Stamp participation. We used this methodology because key informants are individuals privy to important events and are able to provide a researcher

with reliable and valid information (Krannich and Humphrey 1986; Parisi et al. 2000; Poggie 1972; Schwartz, Bridger, and Hyman 2001; Seidler 1974; Young 1999).

Key informant data were generated in two stages. First, individuals knowledgeable about changes in welfare policies in Mississippi were identified. Second, a telephone and a face-to-face survey were conducted to gather information on the implications of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act on food stamp participation.

In order to generate data that was both valid and reliable, key-informants were identified using a telephone snowball procedure. The procedure began with an initial list of 21 individuals who were identified as knowledgeable about welfare reform by researchers with years of experience in the social service field in Mississippi. Each of these individuals was contacted and briefed about the objective of the study. They were also asked to provide the name, phone number, and physical address of other individuals perceived as having considerable knowledge about welfare policies in Mississippi. The new identified individuals were contacted and briefed about the study, and also asked to provide the name, phone number, and physical address of other knowledgeable individuals. This process led to a total of 400 phone calls.

An individual was classified as a key informant based on two criteria. First, one had to be named by others at least twice. Second, the individual must have been willing to participate in the study and knowledgeable about the information sought. In this respect, individuals were asked to rate their level of knowledge on a scale of one to five, where one indicated complete lack of knowledge, and five very knowledgeable. Only individuals identifying themselves as knowledgeable or very knowledgeable were selected for the study. Following this rationale, we were able to identify fifty key-

informants willing to participate in the study. These key-informants held key positions in organizations concerned with the political and practical implications of welfare reform in Mississippi.

The list of key-informants was divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 44 key informants and the second included the six key-informants who were consistently referred as the most knowledgeable about the implications of welfare reform on the well-being of low-income people in Mississippi. The first group of key-informants was used to conduct a telephone survey and the second group to conduct face-to-face interviews. The telephone survey was designed to gather information in five major areas: (1) the strategies undertaken to meet the goals of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act; (2) the relationship between the state and the client with regard to communicating the changes in public assistance; (3) the implications of devolution of program responsibility to the local level; (4) the barriers to work; and (5) the overall effectiveness of the state in meeting the goals of welfare reform. The face-to-face interviews were designed to understand how the political, economic, and social context related to each of the areas outlined in the telephone survey.

Community-Level Data

Two case studies were selected based on the decline in county Food Stamp participation rates between October 1996 and October 2001. The counties selected were Coahoma County and Lee County. The former was located in the Mississippi Delta region and the latter in the Northeast Mississippi region. The Delta region is composed primarily of African Americans and has historically experienced high rates of poverty as well as high levels of dependence on public assistance. In contrast, the Northeast region

is more racially diverse and has a history of economic and civic viability (Parisi et al. 2000).

Three sources of data were secured for each of the case studies. First, Administrative data were compiled to generate information on clients' demographic characteristics. Second, Decennial Census data from 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 were generated to provide information on economic and demographic trends to assess economic capacity for placing clients in the workforce. Third, ethnographic data were collected from face-to-face interviews. Seven individuals were interviewed from Coahoma County and nine from Lee County. These key informants were members of local social service agencies and local civic organizations, and were selected through a snowball sampling procedure. As indicated in the previous section, this procedure consisted of identifying the most knowledgeable people about the implications of welfare reform on the well-being of low-income populations in a given community.

A questionnaire including open-ended questions was developed to assess community social capacity toward helping needy families. Specifically, the questions were designed to gather information in three major areas: (1) the nature of the social relations between low-income families and local organizations; (2) the factors that promote or thwart the emergence of networks between clients and local organizations; and (3) the capacity of local agencies to generate and mobilize resources toward helping the needy.

Client-level Data

Several Food Stamp clients were selected from each case study to gather information on perceptions of welfare reform as it relates to local food assistance

opportunities. These clients were selected through two procedures. The first procedure entailed the identification of Food Stamp clients based on a list generated from administrative data. We were able to obtain telephone numbers through an Internet telephone directory for 63 individuals. Of the 63 individuals, 29 had disconnected numbers and 12 could not be reached. Of the remaining 12, only six agreed to participate in this study. One individual was from Lee County and five from Coahoma County. To increase the number of food stamp participants, the second procedure entailed contacting representatives of local non-governmental organizations. These organizations either (1) provided names and phone numbers of Food Stamp clients, or (2) provided the opportunity to speak with a group of their clients. Through this process, we were able to identify an additional 12 individuals, for a total of 18 clients willing to participate in the study. Unfortunately, we were able to complete only 10 interviews as the remaining eight clients failed to meet their interview appointments. Upon re-contacting these individuals, they indicated that they refused to participate because of a lack of financial incentives and transportation. Of the completed interviews, two were from Lee County and eight from Coahoma County.

Chapter IV: Results

In this analysis, we first report the characteristics of low-income people that have used Food Stamps since the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. Second, we report the changes in economic and demographic characteristics of Mississippi over the last three decades. Finally, we provide an overview of the results of the key informant telephone survey and face-to-face interviews.

State-level Analysis

Client Characteristics

Between October 1996 and October 2001, Mississippi experienced a 31 percent decline in the number of low-income people on Food Stamps (See Table 1). Within the five-year period, the clients who received Food Stamp benefits were predominantly female (71 percent), and only 18 percent of the clients were married.

Approximately 70 percent were African American, and the average age was 38. An appreciative number of clients had less than a high school education (83 percent), and the remaining 13 and 4 percent had high school and some college education, respectively. In terms of number of children, 63 percent of the clients had one child, 20 percent had two children, 10 percent had three children, and the remaining seven percent had four or more children. As for the age of their children, approximately 32 percent of clients had preschool children. Of those clients, 21 percent had one preschool child, nine percent two children, two percent three children, and less than one percent had more than four children. Only four percent of clients reported employment while they were on food stamps, and their average employment duration was less than one month. In addition, 32 percent had a vehicle, and eight percent received TANF benefits.

Table 1: Characteristics of Mississippi Food Stamp Recipients (Between October 1996 and October 2001)

Total Enrollment	
October 1996	210,343
October 2001	145,214
Percent Change 1996-2001	30.96
Mean Spell Duration	17.61
Mean Number of Spells	1.90
Sex	
Percent Male	29.04
Percent Female	70.96
Race	
Percent Black	69.15
Percent White	30.85
Mean Age	37.78
Education	
Percent with Less than a High School Degree	82.57
Percent with a High School Degree	13.16
Percent with Some College Education	4.26
Marital Status	
Percent Married	17.54
Percent Not Married	82.46
Children	
Percent with 1 Child	63.02
Percent with 2 Children	19.17
Percent with 3 Children	10.37
Percent with 4+ Children	7.44
Preschool Children	
Percent with 0 Children	67.76
Percent with 1 Child	20.63
Percent with 2 Children	8.86
Percent with 3 Children	2.17
Percent with 4+ Children	0.58
Employment Status	
Percent Employed	3.99
Percent Unemployed	96.01
Mean Work Duration	0.70
Transportation Status	
Percent with a Vehicle	31.95
Percent without a Vehicle	68.05
Cash Assistance	
Percent Receiving TANF	8.03
Percent Not Receiving TANF	91.97

Source: Authors' Tabulations of data from the Mississippi Department of Human Services

State Economic and Demographic Characteristics

Over the last three decades, Mississippi has experienced very minor changes in its total population and racial composition (See Table 2). During the same period, however, educational attainment increased dramatically. The percentage of people with some college education increased from 17 percent in 1970 to 43 percent in 2000, and the percentage with high school change from 24 to 30 percent. This improvement in the overall level of education accounts for the decline of the percentage with less than high school, which dropped from 59 to 27 percent. Similarly, there has been an increase in the percent of females in the workforce, from 26 to 53 percent. Low-income people also saw a decrease in employment opportunities over the course of three decades. That is, the percent employed in the retail sector in 2000 was the lowest over the last three decades. Although the poverty rate decreased from 35 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 2000, the unemployment rate remained fairly stable around seven percent.

Welfare Policy

The key-informants indicated that many low-income people left public assistance not through the job route but rather because the policy itself forced them to leave cash and food assistance. In this respect, they indicated that the welfare policy contributed to decline of welfare rolls in three important ways: (1) adoption of a work strategy based on case reduction, (2) lack of state responsibility to help the needy, and (3) failure to address barriers to work.

Table 2: Economic and Sociodemographics in Mississippi, 1970-2000

	1970	1980	1990	2000
Population	2,216,994	2,520,638	2,873,216	2,844,658
Race				
Percent Black	36.8	35.2	35.6	36.3
Percent White	62.8	64.2	63.5	61.4
Percent Other	0.4	0.6	0.9	2.3
Education				
Percent Less than High School	59.0	45.2	35.7	27.1
Percent High School Degree	23.9	29.2	27.5	29.4
Percent Some College Education	17.0	25.6	36.8	43.5
Employment Structure				
Percent Females in the Workforce	26.2	24.3	52.0	53.3
Percent Employed in Retail	17.1	14.7	16.1	11.8
Poverty Rate	35.4	23.9	25.2	19.9
Unemployment Rate	5.0	7.1	8.6	7.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Welfare Initiatives. The key-informants who participated in the telephone survey were asked to rate on a scale of one to four the importance given to the goals of increasing workforce participation and reducing caseloads by the state of Mississippi for the TANF and Food Stamp programs (1 = None, 4 = A lot). As indicated in Table 3, the telephone survey key-informants stated that the reduction of caseloads was the primary goal of Mississippi for both the TANF and Food Stamp programs.

Table 3: Welfare Goals

	TANF		Food Stamps	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Increasing Workforce Participation	2.77	.97	2.42	.79
Reducing Caseloads	3.58	.84	3.13	1.17

Available responses 1 = None; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot of state support

When asked about the rationale behind the caseload reduction strategy, several of the personal interview key-informants stated that it was the result of a public mindset that "*demonized*" low-income families and viewed the past welfare system more as a cause of public dependency than a solution. That is, as one key-informant stated: "*the old AFDC Program really was not doing much to help families move out of poverty, and that poor families were getting, were dropping into a deeper class, a deeper strata of poverty*." In addition, *"Generally the poor were treated as though it was their fault for their situation in poverty. This situation seemed to be especially true for Black women, as policymakers saw them as being immoral and having too many children. Basically, they were being punished for having sex and liking it."* These two views created a consensus among

both policymakers and the general public that: *"Everybody needs to get up and go take care of themselves and their children, and we all agreed that these women are just, they're sitting around doing nothing and they need to get out and make a living like the rest of us."*

In this respect, key-informants suggested that welfare reform in Mississippi provided an opportunity for the state to take a *"punitive stance"* against *"the undeserving poor"* by taking away their public assistance safety net. One personal interview key-informant indicated:

> *"The Welfare Reform Act in Mississippi was very welcomed but not from the standpoint of moving people to self-sufficiency. It was very welcomed because the administration had a strong sense that people had to get off their butts and get to work…So, there was a strong sense that what we needed to do was force these people [food stamp and TANF clients] back to work so that that part of it took on a very punitive stance and it is my understanding Mississippi percentage-wise put more people off the rolls than any other state."*

One key-informant noted that the methods taken to force clients to go to work was to convey to them: *"we're going to kick you off, we're going to threaten you, you gotta go to work and you go find your own job, and blah, blah, blah"* and this was directly related to the drop in both TANF and Food Stamps. "*So, [we're] really setting them up to drop off of the program, which is what a lot of people did."* This method, however, was more relaxed towards Food Stamp than TANF clients. As one personal interview key-informant stated: *"I think the whole idea of food stamps elicits more compassion from people than the idea of direct payments in lieu of salaries. I think that there was some of the same treatment but food stamp people got a little bit more compassion."*

The decline in both TANF and Food Stamps was also related to the failure to clearly communicate the changes in public assistance at all levels. For example, although

the Welfare Reform Act was officially implemented in October 1996, the Mississippi TANF plan did not have formal guidelines until 1997. This created confusion regarding eligibility for public assistance, particularly for Food Stamp participants. As a result, some individuals were temporarily denied food assistance.

In addition, key-informants pointed out that the lack of training of state and local DHS personnel to address the new policy requirements, as well as their inability to fully understand the policy changes, might also have contributed to the decline of TANF and Food Stamp rolls. One personal interview key-informant synthesized this problem by saying: *"They [DHS personnel] couldn't keep up with the change, so they would give them a manual and tell them to read it and do it and, of course, people couldn't do this. So, I don't know that they communicated in terms of actual training experience to DHS workers. I think the communication was in big bulks of paper that probably half couldn't read."*

Another communication problem was related to the means used by the state to directly communicate changes to clients. Although the state implemented several massive mail-outs, they may not have been successful for two important reasons: (1) low level of literacy among low-income people and (2) misperceptions about policy changes. These misperceptions were predominantly communicated through word-of-mouth, which added to the clients' confusion as to their public assistance options. Key-informants indicated that the general sentiment among low-income people was that DHS was uncooperative and unwilling to provide assistance. As one personal interview key-informant indicated: "*if the word on the street was that the people at DHS were 'nasty'*

no matter how many meetings and forums the state held, the poor would not go to DHS for assistance". As a result, many low-income people ceased to pursue public assistance.

State Administrative and Civic Responsibility. In the telephone survey, key-informants were asked to indicate the extent to which the state has transferred administrative and civic responsibility for the TANF and Food Stamp programs to local jurisdictions (district/region, county, and community) and to nonprofit, voluntary, or faith-based organizations. They were asked to rate this transfer on a scale from one to four where one indicated that the state had transferred no responsibility and four indicated that the state had transferred a lot of responsibility. The results indicated that in Mississippi administrative responsibility was primarily transferred to the county-level and to some extent, to district or administrative regions (See Table 4). In contrast, little or no administrative responsibility was transferred to local communities. The results also indicated that civic responsibility was primarily transferred to state and local voluntary/nonprofit organizations as opposed to faith-based organizations. In general, more civic responsibility was transferred to aid low-income people with food rather than cash assistance.

Table 4: Transfer of Administrative and Civic Responsibility

	TANF		Food Stamps	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Administrative Responsibility				
District/Region	2.53	.86	2.50	.98
County	2.79	1.09	2.55	1.03
Community	1.97	.91	1.78	.97
Civic Responsibility				
Statewide voluntary or nonprofit	2.68	1.05	3.15	.98
Statewide faith-based	2.38	1.04	2.85	.90
Local voluntary or nonprofit	2.71	1.08	3.18	.90
Local faith-based	2.59	1.12	2.97	1.00

Available responses 1 = None; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot.

Personal interview key-informants expressed concern about the transfer of administrative responsibility to local jurisdictions in order to overcome the problems of poverty. In particular, taking away administrative responsibility from the state increased the level of confusion about the implementation of the policy and mistreatment of low-income people. As one key-informant stated: *"Every county was interpret[ing] the DHS regulations the way the county wanted to interpret them…There was very subjective interpretations on what should put people off of welfare. That became a major issue because people were declared work ready and their time clock began to tick even though we were uncertain that any of them could actually go to work."*

Concern was also raised about the transfer of civic responsibility to voluntary, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations. That is, civic organizations often have limited resources and means to address the issue of food security and the main barriers to place low-income families on a path to self-sufficiency. In this respect, the general sentiment was that the federal and state governments should not be exonerated from assisting vulnerable population and to include other parties in a more inclusive and democratic decision-making process. These two points were clearly stated by one of the key-informants:

"We have to be very careful that we don't allow the government to advocate their responsibility to the people they are to serve… What is the government doing? What is the role of government to serve the poor and to take care of the poor in the country? We have to be careful that devolution [transfer of responsibility] doesn't mean that everybody else is responsible for the people except for the federal government and the state."

"If [welfare reform was] going to be successful [it] had to get out of the plantation system and… address issues [of] collaboration, giving up turf, doing away with racism, building a sound economic program… You will have a plantation system as long as you don't give people a voice in their lives. That was what slavery was. Slavery

was not giving people a voice in their own lives. So, as long a[s] devolution doesn't give people a voice in their own lives, then we perpetuate the plantation system."

The general opinion was that the role of both federal and state government is to intervene in poor socioeconomic conditions and to assist the needy to overcome structural impediments to self-sufficiency. In addition, both the government and the general public must recognize that welfare dependency is the result of low human capital, poor local economic and social conditions, and limited access to transportation and childcare assistance rather than people's unwillingness to work. One key-informant clearly stated this problem: *"In a place like the Mississippi Delta [with high poverty rates, limited employment opportunities, and low levels of human capital], what are you going to do? You know, you can berate and beat 'em and say all kinds of dirty things about them, but what are they going to do?"* The key issue is that in poor socioeconomic conditions, the state must address the structural barriers to work.

Barriers to Work. Telephone survey key-informants were asked to rate on a scale from one to four (1 = None, 4 = A lot) the amount of assistance the state has provided to low-income people for addressing employment barriers since the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. Specifically, key-informants were asked matrix questions concerning four major employment barriers: (1) human capital development, (2) employment opportunities, (3) transportation, and (4) child assistance. The results indicated that the state has taken some actions to improve access to transportation and childcare (See Table 5). Specifically, for transportation, the emphasis has been placed on improving access to personal transportation. For child assistance, the state has placed emphasis on providing health insurance, enforcing child support, and increasing financial assistance for childcare.

Table 5: Efforts to Address Barriers to Employment

Program	Mean	SD
Human Capital Development		
Completion of a high school diploma/GED	2.79	.90
Post high school education	2.10	.89
Job training	2.56	.83
Finding jobs	2.56	.83
Employment skills	2.42	.82
Average Human Capital Development Score	2.49	
Employment Opportunities		
Bringing in jobs to local communities	1.80	.85
Creating partnerships between local industry and local welfare clients	2.02	.86
Seeking out higher paying jobs to Bring into communities	1.67	.76
Providing state subsidized Employment	1.97	.93
Substitution of community service activities for work requirements	2.39	.92
Average Employment Opportunities Score	1.97	
Transportation		
Finding local forms of transportation	2.80	1.05
Obtaining personal transportation	3.23	.99
Average Transportation Score	3.02	
Child Assistance		
Financial assistance for childcare	2.68	.74
Assistance in locating childcare	2.19	.98
Funding the establishment of new childcare centers	1.98	.97
General child assistance	2.50	.93
Enforcement of child support	3.07	.84
Health insurance	3.39	.65
Average Child Assistance Score	2.99	

Available responses 1 = None; 2 = A little; 3 = Some; 4 = A lot.

The results also indicated that the state has taken limited action toward developing human capital and almost no action toward increasing employment opportunities. As for human capital development, the emphasis has been primarily on helping low-income people to complete high school, earn their GED, or receive job training. As for creating employment opportunities, the only significant action that was taken was to substitute community service as a work activity.

The general consensus among personal interview key-informants was that after the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act in Mississippi, the state refused to help shoulder its responsibility toward assisting low-income families. Although key-informants with experience in public service administration indicated that the state did everything in its capacity to help low-income people to gain employment, other key-informants who have more direct contact with low-income people reported that the state has failed to adequately address the "true" barriers to work. First, the state has failed to help poor local communities bring in jobs despite welfare reform's job requirements. In particular, the lack of employment opportunities was addressed by one of the key-informants who stated: *"If the Department of Economic Development in the state hasn't been able to bring jobs in, TANF [welfare reform] certainly won't do it."*

Second, many low-income people fail to gain employment because of job discrimination. *"The very people who were financing the campaigns that were saying, 'we need to kick people off welfare,' these were the same people who couldn't, wouldn't hire them. Didn't want to hire welfare mothers."*

Third, many low-income people fail to gain employment after receiving training because the it is not job specific. As one key-informant speculated: *"Many did not have*

jobs after six months [of training] because they were being trained for nonspecific jobs and [in] the economy there were just no jobs to move to." This failure to create job-specific training programs is due to the disconnection between the state and the business community. As one key-informant noted: *"I think that [meeting welfare reform goals] is going to involve…participation of [the] business community who was never a part of this. You see these people were going out for jobs and the very people who could give them the jobs was not a part of the process."*

Fourth, another obstacle for many low-income people that was overlooked by the state was the mismatch between the public transportation schedule and night shift jobs. "*The easiest jobs to get are the 5-9 shifts because people want to be home with their families, but the mass transit system stops running. So people can get to work but can't get home."* In addition, many overlook the problem of transportation in remote rural communities. One key informant said: "*It [Mississippi] is a very rural state…We are talking about people being miles away from each other and the transportation not being there. Transportation is not [in] existence for a lot of people in the counties."* One possible solution to this problem is the usage of TANF funds to purchase cars for clients who need transportation to jobs. Unfortunately, Mississippi has not embraced this initiative as one key-informant stated:

> "*Wouldn't it be a wonderful way to get people back and forth to work and a wonderful use of money if we gave people cars that they could car pool from Anguila to the fish plant in Belzona and there would be six people getting back and forth because the state invested in their transportation? There are some creative ways we can come up with, and I am not talking about yellow school buses going door to door… I think cars are still considered an asset so people can't get welfare, the support systems, or food stamps because they own a car. Well, for heaven's sakes, how do we expect them to get off food stamps if they don't own a car to get to a job?"*

Fifth, a similar problem exists in regards to childcare. That is, many childcare facilities do not operate during the night hours that low-income parents are at work. Two personal interview key informants asked the question: *"What about people on 2nd and 3rd shift jobs?"* Another problem is that even if transportation is provided for going to and from work, this does not include service to childcare facilities. This forced many low-income people to leave their children in informal childcare arrangements that lack educational and safety standards. "[T*ransportation] wasn't provided for taking children to childcare before you go to work, or picking children up after you get off work. So, the, what has happened as the result of the program, is that a lot of children are in informal care, children who should be getting early childhood education experiences are staying with parents or grandparents or the friend down the street or somebody."*

In sum, key informants expressed mixed feelings about measuring the success of welfare reform solely based on caseload reductions. As one personal interview key-informant noted: *"Measuring success is difficult because if you measure success in terms of people coming off welfare and becoming [self-]sufficient, the answer is no. It has not been successful, it has knocked more people off the rolls and we don't know what has happened to them."* Instead, they suggested that a better measure of success would be one that provides an indication of changes in family well-being and employment status. One personal interview key-informant suggests: *"Success would be moving people from welfare to work and assisting them in staying there until they could…get some stability and a foothold in [the workforce] so that they don't slide back off, and providing the supports [services] that they need."* In this respect, welfare reform has not been successful. A general feeling is that many low-income families after the passage of the

act have struggled with several important issues such as unemployment, economic and food insecurity, bill payments, and spending time with children. On the other hand, key informants indicated that the act has been very successful in terms of increasing awareness of "true" structural barriers that low-income people have to overcome in order to become self-sufficient. The main success of welfare reform was summed up by one key-informant who stated:

I think though, that if welfare reform measured its success, I would say it has been successful in beginning to change mindsets and beginning to[tell] the poor that they do have a voice in their own lives and that they can become self-sufficient. I think it has been successful in naming the problems that need to be changed. I think [that] before we were in La La Land and we took all these issues as a given. I think now we are able to articulate what needs to be changed in terms of changing systems. So, in those ways I would say welfare reform has been a success."

Community-level Analysis

In this section, we first present the characteristics of the clients in both Coahoma and Lee County. Next, we report statistics on county economic and demographic characteristics. Finally, we report the results of the key-informant personal interviews.

Clients' Characteristics

Between October 1996 and October 2001, the number of individuals on Food Stamps in Coahoma County declined from 4,518 to 3,012, accounting for a drop of 33 percent (See Figure 1). During this same time, Lee County experienced a moderate decline in Food Stamp participation. The number of people on Food Stamps dropped from 2,618 to 2,402, accounting for an eight percent decline.

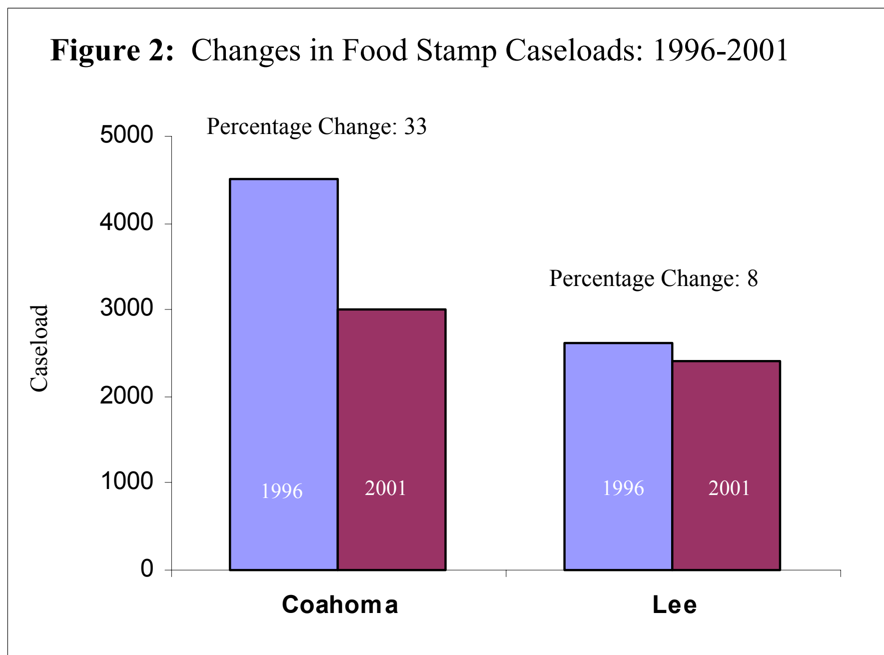


Figure 2: Changes in Food Stamp Caseloads: 1996-2001

Table 6 reports the statistics on the characteristics of low-income people who received Food Stamps between October 1996 and October 2001 in both Coahoma and Lee County. These statistics indicate that the food stamp average spell duration is approximately 22 months for Coahoma County and 19 months for Lee County. Both counties have average of two spells, meaning that exiting from Food Stamp rolls is followed by a reentry.

Demographically, Food Stamp clients in Coahoma County are less racially diverse than those in Lee County (93 and 62 percent African American, respectively). On average, Food Stamp clients are younger in Coahoma County than Lee County (37 and 39 years, respectively). In Coahoma County, however, 13 percent of Food Stamp clients have some college education, compared to only 1 percent in Lee County.

Table 6: Characteristics of Coahoma and Lee County Food Stamp Recipients

	Coahoma County	Lee County
Average Duration	21.86	18.64
Average Number of Spells	1.98	1.83
Race		
Percent Black	93.00	61.74
Percent White	7.00	38.26
Age	36.60	38.99
Education		
Percent Less than High School	70.78	81.74
Percent High School	16.19	16.96
Percent Some College	13.03	1.30
Percent Married	8.23	6.96
Children		
Percent with 1 Child	55.34	61.40
Percent with 2 Children	19.83	19.08
Percent with 3 Children	13.18	11.18
Percent with 4+ Children	11.65	8.33
Preschool Children		
Percent with 0 Children	59.50	67.11
Percent with 1 Child	23.58	19.52
Percent with 2 Children	12.34	9.21
Percent with 3 Children	3.19	3.07
Percent with 4+ Children	1.39	1.10
Percent Working	10.70	2.17
Average work duration	2.22	0.56
Percent with a Vehicle	21.95	38.48
Percent on TANF	17.01	7.39

Source: Authors' Tabulations of data from the Mississippi Department of Human Services.

Coahoma County also has a slightly higher percentage of married clients (8 percent) than Lee County (7 percent). The number and age of children characterize another important difference between the two counties. Clients in Coahoma County are more likely to have higher numbers of children, as well as younger children, than those in Lee County.

In addition, the two counties possess substantial differences in regards to employment, vehicle ownership, and cash assistance. Not only does Coahoma County

have a higher percentage of clients who work while receiving food stamp assistance than Lee County, they also, on average, work for longer periods of time. This is despite the fact that in Coahoma County, there are fewer clients who own a vehicle than in Lee County (22 and 38 percent, respectively). Finally, in Coahoma County there are more Food Stamp clients that receive TANF than in Lee County (17 and 7 percent, respectively).

County Economic and Demographic Characteristics

The differences in economic and demographic characteristics between Coahoma and Lee County are reported in Table 7. Between 1970 and 2000, the overall population of Coahoma County declined by 25 percent, from 40,447 to 30,622. During that same period, however, it experienced an increase in educational attainment. The percentage of people with some college education increased from 16 percent to 40 percent, while the percentage with less than a high school education dropped from 69 percent to 38 percent.

There was also a moderate increase in the percentage of females in the workforce, from 36 percent to 48 percent. The percentage of the population employed in retail increased from 10 percent to 17 percent between 1970 and 1990. However, between 1990 and 2000, it decreased by approximately seven percent. The poverty rate declined from 55 percent in 1970 to 36 percent in 2000, and the unemployment rate fluctuated substantially as between 1970 and 1980 it increased from 8 to 13 percent before declining to 10 percent in 2000.

Table 7: Economic and Sociodemographics for Coahoma and Lee Counties, 1970-2000

	Coahoma County				Lee County			
	1970	1980	1990	2000	1970	1980	1990	2000
Population	40,447	36,918	31,665	30,622	46,136	57,061	65,589	75,755
Race								
Percent Black	64.3	64.0	64.6	69.2	20.6	20.4	21.3	24.5
Percent White	35.4	35.4	34.5	29.3	79.2	79.3	77.7	73.7
Percent Other	0.3	0.6	1.4	1.5	0.2	0.3	1.0	1.8
Education								.
Percent Less than High School	68.8	56.2	46.0	37.8	53.4	41.2	32.2	25.3
Percent High School Degree	15.2	19.5	18.2	21.5	25.6	31.7	27.9	28.2
Percent Some College Education	16.0	24.3	35.8	40.7	19.3	27.1	39.9	46.5
Employment Structure								
Percent Females in the Workforce	35.7	44.3	44.3	47.9	47.2	56.7	59.2	60.7
Percent Employed in Retail	10.3	15.4	16.5	10.2	9.7	14.9	16.5	13.3
Poverty Rate	54.6	40.6	45.5	35.9	22.9	15.8	15.4	13.4
Unemployment Rate	7.7	12.5	12.2	10.1	4.9	5.5	5.2	4.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

In Lee County, between 1970 and 2000, the population grew from 46,136 to 75,755, accounting for a 64 percent increase. Lee County had an increase in level of education and females the workforce that mirror the trends of Coahoma County. Although the percent change in poverty and unemployment were similar to those of Coahoma County, Lee County has historically had lower poverty and unemployment rates.

Key-Informant Personal Interviews

In this section the results are organized around the objective and subjective features of social capital. The former includes the number and type of social relations between and among organizations in a community. The latter includes the nature of the relationship in terms of expectations, obligations, and trust between and among organizations and between the organizations and the clients.

The key-informants came from Clarksdale, the county seat and largest city of Coahoma County. These key-informants were also involved with welfare clients throughout the county. Clarksdale provides the main access to social, economic, and public resources to low-income people throughout the county. In other words, it is the "hub" of social service providers for the county.

In Coahoma County, a sense of mistrust characterizes the relationships between low-income populations and local organizations. As a result, local organizations have to incur an additional operational cost to prevent what they view as misuse of resources. One key-informant provided a description of the complex methods used to determine if a client has "valid" needs: "*If you are a new applicant and you come in, we check you out*

and find out if you own or are renting, what kind of car you drive, are you employed, where your children go to school and if the children are not in school we have to report it to the truant officer". From the local organizations' perspective, clients seek services to exploit resources for illegitimate means. As one key-informant reported:

"We try to take all the preventive measures, checking to see where a person works, checking with neighbors, we have a lady [and] that is what she does, and checking with neighbors to see if there is a real valid need there. We have had people that have come in and gotten food and taken it out and sold it. This has been documented. We have had people that have gotten clothes and had yard sales."

There is also concern that clients do not act responsibly with the assistance they receive and with their personal economic resources. For example, for one organization, proof of living by a budget is required to receive services. As one key-informant noted *"if you have over $150 a month income that you can't account for, then we won't help you with [assistance]. We feel if the person can spend $150 dollars and month and not be able to tell you where it went then he is not being frugal with his money."*

From a client perspective, the organizations have rules and regulations that diminish clients' incentives for seeking their assistance. Part of this comes from the types of information clients are required to give in order to receive services, such as children's paternity and their monthly income. A key-informant commented on this situation by saying: *"Some of them are scared and some of them don't want to give out certain type[s] of information. They feel they might mess them up or something."*

At other times, clients may be hesitant to seek assistance because they don't understand the rules of welfare reform. Clients are encouraged to find employment, however, once they begin working their benefits decline or are eliminated altogether even though they may still require assistance. One key-informant stated this situation was

common among public assistance clients. *"[They ask] 'Why are my benefits cut?' They are not understanding that these programs are supplementary programs, not to completely feed them or provide for them, but it is like supplement programs."*

Much of the insistence on rules and regulations is the result of a scarcity of resources rather than a disinterest in helping low-income people. *"We don't have a Red Cross, we don't have a Salvation Army, we're the only [organization] of this type within 75 miles and we're not limited to the [immediate] three counties".* Many key-informants stated that their organizations received some funding from either the state or federal government. Others cited private foundations and regional or national branches of their organization as sources of funds. For some of these grant opportunities, local organizations tend to compete rather than cooperate among themselves. Over the years, competition among local organizations has become characterized as "turfism." As one key-informant stated: *"It's sometimes a little bit difficult [to provide services] because, you know, we have the problem with turfism and you have to prove yourself that you're not to take over or you're not trying to take away from anybody. We're just showing that if we, if we, put our resources on the table we can serve more people rather than serving an isolated group."*

Turfism has led to the isolation of many organizations, which may cause similar services to be delivered by different organizations. This situation is often more inefficient than if the two organizations combined resources. In the words of one key-informant: *"I don't really know about [services provided by] other agencies, but we are not really goal-oriented but we have a general knowledge of what we do, so in some cases we may duplicate the same services."*

Overall, Coahoma County has few organizations available to help its low-income population and most organizations must go outside the community to gather resources. Competition for scarce local resources and support leads to turfism, which discourages cooperation across organizations. In this way, turfism has lead to the mobilization of resources primarily to maintain the viability of an organization, rather than to support direct services to low-income people. For those who did cooperate, these partnerships are only in one limited area, such as education and training or medical care.

As with Coahoma County, the key-informants from Lee County were all located in Tupelo, the county seat and largest city. Again, because of the small size of other communities, clients came from throughout the county to receive services. This was primarily because Tupelo provides a large number of resources to help low-income people.

As opposed to Coahoma County, key-informants from Lee County indicated that the relationship between local organizations and low-income people is built on trust. As one key-informant noted: *"Some people are afraid by coming here they'll be reported and we make a point of helping people who have fallen through the cracks."* They continue by saying:

> *"We're not in a position to judge those things and, so we're here to help and so we try to be a little less bureaucratic than some of the other agencies and we're a little more sympathetic to hardship stories and, even if we get taken advantage once in while, we don't care cause we're trying to reach people that really need help and occasionally somebody that's not deserving will take advantage of us, but we put up with that."*

Part of the reason why organizations serving Lee County can be less rule-driven lies in their greater number and available resources. Most of the funding for the nonprofit

organizations come from local sources and are the result of decades-long relationships between the organizations and their community. In the words of one key-informant:

"The community, prior to starting [this organization] had done some planning and focus groups and they determined as a county, Lee County wanted to be together for the children and family. And it didn't matter if they went to Head Start or private daycare[s] or public school[s] in Tupelo or in the county that all the children belong to the community and that they should be cared for by the community and the family."

These relationships are not just between local organizations and local funding sources, but also between organizations. Monthly meetings are held where representatives from various nonprofit groups discuss issues and members of one organization may even sit on the Board of Directors of a similar organization. *"We really try to partner with every agency out there because we don't want to duplicate services… If you don't partner, you can't do the best job for the client."*

These interlocking relationships serve to benefit the clients as members of one organization can contact another on behalf of the client. As one key-informant noted: *"Sometimes we can call and work things out, you know, when clients couldn't…if you have somebody you can call an advocate for a client, then a lot of times the doors will open back up and you can get it through."* Often a referral from a partnering organization will indicate that the client has been pre-screened and that their needs are legitimate allowing the an organization to *"cut through the red tape"* and provide expedited services. Even if no partnership exists between an organization and another service provider, Lee County key-informants indicated that they have no reservations about contacting the provider in order to provide assistance to their clients. In the words of one key-informant who had done this on occasion: "*We just have to back our ears and call people."*

Overall, Lee County contains many organizations available to assist low-income families and these organizations receive much of their support from community sources. This investment ties the well-being of the low-income to the good of the entire community. Summing up why Lee County is able to succeed in providing for its low-income people, one key-informant stated: *"If people say that's something's wrong or they need something done, then they don't talk about it for 10 years or something. They'll get a group and they'll do it…overall, they have a sense of community that we work together for the good of everybody. And if one group of people are not being treated fairly or have issues, then [it] will hurt all of us."*

Client-level Analysis

For the low-income in Coahoma County, food stamps were the first resource many turned to in order to provide food for their families. These clients usually heard about the program from their family or friends, who may have also received food stamps. The popularity of the program as a means of combating poverty appeared to lessen the stigma attached to Food Stamp usage. When clients were asked about their experiences using their food stamps, many laughed at the reactions of others who often gave them *"looks"* when cashing their stamps. These reactions did not seem to bother the clients particularly because *"everybody gets stamps"* and often those who were critical of the clients were cast as *"jealous"* because they did not receive food stamps.

The clients in Coahoma County tended to be familiar with public assistance rules. However, while some of the clients felt that *"if you [are] cooperative, they'll be cooperative"* others harbored strong negative feelings toward local DHS personnel. As one client stated about her caseworker: *"She acts like, you know, like the money is*

coming out of their [the caseworker's] pocket. Not like the government is giving it to us. It's like it's coming out of their pocket. That's the way she, that's the way they act." This *"hassle"*, as one client described it included the recertifications the clients had to go through, as well as the waiting period many experienced when first receiving food stamps. While some of the clients said they had their paperwork processed on time, several had experienced delays. When asked about whether or not their paperwork got processed on time one client stated: *"Usually. I ain't gonna say 'Yeah' but it depends on if they're backed up or not backed up but usually, as of right now, they backed up."*

Another problem mentioned by the clients were that letters from DHS, particularly those relating to recertification appointments, arrived late and some mentioned the problems experienced by neighbors who lacked the literacy skills needed to understand the letters. Transportation and childcare was also a problem for one client who told of having problems getting reimbursements for the costs she incurred while attending some training classes. *"We're supposed to be getting paid for [coming to training] and paid for childcare and traveling expenses if you're driving. And that's supposed to come every two weeks. I've been [waiting] maybe a month-and-a-half. I haven't received anything."*

One reason the Coahoma County food stamp clients were able to display such displeasure with their local DHS offices may be related to their strong kinship networks. These clients indicated that, in conditions of economic hardship, immediate family members were the primary source of assistance for overcoming economic and food insecurity. In fact, it was very rare for them to experience food insecurity, given their familial relationships. As one client with adult children said: *"I usually tell my children*

that I ain't got [food] and then they'll throw together trying to, you know, get me something."

Clients also mentioned their skills at budgeting their food stamps as reasons why their families were not food insecure. *"When you get food stamps you [are] basically waiting for the sales to come on and try to go where you can find bargains for your family. So, you know, you would try to have enough food to last."* One client spoke of rationing her food stamps by only spending a little amount at a time which would allow her family *"a little something to work with"* if food ran low towards the end of the month. However, while they seemed eager to dispel the myth that people on public assistance were financially irresponsible, some clients derided others who were not able to budget their food stamps properly.

The food stamp clients in Coahoma County also addressed another major stereotype. Many of them had begun receiving food stamps after the loss of a job or the birth of a child. However, they also were quick to point out that they saw food stamps as a temporary measure to be used only until they were able to return to the workforce and while *"they [their DHS caseworker] don't encourage you [to find a job] but if you have a good mind, you won't want to be on welfare forever."* This sentiment was echoed by another client who stated: *"I know it's something that I need for now but it's nothing that I want to get comfortable and set in saying, 'Hey, this is what I want for the rest of my life,' 'cause it's sort of like a handout to me."*

These clients viewed their food stamp receipt as a temporary situation and talked often about how it would not be needed once they had jobs. However, when asked about the support from DHS for finding jobs, many claimed that there was none. Most of the

emphasis was on employment at nearby casinos. When asked about other job opportunities that would provide adequate pay so that food stamps were not needed, almost all the clients responded by that well-paying jobs were not available in their county. Despite this lack of opportunity, many of the clients expressed hesitation about moving away as this would cause them to lose valuable kin networks. In the words of one key informant: *"I stay in a little small town and my family that's around the corner is actually around the corner and if you don't know where a kid is, somebody can point you out to, 'Well, she went with somebody else', you know, and being in a big town like this, now, around the corner could be anywhere."*

In sum, the clients in Coahoma County viewed food stamps as the major option for food security. However, if this assistance was not adequate, there were kin networks that could help provide food and support. It was primarily these kin networks that clients did not want to leave although they admitted there was very little economic opportunity for them in Coahoma County.

The clients in Lee County also knew that food stamps were a valuable resource to combat food insecurity. While one client claimed *"I always knew about food stamps"* another found out about the availability of the program from friends. When asked about how they felt about receiving food stamps, one client responded: *"I feel good [about using food stamps] because I've never had to do it. I've never had to really ask the government for nothing."* Although the clients did report feeling some stigma from others when cashing their food stamps, they realized it was an economic necessity. *"They [the other people in the store] don't understand you gotta eat no matter if you don't got no income or not."*

Because of the need for food stamps, clients in Lee County indicated that it was worthwhile for them to seek public assistance from the local DHS office, although they experienced some hostility and difficulties. While one client stated that his caseworker was cooperative another objected to the long waits they experienced in the DHS office. *"Sometimes I've had to wait thirty minutes. Sometimes and hour, an hour-and-a-half, two hours. It all depends on how many people is there."* The client felt that the treatment was the result of a lack of commitment on behalf of the DHS personnel. *"Sometimes the women seem to me like they [are] just working out an eight hour day."* Once the client actually met with their caseworker, the interaction was very limited and impersonal *"They kind of run you in like cows. Stamp the cow, give him a shot, poke his ear, tag him, run him on through. Because you got some many other people. And that's, basically, how most of them down there seem."*

However, what one client saw as an even bigger problem was the waiting period they experienced when first applying for food stamps. Recounting his initial experience in applying for food stamps, one client said:

> *"So, I went and applied and unfortuntately, it took them approximately three weeks from the day I went to apply to come back for another interview and then it took another two weeks before I went back again. So, I went back about two or three times, I don't understand all that, but it took over four or five weeks before I even got any stamps. And, I mean, I was at dire straits by then. I was at dire straits at the beginning when I went down there."*

Despite the problems the clients experienced with their dealings with DHS, the clients continued to use food stamps, primarily because of a lack of kin networks to provide alternate means of assistance. The clients were hesitant about asking family members or friends for assistance as they also had low-incomes or may be losing a job. Because help from family and friends was sometimes not an option, the Lee Count clients

had to be especially frugal with their food stamps although as one client claimed: *"But, if you try and stretch that little bit out, you know…I mean you get pretty low at times. And it's not enough."*

Although the Lee County food stamp clients were reluctant to ask for assistance from family and friends, both clients were able to name several local organizations that were available to provide food assistance. *"Well, if you run out of food stamps they have food pantries all over town. [There are also] churches, [the] Salvation Army."* Even though both of the clients had visited at least one of these organizations in the past year, they were unwilling to utilize all the resources available in Lee County. Some of the local organizations were those that were supposed to help low-income families and the clients did not wish to take resources away from those who may be less fortunate than themselves.

On the whole, the clients were pleased with the support they received from local organizations, but there were still rules that were perceived as being unfair. Some food pantries, one of the clients stated, were unwilling to provide assistance if an individual's Food Stamp benefits were above a certain level *"Even the food pantries go by if you've got food stamps, like you have to have a count of your household, you know, and if you draw too many food stamps, you're not eligible to get food like that."* Despite these rules, however, both clients seemed to prefer receiving assistance from these local organizations than from a government program.

As with the Coahoma County food stamp clients, the clients in Lee County saw food stamps as a temporary means for combating food insecurity. The clients had begun using food stamps after the loss of a job or after being diagnosed with a health problem.

Both clients expressed a desire to find a job and begin working again. However, the local DHS office did not offer much assistance to find a job. Although one of the clients had been referred to someone to help him find employment, his messages were never returned. The client remained hopeful, however, that this woman may be able to open doors for him with local employers. *"I'm, hoping that she'll find something whereas she can go in and talk to people better'n I could. I had to go in and be myself, but she might go in and say, 'Well, I got 4 or 5 guys need a job real bad.' You know? But if I go in there and say, 'Look, I need a job real bad,' they don't care about that."*

For those without dependents, welfare reform included work requirements and when asked about how their local DHS office helped clients to meet these requirements, one client remarked: *"Well they don't actually find a job for you. You have to get out and hunt them yourself…They'll send you to places [to meet your work requirements]. You work for your food stamps. You're not going to get them free."* Often the clients hoped that these temporary jobs would lead to permanent employment, although they were concerned because Lee County had seen the closings of several industries in recent years.

Despite these closings, the clients still felt there were economic opportunities available in Lee County. They believed the real problem to be that they lacked the social connections that would help them land a job that would allow them to leave Food Stamps. When asked about the possibility of moving in search of a job, one client responded: *"You know, it's, it's impossible to move away. Got nowhere to go. Got no money to go on. And you got to eat and live somewhere if you go somewhere."*

In sum, the Lee County Food Stamp clients were more likely to seek assistance from local organizations rather than from kinship ties and seemed to prefer this relationship to the impersonal relations they had with their local DHS office. They noted that such organizations helped them supplement their Food Stamp benefits, as well as inform them about other sources of assistance. The clients in Lee County still felt that it was possible to find a job in their area that would lead to self-sufficiency. Thus, the clients in Lee County were more hopeful that food stamps would only be a temporary part of their lives.

Chapter V: Summary and Conclusion

Summary

Between October 1996 and October 2001, the number of low-income people on Food Stamps in Mississippi declined from 210,343 to 145, 214, accounting for a 31 percent drop. The results indicted that the drop in Food Stamps was linked to the welfare strategy undertaken by Mississippi. In this respect, the implementation of the new welfare policy provided the state with an opportunity to take a punitive stance against both TANF and Food Stamp clients. The results also suggested that the state undertook a *diversion* strategy by conveying to TANF and Food Stamp clients: *"We're going to kick you off, we're going to threaten you, you gotta go to work and you go find your own job, and blah, blah, blah…. So, [we're] really setting them up to drop off of the program, which is what a lot of people did."* Furthermore, the results suggested that the decline in Food Stamps was related to the failure to clearly communicate the changes in public assistance at all levels. In general, the state took a position of less responsibility toward assisting low-income families, creating an uncooperative and unfriendly environment at the "front door" of many local DHS offices.

In addition, the results indicated that decline in Food Stamp use was more pronounced in economically and socially disadvantaged local conditions. Food Stamp clients in poor economic conditions (Coahoma County) were found to harbor strong negative feelings towards local DHS personnel, which inhibited low-income families from seeking public assistance. In contrast, clients in more advantageous conditions (Lee County) held less negative feelings toward their local DHS office. The main reason for the latter attitude was that in more advantageous social and economic conditions, non-

governmental organizations played a major role to help clients seek public assistance by linking them to state and other public agencies.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to address the link between welfare reform and the decline in Food Stamp caseloads. What we have found is that how the state implements its welfare policy and the extent to which communities can cope with the changes imposed by the new legislation directly impacts the use of Food Stamps.

For Mississippi, there has been a strong emphasis on caseload reduction. As soon as clients walk into the front door, they are encouraged, and sometimes threatened, to find work and to leave the welfare system. Clients have also been faced with diversion (both intentional and unintentional) that resulted in discouraging clients from seeking food assistance.

There is no doubt that welfare reform has encouraged many low-income families to leave the TANF and Food Stamp rolls both in Mississippi and nationwide. Although this is often viewed as a sign of success, the experiences of Mississippi suggest that what now needs to be done is to shift the focus of welfare policies from caseload reduction to poverty, inequality, and social injustice. In other words, welfare reform comes with an obligation to assure that those who are in need receive adequate assistance so that they do not fall further behind due to forces beyond their control. Our findings clearly suggest that more emphasis should be placed on developing community capacity for bridging civic/faith-based organizations with governmental agencies to cope more effectively with the needs of low-income people.

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