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Explaining Restrictive TANF Policies: Group Threat Hypothesis and State Economy Conditions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether TANF policies' restrictiveness is related to states' racial composition and economic conditions. The data were extracted from various reports dated 2000–2014. Results from generalized least squares random-effects modeling showed the number of restrictive TANF policies to be associated positively with larger populations of Hispanic individuals and associated negatively with larger populations of African American individuals. No association was found between policies' restrictiveness and "other" minority population, nor between restrictiveness and either poverty or unemployment. One conclusion suggested by the analysis is that restrictive TANF policies result from dramatic increases in the Hispanic population that trigger the dominant group's resentment of ethnic minorities. Several policy implications are stated.

KEYWORDS

welfare policies; group threat hypothesis; racism

Introduction

After Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) beginning in 1996, caseloads fell by 30%–55%, in some states, until 2000. The dramatic reduction was attributed to U.S. economic growth and to TANF's welfare-to-work emphasis; decline in caseloads has slowed since 2000, and TANF served 1.3 million families in 2015 (Haskins, 2016; Holcomb & Martinson, 2002; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016a, 2016b). These state programs' new emphasis on welfare to work relied on their policies becoming increasingly restrictive and punitive over time (Kim & Fording, 2010; Snarr, Friesner, & Underwood, 2012). Restrictive, punitive policies reduced caseloads (Albert, 2016; Cheng, 2010; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004), but they also had many negative consequences for TANF recipients and TANF leavers. For example, many states began to reduce benefits and even close cases to sanction noncompliance with work requirements and other demands. TANF recipients who are sanctioned by the programs often face decreased likelihood of finding formal employment along with lower earnings and resulting hardship

in obtaining food, shelter, utilities, and health insurance (Cheng, 2007b, 2009; Lee, Slack, & Lewis, 2004). Individuals who leave TANF due to sanctioning are relatively unlikely to obtain help from other public assistance programs (Aratani, Lu, & Aber, 2014; Cheng, 2009). Not surprisingly, restrictive TANF policies increase the likelihood that TANF recipients will leave TANF and become employed below poverty level (Cheng, 2007a); former TANF recipients whose earnings are reduced (especially if they are reduced below poverty level) are likely to return to TANF (Cheng, 2003). As many as 36% of former recipients who left TANF unemployed eventually return to and become dependent on TANF; in fact, sanctioning is the major contributive factor to such return and dependency on TANF (Cheng, 2005, 2010). Because restrictive TANF policies trigger so many undesirable consequences, it is vital that we pinpoint factors prompting states to enact restrictive policies.

Federal Impacts on State Policies

States' TANF policies are in fact bounded by the federal rules on TANF policies. Restrictive state policies are promoted by restrictive federal rules. For instance,

if a state fails to achieve for its TANF recipients a certain participation rate in work or work preparation, that state may see its block grant significantly reduced (Lurie, 1997). Federal rules also limit the states' potential generosity with TANF. For example, a state deciding to support TANF recipients beyond the federally mandated maximum of five years will lose part of its block grant (Lurie, 1997).

Restrictive TANF Policies

Many states' TANF policies can be considered stringent or restrictive, as when a work exemption is unavailable to those caring for children; when 35 hours' or more work weekly is required; when TANF application involves diversion payment or job; when sanction is permanent or ends in either mandatory reapplication or case closure; when a family cap is enforced; or when fewer than 60 months' benefits are available (lifetime) (Albert, 2016; Snarr et al., 2012). Other TANF policies are perceived as lenient or generous, for example liberally applied work-requirement and other exemptions/extensions; minimal required hours of work; liberal definition of work activities; exclusion of intermittent time limits; monthly benefits and income disregards; and lifelong benefits eligibility (Lim, Coulton, & Lalich, 2009). Federal policy requires states to spend state funds on generous policies like continuous, 61-plus months of TANF benefits or assistance for ineligible noncitizens (Huber, Cohen, Briggs, & Kassabian, 2015). A final example of a restrictive policy concerns drug use. Neither AFDC receipt (Schmidt, Weisner, & Wiley, 1998) nor TANF receipt (Cheng & McElderry, 2007) has been associated with drug use, but some states do require recipients to be screened for drug/substance use as part of becoming and/or remaining eligible for benefits (Huber et al., 2015).

Economy

As we noted above, economic growth may have contributed to TANF's caseload decline in the first five years of its existence. During times of economic downturn, in contrast, TANF recipients tend to remain in TANF, and other low-income individuals may seek temporary aid through TANF (Cheng, 2007a, 2010; Cheng & Lo, 2014). However, two studies found county-level economic conditions to have no association with TANF enrollment or exit (Cheng, Lo, &

Weber, 2017) and rate of sanction (Keiser, Mueser, & Choi, 2004). Another found that during economic downturn restrictive TANF policies helped push some mothers out of welfare to become working poor (Cheng, 2007a). Prior research has shown restrictive TANF policies to be associated with high unemployment (Bentele & Nicoli, 2012) and has also observed a tendency, among states with high unemployment, to increase TANF's cash benefit (Hero & Preuhs, 2007). One study reported that the unemployment rate was not associated with the presence of a policy excluding legal immigrants from TANF (Filindra, 2013); while other found that states with relatively high rates of poverty were relatively likely to restrict immigrants' TANF eligibility (Filindra, 2013; Reese, Ramirez, & Estrada-Correa, 2013). Additionally, state poverty rate was recently found to be associated positively with TANF receipt among White residents but not among ethnic-minority residents (Cheng et al., 2017). The takeaway is that, especially during economic downturns, a state's TANF policies may be restrictive or generous, and they may not be colorblind.

Group Threat Hypothesis

The group threat hypothesis offers to help explain increasing restrictiveness of TANF policies enacted by the states. The group threat hypothesis proposes that prejudice evolves from a sense of the increasing size or proximity of subordinate racial/ethnic groups and from the dominant group's fear of eventual dominance by the subordinate group (Dixon, 2006; King & Wheelock, 2007; Taylor & Mateyka, 2011). This perception of threat increases with the size of the subordinate racial/ethnic minority group. The dominant group becomes alarmed at the growing number of members of a subordinate group, viewed to threaten its dominance and exacerbate competition for scarce resources and successful political mobilization (Buckler, Swatt, & Salinas, 2009; Hjern & Nagayoshi, 2011; Quillian, 1995, 1996).

Applying the group threat hypothesis to welfare policies suggests that a growing ethnic-minority population often fosters mounting resentment of welfare programs and their ethnic-minority participants (Cheng, 2009). Resentment is rooted in the dominant group's negative racial stereotyping concerning work ethic and welfare participation (Fox, 2004; Schram, 2006). A perceived threat from a minority group may generate social

norms limiting work and welfare options available to its members (Festre, 2010; Taylor-Gooby, 2008), for instance through restrictive TANF policies. A relatively large number of restrictive TANF policies in effect in a state has been linked to diminished likelihood of TANF receipt among African Americans but not among Hispanics or Whites (Cheng et al., 2017). States with relatively large percentages of ethnic-minority residents have tended to experience greater reductions in TANF caseloads (Johnson, 2003), to offer smaller cash benefits (Hero & Preuhs, 2007), and to sanction TANF recipients at higher rates (Keiser et al., 2004; Monnat, 2010). States having the relatively large African American populations also have more restrictive, less flexible TANF policies (Fellowes & Rowe, 2004), providing comparatively less funding of their programs (Rodgers & Tedin, 2006) and excluding legal immigrants from participation (Filindra, 2013). In states having relatively large Hispanic populations, TANF recipients are relatively unlikely to receive transitional support services like a childcare subsidy, transitional Medicaid, transportation assistance, or rent assistance (Cheng, 2009).

The present study's purpose was to examine the relationship, if any, between a state's racial composition and economy and its TANF policies. The study hypothesized that larger ethnic-minority population and worse unemployment and poverty rates would be associated with more restrictive state TANF policies.

Methods

This study analyzed secondary data from 2000–2014 obtained from the Urban Institute's *Welfare Rules Databooks* (Huber et al., 2015; Huber, Kassabian, & Cohen, 2014; Kassabian, Huber, Cohen, & Giannarelli, 2013; Kassabian, Vericker, Searle, & Murphy, 2011; Kassabian, Whitesell, & Huber, 2012; Rowe, McManus, & Roberts, 2004; Rowe & Murphy, 2007, 2009; Rowe, Murphy, & Kaminski, 2008; Rowe, Murphy, & Mon, 2010; Rowe, Murphy, & Williamson, 2006a, b; Rowe & Roberts, 2004; Rowe & Russell, 2004; Rowe & Versteeg, 2005) and from the census bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics. The selected data concerned characteristics of the 50 states and District of Columbia that were relevant to our hypothesis.

For the study, we created for each state a longitudinal record that contained outcome and explanatory variables measured in each of the specified 15 years. Next, each longitudinal record was separated into 15

“state-years” (a state's data measured in 2000, a state's data measured in 2001, and so on through a state's data measured in 2014). Every state-year became a case in a data file for data analysis. The final data analysis involved 765 state-years, the units of analysis.

Measures

The outcome variable, *number of restrictive TANF policies*, denotes how many, of eight dichotomously measured restrictive policies in all, were in force in a state in a specific year. These eight policies were (1) mandatory job search at TANF application (enforced by 19 states in 2014) (Huber et al., 2015); (2) asset limit of \$1,000 or less (enforced by 8 states in 2014, remaining states allowing assets above \$1,000); (3) no income disregard (enforced by 20 states in 2014, meaning those states disregarded *no* earned income when determining eligibility, while others disregarded a dollar amount or percentage); (4) behavior requirements (41 states mandated certain TANF-recipient behaviors in 2014, such as that dependent children be immunized and meet school attendance/performance standards; and that parents and children complete health screens including parent drug screens); (5) no work exemption for those caring for year-old-plus children or no childcare work exemption at all (enforced by 27 states in 2014, while 24 states exempted caregivers of year-old-plus children); (6) lifetime benefits limit under 60 months (enforced by 13 states in 2014, versus other states' 60-plus months); (7) ineligibility of noncitizens within the first five years after U.S. arrival (enforced in five states in 2014); and (8) sanctioning withdraws entire benefit or closes case (enforced in 46 states in 2014). In the present study, a given policy's categorization as “restrictive” (1) or not restrictive (0) was subjective (originating with the researchers), except in the instance of no work exemption for those caring for year-old-plus children or no childcare work exemption at all and in the instance of lifetime benefits limit under 60 months. In these two instances, federally set policies governed all TANF programs (Rowe & Roberts, 2004).

The first set of explanatory variables in the study consisted of state's *African American population*, *Hispanic population*, and *other ethnic-minority population* in a given year; a minority population was given as a percentage of overall population. We obtained information on states' racial compositions in 2000–2014 from

the U.S. Census Bureau's "Statistical Abstracts of the United States." The second set of explanatory variables comprised measures for two state economic conditions in a given year—*unemployment rate* and *poverty rate*. We extracted annual unemployment rates from Bureau of Labor Statistics-issued "State and Regional Unemployment Annual Averages" (2000–2009) and "Unemployment Rates for States: Annual Average Ranking" (2010–2014). The 2000–2014 poverty rates were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's "Statistical Abstracts of the United States."

A third set of explanatory variables comprised a time indicator for each year from 2000 to 2014: *Year 2000* (the reference), *Year 2001*, *Year 2002*, *Year 2003*, *Year 2004*, *Year 2005*, *Year 2006*, *Year 2007*, *Year 2008*, *Year 2009*, *Year 2010*, *Year 2011*, *Year 2012*, *Year 2013*, and *Year 2014*. Time indicators served as control variables during data analysis. Moreover, discrete time periods, such as yearly time indicators, provide the most flexible representation of the time function during data analysis (Singer & Willett, 2003).

Data Analysis

This study utilized Stata generalized least squares (GLS) random-effects modeling for panel data (with robust standard errors). Such modeling is more efficient than GLS fixed-effects modeling for the estimation of coefficients during data analysis (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008).

Results

Across the 765 state-years, the average number of restrictive TANF policies was 3.3 (of eight possible) (see Table 1). The average African American population was 11.5%, Hispanic population was 10.5%, and other ethnic-minority population was 7.8%. Across the units of analysis, the average unemployment rate was 5.9% and average poverty rate was 12.7%. For the

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of outcome and explanatory variables ($n = 765$ state-years).

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	s.d.
Number of restrictive TANF policies	0	7	3.3	1.3
African American population	0.3%	60.0%	11.5%	11.5%
Hispanic population	0.7%	91.2%	10.5%	12.1%
Other ethnic-minority population	0.1%	74.0%	7.8%	11.4%
Unemployment rate	2.2%	13.6%	5.9%	2.1%
Poverty rate	4.5%	25.8%	12.7%	3.5%

Note: s.d. = standard deviation

15 years' worth of data analyzed, Table 2 illustrates how many states maintained at least four restrictive TANF policies in each year. For 2004, 23 states had maintained at least four restrictive TANF policies; for 2010, there were 25 states; and for 2014, there were 26 states. There were some small fluctuations of the number of states between 2004 and 2010 as well as between 2010 and 2014.

The study's multivariate analysis results confirmed that the hypothesized model differed significantly from the null model (Wald's $\chi^2 = 134.4$; $p < .01$; see Table 3). While African American population ($b = -.03$; $p < .05$) was associated negatively with number of restrictive state TANF policies, Hispanic population ($b = .02$; $p < .05$) was associated positively with the outcome. Neither other ethnic-minority population, unemployment rate, nor poverty rate showed significant association with the outcome. Of the 15 time indicators, only Year 2004, Year 2006, Year 2007, and Year 2008 showed an association (positive, in this case) with number of restrictive state TANF policies.

Discussion

Confirming prior results, the present findings indicate that the number of states enforcing at least four restrictive TANF policies rose steadily, even if gradually, between 2000 and 2014 (Kim & Fording, 2010; Snarr et al., 2012). Such a trend—states' growing restrictiveness—justifies, we believe, our investigation of the potential roles of state's economy and group threat.

Our present results partially support the hypothesis that the size of states' ethnic-minority populations, unemployment rates, and poverty rates would be

Table 2. Number of states had at least 4 restrictive TANF policies.

Year	Number of states had at least 4 restrictive TANF policies
2000	19
2001	20
2002	20
2003	20
2004	23
2005	22
2006	22
2007	23
2008	23
2009	24
2010	25
2011	22
2012	24
2013	25
2014	26

Table 3. Generalized least squares random-effects modeling results of number of restrictive TANF policies ($n = 765$ state-years).

Variables	b	RSE
African American population	-.03*	.01
Hispanic population	.02*	.01
Other ethnic-minority population	.00	.01
Unemployment rate	.01	.05
Poverty rate	.01	.02
2001	.05	.07
2002	.04	.11
2003	.09	.11
2004	.22*	.12
2005	.20	.12
2006	.24*	.11
2007	.30**	.12
2008	.26*	.14
2009	.22	.23
2010	.15	.25
2011	.11	.24
2012	.21	.25
2013	.25	.22
2014	.32	.21
Constant	3.03	.42
Wald's χ^2	134.43**	
Overall R^2	.004	
$\sqrt{\psi}$	1.21	
$\sqrt{\theta}$.56	
ρ	.82	

Note: RSE = robust standard error; $\sqrt{\psi}$ = between-subjects standard deviation; $\sqrt{\theta}$ = within-subject standard deviation; ρ = intraclass correlation.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

positively associated with the number of restrictive state TANF policies they employ. Consistent with prior findings (Cheng, 2009; Hero & Preuhs, 2007; Keiser et al., 2004; Monnat, 2010), this study found the size of a state's Hispanic population to be linked significantly to the number of its restrictive TANF policies. Such a result supports the concept (from the group threat hypothesis) that the dominant group perceives as a threat any noticeable growth in states' Hispanic populations, coming increasingly to resent whatever support a state gives to TANF programs and participants (Cheng & Lo, 2014).

Unlike some prior research (Fellowes & Rowe, 2004; Filindra, 2013; Rodgers & Tedin, 2006), this study found that relatively larger African American state populations were associated with state enforcement of relatively fewer restrictive TANF policies. One plausible explanation for the discrepancy is that the earlier studies relied on data from a single year (Fellowes & Rowe, 2004; Filindra, 2013) or on data predating 2000 (Rodgers & Tedin, 2006). Recent growth in states' African American populations has been less dramatic than such growth among Hispanics, meaning (per the group threat hypothesis) less stimulation by the African American population

of the dominant group's resentment. In addition, the literature links states' relatively larger African American populations to reduced segregation (Iceland, Sharp, & Timberlake, 2013; Lewis & Hamilton, 2011). If this is so, and if reduced segregation brings with it reduced resentment of African Americans by the dominant group, then large African American population may exhibit some association with relatively liberal TANF policies.

No associations were observed, in the present study, between restrictive TANF policies and state unemployment rate. This supports findings from at least two prior analyses of county-level data (Cheng et al., 2017; Keiser et al., 2004). However, the present results also contradicted some earlier research findings (Filindra, 2013; Reese et al., 2013), in observing no link between restrictive policies and state poverty rate. A plausible explanation is that, while the two prior studies on poverty rate used data dating from soon after TANF's implementation (i.e., from 1996–2000, the program's early years), the data in the present study were obtained later and over 15 years (2000–2014), a longer period able to yield a fuller picture of hypothesized relationships between state poverty rate and restrictive TANF policies. That these relationships here proved insignificant suggests states have a tendency toward stringency and punitiveness in executing TANF programs and managing recipients, regardless of the economic conditions at play. This tendency makes it likely that in time many TANF families will be forced from TANF programs and many other low-income families denied benefits eligibility. In both instances, the consequences will be extensive and serious (Aratani et al., 2014; Cheng, 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2009, 2010; Lee et al., 2004); most will be left to fend for themselves, even during the worst economic downturns.

Conclusion

This study showed that a better grasp of the role of restrictive state TANF policies is indeed obtained by applying the group threat hypothesis. Our findings' implications include the likely limitation of the TANF options available to low-income parents of any ethnicity—even though this limitation is a predicted outgrowth of the attachment of unfavorable stereotypes to, specifically, Hispanics in the U.S. As long as Hispanics continue to be stereotyped, states' great

power over welfare programs will continue to come between needy families and the TANF aid that has enabled so many before them to become self-sufficient (Fox, 2004). The present findings generated several implications for TANF policies. The first is a need for the federal government to lead the states, promoting generous TANF policies by, for instance, removing any block grant reduction levied on states falling short of expected rates of TANF participant work preparation or work participation, or on states willing to fund sixth-year and subsequent TANF benefits using their own funds. The second is a need to curb a “race to the bottom” by states developing TANF policies. Here again the federal government must lead, establishing minimum standards for all states, to include at least seven rules, as follows: (a) five-year lifetime benefit eligibility, (b) six months’ benefit receipt without mandated job search, (c) deferment of work requirement for those with children under age 5, (d) cessation of any monitoring of participant behavior, (e) benefits eligibility for new immigrants with need, (f) limitation of sanctioning to comparatively minimal (e.g., 25%) benefit reduction as a problem is addressed and resolved, and (g) uniform nationwide income-disregard formula.

In providing fairly comprehensive investigation of states’ TANF policies—eight restrictive policies in each of 15 years—this study contributed significantly to the literature. Of course, with so many TANF policies around the nation, it was not possible for us to consider every one. Individual TANF policies are, furthermore, likely to be connected to disparate patterns of significant explanatory factors. Future research might examine TANF policies that were beyond the present study’s scope. It will also need to focus on examinations of specific state policies over extended periods, especially as to their effects on ethnic-minority TANF applicants/recipients.

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