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## **Welfare Reform and Household Survival: The Interaction of Structure and Network Strength in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas**

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*The 1996 welfare reform act created 50 state “workfare” systems. This study analyzes the impacts of reform on the survival strategies of single-female headed families in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The findings indicate that variation in outcomes results from the interaction of structural conditions with private network strength and that access to state support services is determined less by need than by the political-organizational goals of workfare states. The findings suggest that studies of welfare reform incorporate analyses of workfare state policies and practices into explanations of how reform affects household survival strategies and well-being.*

**KEYWORDS** *welfare reform, workfare, household survival strategies, networks*

Policymakers can no longer assume that poor women can endure indefinite hardships because of the strength of their community networks. (Roschelle, 1997, p. 200)

Shortly after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Edin and Lein (1997a) published a landmark study on how single mothers survived low-wage work and welfare. Their ethnographic work

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compared the “household survival strategies” and material well-being of mothers who relied primarily on low-wage work (i.e., “work-based” strategies) versus those who relied on “welfare-based” strategies. They found that neither group got by on work or welfare alone but rather combined income from both spheres with assistance from personal networks, other government programs, and community-based organizations. In addition, and of major importance regarding the impacts of welfare reform, the mothers who relied on welfare were better off, in material terms, than those who relied primarily on work. This finding was explained by the low earnings of those who worked combined with the costs of working, including child care and transportation, as well as the opportunity cost of having less time to pursue other income-garnering activities. What is more, though nearly all mothers in their sample expressed the desire to work, two key factors distinguished those who were able to work from the others: (1) the strength of their personal networks and (2) the “social-structural characteristics of the cities” in which they lived, measured in terms of local labor-market conditions, city size, character of the informal labor market, and the practices of local child-support officials.

Welfare reform’s work requirements and time limits effectively eliminated the welfare-based strategy as an option, thereby forcing all single mothers to, as one respondent interviewed for this study put it, “go on with our lives in another way.” Because of the key role of network supports and the significant variation in access to them, Edin and Lein (1997b) predicted that “substantial numbers of low-skill single mothers, particularly those with little network support, will be significantly worse-off financially” (p. 264).

In this article, I apply Edin and Lein’s analytical framework to examine how welfare reform affected mothers’ abilities to maintain multifaceted survival strategies and family well-being in a region that presents uniquely difficult structural conditions, the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Because PRWORA devolved significant authority over policy and implementation to the state, regional, and local levels, case studies linking household-level outcomes to local structural conditions are needed to grasp the potentially wide-ranging impacts of the policy across differentially resourced places (Peck, 1996; Tickamyer, White, Tadlock, & Henderson, 2007).

To date, studies that have applied this approach (see Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, London, Scott, & Hunter, 2003; London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004; Scott, Edin, London, & Kissane, 2004) present a mixed assessment of reform. On one hand, the studies find “no evidence that welfare reform caused widespread hardship” (see Polit, Nelson, Richburg-Hayes, & Seith, 2005, p. iii). Rather, the majority of mothers who left welfare found jobs and experienced net improvements in material well-being (see Scott et al., 2004). On the other hand, because their wages were extremely low and access to postemployment support services (e.g., child care, transportation, and training) was highly limited (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2003) most

remained in poverty and reliant on other welfare programs and network supports (Brock et al., 2002; Frogner, Moffitt, & Ribar, 2008; Hennessy, 2005; Kissane & Krebs, 2007; Michalopolous et al., 2003; Pearson, 2007; Polit et al., 2005).

Of course, averages obscure significant variation. Scott et al. (2004) found some mothers who went to work were in fact worse off financially than they had been on welfare. Among them were those who left welfare without a job and thus were without welfare or work. Brock et al. (2004) found that 30% of the Miami leavers they interviewed were in this category and surviving by drawing heavily on personal networks and charity, and in some cases by engaging in illicit activities.

A key question, then, is what factors determine how particular households fare under workfare, allowing some to obtain work and a marginally higher state of material well-being while others fall deeper into poverty? Not surprisingly, individual-level factors including educational attainment and work experience matter (Hennessy, 2005) as do the structural and network factors noted by Edin and Lein (1997a). Regarding the latter, Clampet-Lundquist et al. (2003) found that families “doing well” under reform tended to possess at least one of the following two advantages: (1) greater access to state-provided transitional services and/or (2) “private safety nets to fall back on [that] were far stronger” than others (p. 8; see also Moffitt & Winder, 2005; Scott et al., 2004). Those not doing as well lacked one or both of these advantages and those who were worst off tended to be “the most needy, the least educated, the least emotionally stable, the least physically able, with the most difficult children” (Hays, 2003, p. 74; see also Cherlin, Frogner, Ribar, & Moffitt, 2009). Such families were also most likely to be sanctioned while on welfare and have their grants terminated because of failure to complete program requirements (Cherlin et al., 2001).

In sum, the literature suggests a feedback-loop obtains among network strength, access to state support services, and ability to work such that strength in one sphere facilitates successful participation in others whereas weakness in one undermines participation in others. Scott et al. (2004) pointed to this when they wrote that “oftentimes it was the availability of other sources of income,” including network resources, “that made it possible for women to remain employed” (p. 84), whereas access to network resources often depended on “other resources coming into the household” (p. 84). Medley, Edelhoch, Liu, and Martin (2005) explicitly acknowledged the connection between network resources and the “other resource” of state work-support services when they wrote that household outcomes stem from the “interplay of programmatic and personal factors,” that is, the availability of support services and the “ability to utilize such services effectively” (p. 59).

The ethnographic literature provides a valuable corrective to studies that focus narrowly on caseload declines and growth in official earnings as

indicators of policy impacts (see Lichter & Jayakody, 2002 for a review, and Schram & Soss, 2001, for a critique). That said, it is marked by four shortcomings: One, a near exclusive focus on major metropolitan cities located in states that offer relatively generous welfare benefits and more developed workfare service infrastructures (e.g., Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia) limits the variation in structural conditions observed and thus fails to capture how workfare “works” across diverse structural contexts. Two, a general lack of attention to the internal dynamics of workfare states themselves, that is, their organizational goals and strategies, has resulted in explanations of variation in outcomes that overemphasize individual and household level factors while underemphasizing structure. Three, despite the concern to understand the impacts of reform on “households,” the literature tends to focus heavily on the experiences of “leavers,” that is, that subgroup of households that left welfare and that, as a whole, tended to have greater access to network assistance than those who remained on the program. Thus, we know little about how being subject to workfare requirements affects the survival strategies of those who remain in the program. Finally, analytically, most studies treat the effects of structural- and household-level factors on survival strategies as if they operate independently of each other (e.g., Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2003) despite indications that they are constitutively connected (Edin & Lein, 1997a; Medley et al. 2005; Scott et al., 2004).

This article addresses each of these shortcomings as follows. One, through in-depth case-study analysis of the implementation and impacts of reform on families in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, I explain how state and local structures interact to define the meaning of *reform* in a structurally disadvantaged region. Two, by paying attention to the internal dynamics of the Texas workfare state, I explain why funding for support services was highly limited and why services were, in practice, targeted toward locales where labor markets were stronger and toward households with stronger private networks. Three, rather than focusing on leavers, the highly inauspicious structural conditions in the case-study counties force us to examine how mandatory participation in workfare affected the survival strategies and well-being of households who remained in the program. Finally, analytically, I build on Medley et al. (2005) to show how household outcomes varied through the interaction of structure and network strength, resulting in families with the weakest personal networks residing in the most structurally disadvantaged counties being afforded the least access to support services and suffering negative impacts as a result.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

Methodologically, this article strives to answer Peck’s (1996) call for more “theoretically informed empirical investigations” of the implementation and

impacts of workfare at the local level (p. 17). The signal elements of PRWORA were the end of the entitlement to relief and the devolution of authority to states and localities. As such, the limited uniformity imposed by the federal government under the AFDC program was replaced with far greater state discretion.

Because the availability of work-support services, as well as that of work, varies widely across states and localities (Tickamyer et al., 2007), it is reasonable to expect that the ability to maintain multifaceted survival strategies under reform is greater in places where services are stronger. Thus, to the extent that welfare reform resulted in states investing new resources in services (e.g., Wisconsin), the ability to combine work with network supports should have been enhanced. However, to the extent that states merely mandated participation in workfare without such investments (e.g., Texas), ability to work would have remained limited at best or reduced while reliance upon network supports increased.

The research design highlights the relationship between structure and household network strength under reform by examining it in a context in which labor markets are extremely slack, welfare-to-work services extremely weak, and survival strategies rely on combining participation in these spheres with participation in networks of reciprocal exchange. Such structural conditions left mothers in the Rio Grande Valley less able to leave TANF for work than their northern metropolitan counterparts and thus more likely to remain in the program and subject to work requirements. Importantly, these same structural conditions also left local administrators more reliant on “administrative mechanisms of restrictiveness” (Brodkin & Majmudar, 2010, p. 838) such as diversionary tactics and sanctions to meet “performance” criteria placed on them by higher levels of government to avoid incurring financial sanctions themselves (see also Arseneault, 2006).

The border counties of Starr and Maverick were selected for case study on the basis of the particularly inauspicious conditions they presented for implementation of a work-based relief system. Table 1 presents relevant demographic data and quality-of-life indicators.

The counties were also selected on the basis of their location in Texas, a former Jim Crow state where welfare benefits and investments in work-support services for welfare recipients were always among the lowest in the nation (Lein & Schexnayder, 2007).

Between October 2002 and July 2003, in-depth semistructured interviews concerning household survival strategies and family well-being were conducted with 26 single (i.e., divorced, separated, and never married) mothers, 13 of whom were receiving TANF at the time and 13 of whom had left the program. The interview instrument followed that of Edin and Lein (1997a) plus additional questions about participation in workfare. During the course of the fieldwork it was further expanded to include questions addressing recurrent themes raised by respondents. Respondents

**TABLE 1** Demographics and Quality of Life Measures

	Maverick	Starr	Texas
Population	47,297	53,597	21,779,893
Hispanic or Latino origin	95%	98%	32%
Persons age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher	9%	7%	23%
Persons age 25 and older less than high school graduate	58%	63%	24%
Individual poverty rate	35%	50%	15%
Female-headed families who worked full-time yearround in poverty	24%	39%	10%
Unemployment among female-headed families	22%	14%	7%

*Source.* U.S. Bureau of the Census. (2004). American Fact Finder, Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF3). Available at <http://factfinder.census.gov>

were recruited through community-based organizations, schools, and three local assistants who were paid to help with recruitment and interviewing. Snowball sampling was also employed. Most interviews were conducted in community centers; however, some were held in the homes of respondents, public parks, and cars. They averaged 1 hour and 45 minutes in duration and ranged from 45 minutes to more than 4 hours. Respondents were paid \$35. Twenty-four interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Extensive notes were taken during the two that were not recorded due to excessive background noise.

The data were analyzed using inductive and focused coding. Access to network assistance and state-support services received focused analysis. Network strength was operationalized according to responses to three questions: (1) "Have you ever missed work, an appointment, or failed to complete your work requirement due to lack of transportation?" (2) "Have you ever missed work, an appointment, or failed to complete your work requirement due to lack of child care?" and (3) "Have either you or your children ever gone hungry?" Negative responses indicated the presence of network resources, and mothers who reported none or one of these hardships were coded as having "strong" networks. Those who reported two were coded as having networks of "moderate" strength whereas those who reported three were coded as having "weak" networks. It is important to note that none of the mothers coded as having strong or moderate networks reported experiencing hunger. Thus, the experience of extreme hardship distinguished those with weak networks. Table 2 summarizes the network strength of respondents on TANF versus those off TANF.

Finally, data on state and local workfare policy and administration were collected through policy documents, secondary literature, newspaper reports, and in-depth interviews with 98 key informants selected on the basis of their institutional positions. These included top-level regional workfare administrators, political officials, and directors/employees of nonprofit

**TABLE 2** Respondent's Network Strength by TANF Status

	<i>n</i>	Percent
On TANF		
Strong	3	23
Moderate	6	46
Weak	4	31
Total	13	100
Off TANF		
Strong	9	69
Moderate	2	15
Weak	2	15
Total	13	100

TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

agencies. Respondents were asked to discuss the impacts of welfare reform on their organizations and its effects on the families they served. In all but a few cases the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

## FINDINGS

Before addressing how reform affected household survival strategies we must first establish what *reform* meant in Texas and, more specifically, in the Rio Grande Valley. This requires understanding how (1) state-level policy makers and local administrators used the discretion granted them under PRWORA to pursue political-organizational goals and (2) how the pursuit of those goals affected access to services among TANF-reliant households of different network strength.

### The "Opportunities" PRWORA Presented to Texas Officials

Access to services in the Rio Grande Valley was determined by state- and local-level factors that must be understood in historical context. When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935 Texas was a Jim Crow state in which labor control practices in its agricultural areas were based upon peonage (Maril, 1989). As such, the state initially resisted implementing the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program and was one of the last to do so in 1941 (Harpham, 1987). From that time through the passage of PRWORA the state's relief program ranked among "the most miserly in terms of payments and one of the most difficult for which to become and remain eligible" (Harpham, 1987, p. 264). In fiscal terms, the state's "general approach to public assistance policy was to appropriate the minimum amount of state dollars to get the maximum amount of federal money available" (p. 275). According to respondents, prior to the massive federal intervention of the

Great Society, access to public assistance among Mexican Americans in the Valley was highly limited. The director of a local school and former migrant worker explained what was available to his family in the early 1960s: “My mom—we used to get . . . ‘relief.’ You know, welfare when they gave us all this canned food and stuff; grits and . . . pork in a can . . . In the 1960s that’s the only thing we had.”

The elimination of the entitlement to relief and devolution over control of TANF to the states allowed Texas, among other states, to apply its historical minimal investment for maximum return strategy to its TANF block grant (see Hovey, 1999). In 1997, the Republican-controlled state house and governor’s office passed a welfare-to-work law specifically designed to minimize spending on participants and leavers so as to maximize the amount of TANF funds that could be transferred—as allowed by the federal law—to other areas of the state budget. As documented by Winston (2002), the guiding principle in the legislative debate over TANF in Austin was “avoid spending money” (p. 156). This was not unrelated to Governor George W. Bush’s plan to cut property taxes by \$1 billion and which “increased the temptation to siphon off TANF money” (p. 168). The means to this end was a tough “workfirst” program (see below) that would rapidly drive down the caseload by establishing obstacles to eligibility. The result was a \$393 million “surplus” of TANF funds—39% of which were used to supplant general revenue spending and thus partially fund the Bush tax cuts (Winston, pp. 168–169; see also Sabo, Bresette, & DeLuna Castro, 2002). The use of TANF monies to supplant state spending continued through 2001 when, according to Winston, the “state’s enthusiasm for using TANF money for other purposes . . . appeared to have caught up with it” (p. 177).

### Local Control: The “Survival Strategies” of Workfare Administrators in the Rio Grande Valley and Access to Services

Responsibility for achieving caseload declines in practice was passed down to 28 regional “workforce development boards,” each of which received their own miniblock grants from the state as well as some discretion over where (within their region) and how funds would be spent. Like the state, board decisions reflected political-organizational concerns that included maintaining and, if possible, increasing the amount of TANF and related funds under their control which, importantly, were subject to distribution through local patronage networks in the form of jobs and service contracts (Harvey, 2005; Harvey & Pickering, 2010; Maril, 1989; Pickering, Harvey, Summers, & Mushinski, 2006). The boards were subject to financial sanctions for failing to meet “performance criteria” set by the state, and the findings below indicate that their behavior toward particular counties in their regions as well as particular types of households was determined less by need than by these organizational imperatives.

High-ranking workfare administrators in the Valley were forthright in explaining how organizational concerns directly affected decisions about where and to whom limited work-support services were made available. This was most clearly illustrated in the allocation of highly limited on-the-job training and education placements. Regarding the effect of place on these opportunities, a top administrator of the workfare board that oversaw Maverick County, was emphatic in explaining how the county's weak job market deterred him from allocating training opportunities to TANF participants who resided there:

[I]f you go train someone they go out and they get a job with . . . “*Pepe’s Plumbing*” [i.e., off the books] . . . They show no income! . . . We know we need to train in that area but how do you . . . when you’re not gonna be able to get any follow-up information? . . . If you train [there] you’re gonna take negatives!

The concern to avoid the financial sanctions associated with taking negatives also influenced administrator’s decisions regarding the allocation of opportunities for education and training to individuals. A former top administrator of the board that oversaw Starr County stated that it was “creaming,” that is, only offering General Equivalency Diploma classes to participants “with [a] 9th grade [education] or above” because they were more likely than those with less education to complete the program. In his words, board administrators were “more interested in ‘performance’ than they are with the other people.”

### State Reliance on Client Networks to Deliver Support Services

In 2002 the former director of a Valley workforce board characterized the availability of services for TANF participants and leavers in the region as follows:

I don’t think there’s adequate child care and there never will be . . . The government would probably have to put out a whole bunch of money . . . We had about 2,300 [families] on the waiting list and . . . 2,300 in service. So when are you gonna serve those 2,300? . . . As far as transportation, we just don’t have any transportation system here so we depend on the clients to provide their own vehicles.

Structural conditions in Starr and Maverick made TANF participants less likely to have access to education and training than those in other areas and thus more likely to be subjected to the state’s diversionary “workfirst” program. In this section I describe the workfirst program in detail to show how variation in the impacts of the program among households was the result of the interaction of structure with network strength. In short, the services made available by the state to support participation in TANF were only partial

services that required supplementation, in effect subsidization, by the private network resources of participants. This meant that mothers with moderate to strong networks were able access state assistance with transportation and childcare whereas these services remained out of reach to those who needed them most, mothers with the weakest networks.

As noted above, Texas accrued its TANF surpluses while at the same time meeting PRWORA's participation rates through implementing a low-cost workfirst program (Weaver & Hevenstone, 2002). Ridzi (2009) captured the essence of workfirst when he described it as a "gauntlet" that functions to divert families from accessing state assistance for which they are eligible (see also Brodtkin & Majmundar, 2010; Lens, 2009). The first obstacle was the "orientation." Before being certified for benefits mothers were required to meet with a caseworker tasked with deterring them from going on the program. In Maverick County, where the caseload plummeted by more than 60% between 1996 and 2002, a number of respondents explained that they were misinformed at the orientation that use of TANF would count against their childrens' 5-year federal lifetime limit. Although not official policy, this deterrence-oriented "street-level" policy making, which was also found in other parts of the state (see Lein & Schexnayder, 2007; Lens, 2009; Weinberg, 2000), indicates the extent to which the state prioritized caseload reduction over other considerations.

The orientation was followed by a week-long "job club" consisting of classes on "how to look for a job." Although a few respondents found the job club useful it was more often characterized as a "waste of time" due, in large part, to the fact that nearly every respondent's survival strategy included having worked at some time (Table 3). The club was accompanied by a "job search" that continued for 5 additional weeks and during which participants had to canvas employers for work. A minimum of 10 in-person contacts, documented by the signature of a manager, were required during each week of the search.

Mothers who remained on TANF after 6 weeks were required to work off the cash value of their family's TANF and Food Stamps Program benefits in "community service" jobs. Eight of the 13 respondents on TANF were performing community service and working an average of 32 hours per week for TANF checks that averaged \$225 per month, the equivalent of \$1.76 per hour (Table 4). Such conditions led all respondents with any other option to quit the program. Whether one had another option was largely determined by network strength as 75% of respondents with strong networks left whereas 67% of those with weak networks remained in the program (Table 2). Those who quit the program reported being less helped than "hassled" off. Karen (M3), a young mother with an extremely strong network, quit during the job search. Her experience illustrates the difficulties associated with meeting program requirements in the context of the Valley as well as the rigidity with which rules and sanctions were enforced by caseworkers:

**TABLE 3** Work Experience, Reasons for Welfare, Length of Spells, and Aspirations

Name	Work experience	Why welfare?	Length of most recent spell	Aspiration
On TANF ( <i>n</i> = 13)				
Ophelia (M9)	Secretarial	No work or child support	4 mos	Administrative assistant
Jolanda (M2)	Nurse	To go to school	6 mos	Nurse
Wanda (M21) <sup>a</sup>	Cashier	No work	"a few" mos	Law enforcement
Donna (S21)	Manufacturing	Applied for Medicaid	5 yrs off/on	"Anything"
Esmeralda (M6)	Field labor	Referred by school counselor	3 yrs	Computers
Julia (S5)	None	Child birth	2 yrs	"Doesn't matter"
Maria (M27)	Field labor	Low wages	5 yrs	Beautician
Beatriz S(7) <sup>a</sup>	Field labor	Became pregnant	2 mos	Teacher/coach
Tara (M17)	Food service	Separation/divorce	2 yrs	Restaurant
Blanca (S16)	Field labor	Father of child deported	2 mos	Artist
Lydia (S20) <sup>a</sup>	Food service	Pregnant with "no help"	9 yrs off/on	Nurse
Rita (S19) <sup>a</sup>	None	"For the kids"	3 mos	Office work
Valeria (M18)	Field labor	No work	6-7 yrs off/on	Police officer
Mean			2.7 years	
Off TANF ( <i>n</i> = 13)				
Denise (M13)	Cashier	In high school	2 yrs	Dentist
Gloria (S26)	Manufacturing	No work	3 mos	Don't know
Helena (S33)	Food service	No work	6 mo	Cosmetologist
Karen (M3)	Telemarketer	Separation	2 mos	Pharmacist
Rose (M11)	Child care	No work	3 yrs	RN
Suzanne (S27)	Navy	Separation and no child support	2 yrs	Clerk
Deborah (S32)	Field labor	Separation/divorce	2 yrs	Nurse
Elizabeth (S31)	Customer service	No work/money	1 yr	Nurse
Inez (S18)	Home health	Separation/divorce	6 mos	Teacher
Lela (M5)	Secretarial	No work and no child support	3 mos	Cosmetologist
Patricia (M10)	Administration	Separation/divorce	1 yr	Administrative assistant
Yasmin (M25)	Retail	No work	7 yrs off/on	Welder
Zoe (M26)	Food service	Applied for food stamps	3 mos	Nurse
Mean			1.5 years	

TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

<sup>a</sup>Combining TANF with an official job.

**TABLE 4** Workfare, Work, and Child Support among Respondents

Name	Workfare placement	Hours per week	Monthly TANF	Monthly earnings	Child support	Total cash income
<b>On TANF (N = 13)</b>						
Ophelia (M9)	Head Start assistant	20	\$241	\$0	\$0	\$241
Jolanda (M2)	Unknown <sup>a,d</sup>	30	\$256	\$0	\$0	\$256
Wanda (M21)	N/A <sup>c</sup>	Exempt	\$213	\$648	\$0	\$861
Donna (S21)	Job search	In Job Search	\$256	\$0	\$0	\$256
Esmeralda (M6)	N/A	Exempt	\$184	\$0	\$0	\$184
Julia (S5)	Housekeeping	35	\$184	\$0	\$0	\$184
Maria (M27)	Admin assistant	30	\$184	\$0	\$0	\$184
Norma (S7)	Unknown <sup>a,b</sup>	30	\$274	\$221	\$0	\$495
Tara (M17)	Head Start assistant	20	\$213	\$0	\$0	\$213
Blanca(S16)	Housekeeping	33	\$213	\$0	\$0	\$213
Lydia (S20)	Cleaning offices <sup>b</sup>	38	\$256	\$123	\$0	\$379
Rita (S19)	Cleaning offices <sup>b</sup>	40	\$268	\$180	\$0	\$448
Valeria (M18)	Teacher's assistant	40	\$178	\$0	\$0	\$178
Mean		32	\$225	\$90	\$0	\$315
	Workfare to What?	Hours per Week	Monthly TANF	Monthly Earnings	Child Support	Earnings plus Child Support
<b>Off TANF (n = 13)</b>						
Denise (M13)	Child support	0	N/A	\$0	\$155	\$155
Gloria (S26)	Food processing	40	\$7.5	\$1,200	\$0	\$1,200
Helena (S33)	Child support	N/A	N/A	\$0	\$50	\$50
Karen (M3)	Child support	N/A	N/A	\$0	200	\$200
Rose (M11)	Child support	N/A	N/A	\$0	\$576	\$576
Suzanne (S27)	Post Office	40	\$8.5	\$1,360	\$0	\$1,360
Deborah (S32)	Medical assistant	40	\$5.5	\$880	\$250	\$1,130
Elizabeth (S31)	Medical assistant	25	\$5.5	\$550	\$0	\$550

Inez (S18)	Child support	N/A	N/A	\$0	\$0	\$0
Lela (M5)	Retail	25	\$6	\$600	\$0	\$600
Patricia (M10)	Child support	N/A	\$286	\$0	\$286	\$286
Yasmin (M25)	Farm work	50	\$3	\$600	\$0	\$600
Zoe (M26)	Farm work	50	\$3	\$600	\$0	\$600
Mean		33.75	\$6	\$445	\$117	\$562

TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

<sup>a</sup>Our interview was held a few days before she was to begin her service and she did not know where she would be placed.

<sup>b</sup>Combining workfare with a job.

<sup>c</sup>Combining TANF with a job but exempt from work requirements.

<sup>d</sup>Combining workfare with a technical education program but had yet to transition from Job Search to community service.

They started giving me \$198 and they started . . . reducing it because I couldn't find a job . . . to like \$110 and then . . . to \$38 and I was like: No, I'm better off without that . . . [Y]ou have to be looking for a job like day and night—and I did! And then I couldn't find a job and I would tell them . . . They were like, "*Pues* [Well], I'm sorry but we can't do anything, you have to like, talk to somebody else." . . . And I was like, you know what? I don't want it anymore. It was affecting me, so I was like, I'm better off without it.

Among the 13 respondents off TANF, less than one half ( $n = 6$ ) had found work whereas another five had quit to receive child support, neither of which provided an adequate or reliable source of income (Table 4). Those with jobs were in low-wage and flexible positions paying an average of \$445 per month whereas those receiving child support reported an average monthly payment of only \$250, barely more than the average TANF check but superior to TANF in that it did not require participation in time- and resource-consuming work requirements. Moreover, all who received child support noted its "on again, off again" nature. Additionally, because workfirst led most to quit TANF without a job or without informing their caseworker they had found a job they were ineligible for the limited transitional assistance the state did offer employed leavers with childcare and health insurance (see also Lein & Schexnayder, 2007).

Households with weak networks were most reliant on TANF and least able to survive without the program. In this section I show how the state's partial provision of critical support services and systematic reliance upon networks to supplement their delivery left families with the weakest networks unable to access the services needed to simply fulfill their work requirements and thus vulnerable to sanction and serious material hardships.

#### TRANSPORTATION

According to respondents, the only transportation assistance provided by the state was a \$15 allowance for gas, and this was limited to the job-search stage of the program. As such, access to assistance depended on access to a car or someone willing to provide regular rides. Inez (S18), among others, had neither and was sanctioned for failing to complete her job search. She explained: "They didn't care if you didn't have the means to go to their places. If you don't go, well, they take away the benefit." She added, "There were some girls that would go walking, or they would ride with another friend or something." Although Texas law recognized hardships with transportation and child care as "good cause" for exemption from work requirements, these were rarely granted in practice (Lens, 2009, p. 294). Rather, practicing another method of diversionary street-level policy making, caseworkers often "overlooked or ignored" mothers' explanations

of hardship (p. 298). The likelihood of receiving an exemption was highlighted by the case of Rita (S19) who not only lacked transportation but was 8 months pregnant when she was made to perform the job search: “They told me that I had to, I needed [to find] the transportation and I needed those signatures or I would be sanctioned.”

As noted, gas assistance was only available during the job search despite the fact that transportation expenses were incurred in performing community service. Here again, the negative impacts of the state’s decision to use TANF funds for other purposes fell on those with the weakest networks. For example, Blanca’s [S16] network was extremely weak and at the time of her interview she was under sanction for failing to complete her community service due to transportation problems. She explained:

I told them I needed some gas vouchers and they told me that I didn’t qualify because I [lived] too close [to my worksite] . . . [Interviewer: Have you ever failed to go to work due to a lack of transportation?] Yes . . . this couple of days I haven’t gone to community service because my van wasn’t working too good and I don’t have money for the gas.

The sanction cut her monthly TANF grant by \$78, further constraining her ability to fulfill her work requirement and thus reinforced the downward cycle in which she was caught and which included serious material hardships for herself and her two young children, age two and eight:

I’ve been having welfare [on and off] since 1994 and I never had problems like today . . . There were not so many requirements . . . [At that time I had enough money to buy for the food and everything. I had [money] for blankets—even for blankets! I don’t have right now blankets for my kids!

#### CHILD CARE

As with transportation, the state’s priorities as regards TANF made access to child care assistance in the Valley systematically dependent upon access to network assistance (see Weinberg, 2000, 214). According to a local workfare administrator, in 2002 there were only three licensed childcare providers in Starr County (population roughly 60,000) and among families that did receive state assistance, “70-80%” did so through the state’s “self-arranged” program. The self-arranged program pays a participant’s kin (e.g., mother, grandmother, sibling) a small stipend to care for her children while she works or performs work requirements. Only 12 of the 26 respondents (46%) reported ever receiving any assistance with child care and, of those, 75% were self-arranged. A comparison of two mothers on TANF with networks of different strength indicates that the self-arranged program offered a small

benefit to those with moderate and strong networks while presenting a significant barrier to those with weak networks, illustrating, as in the case of transportation, that the effects of reform on household survival strategies reflect the “interplay of programmatic and personal factors” (Medley et al., 2005; see also Haney & Rogers-Dillon, 2005).

Beatriz’s (S8) network was of moderate strength. She was mandated to perform more than 30 hours of community service per week and enlisted her sister to provide self-arranged care for her children. She reported being very satisfied with the arrangement. On one hand, she knew that her children were receiving quality care: “with my sister, I know that they’re under good care.” On the other hand, because her sister was paid by the state—albeit only \$220 per month to watch three children—she was not worried about incurring the type of network debt that often accompanies nonreciprocated or nonremunerated network reliance and threatens the long-term viability of such supports (Roschelle, 1997). What is more, by creating a job for a network member who may otherwise have been unemployed, the self-arranged program bolstered the overall strength of Beatriz’s network, making it somewhat less likely that her sister would need financial help from her and somewhat more likely that she would have some cash if Beatriz had an emergency.

In contrast, Lydia (S20) was among the respondents with the weakest networks. Her own mother had died, and she could not convince one of her siblings to provide self-arranged care while she completed 33 hours per week of community service cleaning a hospital. Thus, she arranged for her elderly grandmother to care for her three young children (ages 4, 6, and 8). Given her grandmother’s age and the fact that she was also responsible for a number of other children, Lydia worried about the quality of care. Upon returning home one night to find that her youngest child had not been bathed and the older ones had not done their homework she concluded that the arrangement was unacceptable. Lacking another network member willing to provide care—and with no licensed providers offering night-time hours—she told her caseworker that she “didn’t wanna go [to community service] anymore.” That provoked, in her words, the following response:

So that man told me, “If you don’t do the hours they’re gonna cut your food stamps and cut your TANF.” . . . I said, “Well, how do you expect my kids to eat if we don’t have food stamps?” And he said he didn’t care, that we just had to do everything they asked [us] to do.

At the time of her interview she remained under sanction, which reduced her TANF grant by \$78 a month. She had, however, contracted one of her sisters to provide self-arranged care and resumed her community service. However, like Blanca (S16) she continued to struggle to meet her requirements because of transportation problems and problems with her caseworker.

As indicated in the words of respondents, threats of sanction and their application appear to have been widely employed in the Rio Grande Valley to coerce mothers to either comply with program requirements or quit the program. In either case, workfirst caused mothers to rely more heavily on their private networks of support. Importantly, increased network reliance allowed state officials to achieve their dual goals of meeting TANF “performance” mandates, and thus avoid financial sanctions, while conserving TANF funds for other purposes. Although this approach worked well for the state, it contributed to 67% of respondents with weak networks being sanctioned and experiencing additional hardships as a result.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The case examined here suggests that the household survival strategies analytical framework is useful yet should be extended to develop explanations of the impacts of welfare reform on households that more fully capture the role of workfare state structures and the ways in which they interact with, indeed exploit, program participants’ network resources. Methodologically, it indicates that ethnographic case studies of the impacts of welfare reform on single mothers’ survival strategies need to (1) include explanations of why funding for services necessary to support participation in work—as well as in TANF—is so limited and (2) examine whether structural factors lead to the systematic targeting of scarce services toward places exhibiting more favorable structural conditions and persons with higher levels of human capital and greater network resources. This entails investigating what Brodtkin and Majmundar (2010) called the “hidden organizational costs” associated with claiming welfare benefits and which they also found to be “unequally distributed . . . , with some groups more likely than others to be administratively disadvantaged” (pp. 828–829).

Explaining variation in household outcomes requires incorporating an analysis of the goals and strategies of the state actors who set the structural terms under which local-level administrators work and which low-income families confront at the frontlines of workfare offices (Ridzi, 2009). In Texas, services were scarce and only partially provided by the state due to the fact that its leaders saw the TANF block grant as a resource to be used to supplant general revenue spending and fund politically popular middle-class tax cuts (Winston, 2002). In light of how Texas historically used its discretion over federal welfare programs, its approach to TANF was entirely consistent (Harpham, 1987). As regards who among TANF participants was able to gain access to the limited services available, this was mediated at the regional level by workfare administrators who—engaging in a kind of “survival strategy” of their own—sought to avoid financial sanctions and maximize the funds under their control by targeting education and training

opportunities to places and persons deemed most likely to fulfill their need to garner “performances,” the flip side of which entailed withholding funding from places and persons deemed least likely to fulfill this organizational goal and the aggressive application of sanctions to the “noncompliant.”

The lack of formal transportation and childcare services in the Valley and the state’s failure to invest TANF funds in building a service infrastructure combined to make access to crucial support services systematically dependent on access to network resources. Thus, the interaction of network strength with these structural conditions, not either factor working independently, determined the effects of the policy on individual household survival strategies and family well-being. Those with the strongest networks simply quit the program to become more reliant on their networks. Some with moderate networks did the same whereas others drew more heavily on their networks to meet the costs of claiming TANF benefits and avoid sanction. In both cases, the costs associated with TANF were absorbed by private networks. In contrast, those with the weakest networks lacked the capacity to quit the program or meet its requirements. In these cases the costs of the state’s transfer of TANF resources to “other purposes” were absorbed by household members in the form of lack of food, adequate shelter, and quality child care, among others (see Harvey, 2005; London et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2004).

When structural considerations are taken into greater account, the widely reported finding that households with strong private networks fared better under reform than those without them (Clampet-Lundquist et al., 2003; Scott et al., 2004) is explained not merely by the fact that strong networks may act as functional substitutes for welfare but, also, by the fact that it often requires a strong network to wrest services from workfare states more concerned to meet goals that have nothing to do with assisting low-income mothers transition from welfare to work or improving their well-being.

These findings raise serious concerns not only about the effects of PRWORA but, also, its impacts on future social policies. Edin and Lein (1997a) found that it was not the desire to work that distinguished mothers who held jobs from those who did not but, rather, the capacity to do so—particularly network strength and local structural conditions. The targeting of TANF resources at the county and household levels observed here suggests that mothers who were better off to begin were more likely to have left TANF for work while those who were worst off and residing in the poorest counties were most likely to remain stuck in workfare, unable to complete its requirements, and sanctioned (Cherlin et al., 2001). If such outcomes are not limited to the Valley, and there are reasons to believe they are not, they may exacerbate the role of the invidious moral distinction between the so-called “deserving” working poor and the “undeserving” welfare poor that was central to the passage of PRWORA in future policy debates. Moreover, insofar as racial minorities have left welfare for work at lower rates than

Whites (Gooden, 2004) and are concentrated in high-poverty urban and rural ghettos in which access to jobs and work support services organizations is lacking (Allard, 2009), the notion of deservedness may become even more racialized than it is, possibly fueling public support for more punitive policies to transform the “bad behavior” of the “hardcore” welfare-dependent “underclass.” Thus, future research should not only address the interaction of structure and networks in other local contexts but do so with specific reference to the role of race in structuring those interactions (Harvey & Pickering, 2010).

Finally, the findings direct our attention to elements of PRWORA that are generally absent from studies evaluating its impacts on households. Contra the rhetoric about providing opportunities for welfare recipients to become “self-sufficient” and the promise of devolution to facilitate that goal via the introduction of local flexibility and “individualized treatment,” findings from a wide range of spatial contexts (inner-city, suburban, and rural) indicate that, in practice, states and localities generally applied the kind of case-clearing and budget-balancing workfirst model found in the Valley (Ridzi, 2009). This is explained by a number of factors (see Peck, 2001); however, the one emphasized throughout this article, and which suggests that the findings are generalizable beyond the particular case, is the fact that organizations charged with implementing workfare pursue multiple goals, including those that have nothing to do with assisting mothers moving from welfare to work. PRWORA made the pursuit of such other goals possible by allowing states to meet participation mandates merely by cutting caseloads (see the “caseload reduction credit” provision) and, what is more, it made that path a likely outcome by allowing states to transfer up to 30% of their TANF block grant funds to other purposes (Conlan, 1998, p. 290). By linking these macrolevel policy provisions to Texas’ policy decisions and their direct impacts on households of different network strength, the current study suggests that analyses of the impacts of reform on families cannot begin with the assumption that the workfare state, at its various levels, is concerned to assist families. Rather, the stated goals of the policy were to reduce “welfare dependency,” promote “self-sufficiency,” and cut welfare spending. The most efficient way to achieve these goals was to encourage mothers to quit welfare and, as one respondent cited above put it, “to go on with our lives in another way.”

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