

Systemic Racism & Welfare: A Brief Introduction

About Me

- Assistant professor in the Boston College School of Social Work
- Research focuses on social welfare policy in the U.S., including:
 - Its relationship to material hardships like food insecurity and homelessness
 - Influences on state policy design and implementation (e.g., why do some states have stricter policies than others?)
- One aspect of my research examines systemic racism as an influence on welfare

Some Important Notes

- Not representing the views of Boston College or the Boston College School of Social Work
- As a white, middle-class male I study and teach about oppression as an outsider
 - Not claiming to speak *for* people of color or economically disadvantaged people
 - But cannot ignore issues of race and racism when trying to understand scope and nature of poverty in the U.S.
- Discussing race and racism is hard—that's OK!
 - Hope we give each other room to learn
 - Always open to feedback about how I discuss these issues
- What I'm going to talk about may or may not be useful for advocacy in Massachusetts

Systemic/Institutionalized Racism

- When you think about “systemic racism” or “institutionalized racism” in welfare, what comes to mind?

(Some of) My Research

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a funding stream that partly funds cash assistance, but most researchers have only looked at cash assistance
 - Today, cash assistance is only about $\frac{1}{4}$ of all TANF expenditures
- States differ widely in how they use TANF funds (e.g., child care, tax credits, college scholarships, marriage promotion)
- What explains how states use their TANF funds?

(Some of) My Research

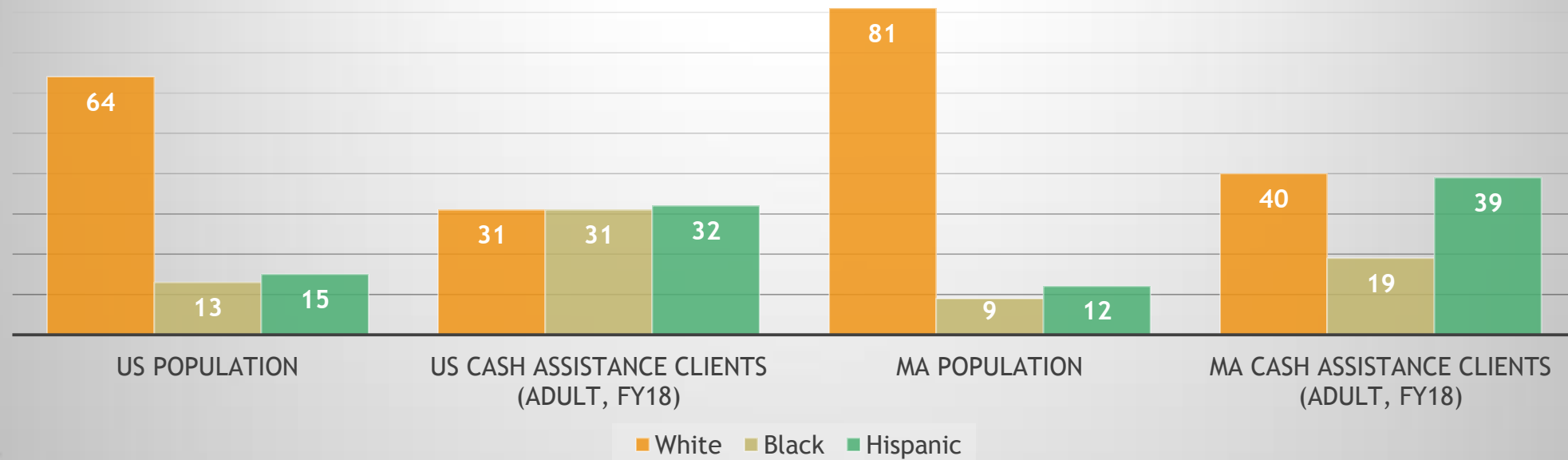
- Found that states where anti-black racism was more common use a smaller fraction of TANF for traditional cash assistance
- States where blacks and, to a lesser degree, Hispanics make up a larger fraction of the cash assistance caseload use a smaller fraction of TANF for traditional cash aid
 - More likely to use funds for other forms of cash aid, like tax credits for low-wage workers

Systemic/Institutionalized Racism

- When social or economic structures—basically the “rules” of society—reflect or reinforce racial hierarchy
- Systemic racism *does not require explicit bias on the part of individuals*
- E.g., an individual caseworker penalizing black clients more harshly than white clients is not necessarily systemic racism
- But, a policy the caseworker must enforce that disproportionately and negatively affects people of color is systemic racism

Demographics: Who Gets “Welfare?”

Percentage Identifying as Member of Racial/Ethnic Group



History (Two Examples)

- First “welfare” programs were state widow’s pensions in the early 1900s (pre-Depression)
 - Black families generally excluded
- Becomes a federal program, with high degree of state control, in the 1930s (Aid to Dependent Children/Aid to Families with Dependent Children)
 - Some states explicitly restrict participation by black families
 - Other states *implicitly* exclude black families through disproportionate use of punitive tools (e.g., “man in the house” rules)
- This is the foundation of the modern program!

Public Opinion About “Welfare”

- Attitudes toward “welfare” and racial attitudes are closely related (Gilens, 1998)
 - That is, people holding more prejudicial racial attitudes (overt racism) also tend to strongly disapprove of welfare
- Media images in stories about poverty and welfare disproportionately use images of people of color, linking the two (Gilens, 1998; van Doorn 2015)
- Whether intentionally or not, influences how decisionmakers approach welfare policy (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011)

1996 Welfare Reform Law (PRWORA)

- Ended AFDC, a quasi-entitlement to cash aid
- Created TANF--converted “welfare” into flexible block grant; added time limits, work requirements, and other restrictions to cash assistance; re-asserted state control over policy
- What does this have to do with systemic racism?
 - Many aspects of PRWORA related to racial stereotypes about poverty—the “welfare queen” rhetoric (Hancock, 2004; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001)
 - E.g., time limits parallel stereotypes about abuse of benefits, work requirements about motivation, family caps about irresponsible child-bearing
- Some of this was pretty explicit...

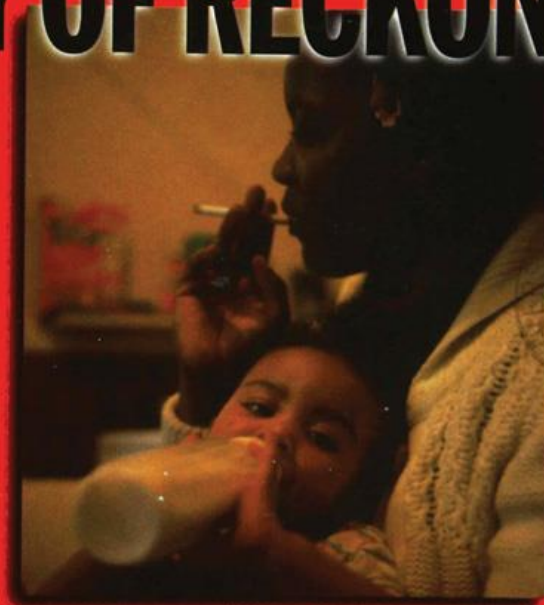
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State Policies

- Allowing states greater control under TANF allows some to implement harsher policies than others
- Often consistent with racial stereotypes
- States with larger black and (to a lesser degree) Hispanic representation on caseload tended to:
 - Have less generous benefits (Fellowes & Rowe, 2004)
 - Implement stricter sanctions, stricter time limits, and family caps (Soss et al., 2001)
 - Devote less of their TANF funds to cash assistance (Fusaro, 2020; Parolin, 2019)

Does it Matter?

- Restricted access to cash assistance associated with:
 - Increases in food insecurity and public school student homelessness (Shaefer, Edin, Fusaro, & Wu, 2020)
 - Increases in child poverty, especially in black families (Parolin, 2019)

Tying it Together

- Welfare policy disproportionately affects blacks and Hispanics (because they're disproportionately represented among America's poor)
- Racism shaped the history of cash assistance in the U.S.
- The way Americans think about welfare is closely linked to attitudes about race
- Welfare reform and state-level policy in response to reform lock in racialized ideas—you could entirely eliminate overt prejudice and the system would be the same

Massachusetts

- It is true that Massachusetts is among the less stringent states on some aspects of TANF, but it is not immune to these issues!
 - Until recently, had a family cap—one of the most explicitly racialized policy choices available to states
 - Its spending on cash aid *as a fraction of all TANF spending* is near the middle of the range
- Even more importantly, the *overall* system of TANF, of which TAFDC is one piece, is structured in response to racialized stereotypes about poverty
 - Being “better” in a bad system isn’t the same as “good”

Considerations

- To a degree, welfare advocacy work *is* anti-racist work because of the deep linkages
- But, don't want to inadvertently reinforce racial stereotypes about poverty
- Note that a common message in support of welfare is “most welfare users are white.” Problematic:
 - Isn't true if we take ethnicity into account (that is, if we define white as “non-Hispanic white”)
 - Accepts racism on its own terms--implies, even if the intention is good, that being from a non-dominant racial or ethnic group is a problem!