

Collisions of the Personal and the Professional: How Frontline Welfare Workers Manage Carceral Citizens

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Abstract

For criminalized people, particularly those who have been recently incarcerated, applying for and maintaining public assistance—cash aid and/or food assistance—is an immediate and crucial element of survival. Yet relative to a substantial body of research that documents pathways into and out of carceral citizenship, this aspect of postincarceration work has received little scholarly attention. Likewise, frontline welfare workers are often simplistically portrayed as gatekeepers who restrict poor people’s access to public assistance. In this article, we make visible the intersection of welfare and criminal-legal involvement by examining how criminalized clients are understood by welfare workers in one large, densely populated California county. Our data come from a larger ethnographic study of women’s postincarceration experiences of public institutions and include in-depth interviews with 19 frontline welfare workers and participant observation of welfare offices. We find that (a) criminal-legal awareness varies among welfare workers; (b) workers engage in substantial invisible labor, in large part to counteract the carceral logics of the welfare system; and (c) in absence of professional training, workers draw heavily on their own situated knowledge to manage the challenges of their work. Contextualizing these findings within a broader trend toward the deprofessionalization of welfare workers, we argue that the training and education of this workforce, particularly around criminal-legal issues, is an important avenue for social work advocacy.

Keywords

criminalization, discretion, public assistance, situated knowledge, welfare

For criminalized people, particularly those who have been recently incarcerated, applying for and maintaining public assistance—cash aid and/or food assistance—is an immediate and crucial element of survival (Welsh, 2015). Yet relative to a substantial body of research that documents pathways into and out of “carceral citizenship” (Miller & Alexander, 2016), this aspect of

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postincarceration work has received little scholarly attention. Likewise, little research exists on frontline welfare workers' understandings of the criminal-legal system. Van Cleve and Mayes (2015) urge scholars to examine "criminal justice adjacencies," or how a culture of surveillance and the perpetuation of criminalizing stigma is both shared between agencies and executed in locally specific ways (see also Lara-Millán & Van Cleve, 2017). Indeed, the reverberating effects of criminal-legal involvement have aptly been termed "invisible punishments" (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002).

How do frontline welfare workers understand the criminal-legal system and its effects on the lives of their criminalized clients? To what extent do workers try to help their criminalized clients in specific ways, and in doing so, what values do they communicate? In this article, we make visible the intersection of the welfare and criminal-legal systems. Our data come from a larger ethnographic study of women's postincarceration experiences of public institutions in one California county and include in-depth interviews with 19 frontline welfare workers (eligibility workers and case managers) as well as the first author's participant observation of welfare offices—both alongside the criminalized women in the study and through volunteer work with a legal aid group advocating for welfare rights.

Our analysis is driven by feminist epistemologies of how people negotiate the false divide between the public/professional and the personal/private (Yu, 2011) and of how invisible forms of extra physical and emotional work disparately fall on oppressed groups (DeVault, 1991, 2006; Hochschild, 1979; Wingfield, 2010). We examine workers' narratives of how they draw on their situated knowledge (Anderson, 2017)—life histories, social identities, and on-the-job experience—in their work with clients. Importantly, our data support a critique of the extant literature on frontline welfare workers, which often simplistically portrays workers as gatekeepers who restrict poor people's access to public assistance. As other researchers have recently highlighted, such a narrow focus neglects workers' own complex positionalities including race/ethnicity, gender, personal experiences of poverty, motivations for pursuing a career in welfare, and how these elements shape both the interpersonal aspects of their work and their discretionary decision-making processes (Koncikowski & Chambers, 2016; Watkins-Hayes, 2009a, 2009b). In doing so, our analysis identifies how workers replicate, and often resist, the criminalizing norms and values that produce carceral citizens.

As prior research has observed (Schram & Silverman, 2012; Taylor, 2014; Watkins-Hayes, 2009b), and as our data support, a lack of formal education and training stifles workers' abilities to effectively advocate for their clients, keeping them stuck as "paper pushers," when they could be leveraging their extensive knowledge of the welfare system to push for substantive reforms. While acknowledging the complex historical relationship between social work and public welfare work, we argue that the professionalization of frontline welfare workers is an important avenue for social work advocacy. Further, we argue that workers' lack of knowledge around the criminal-legal obligations of their criminalized clients (e.g., how parole and probation requirements often conflict with welfare-to-work requirements) contributes to the continued invisible punishment of this clientele. Far from unintentional, the deprofessionalization of welfare workers is a deliberate effect of neoliberal welfare policy (Watkins-Hayes, 2009b) and must be challenged.

Literature Review

Welfare in the Institutional Circuit

In managing and rebuilding their lives postincarceration, criminalized people must navigate what Sered and Norton-Hawk (2014) term an "institutional circuit" of temporary housing programs, mental health clinics, drug treatment programs, child welfare/family court offices, and community

supervision agencies, among many other institutions. Although these institutions claim to offer help, in reality, they exemplify neoliberal social welfare policies that emphasize personal responsibility and independence from governmental assistance (McCorkel, 2004; McKim, 2008; Miller & Alexander, 2016; Moore & Hirai, 2014; Schram & Silverman, 2012; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011).

The social safety net for very poor people has shrunk substantially over the past several decades, and this decline has been driven in large part by a preference for incarceration and other punitive responses to poverty; the programs that benefit childless adults (including criminalized people) have been the hardest hit by this trend (Anderson, Halter, & Gryzlak, 2002; Mauer & McCalmont, 2015; McCarty, Falk, Aussenberg, & Carpenter, 2016; Shannon, 2017). The cumulative effect of this policy trend has been a continuous “redistribution of the poor,” in which poor people are shuffled between different institutional spaces to project an illusion of client mobility and success (Lara-Millán, 2014). For criminalized people in particular, these institutions often work at cross-purposes, with the requirements imposed by one institution (e.g., welfare work requirements) conflicting with those of another institution, such as meeting with one’s community supervision agent or family court–mandated parenting classes (Welsh, 2015).

Welfare offices are frequently a first stop on the institutional circuit for formerly incarcerated people. These offices offer a mix of state and federal forms of assistance that are administered locally. General Assistance (GA) programs, often referred to as “the safety net of last resort,” (Anderson et al., 2002) are for poor adults categorized as “Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents” (ABAWD; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). Many criminalized people, including those who lost custody of their children during their incarceration, fall into this ABAWD category (Welsh, 2015). Criminalized people also frequently apply for federal food assistance (commonly referred to as “food stamps,” now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Although there remains a federal lifetime ban on these social assistance programs for people convicted of drug felonies (Mauer & McCalmont, 2015; Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [PRWORA], 1996), a majority of states have either modified the ban or opted out of it entirely. As of this writing, only 4 states continue the lifetime ban on food stamps and 23 states have opted out entirely; however, 22 states still uphold a modified version of the ban, with some states mandating drug testing as part of the eligibility process (Wolkomir, 2018).

Thus, while some recent changes are promising, the American welfare system continues to function as a surveillance apparatus designed to monitor and control poor people (Beckett & Western, 2001; Soss et al., 2011). Kaaryn Gustafson, for example, has extensively documented how the welfare system replicates the carceral logics of the criminal-legal system. Gustafson’s analysis shows how the experience of applying for and receiving welfare exemplifies a “degradation ceremony” (2013; see also Garfinkel, 1956; Gustafson, 2011) in which applicants are shamed into taking responsibility for their poverty in order to receive meager benefits that are subject to a plethora of rules and regulations. In this way, welfare recipients are forced to relinquish their right to privacy and autonomy, as they must agree to be subject to state surveillance in order to receive assistance. Such degradation is both gendered and racialized and serves the symbolic purpose of “marginalizing a few [to] promote solidarity among the majority” (Gustafson, 2013, p. 301).

“Herding Cattle Instead of Tending Sheep”: Welfare Workers and the Question of Discretion

While we know that the welfare and criminal-legal systems coproduce and perpetuate the surveillance and marginalization of poor people, the research is less clear on how this plays out day-to-day in welfare offices. Welfare eligibility workers and case managers are the faces of an institution that often serves as a first point of contact for recently released former prisoners, yet very little is known about how these workers understand the criminal-legal system. A key question in the extant research

literature on this topic is the extent to which frontline welfare staff have the ability to exercise discretion in ways that help or hinder their criminalized clients.

Some research suggests that, because frontline welfare workers have little discretion and are constantly overburdened, it may not matter whether these workers have even a basic awareness of the criminal-legal system. Indeed, as a worker in Schram and Silverman's (2012) study put it, "welfare . . . is no longer a social service . . . [it's] now herding cattle instead of tending to sheep" (p. 135). Taylor (2013) observes that workers spend nearly two thirds of their time doing paperwork and that they do so in part because paperwork offers "a means to feel effective" (p. 10) in an occupational role that otherwise does little to help clients (see also Schram & Silverman, 2012; Soss et al., 2011). Taylor only observed one instance in which a caseworker took extra time to consult with a client who had a criminal record about how to find employment; she concludes that this consultation was so unusual because despite paying lip service to the "mutual responsibility" of both workers and clients for achieving client success, workers' roles were primarily to document (rather than facilitate) the efforts of their clients.

Building on the work of Watkins-Hayes (2009b), Taylor, Gross, and Towne-Roese (2016) develop a typology of welfare managers on a spectrum of views aligning with clients' needs and identifying structural barriers ("social work" type) versus "efficiency engineers" who prioritize the rules of the agency and place responsibility on clients to follow them. In the middle are the "conflicted" managers who identify both individual and structural barriers to client success. Notably, managers' views track with how often they themselves engage with clients; managers who frequently interacted with clients were more likely to align with the social work perspective, which in turn more closely resembles frontline workers' views. In Taylor et al.'s (2016) study, the majority of managers fell into the efficiency engineer group. It stands to reason, then, that while most welfare managers may not see an awareness of the criminal-legal system as a priority area of knowledge for their staff, frontline workers' views on this topic may differ.

Overall, this typology fits with many other theories of frontline work, such as Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2000) "state agent" and "citizen agent" typology of frontline worker use of discretion and Klockars's (1972) typology of probation officers as "law enforcers," "time servers," "therapeutic agents," or "synthetic officers." The consistent thread throughout these typologies is that workers in public agencies who are tasked with both helping and policing their clients will vary along a spectrum in terms of how much they (a) utilize their discretion to benefit clients, themselves, or the agency and (b) see the barriers clients must overcome to succeed in terms of structural/external forces versus the individual motivation and responsibility of clients.

Taylor (2014) observes that workers tend to use their discretion to benefit the agency (e.g., by emphasizing time limits or work participation requirements), but that in interviews, these same workers described simply adhering to the rules. This finding is in contrast to previous studies of welfare worker discretion (e.g., Blau, 1963; Hays, 2003) that found that workers tend to use their discretion to either help their clients or themselves rather than to benefit the agency. Taylor (2014) suggests that these differences are likely due to the proliferation of rules and regulations that workers must follow in the wake of welfare reform under the PRWORA. This dynamic may also be due in part to how workers construct their moral identities as helpers and may help to explain when workers legitimate programs that don't fully address clients' needs in order to preserve workers' own moral identities (Taylor, Turgeon, & Gross, 2017).

Conceptualizing the Personal and the Professional in the Welfare Office

A nuanced discussion of the roles that worker racial/ethnic identities, gender, and other positionalities and life experiences might play, both in how workers interact with clients and in how they make case-processing decisions, is largely absent from research on worker discretion (see Watkins-Hayes,

2009a, 2009b, for exceptions). The importance of these elements of worker identity in shaping how workers engage with clients—and particularly criminalized clients—cannot be understated, especially in light of related research indicating that how people perceive the criminal justice agents who supervise them may affect whether they have repeat encounters with the criminal-legal system (Chamberlain, Gricius, Wallace, Borjas, & Ware, 2018; Kennealy, Skeem, Manchak, & Eno Louden, 2012). The collisions of the personal and the public in present-day welfare work can be traced in the complex history of welfare work in the United States. Importantly, this history also illuminates how welfare work and social work have coevolved as related but distinct professions. A full review of this history is beyond the scope of this article, but some key turning points are worth noting.

Poor-support work became formalized with the passage of the 1935 Social Security Act, which formed the Aid to Dependent Children Program. With this legislation, case management became a key component of the professional orientation of workers who investigated, documented, and delivered social services and financial support to the poor (Katz, 1996; Watkins-Hayes, 2009b). Tensions began to emerge, as workers and policy makers alike debated whether assistance to the poor was fostering dependency or fulfilling a key societal responsibility to care for its most vulnerable members. As Watkins-Hayes (2009b) observes, “the links between private social work and public welfare work were tentative . . . each struck its own path toward professionalization based largely on its critique of the other field” (p. 218). For welfare workers, that path led to battles over autonomy and power amid the increased bureaucratization of welfare services and the routinization of case processing. Welfare workers’ primary role became the provision of economic assistance, while “private social workers . . . adjusted personalities and dispensed services, not money” (Katz, 1996, p. 174).

Several decades later, the Civil Rights Movement and President Johnson’s War on Poverty prompted a renewed effort to import a social work orientation to welfare work (Trattner, 1999), though workers’ monitoring of the poor in this era was moralistic, paternalistic, and racially discriminatory (Brodkin, 1986; Katz, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1993). In this era, welfare workers spent a considerable amount of their working hours visiting (and scrutinizing) clients’ homes. A well-known example of this was the “man-in-the-house” rule (Piven & Cloward, 1993; Trattner, 1999), disproportionately applied to black women, in which workers would look for indications that a man lived in a welfare recipient’s house as a reason to terminate assistance.

Despite these issues, white welfare workers in Watkins-Hayes’s (2009b) more recent study remember the 1970s as the “good old days” when workers were highly educated professionals with considerable autonomy (p. 227). However, political pressure to shrink the welfare rolls led to the demise of the professional welfare worker: In 1969, the federal government dropped the requirement that welfare workers have a college degree, and caseload limits were also removed (Brodkin, 1986; Katz, 1996). These changes, alongside larger social and economic forces in the 1970s and 1980s, fundamentally reshaped the role of welfare workers who now operated within an “eligibility-compliance” model in which service delivery focused on rule compliance and fraud detection (Brodkin, 1986; Gustafson, 2011; Trattner, 1999). The passage of the PRWORA in 1996 further cemented this shift, creating the structural conditions to further deskill workers, resulting in what Taylor (2014) describes as “a routinized labor process in which caseworkers with few skills and coming from poor and working-class backgrounds, lacking professional credentials, are in little position to demand autonomy and discretionary power to help clients” (p. 430).

Welfare work continues to be dominated by women and, while the sector is diversifying, the majority of workers are white. Nationally, in the occupational category of “eligibility interviewers, government programs,” 80% of workers identify as female; 3.1% identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, 25.2% black, 20.5% Latinx, and 65.9% white (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Recipients of welfare services are increasingly nonwhite: For adults with children at least, 3.8% of recipients

nationally identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, 30.2% black, 30.4% Latinx, and 32.5% white (Administration for Children and Families, 2018).

Watkins-Hayes's research (2009a, 2009b) highlights how since welfare reform, workers—like their clients—are expected to “do more with less,” as clients must do more to prove their worthiness for receiving benefits, and workers are expected to do more interpersonal work to facilitate clients' self-sufficiency. This leads black and Latinx workers to employ a “racialized professionalism” in which they draw on aspects of themselves that help them define their occupational role (Watkins-Hayes, 2009a). Workers' use of their racial/ethnic identities as a professional tool to successfully engage with their clients is an insight that is learned, not taught, and an example of how workers learn to assemble a tool kit of skills for working with clients.

This finding points to the ways in which present-day public institutions demand that their frontline workers bring their “full” (personal and professional) selves to their work. These personal elements can include not just racial/ethnic identities but also gender (Welsh, 2019; Wyse, 2013), parental experience (Koncikowski & Chambers, 2016), and, as our data will show, lived experiences of poverty, criminalization, and other struggles that a worker might leverage to make sense of their work. These personal assets comprise what feminist epistemologists have long conceptualized as “situated knowledge” or ways in which one's understanding of the world is shaped by their social location (Anderson, 2017). Arguably, frontline welfare workers utilize situated knowledge to cope with the challenging situations they confront on a daily basis, in a similar way that Miller (2011) observes first-time fathers “falling back into gender” or resorting to familiar, gender-normative behaviors as a path of least resistance when confronted with the challenges of parenthood. Likewise, Welsh, 2019 finds that some female parole agents and probation officers adopt a mothering posture in supervising their clients. Workers' use of situated knowledge, we argue, exemplifies a coping strategy to survive in neoliberal public institutions that are demanding more and more of workers' personal selves, while giving them less and less professional support in doing so.

Method

The data analyzed here come from a larger ethnographic study conducted from 2012 to 2014 of women's postincarceration work in one large, densely populated California county. The study included interviews with and observations of formerly incarcerated women's experiences managing the institutional aspects of reentry, including navigating the welfare bureaucracy as well as managing parole or probation supervision requirements. Institutional review board approval as well as agency permissions were obtained for all components of the study.

The first author conducted in-depth interviews with 19 frontline welfare workers in 2013. A purposeful sample of workers was selected from across 14 of the county's welfare offices and from two job roles—eligibility workers and case managers—that criminalized clients encounter in their involvement with the welfare system. These workers operated within three key poor support programs: cash aid for “able-bodied adults without dependents” (GA), the required work program associated with GA, and the required work program for adults with children, known federally as Temporary Aid to Needy Families. It is important to note that at the time of this study, California still upheld the federal lifetime ban on food stamps for people convicted of drug felonies; in 2013, the California state legislature passed SB 283, which lifted this ban effective January 2015.

The demographics of the sample of workers were as follows: 63% identified as female and 37% as male; 11% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 16% black, 63% Latinx, and 11% white. While we did not systematically capture the number of languages spoken by our sample of workers, a large majority was fluent in at least one language other than English. It is important to note that on these two characteristics—race/ethnicity and languages spoken—our sample of workers is considerably

more diverse than what would be indicated by the national statistics cited above and is a reflection of the highly diverse county in which the research was conducted.

Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 90 min, with most lasting about an hour. Interview questions asked workers to reflect on their work history and experience; their daily work life in their current position, typical interactions with clients; and specific knowledge of and interactions with criminalized clients, and women in particular. All interviews were conducted by the first author who used a loosely structured interviewing approach in order to allow workers the space to develop narratives about the meaning of their work and their experiences with and perceptions of clients.

During 2012 and 2013, the first author also conducted extensive participant observation of the county's welfare offices. These observations took place in two contexts. First, while conducting fieldwork with the criminalized women in study, she often drove women to their various appointments, and this frequently included long days of sitting with women while they waited to apply for public assistance or deal with issues arising with their public assistance case (e.g., wrongful termination of benefits). Second, the first author also volunteered with a legal aid group working inside welfare offices to assist and advocate on behalf of welfare clients and applicants. As the result of a lawsuit, this group was permitted to show up unannounced at any of the county's welfare offices to provide assistance. The first author received training on the county's welfare policies and procedures and then worked as a volunteer advocate approximately one afternoon per week for a year. The first author then gained permission to interview the workers after nearly a year of observations. Thus, she was able to use the interviews as an opportunity to verify patterns she had observed as well as to get workers' "side of the story" about aspects of the welfare system that were opaque and deeply frustrating from the client perspective—such as excruciatingly long waiting times.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and the first author then checked the transcripts against the audio recordings for accuracy. Field notes from the welfare office observations were handwritten and then typed up for coding. Working in Excel, both authors employed a data-driven, inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), assigning codes to passages of text and keeping a running log of our reactions and interpretations in adjacent columns in the spreadsheet (Meyer & Avery, 2009). This system allowed us to use Excel's "Sort" feature to compare all similarly coded passages for consistency and accuracy as well as to identify emerging patterns in the data. To maximize consistency, we initially selected three interviews (chosen to maximize variation based on worker type) and one set of field notes that each author coded inductively, and we then compared our codes to discuss and reconcile discrepancies in how we developed and applied our codes. From this, we generated a list of codes. The second author then coded the remaining transcripts and wrote analytic memos for each interview and sets of field notes. To protect participants' privacy, all names used here are pseudonyms.

Findings

Our analysis examines how frontline welfare workers understand the criminal-legal system and the extent of their awareness of the criminalizing histories of some of their clients. We identify how clients of both systems can potentially get lost in the blind spots, as each agency fails to account for the demands and constraints of the other. We also highlight how workers maneuver within and at times subvert the rules governing their work. Far from the passive gatekeepers, they are often perceived to be by policy makers, academics, and even clients, these workers have a nuanced understanding of the welfare system and their role in it and have developed a set of techniques to cope with the demands and limitations of their work. Often, workers cope by taking on extra forms of work well beyond their formal job description. These coping mechanisms are rooted in each workers' situated knowledge—their own complex positionalities including personal experiences of poverty and criminalization. We argue that workers are relying on this situated knowledge because

their work demands that they at times engage in deeply personal work with their clients, yet most workers have little formal training or education to draw on when doing so.

Criminal-Legal Awareness Among Welfare Workers

Some workers were unaware of the effects of criminalization on their clients, while others were deeply aware of the hardships produced by criminal-legal involvement. The variation in criminal-legal awareness stemmed largely from workers' distinct job roles: Eligibility workers tended to describe much less of an understanding of the meaning of criminalization for applicants, while case managers articulated a more comprehensive understanding of the "mark of the criminal record" (Pager, 2003) but varied in the extent to which they believed they could help clients to overcome these barriers.

When asked about their awareness of applicants' criminal records, eligibility workers tended to give responses like, "we're not allowed to ask too many personal questions," and "it's just the facts" in an eligibility interview. This may be a deliberate rejection of the earlier era of welfare work discussed above in which workers were given broad discretion to scrutinize clients' personal lives. Still, some eligibility workers noted picking up on certain clues of criminal-legal involvement. These clues included unspent money on a client's Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card and a refusal to accept a hotel voucher in areas known for high levels of criminal activity:

There's accumulation of so much money [that] they haven't picked up. "Ok, where have you been?" . . . As a rule we are not allowed to ask too many personal questions. (Dina)

We don't have a specific question about if they've been incarcerated. We just ask, "how have you been supporting yourself for the past 30 days, 60 days?" And that's when they'll say, "oh, I was just released from prison." "Oh, ok." Our take on that is, is it drug related? And they'll say "no, it's not." And after that, honestly I don't go further. Because if it's not drug related then it has really nothing to do with either program. (Mindy)

That hotel [that we give vouchers for] is on Skid Row. But 90% of [GR] participants refuse to go over there. It's dangerous. Why? What they told me a couple of times is because Skid Row is an area where they're selling drugs. And most of the participants, they're on parole or probation. And . . . parole says don't go ever to places where they're selling drugs. Once you go over there, that's it. Parole violation. That's why they refuse to go over there. (Sam)

In one way, the "rule" Dina mentions that eligibility workers cannot ask questions about applicants' histories of criminalization eliminates an important opportunity to connect people with services they might need, such as housing referrals that don't violate parole conditions and criminal record expungement clinics. As Mindy, another eligibility worker put it, "When people get out [of jail or prison] . . . there's not a central place where you can say, 'here, you can go to this department and this is where you'll get all the help you need. This is where all your questions will be answered . . . So you end up being that person by default . . . But then you don't have time.'" On the other hand, this "just the facts" approach may be important for preventing further stigmatization of applicants.

Processing applications and conducting eligibility interviews is highly routinized work. Criminalized people don't fit neatly into this routine. For example, on multiple occasions while volunteering for the legal aid program, the first author witnessed the extra hassles experienced by people recently released from prison who lacked a conventional state-issued identification card. In one incident, a man recently released from prison received approval from his eligibility worker to

receive GA, but when he was called up to the cashier's window to receive his EBT card, bus tokens, and hotel voucher, the cashier refused because he only had his prison identification card, not a state-issued ID. This was in direct conflict with official GA policies, which require a picture ID but also state that a client cannot be denied benefits merely because they lack ID (and, in fact, the county expects that this might be a barrier for many people and offers a voucher for an ID from the Department of Motor Vehicles. The first author advocated on behalf of the man and was able to get a supervisor to override the cashier's determination. In another irony, many counties, at least in California, require welfare applicants to have established "residency" in the county for 2 weeks before they can apply for assistance; this means that people recently released from prison must wait an excruciating—and precarious—2 weeks before they can even begin to receive help. These examples underscore the need for welfare policies to be modified for criminalized clients and for front-of-the-office staff to be trained on these issues.

Welfare case managers, in contrast, articulated a deeper understanding of the effects that criminalization can have on their clients, particularly the effects of being on community supervision (parole or probation). This may be because case managers are tasked with overseeing clients' efforts to find work:

They feel like they're being punished twice. "Ok I paid my price, I paid my dues. Ok, I did something wrong. Now I'm coming to real life now and I'm still paying, I still have to deal with people asking me this." So we see that frustration in their eyes of "why am I paying the price over and over and over again? . . . I can't apply for any job that I want anymore." So that frustration and discouragement is very overwhelming. Just look at them and you know some are bad mistakes, some are just accidents . . . It's very frustrating and my heart go out for them. (Don)

If the parole officer calls 'em up and says, "hey, I need to see you in my office tomorrow" and that participant has a [job] interview, well you gotta go to parole. You have to go. And so it can be kind of a competition there, and in an ideal world there can be communication and collaboration but the reality is just that it's not happening. (Jack)

They can lie. But when they get fingerprinted, when they do background check they'll see it. Then they won't get the job. So I always tell them be truthful . . . And I don't know how to help them. How do we help this population? It's hard enough to have the ones without the record . . . And that's one of the problems that they have. It's you know how do we help them get a job? Or even how do we send them to training for school if they've had a conviction? That's the main one. I get that we can help 'em get a job, but we send 'em to school. What's the point of sending them to school if we know nobody will hire them at all? The only thing they can do is have their own business. (Eva)

Case managers are sympathetic to the barriers that formerly incarcerated people encounter in trying to enter to the workforce with a criminal record. Further, Jack's remarks highlight that case managers are aware of the conflicting constraints that community supervision places on welfare clients and that in the hierarchy of demands, supervision trumps welfare—when your parole officer calls, "you gotta go." Yet case managers varied substantially on whether they viewed these additional challenges as something that they could help clients overcome. Later in his interview, Jack described the strategies he used to help clients find work that complied with parole requirements such as that the parolee can't leave the county. Other case managers, like Eva, however, were less optimistic that they could substantively help their criminalized clients, questioning the usefulness of helping these clients to go to school when "nobody will hire them." The range of these narratives underscores workers' lack of formal, standardized knowledge of criminalization; instead, workers develop their own individualized ways of working with clients.

“It Takes a Lot More Than Just Pushing Paper”: How Workers Engage in Extra Work That Counteracts Carceral Logics

A central theme that emerged in our analysis was how workers maneuvered within the time- and rule-bound nature of their jobs, often taking on extra work that made their jobs more difficult (or that could even put their jobs at risk). A key way in which some workers subvert the system is through what we came to call “coaching” clients on how to prove their eligibility and how to follow the rules to maintain assistance. As Lia, an eligibility worker, put it, “it takes a lot more than just pushing paper.” For example, on a few occasions, the first author observed eligibility workers coaching clients on how to fill out their application so as to meet the strict financial requirements for eligibility.¹ In one instance, an applicant had a bank account containing just over the US\$50 allowed maximum, and the worker told the applicant to go to an ATM, withdraw US\$20, and then come back to see her. These instances were rare (possibly because workers feared the potential repercussions), but represented an overt subversion of the carceral logics of the welfare system, which dictate that workers and clients alike must follow the rules, many of which are intended to prevent, police, and punish welfare fraud. In interviews, some eligibility workers also described “bending the rules” in this way. Mindy put it like this:

I will tend to bend those rules for the person who really needs the program. Where you’re asking a question and they’re not answering the way they should . . . So you kinda just have to tweak things a little bit to make them eligible, to make them be able to get what we’re offering . . . Like for instance, [I] have clients who will tell you “ok, I have two cars.” “Ok. Now is your car working?” “No, it’s not working.” “Is it registered under your name?” “Well yes it is.” “But it’s not working?” “No, it’s not working.” “Ok, which one do you use?” “Well, I use this one.” “Ok, so then we’ll just say you have one car. It’s that one that’s working.” (Mindy)

Ana, likewise, described “going out of her way” to connect applicants with additional resources:

Once I’m done with my interview to see if they qualify for any benefits, if I see any potential in the individual, not because I’m passing judgment but because I see they are showing interest in trying to get something more other than just benefits, then I will do what I can to see if I can find them some job leads for . . . “felon-friendly jobs” is what they call them. I’ll go out of my way to do that or share other information with them to perhaps get their foot in the door . . . (Ana)

A common theme across these two narratives is that workers don’t do this extra work for every client; instead, workers informally assess each client’s level of need and motivation (what Ana calls “potential”)—or perhaps what Werth (2016) conceptualizes as client “affect”—and devotes extra effort to aiding these clients. To be clear, not all workers described engaging in extra work in this way, but the fact that many did complicates the conventional notion of welfare work as routine, depersonalized, and preoccupied with gatekeeping.

The workers who described “coaching” techniques did so despite being heavily constrained by time: Eligibility workers, for example, are scheduled to see clients at a relentless pace of a new client every 15 min—a pace many of them didn’t abide by:

We have appointments scheduled every 15 minutes but I take the time that I need. I never count the time because there are some that are really fast but there are some others that need to talk more. (Jess)

There are some that I can try and do in 30 minutes, yes that’s possible. But there are some who come in here, especially the ones who are first-time applicants, they have so many questions. They want it to be very thorough. I think the most I’ve had one application for is 2 hours. (Mindy)

Are there consequences that I pay for keeping those cases on my desk? Yes of course. They think I'm neglecting my cases and to a certain extent I neglect the paperwork but never my client. So there's a price to pay but I don't mind. (Ana)

Workers consistently described skipping breaks, working through lunch, and staying late without overtime compensation to help their coworkers process cases. One case manager, in reflecting on her time as an eligibility worker, stated, "I barely had time to use the restroom."

Another form of extra work that many workers described related to their language skills. Multilingual workers are frequently expected to take on additional cases beyond a typical English-speaking caseload. Further, some clients want special treatment because the worker is "one of them." Dina, for example, who is Armenian and also speaks Farsi, described how her Farsi-speaking clients often wanted her to:

"do something for us" . . . they come to me like they're here to have a cup of coffee. Haha . . . They feel very comfortable with me. But I'm very strict when it comes to the rules . . . I say, "I can very nicely explain to you, because when you know the regulations, you can make it work for you."

Dina's clients often can't read the paperwork she gives them, so they call her to ask questions. "I'm very good at explaining," she says, "taking time to do it . . . The clients, oh, they love me. But it's the time to do it, you know, we don't have the time." Although Dina happily takes on this extra work, she is rarely recognized for it, as her Armenian- and Farsi-speaking clients want to bring her gifts of thanks (which she cannot accept) but won't fill out the client satisfaction comment cards, which is the only way this extra work might be acknowledged by her superiors.

Spanish-speaking workers also described extra labor that comes along with clients who trust them more because of their shared native language. Ty described often being asked to dispense advice well beyond his expertise:

[My caseload is] a Spanish caseload so I'm dealing primarily with people of Latin descent, which I am as well . . . I guess they get some sort of comfort level with me . . . A lot of them will—whenever something's going on, even if it's with their children, they'll call me. They're like, 'oh, what do you think I could do?' And I try to give 'em the best advice I can, especially when it's in regards to school. Sometimes I ask my wife, because my wife is a teacher. So I ask her. (Ty)

Interestingly, the only worker who disclosed that she herself was formerly incarcerated described engaging in a similar form of extra work related to a responsibility she feels to support and encourage her former clients who have criminal histories:

They call me, of course, even when they're not my clients anymore . . . I encourage them to call me and let me know how they're doing . . . One, he was fighting a life sentence. Somehow he managed to beat it . . . I didn't want to get into the full details but he came home after 25 years and I would tell him, "check in with me once a week. Just let me know how you're doing. Or if you feel like talking go ahead and call me." (Ana)

Lastly, when workers described bending the rules, coaching, taking on extra cases for non-English speakers, following up with former clients, or otherwise doing extra work to help clients to maximize the resources they could receive, they tended to justify doing so in recognition of how precarious their own status was:

You find very few workers that are willing to help the clients. They're just in and out in and out in and out like cattle. And I don't see it that way . . . God forbid one day I end up back in a situation or a family

member or even one of my children. I would never want them to be treated in the manner I've seen some people being treated. (Ana)

To me the only thing separating us is this desk. I can be in your place tomorrow. (Mindy)

You know what? I was an eligibility worker for 3 years and low and behold this ex-eligibility worker who decided to take off, go to Mexico for 6 months with all his family and just leave the job, and he came back and he was broke and he was on the other side of the desk. And I was interviewing him. And I said, "let that be a lesson to me. That nothing is really separating me from being on the other side." (Juan)

Workers see themselves as occupying a precarious position of relative security; they are acutely aware that their own economic status could change at any time, and this shapes how they understand and approach their work.

Self-Made Social Workers? The Situated Knowledge of Welfare Workers

In this final section, we examine how the workers interviewed for this study articulate their personal experiences with incarceration, poverty, or other hardships as shaping their approach to the work. Workers leverage these forms of situated knowledge to cope with the challenging nature of their work because their skills have been forged through on-the-job experience rather than formal training or education. In this way, many frontline welfare workers view themselves as "self-made" social workers, rooted in the same motivations of people-oriented public service as are the formalized helping professions.

Workers described widely varying pathways to their current positions. Thirty-six percent of the sample had a college degree and another 21% had completed an Associates (two-year) degree or at least some college coursework. One worker had a master's degree in divinity. Only a handful of workers stated that they had studied human services in some form; most "fell into" the work. As Mindy put it, "I didn't really know what I was getting in to." Lia's experience was typical of how other workers described coming to work in the county welfare system:

Hehe. I wanted to be a lawyer. But because of my socio-economic background, that didn't happen . . . So [after college] one of my friends was like, "hey, they're hiring at the county" and I was like, "who's the county?" I didn't know who the county was . . . So I went there . . . I only qualified for one position, which was the eligibility worker. And I applied. Six months down the line, I had forgotten about applying there, but I got a letter saying that I was gonna take a test . . . Then another 6 months came around and they called me to come in to start the [hiring] paperwork.

When Dina applied for the eligibility worker position, she was getting a divorce and had two young children, and she just needed a stable job with benefits. It was only later that she discovered that the work suited her personality and her desire to help people:

I had different kinds of jobs. I worked for Yellow Pages. I was a small business office manager type of a thing. But my character and I would say my [astrological] sign, when you read my sign that's one of the things you need to do. Some sort of a social thing. You wanna help. You wanna be a nurse, a social worker. And it does fit you know, I like that part of it. To think that I am in one way, some way helpful to someone even though our program, sometimes it's a revolving door. They come in and out of there. They're not learning anything. They're not taking advantage of things. We see the same clients over and over again. But there are some that will be helped. So that's good to know.

When asked a very broad question about how they came to be in their current position, several workers voluntarily disclosed their own struggles with poverty or criminal-legal involvement. Rod,

for example, described his parents' bad experience with the welfare system as a key motivating factor for becoming "a better bridge" to public assistance:

So being a product of social services . . . what I mean is that my parents received benefits when I was growing up. Seeing my parents go through the social work system, sometimes given bad customer service, going through so many appointments and paperwork, just to obtain minimal cash and food stamps, when they had lost their jobs due to downsizing, layoffs, or even disability, because my dad got disabled a couple times. Well, that encouraged me to become a social worker and become a better bridge for individuals who need the assistance, as my parents did. I vowed not to be the social worker that my mother least liked calling for help.

The way Rod uses the term "social work" is noteworthy—he sees the welfare system as part of social work and views himself as a social worker—perhaps in part because he has a college degree, which allowed him to start at the county in a relatively higher position than others.

Val, in contrast, has a high school diploma. She started out in an entry-level position taking people's fingerprints for verification that they don't have an open welfare case in another jurisdiction and worked her way up to eligibility worker. Perhaps for this reason, Val describes her orientation toward her work in plainer terms, stating:

I like to help people and I like to listen to clients. What they went through. I went through a lot too but I'm glad I have parents. They were there for me. But they [clients] don't have nobody. So it's emotional sometimes. And I try to help them as much as I can.

While Val hints at having been "through a lot" in the past, which could imply criminal-legal involvement, Ana explicitly described her own criminal history. As she put it,

I was in a situation where I myself was incarcerated. So once I was released, I felt really lost and because of that experience and the struggles that I went through to finally get myself into a stable situation, that's why I tend to empathize with these individuals.

The kinds of coaching of clients that Ana engages in is rooted in this experience—she discloses her own history to her criminalized clients and tries to motivate them through this shared experience:

Everyone says, "well, no one gave me the opportunity," but see, if you have that negative attitude then that's exactly what you're gonna show these people. Like, "you really don't care I'm here just 'cause my PO made me come." "No. Show them that you're serious. You're hard working, you're willing to work and accept anything that comes your way. Because you still have a price to pay just like we all do. It's hard for us out here as well." I share those experiences with them and also those of other people in my life.

Although Ana was the only worker to disclose a criminal history, how she describes using this information in her work with clients is consistent with how other workers described other aspects of their experience as both allowing them to empathize with their clients and as foundational to their professional expertise. Workers are not only "coaching" and otherwise trying to educate their clients, but as the faces of an otherwise impenetrable bureaucracy, they are also trying to communicate that the institution cares about clients' well-being and success—even if the caring is really coming from workers' personal selves rather than from the institution.

Discussion and Implications

It is common in the research literature for the criminal-legal and welfare systems to be described as cooperators in the punishment, surveillance, and further marginalization of poor people. While we certainly don't argue this point, our analysis has shown that the reality is more complex. Some of the workers interviewed for this project lacked a clear understanding of the criminal-legal system and how it operates in clients' lives. This was especially true for eligibility workers, who often serve as a first point of contact for services for recently incarcerated people. As our data show, this blind spot may prevent the further stigmatization of this vulnerable population, but it is also a missed opportunity to connect people with services tailored to their circumstances.

Our analysis highlights important ways in which frontline welfare workers resist the routinized and depersonalized nature of their work. These acts of resistance in some ways stem the overflow of carceral logics into this adjacent system. The workers we spoke with described engaging in multiple forms of extra and unrecognized work to benefit their clients. This is in sharp contrast to some other recent studies of welfare workers (e.g., Taylor, 2013, 2014) and may in part be a function of regional differences. Notably, we found that language is a substantial shaping force in the worker-client relationship: Multilingual workers saw themselves as their clients' only viable option for success in navigating the welfare system and beyond, making language a crucial factor in the responsibility they felt towards clients. This is similar to the "racialized professionalism" noted by Watkins-Hayes (2009a) and highlights language as another important dimension of how workers forge relationships with their clients.

Further, multilingual workers and workers who were savvy to the needs of criminalized clients were similar in that they felt an obligation to resist the relentless pace of welfare application processing in order to increase the success of these particularly disadvantaged clients. In this way, our data show that some frontline welfare workers have a depth of personal investment in their clients that is rarely described in the extant research literature. Ignoring the personal investment that workers make in coaching their clients perpetuates the false stereotype of these workers as unskilled paper pushers, when in reality, many of them not only care deeply but also have spent years if not decades honing their skills through on-the-job experience.

The deprofessionalization of frontline welfare workers that began in the 1970s and 1980s and that was further cemented in the welfare reform of 1996 has both disempowered these workers and widened the gap between welfare workers and the social work profession. Because many welfare workers lack a college degree, their views are often dismissed by policy makers, researchers, and social work professionals. Arguably, this is a brilliant design feature of welfare reform, as it has sidelined a key group that could otherwise mobilize to fight the drastic downsizing of assistance for the very poor. We echo Watkins-Hayes's (2009b) call for an increase in funding to enhance welfare worker training and ongoing professional development to better serve as "first responders" to a wide range of client issues. To this, we would urge the addition of training on issues related to criminalization. It is critical to the success of formerly incarcerated people that the welfare system substantively acknowledge this population and its needs. Our data show that workers are willing to teach themselves about the criminal-legal system and to tailor their work in response to client needs, but training on these issues must be formalized.

Social work as a profession has a very specific history and present-day training and skill set. We are not suggesting that the solution is simply to turn all welfare workers into social workers—though as Watkins-Hayes also found in her study, many workers intuitively recognize the value of "soft skills" for improving client outcomes. Rather, we argue that social work as a profession should become more invested in what welfare workers are doing as allies in the cause of alleviating poverty. Advocating for better training and education of welfare workers on the criminal-legal system and issues of criminalization would be an excellent first step.

Criminal sentencing reform is gaining more and more traction both at the federal and state levels, and social work is uniquely positioned to facilitate this trend (Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2014). Combined with legislation aimed at reducing overcrowding in prisons, frontline welfare workers will be coming into contact with criminalized clients more than ever before. It is crucial that social work research and advocacy be attuned to what is happening in the welfare system to better understand what can be done to both increase the effectiveness of workers in providing resources and improve the life prospects of people with criminal histories.


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1. At the time of this study, the financial criteria to be eligible for General Assistance in the county where this study took place were no more than US\$50 in cash on the day of application, no more than US\$500 in personal property, car Blue Book value cannot exceed US\$4,500, and any real estate cannot be assessed at more than US\$34,000 fair market value.

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