

## Barriers to public service delivery and receipt

### TAKEAWAYS

**Red tape and administrative burdens** are obstacles to providing access to and obtaining public services; they are explored here in their effect on poverty and social inequality.

**Red tape can diminish public agency staff** morale and agency effectiveness, and administrative burdens can keep people who are eligible for public programs from receiving the help they need.

**To reduce stigma associated with** requesting help (a type of administrative burden), the largest federal food assistance program moved from issuing food stamps, which were highly visible and stigmatizing, to electronic benefit transfer cards, which call less attention to recipients.



**Institute for  
Research on  
Poverty**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
irp.wisc.edu

**A long line of social science research focuses on obstacles to providing and obtaining access to public services.**<sup>1</sup> These barriers are divided into two categories, commonly called “red tape” and “administrative burdens.” *Red tape* comprises tedious rules imposed on public agency staff that do not serve any useful purpose and may negatively affect mission effectiveness and service delivery. *Administrative burdens* are obstacles citizens experience. Both barriers can have negative effects, especially when viewed through the lens of poverty and social inequality.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 outlines the differences between red tape and administrative burdens, showing that red tape affects public service delivery by staff and administrative burdens affect public service receipt by citizens. Put another way, red tape comprises the rules and procedures of administrative systems themselves that affect the people charged with carrying them out. Administrative burdens result from rules and procedures related to specific policies that affect the people who use them.

**Table 1. Red tape and administrative burdens are related but distinct concepts.**

Focal area	Red tape	Administrative burdens
Population affected	Managers/caseworkers	Citizens
Blocks (adverse effects on staff and clients)	Mission effectiveness; morale	Access to needed services
Level	Organization	Individual
Quality	Inherently bad	Not inherently bad
Perspective	Rules themselves	Costs that rules impose
Research examines	Compliance burden among agencies/managers/caseworkers	Learning costs; psychological costs; and compliance costs that citizens face in their interactions with government
Consequences	Caseworkers face meaningless paperwork, excessive formalization, and unjustifiable delays, and become frustrated, less committed to mission	Citizens who are eligible for public assistance do not receive it

**Source:** Adapted from D. Moynihan, P. Herd, and H. Harvey, “Administrative Burden: Learning, Psychological, and Compliance Costs in Citizen-State Interactions,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (2014): 43–69.

### Origins and impact of red tape vary.

Examples of red tape include rules often found in human resources, procurement, information systems, and budgeting that do not serve a legitimate purpose.<sup>3</sup> Another way of thinking about red tape is the effect of managers’ impressions that the burdensome rules and procedures deter their organization from carrying out its mission.<sup>4</sup> Red tape can be imposed externally, such as federal guidelines that state and local agencies must follow. While internally imposed rules can be changed, red tape imposed externally is more difficult to navigate. Similarly, the impact of imposed red tape can be felt either internally through staff ineffectiveness and morale loss or externally if the red tape is passed onto a subcontractor or client, which can lead to client dissatisfaction. Studies have found that having strong managers who help staff navigate red tape is an effective approach to mitigating its influence.

### Costs of administrative burdens comprise three categories.

Public management scholars generally define administrative burdens in terms of their costs to those affected by them, divided into three categories:

**Table 2. The three categories of administrative burden costs illustrate the types of barriers citizens face and techniques to reduce them.**

Burden	Definition	Examples	Ways to reduce
Learning costs	Citizens searching for information about public services, whether they are eligible, and how they are relevant to them	Finding out that a program exists Determining one's eligibility Discovering possible benefits Learning how to apply	Make information and application processes accessible and online Use simple language with multiple language options Provide calculators to estimate benefits Use outreach campaigns to shape public perception and provide information
Compliance costs	Citizens' burdens in following administrative rules and requirements	Completing forms Providing documentation of status Re-certifying (frequency requiring) Expending time and financial resources (e.g., fee for services, hiring legal help) Meeting voter identification requirements	Integrate multiple forms with similar questions into one form Allow multiple options for documentation to be handy Allow standard deductions rather than require extensive documentation Use administrative data to verify status and pre-fill forms Allow online or phone interviews Make administrative centers locally available Provide help in evenings and weekends Allow third parties to enroll at point of contact
Psychological costs	Citizens experiencing stigma of applying for or participating in a program with negative public perceptions	Feeling sense of loss of personal power in interactions with government Experiencing stresses of dealing with administrative processes	Send messages of welcome to potential participants Build a cultural ethic based on respectful interaction and eagerness to help Give individuals opportunities to tell their story, provide feedback Offer participants clear ways to voice frustration

**Source:** Adapted from P. Herd, "A Theory of Administrative Burdens," slide presentation given at an Institute for Research on Poverty Learning Exchange for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, August 20, 2018.

learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs. Table 2 defines these concepts, provides examples of each, and suggests ways to reduce them. The table also includes researchers' suggestions for reducing administrative burdens, including making online application and renewal available; using clear, accessible language in instructions; and allowing use of administrative data to verify clients' status and for pre-filling forms. Research also has documented that administrative burdens can be used to achieve political ends through "hidden politics," where significant policy changes are made without broad political assessment.<sup>5</sup>

## Red tape and administrative burdens have real-world consequences.

Red tape can lower public service professionals' motivation, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, the desirability of public sector work, and organizational performance.<sup>6</sup> Many studies have shown that red tape proves damaging, such as when caseworkers are required to process frequent re-certifications of their clients' eligibility in person. In turn, such requirements also function as obstacles, making it difficult for people to access the public services they need, and for which they are eligible. These consequences can perpetuate poverty and reinforce inequality between groups.<sup>7</sup>

Administrative burdens harm (or benefit) some groups more than others.<sup>8</sup> For example, compared to nearly 100 percent take-up for universal programs such as Medicare and Social Security, take-up rates for means-tested public programs (programs that are conditional on financial status and that thus impose a higher administrative burden) targeted at low-income people are much lower—40 to 60 percent for Supplemental Social Insurance and 65 percent for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP.<sup>9</sup> A recent study found that lower levels of human capital (education and skills) and higher levels of "allostatic load" (stress that diminishes clear thinking), which are common among low-income populations, make it harder for people to overcome burdens that impede applying for or renewing public assistance.<sup>10</sup> Although, administrative burdens are not necessarily bad—most serve legitimate purposes—researchers note that they result from administrative and political choices, and these choices can have unanticipated (or deliberate) negative effects on citizens, especially the disadvantaged, that can perpetuate poverty and inequality.

For sources and more information, go to <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/barriers-to-public-service-delivery-and-receipt>

## Barriers to public service delivery and receipt

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, B. Bozeman, "A Theory of Government 'Red Tape,'" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART* 3, No. 3 (July, 1993): 273-303.

<sup>2</sup>P. Herd and D. Moynihan, *Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Bozeman, "A Theory of Government 'Red Tape,'" p. 283.

<sup>4</sup>S. K. Pandey and G. Kingsley, "Examining Red Tape in Public and Private Organizations: Alternative Explanations from a Social Psychological Model," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10, No. 4 (2000): 779-799.

<sup>5</sup>Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, "Administrative Burden," to describe what they mean by the term "hidden politics," use the example of Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson's changes under welfare reform to the state health insurance programs (p. 55). See also, J. Soss, R. C. Fording, and S. F. Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, C-A. Chen, "Sector Imprinting: Exploring Its Impacts on Managers' Perceived Formalized Personnel Rules, Perceived Red Tape, and Current Job Tenure," *The American Review of Public Administration* 42, No. 3 (2012); D. P. Moynihan and S. K. Pandey, "The Role of Organizations in Fostering Public Service Motivation," *Public Administration Review* 67, No. 1 (2007): 40-53; and E. C. Stazyk, S. K. Pandey, and B. E. Wright, "Understanding Affective Organizational Commitment: The Importance of Institutional Context," *The American Review of Public Administration* 41, No. 6 (2011).

<sup>7</sup>Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, "Administrative Burden"; Soss, Fording, and Schram, *Disciplining the Poor*; C. Sunstein, *Simpler: The Future of Government* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); K. Hale and R. McNeal, "Election Administration Reform and State Choice: Voter Identification Requirements and HAVA," *Policy Studies Journal* 38, No. 2 (2010).

<sup>8</sup>Herd and Moynihan, *Administrative Burden*.

<sup>9</sup>Herd and Moynihan, *Administrative Burden*.

<sup>10</sup>F. Schilbach, H. Schofield, and S. Mullainathan, "The Psychological Lives of the Poor," *American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings* 106, No. 5 (2016): 435-440.