

# **Reducing Administrative Burden: Some Qualitative Evidence**

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# Key Questions

- What contributes to administrative burden at agencies?
- What makes using benefits difficult to use?
  - Housing
  - Medicaid
  - Nutrition Assistance
  - Child Care

# Methods

- Three Qualitative studies
  - WIC utilization (2015-2019)
  - NC WIC, SNAP, and Medicaid Study (2015-2019)
  - WIC, SNAP, and Medicaid Access during and after COVID-19 Pandemic (ongoing)
- 600 plus interviews of workers and beneficiaries across three states
  - Limited generalizability
  - But provides some plausible hunches on problems and solutions that can be tested through quant research and practice.

# What contributes to administrative burden at agencies?

- Administrative capacity of agencies
  - Depends on state or county-level funding (federal government covers half of admin costs)
    - Fewer workers, higher compliance and psychological costs for beneficiaries
  - Covid demand for benefits outpaced capacity of agencies
    - Increased psychological costs for claimants
      - Delays and denials
- How agencies measure performance
  - Mostly determined by the federal government but enhanced by state and county/local agencies
    - Benchmarks for recruitment and retention yield psychological benefits.
      - WIC and Child Care
    - Benchmarks that push caseload reduction, accuracy, and efficiency increases psychological costs.
      - TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid
  - Complicated policies can also constrain workers from meeting benchmarks.
    - High compliance costs programs

# The Power of Performance Measures and Limited Capacity

SNAP Worker viewed her work as “overwhelming” and worried about falling behind and getting into “trouble” with the state.

We average—a good average would probably be 90 to over 100 cases a month that we have to process within those 30 days [...] And then we have to do the changes. We have phone calls. We have to come see clients. So it's a lot to it. So sometimes it's very overwhelming[...].if we don't get it done, we're going to get in trouble. And of course we all—we want our records to look good, but sometimes I just feel rushed, like I have to do these things in a certain amount of time.

Medicaid worker, the stress of meeting these goals leaves her feeling disconnected from her clients.

Sometimes I don't feel like I help people because I just stay so busy. I feel like I'm pushing numbers, pushing papers, keying all day long, just frantically trying to get it done. Sometimes I don't know who I'm helping.

# The Power of Performance Measures

WIC worker comments on the connection between caseloads and funding

There's been a decline, and it's been happening for the last five years. [...] And so if the numbers go down, [...] so will the funding. Pretty much the state will cut the funding for the program. And so they haven't been able to really hire any more staff on because of that...

Workers spend time doing outreach to community organizations and churches and aim for greater flexibility in accommodating WIC participants' schedules for appointments.

Outreach is going on, [...] it's being conducted on a regular now it's like a mandatory, because the main thing is bringing up our numbers....

# The Power of Performance Measures

This WIC client remarked on the staff's flexibility and "customer service" when describing her interactions with her WIC staff:

She's very sweet. **She calls us.** She knows we have a lot of kids. She'll call and be like, "Oh you know you have your appointment tomorrow" and I'll be like, "Oh my God I forgot." She'll be like, "Don't worry about it. **We can schedule it for whatever day you're free.**" **You know she's always about us.** She has **great customer service** and you know she's just very good with people.

# What about using benefits?

- After you've managed to get benefits, you have to learn how to use them.
  - Redemption costs
    - Narrow and constrained benefits (limited portability)
    - Navigate third-party agents/vendors that redeem benefits
    - Housing Voucher Program, WIC, Medicaid, Child Care Subsidy
  - Bad experiences using benefits can deter program participation
- We know some about what people experience
  - Negative HCV/Section 8 Experiences
  - Difficult retail experiences in WIC
  - Difficulty finding health care providers
  - Challenges finding subsidized child care options



# What about using benefits?

- Hunches of why third party agents are hard to navigate
  - Limited monitoring and sanctioning of third party agents
    - Don't know who bad agents are
    - No threat of consequences for poor redemption experiences
- Few incentives for third party agents
  - Program beneficiaries aren't crucial agent's bottom line
    - Retail—poor cashier training, limited stock of WIC approved items, incorrect labeling
    - Housing—landlords discriminate on SOI, steer voucher holders to high poverty neighborhoods
    - Child care and Medicaid—low reimbursement rates

# Key Take-Aways

- Administrative capacity of agencies
  - Advocate at county and state level for additional administrative funds to expand and improve workforce
- Performance Benchmarks
  - Incentivizing recruitment and retention of eligible families across means-tested programs
    - Advocacy at federal, state, and local governments for benchmarks that encourage good “customer service” as defined by beneficiaries
  - Reducing the compliance demands of programs eases implementation for workers and can reduce psychological costs for claimants
- Monitoring and incentivizing third party agents to reduce redemption costs

# Published Work

- Barnes, Carolyn Y. "“It takes a while to get used to”": The costs of redeeming public benefits." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 31, no. 2 (2021): 295-310.
- Barnes, Carolyn. *State of empowerment: Low-income families and the new welfare state*. University of Michigan Press, 2020.
- Barnes, Carolyn. "“I can’t get ahold of them”": Perceptions of administrative burden and administrative exclusion across SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid during the COVID-19 pandemic." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 706, no. 1 (2023): 118-136.
- Barnes, Carolyn, Jamila Michener, and Emily Rains. "“It’s like night and day”": How bureaucratic encounters vary across WIC, SNAP, and Medicaid." *Social Service Review* 97, no. 1 (2023): 3-42.

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