

The Private Safety Net: The Role of Charitable Organizations in the Lives of the Poor

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Abstract

As welfare reform unfolds, nonprofit social service agencies will increasingly be called upon to help fill the gap between what unskilled and semiskilled mothers can earn in the low-wage labor market and what they need to meet their monthly expenses. This article draws on in-depth interviews with low-income single mothers and multiyear observational studies of two nonprofit social service agencies.

Using these data, the authors show what kinds of resources these agencies provide low-income single mothers, how mothers mobilize the resources available, to what degree agencies actually contribute to mothers' cash and in-kind resources, how agencies distribute their resources, and what effect agencies' distribution practices have on these women. The analysis shows that although nonprofit social service agencies are a crucial part of many low-income mothers' economic survival strategies, they cannot come close to substituting for the eroding public safety net.

Keywords: Neighborhood; Nonprofit sector; Welfare

Introduction

No one can predict the full effect that ending the federal welfare entitlement for poor single mothers and their children will have, because such an act is unprecedented in modern history. It is certain, however, that the reforms will force more single mothers than ever into attempting a speedy transition from welfare to work. Indeed, this is apparently already happening, because caseloads across the nation are down by roughly one-third (Brookings Institution 1998). Unless lawmakers fail to fully implement the new welfare law, mothers who fail to sustain their families with their wages will, after a lifetime limit of two, three, or five years (depending on the state), have no government safety net to fall back on.

What will happen when welfare-reliant single mothers and their children start "hitting the wall"? Lawmakers in most states expect

them to fend for themselves or turn to nongovernmental charities for help. Perhaps one of the most important but least discussed elements of the new welfare law is the burden it could potentially place on nonprofit social service organizations—the local charities, churches, and service groups that run the nation’s soup kitchens, homeless shelters, food pantries, and other nongovernmental charitable endeavors focused on providing for the subsistence needs of poor families.

Some have argued that such nonprofit social service agencies can help absorb some of the load (Garr 1995). Media accounts of nonprofits that improve the lives of the poor are common (Alter 1995) but typically feature small-scale agencies that devote intensive resources to a relatively small group of families. In her book *It Takes a Nation*, Rebecca Blank (1997) estimates that if nonprofit social service organizations were to try to replace the safety net the government has long provided for poor mother-only families, they would have to raise over seven times more in private sector donations than they do now. Moreover, Abramson and Salamon (1986); Bielefeld (1992); Hodgkinson (1989); and McNurtry, Netting, and Kettner (1991) note that federal funding cuts for nonprofit organizations in the 1980s have led to a climate of uncertainty for nonprofits, perhaps weakening their capacity to serve their clientele.

Review of the literature

Two kinds of social science literature inform the research presented here. The first is the burgeoning research on nonprofits. The second is our own past work on the survival strategies of welfare-reliant single mothers and their low-wage working counterparts, along with nationally representative longitudinal studies of single mothers who left welfare for work prior to implementation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. We address each in turn.

The nonprofit social service sector

The nonprofit sector in the United States has generated a wealth of scholarly attention since the 1970s. The largest nonprofit sector in the world, it provides nearly 7 percent of the country’s jobs and accounts for nearly \$350 billion a year in expenditures. Three-quarters of these expenditures are in health and education. Only 10 percent are in the social services—the domain of interest here. Most nonprofits rely on fees (52 percent of total revenue), government contracts (30 percent), and private giving (19 percent). Nonprofit social service agencies rely primarily on government contracts and private donations (Salamon and Anheier 1996).

Scholars generally agree that nonprofits play a unique and important role in social service provision. For many scholars, their uniqueness is due to their being more able to employ “particularism” than the public sector. Whereas the public sector must use consistent eligibility criteria and must treat all eligibles alike, the private sector is free from these constraints. It can meet needs in an individualized and holistic way. Thus, nonprofits can be conceptualized as “custom” or “special order” service providers, whereas their public sector counterparts are seen as “off-the-rack” or “one-size-fits-all” providers. Without the presence of nonprofit social service agencies, many scholars argue, highly specialized needs would go unmet (Kramer 1987; Lipsky and Smith 1989; Weisbrod 1988). Nonprofits are also noted for their ability to experiment and innovate. This is possible because their level of bureaucratization is generally low. Thus, the start-up costs are low, and agencies can dismantle unsuccessful programs with relative ease (Douglas 1987).

Some researchers, however, are not so sanguine about the role that nonprofit social service agencies play in the lives of the poor. These criticisms take two forms. First, some critics point out that the particularism and low bureaucratization of nonprofits can lead to amateurism and large gaps in service provision (Salamon 1995). Yet Grønbjerg (1982) has shown that nonprofits tend to become more bureaucratized and professionalized with time. This is due to both the pressure funding agencies place on nonprofits as they grow and the necessity of competing for those agencies’ scarce resources (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). This trend itself is a second source of criticism. As nonprofits bureaucratize and professionalize, critics worry that they may become overconcerned with efficiency and thus less able to meet the specialized and holistic needs of the clients they serve (Perrow 1974).

Although the literature on nonprofits has grown rapidly since the 1970s and is now vast, very little of it is written from the client point of view. Researchers have generally looked at the role that nonprofit social service agencies play in the lives of the poor from the point of view of nonprofits. Some offer a comprehensive portrait of the types of services available in a given city, county, or region. This information is useful for describing both the size and scope of the so-called third sector (see Powell 1987). This article relies, in part, on data from 379 in-depth family interviews—214 with welfare-reliant mothers and 165 with low-wage working mothers—and two multiyear observational case studies of social service agencies. These data are useful for analyzing the microlevel relationship between clients and nonprofit social service agencies within specific communities. They can help illuminate the role that specific nonprofit social service organizations play in the lives of a particular

group of poor clients, what social welfare needs these nonprofits fill, and where they falter.

The economic survival strategies of low-income single mothers

Our work is also informed by a prior analysis of the family interview data used in this analysis and by longitudinal analyses of single mothers who moved from welfare to work prior to TANF. In previous work (Edin and Lein 1997a, 1997b), the authors found that Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, and other government welfare benefits covered only about 64 percent of an average welfare-reliant mother's expenses in a typical month. She received about \$565 in cash and food stamps but spent nearly \$900 per month. If she did not have a housing subsidy and paid the rent herself, she spent nearly \$1,200 per month and her rent often equaled or exceeded her cash welfare benefit. When calculating these figures, we counted only cash resources and did not attempt to estimate the value of in-kind resources. Because virtually all of the families received substantial in-kind contributions, these figures underestimate families' income needs. Each of the 214 welfare-reliant mothers had to develop a set of strategies to make ends meet. Most mothers had to generate several hundred dollars—\$311 on average—in outside income to make up for the shortfall.

In addition to welfare recipients, we interviewed 165 low-wage working single mothers. We found that their wages from their main job covered only 63 percent of their bills on average. On paper, they looked better off than the welfare recipients did because working, even for the minimum wage, pays better than welfare. But the low-wage workers we interviewed were not better off than their welfare counterparts. In fact, they were worse off. Although they earned more than they could have received from welfare, the additional income was eaten up by the added costs of working. These costs included child care, health care, transportation, and clothing.¹ This meant that the working mothers actually had to fill a much larger cash gap—\$441 per month on average—than the welfare recipients did. Food stamps, supplemental security income (SSI), and the earned-income tax credit (EITC) helped somewhat (the typical working family received \$60 per month from these sources), but mothers had to generate most of the rest from other sources.²

¹ The differences between the expenditures of welfare recipients and low-wage working single mothers were statistically significant at the 0.01 level in each of these areas.

² All of these differences were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

The *welfare-reliant* single mothers we interviewed employed one or more of several fill-the-gap strategies. About half had employed strategies over the past 12 months that involved covert work, either in the formal, informal, or underground economy. Welfare-reliant mothers also relied heavily on the generosity of those in their personal networks. Nearly 9 of every 10 welfare recipients we interviewed told us they received cash help from family members, friends, boyfriends, and/or their children's fathers over the past 12 months. However, the final strategy welfare-reliant mothers employed was the one most relevant to this analysis—namely, cash or voucher assistance from community groups, charities, and other nonprofit organizations. In calculating welfare-reliant mothers' budgets, we did not include the value of in-kind help received from such organizations, but we did collect data on in-kind help and will discuss them below.

The *low-wage working* mothers—who faced an even larger budget deficit than their welfare counterparts on average—used the same set of strategies but relied much more heavily on their networks and less on side work and help from nonprofit groups.³ We could interpret this difference in several ways, but our data suggest that those with the most lucrative personal networks were the most likely to be working (Edin and Lein 1997a). Network-based strategies are the most conducive to working because they require far less time than working a side job or trying to generate help from private charities. Work took our mothers out of the home for 35 hours a week on average, and the commute to and from work took roughly an additional 10 hours per week. The time constraints associated with working made avoiding welfare less viable for mothers who did not have lucrative or generous networks and had to rely on more time-consuming survival strategies (side work or agency assistance) to get by. In other work, we have argued that only mothers with networks from which they can draw substantial cash resources are better able to avoid the public safety net because wages from unskilled jobs simply do not pay the bills (Edin and Lein 1997a, 1997b).

These family interviews and other nationally representative studies of welfare recipients suggest that, in the past, mothers who man-

³ These claims are based on analysis of mothers' average monthly supplemental cash income from network members (family, friends, boyfriends, and absent fathers), work (both formal and informal), welfare, and agency-based strategies. The first two differences noted between the welfare-reliant and low-income working mothers (help from network members, formal and informal work) are based on average dollar amounts received over the 12-month period and are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The final difference (agency use) was based on frequency of use over the 12-month period. Mothers who used an agency for help were distinguished from those who did not. This difference was also statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

aged to leave welfare for work and sustain themselves at their jobs had certain advantages. They had older and fewer children and more human capital (years of formal education and formal-sector work experience) on average (Harris 1991, 1993, 1996; Harris and Edin 1997). The family interview data suggest they also may have had more lucrative networks (and the national-level data cited above provide some evidence of this as well). As welfare reform provisions unfold, mothers with younger children, more children, less human capital, and less lucrative networks will now be working. What will these mothers do to bridge the gap between their income and expenses?

For mothers who are disadvantaged in these ways, their only recourse might well be to approach nongovernmental social service agencies for help in alleviating their increased economic need. The result will likely be that the demands on already overburdened agencies will grow dramatically.

Study methods

As indicated earlier, this study draws from two sources of data. First, we use data from repeated, in-depth interviews with 379 low-income mother-only families in four U.S. cities: Chicago; Charleston, SC; San Antonio; and Boston. These data were collected between 1988 and 1993. Second, we use data from multiyear observational studies of two nonprofit social service agencies located in two of these cities—Charleston and San Antonio. These observations occurred between 1990 and 1998.

We use the in-depth interview data to analyze the role nonprofit social service agencies play in the lives of the poor from the client point of view. We draw on the data from the observational studies to analyze the role nonprofit social service agencies play in the lives of the poor from the agency point of view. Despite an abundance of literature on nonprofits, participant observation studies of the day-to-day functioning of nonprofits are rare.

Repeated in-depth interviews

Edin, Lein, and roughly a dozen trained and experienced graduate students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds conducted the repeated, in-depth semistructured interviews. Edin conducted 90 percent of the family interviews in Chicago and Charleston and used students to conduct the rest. Lein's team of graduate students conducted the family interviews in San Antonio and the Boston area. Families were remunerated for their participation with \$20 in cash or with groceries or other supplies (such as disposable diapers)

worth about \$20. Interviewers asked each respondent to invent a pseudonym, and all records relating to that respondent were labeled using that pseudonym. No identifying information (actual names, street addresses, or telephone numbers) was attached to any of these records. After interviewers completed the interviewing process with a respondent, all identifying information was destroyed. Finally, the investigators obtained a federal waiver from the Department of Justice, giving them the legal right to protect the identities of their respondents. These steps were taken to ensure confidentiality.

In-depth interview site and sample selection. The cities of Boston, Charleston, Chicago, and San Antonio were selected to represent variations in welfare benefits, labor market strength, and living costs across the United States. We began the family interviews in 1988 in Chicago, where a mother and two children with no other source of income could receive a maximum of \$368 a month in cash and roughly \$292 in food stamps in a given month. In 1990 we extended the study to Boston, whose welfare benefits were more generous than Chicago's (\$535 a month in cash for a family of three), and to Charleston and San Antonio, where welfare paid considerably less than in Chicago (\$205 and \$185 for a three-person family, respectively). Chicago's benefit levels approximated the national average.

The Boston area was a high-cost-of-living, high-welfare-benefit city that had higher-than-average unemployment in the early 1990s. It typifies many large cities in the Northeast. Chicago had somewhat lower living costs than the Boston area, offered average welfare benefits, and had an average unemployment rate in the late 1980s and early 1990s (when we conducted our interviews). This site's characteristics were shared by several large midwestern cities. Charleston had average living costs, low welfare benefits, and a very low unemployment rate in the early 1990s. Charleston's attributes were shared by many fast-growing "New South" cities. San Antonio had low living costs, low welfare benefits, and higher-than-average unemployment in the early 1990s. It typifies many less prosperous southern and southwestern cities, some of which also have large immigrant populations.

One of us lived in each city for a substantial period of time to conduct the interviews with families to whom we had been introduced by a trusted third party. This approach enabled us to collect sensitive data regarding the income and spending habits of low-income mothers that we had been unable to collect using a random sample of respondents.⁴ We contacted our initial group of low-income single

⁴ An initial attempt to conduct a telephone survey with a random sample of welfare

mothers through grassroots community organizations, local institutions, and community leaders (for example, block group captains, members of public housing residents' councils, small business owners, and local clergy). We then asked mothers referred to us by an organization or a leader to refer us to another mother whom they thought we would not contact through an organization or community leader. In order to make the sample as heterogeneous as possible, we recruited respondents from between 33 and 40 non-overlapping referral chains in each metropolitan area. Roughly 90 percent of those contacted agreed to participate in the study.

We pursued referrals selectively in accordance with our study design. Table 1 shows the number of respondents in each of our study cells. In each city, we recruited roughly even numbers of welfare-reliant mothers and single mothers who relied not on welfare but on low-wage employment. Within those groups, we recruited roughly even numbers of African Americans and whites in Charleston, Boston, and Chicago, and even numbers of African Americans, whites, and Mexican Americans (nonimmigrants) in San Antonio. About half of the members of each subgroup lived in subsidized housing and half lived in private housing. We interviewed mothers in a wide variety of neighborhoods in each city and its suburbs. The average characteristics of the welfare recipients in our sample (in terms of age, number of children, past work experience, length of time on welfare, educational level, and race) were nearly identical to the characteristics of the national population of welfare-reliant single mothers at the time of our study (for precise figures, see Edin and Lein 1997a).

However, half of our recipients received a housing subsidy, compared with less than one-quarter of the welfare population nationally (U.S. House of Representatives 1996) and an even smaller portion of low-wage working single mothers.⁵ This bias means that our mothers' financial needs might well have been less acute than the

mothers resulted in unreliable data. Those respondents who agreed to speak with us reported that they spent more than they got from welfare, but they were not willing to divulge how they make up the difference. We then attempted face-to-face interviews with a similar group of randomly recruited poor residents and experienced the same difficulties. For virtually every mother, getting by meant breaking the welfare rules, and mothers were unwilling to tell a stranger about activities that could get them in trouble with the welfare office. Our experience is echoed in most nationally representative data sets, including the U.S. Census Bureau's Consumer Expenditure Survey, in which the poor report spending several times what they earn (Edin and Lein 1997a, 1997b). Because few have past earnings to live off and few can borrow from future earnings through credit, it is reasonable to assume the data are problematic.

⁵ We know of no official estimate of how many of these working mothers have housing subsidies.

Table 1. In-Depth Interview Sample

	San Antonio	Charleston, SC	Chicago	Boston	<i>n</i>
Welfare	63	44	62	45	214
Working	41	47	43	34	165
<i>n</i>	104	91	105	79	379

Note: In each cell, we sampled roughly even numbers of African Americans and whites (except for San Antonio, where we sampled roughly even numbers of Mexican Americans, African Americans, and whites). We also stratified within each cell and ethnic group by housing status, recruiting roughly half from subsidized housing and half from private housing. For example, in a cell containing 40 respondents, roughly 10 would be African Americans with housing subsidies, 10 would be African Americans without subsidies, 10 would be whites with subsidies, and 10 would be whites with no subsidy.

needs of a national sample. Later in our analysis, we will show that mothers living in poor neighborhoods (census tracts where at least 40 percent of the population lives in official poverty) receive significantly less discretionary cash and voucher help from agencies than mothers living in more mixed-income neighborhoods. In the cities we studied, public housing projects anchored virtually all of the very poor neighborhoods in which we interviewed.

As we approached mothers, we were careful not to appear to be social workers or any other type of government bureaucrat because virtually all of the mothers we interviewed felt they had something to hide from the government. For example, community members often referred to state social workers as “baby snatchers” because of the child protection role some were known for in the community. Our conversations were as informal as possible, and we went back several times to ensure that we had developed sufficient rapport to obtain accurate information. The initial interview lasted between 1 and 11 hours; the follow-up interviews were somewhat shorter, ranging between 30 minutes and 3 hours in duration. Interviews were generally conducted in respondents’ homes or, if they requested it, at a park, diner, or other location in the neighborhood.

During the interviewing process, we asked each mother to describe her financial situation, as well as her use of community groups and other nonprofits. Mothers estimated the amount of both cash and in-kind assistance they had received from such organizations during the prior 12 months. Furthermore, mothers described in detail how they went about getting help from agencies. We compared mothers’ income figures to their expenditures after each interview and resolved any discrepancies in subsequent interviews. Other discrepancies in families’ stories were noted in team meetings, and these issues were raised and clarified in subsequent interviews. We

judged our set of interviews as complete when respondents reported budgets that came within \$50 of balancing and the team felt that other discrepancies in families' stories had been satisfactorily resolved. Although each family was interviewed at least twice, reconciling these accounts sometimes required additional interviews (12 in one case).

Analysis of depth-interview data. We transcribed and inductively coded each interview, using the grounded theory method of analysis (Corbin and Strauss 1990). We used the codes, categories, and overarching themes derived inductively from our grounded theory analysis to construct a Microsoft Access database, where information could be stored, retrieved, and analyzed by case or category. This was ideal for our purposes because it allowed us to store both the qualitative and quantitative data (family budgets, frequency of agency use, and so on) we had collected. Quantitative data were then uploaded into SPSS software for statistical analysis.

Observational study

The observational study began at All Service, a nonprofit social service agency in San Antonio, in 1990, and at Community Cooperative, a similar organization in Charleston, in 1991.⁶ These studies were completed in 1998. Lein conducted the observations at All Service, beginning with an intensive three-month period of full-time observation. During this period, Lein lived next door to the agency in quarters All Service used to house volunteers. Lein volunteered daily at the agency, met with clients in their homes to conduct a needs assessment, attended monthly board meetings, and engaged in informal conversations with staff and volunteers. Lein and her students conducted quarterly observations thereafter. These generally included a visit to the agency, several hours of volunteer service, and an interview with the agency's executive directors.

Edin conducted the observations at Community Cooperative, beginning with a six-month period of observation twice each week. During this period, each observation lasted between three and seven hours. Edin conducted annual observations thereafter, spending at least two days each time volunteering at the agency and conducting a lengthy interview with the executive director. On two of these annual visits, Edin also attended a monthly board meeting, a volunteer picnic, and an agency fund-raiser.

Observational study sample. These agencies were chosen for several reasons. First, they were located in southern states where the gov-

⁶ The organization names used in this article are pseudonyms.

ernment safety net has always been extremely weak and families have long had to fall back on such organizations for assistance to get the goods and services they need to avoid material hardship. Thus, the situation the agencies' clients faced in these cities is closest to that most TANF families will face once they reach a time limit. Second, both agencies offered a variety of services to area residents, rather than providing services in just one or two domains. Both were among the largest and best known in their respective cities and thus had unusually large capacities to provide assistance to the needy families within their reach. Finally, both agencies were located in impoverished communities within large metropolitan areas and served residents of public housing projects. Large public housing projects often anchor communities with high levels of concentrated poverty. The well-known needs of such communities mean that they are often magnets for nonprofit social service agencies (Wolch and Sommer 1997).

Both of the agencies were founded by religious groups that sought to provide assistance to those living in areas they perceived as the most disadvantaged within their respective metropolitan areas. Thus, the services these agencies provide are targeted toward meeting the needs of residents of high-poverty neighborhoods or regions with large concentrations of ethnic and racial minorities. In San Antonio, All Service targeted a single neighborhood in the inner city. In Charleston, Community Cooperative targeted portions of two counties that incorporate both an urban and several semirural communities within the greater Charleston area.

Analysis of observation data. Each investigator recorded observational study data by means of ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). These field notes were coded by hand (because many initial notes were handwritten) and analyzed using the grounded theory method. Between observations, the investigators coded data from previous observations and developed a list of preliminary codes, concepts, and themes that could be tested and modified in subsequent observations. This grounded theory analytic technique is referred to as "theoretical sampling" (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

Research questions

We use both the depth-interview data and the observational study data to address four main questions. These questions are motivated by our review of the existing nonprofit literature and by our own previous analysis of the economic survival strategies of low-income single mothers reviewed above.

1. What kinds of resources do nonprofit social service agencies provide to poor or near-poor single mothers, and how do these agencies' service missions evolve?
2. How do poor single mothers mobilize the resources available from nonprofit social service agencies?
3. To what degree do these agencies actually contribute to families' cash and in-kind resources?
4. How do agencies distribute their resources, and what effect does this have on clients?

Results

What kinds of resources do nonprofit social service agencies provide to poor or near-poor single mothers, and how do these agencies' service missions evolve?

In San Antonio, Lein observed All Service, a nonprofit social service organization serving residents of The Courts, an impoverished inner-city community containing two of the largest housing projects in the city, whose residents included approximately 900 poor second-generation Mexican-American single mothers and their children. The organization also served privately housed poor families who lived in run-down shacks on the periphery of the housing projects.

The housing projects were built between the world wars, and poor upkeep had left many of them extremely dilapidated; residents complained of rat and roach infestation and plumbing and electrical problems. The private housing stock surrounding the estates was in somewhat better condition on average, but some of it was also quite run-down. In addition to these endemic housing problems, community residents had high rates of diabetes and other serious health problems, as well as language barriers to employment (Frisbee 1992; Pendry 1995; Weinberg in press). Although some community residents worked at seasonal service sector jobs in tourist industries, most relied primarily on public assistance as their main source of financial support.

All Service provided the following formally organized programs for community residents: a soup kitchen, a food pantry, used clothing, a year-round sports program for children, a summer recreation program for children, and a family literacy program. In addition, All Service offered its space to other programs sponsored by or cosponsored with other private and government organizations. These

ranged from drug abuse prevention to English classes. The staff of All Service were all volunteers; no one, including the directors, received salaries. Volunteers who worked there were often supported by religious groups or held other jobs. They came from churches and religious organizations across the country, the neighborhood surrounding All Service, and local colleges and universities.

In Charleston, Edin observed Community Cooperative, an organization serving publicly and privately housed African-American and white residents of what had historically been a semirural area but had since been enveloped by the Charleston metropolitan area due to rapid population growth and the residential expansion that accompanied it. Some of Community Cooperative's clientele were drawn from an aging housing estate nearby. Others lived in Section 8 apartments or in marginal shacks or ramshackle trailer homes. Some African-American families lived in homes or trailers on land their ancestors had been deeded following the Civil War (called "heirs' property"). Many of these homes and trailers were without power, so families "ran a cord"—that is, they electrified their dwellings by running heavy-duty extension cords through the trees from an electrified dwelling close to their own. Although a substantial portion of the low-income families living in the community received some form of public assistance, some also worked seasonally in the construction, fishing, or tourist trades that provided the bulk of the employment for unskilled and semiskilled black workers there.

In addition to these poor and predominantly African-American families, the community was home to the fastest growing retirement and resort community in the Charleston metropolitan area (and the United States as a whole). Developers began to buy up heirs' property in the 1970s, and the community now resembles a checkerboard of million-dollar homes, opulent condominium complexes, and unheated shacks. Developers separated these residential zones from one another with high fences and landscaping. When Hurricane Hugo hit the South Carolina coast in September 1989, the fences and shrubbery disappeared and wealthy whites discovered they were within yards of African Americans living in astonishingly poor conditions. The solidarity built among these families following the hurricane helped to coalesce members of more than a dozen local churches to found Community Cooperative.

Community Cooperative now provides a variety of programs: a food pantry that also provides household goods, used furniture, and used clothing; a free dental clinic; and an emergency assistance program that helps families pay overdue rent and utility bills and buy prescription drugs not covered by Medicaid. It has a program to repair and install plumbing and wiring and is launching a new program to help poor families with home repair. In addition, Community Coop-

erative houses a state-funded counseling service to which it can refer clients and has institutional linkages to a free health clinic and a program that builds new housing for low-income homeowners whose current housing is very substandard. Community Cooperative is run by two paid, full-time staff, a part-time office manager, and several dozen volunteers, most of whom are elderly white retirees and members of the cooperative's 16 supporting churches.

At both All Service and Community Cooperative, families that require assistance are interviewed by a volunteer or staff member, and the agency keeps a record for use in subsequent visits. Families must report their income and must explain the circumstances that led them to apply for services. Intake records help the organizations' grant-writing and other fund-raising efforts but are primarily designed to prevent any single family from receiving a disproportionate share of organizational resources. Both organizations have rules about how frequently each family can receive assistance, and these rules vary according to the type of assistance received. For example, Community Cooperative allows families to receive groceries once a month. Both of the organizations' services are designed to meet families' unanticipated emergencies. However, families in poverty learn to depend on these "emergency" services as part of their regular financial survival packages.

How do poor families mobilize the resources available from nonprofit social service organizations?

In San Antonio, families living in The Courts sought services from as many as a dozen private charities in a given year, as well as from federal, state, and local government programs. This was because their welfare benefits were low and their social networks were largely made up of other very poor individuals who could not offer significant cash help on a regular basis. In addition, they were disproportionately likely to have health or language barriers to formal sector employment, and they faced an informal sector already flooded with immigrant workers. Low-income mother-only families in other, less-disadvantaged sections of San Antonio, and families throughout the Charleston area, reported receiving in-kind and cash assistance from fewer nonprofit organizations—generally no more than five or six in a given year. Families in Chicago and Boston (where welfare benefits were much higher) used fewer still—three or four a year. However, when we combine families' use of nonprofit organizations with their use of federal, state, and local government programs, the picture becomes more complex. Most of the low-income mother-only families we interviewed in the four cities maintained contact with over a dozen separate organizations

and programs to get the in-kind and cash assistance they needed in a given year.

Because so many agencies focused on particular domains of need, families typically grouped nonprofit social service organizations by the kind of need they could meet. Indeed, many discussions among residents of the poor neighborhoods we studied revolved around such strategies. Here we use organizations in the food domain as an example.

Food was a major topic of conversation among people in the San Antonio neighborhood served by All Service, as well as in the other neighborhoods we studied. While residents stood in line at the welfare office or at local charities, they often swapped strategies for how to make their food stamps go further and where to go to get food once their stamps ran out. They discussed the type and quality of the food available from a given food pantry or soup kitchen and how to find hard-to-get items (families rarely could get any type of meat from food pantries, for example). They also talked about how to shape the stories they told nonprofit social service organizations about their situations in order to get the most food.

Food stamp benefit levels were more generous for mothers in our southern cities than in the North because cash benefits were low and food stamps are adjusted for cash benefit levels.⁷ However, southern families sometimes fed members of their extended families that were not included in the food stamp grant. Thus, the food stamps often ran out before the month was over. In the northern cities, food stamps were less generous and families often ran out three weeks into the month even if they did not cook for outsiders. In addition, in each of these cities, privately housed mothers who relied on welfare had to use virtually their entire cash grant for rent, so they sometimes sold food stamps to pay for their utilities or other bills.⁸ Residents in all the cities used multiple organizational sources for food: food stamps, soup kitchens, emergency food pantries, U.S. Department of Agriculture surplus food programs, subsidized school breakfast and lunch programs, recreation program lunches and snacks, and the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Families used some sources routinely and some infrequently or only in emergencies. This was because each of these organizations or programs had distinctive eligibility requirements, stigma costs, and rules for how

⁷ For every additional dollar a family receives in cash welfare, its food stamp allotment is reduced by roughly 25 cents.

⁸ The families we interviewed reported that they received between 40 cents and a dollar for every dollar's worth of food stamps they sold.

often each family could use them. However, most families used several different strategies in the course of a month to bring food into the household.

Families that were eligible for a particular food program often shared what they received with kin or neighbors who were not eligible. One family's bonanza from an overstocked food pantry was thus a boon to others in their network. Even if a family was not willing to give away some of their food, they were often willing to invite other network members who were not so fortunate to their dinner table. Sharing one's resources made sense because families who shared their food with those in their networks could later draw on those network members for help in leaner months.

Despite this wide variety of food-generating strategies, one-fourth of the families we interviewed reported running out of food at least once during the prior year, and for many of these families, food shortages were a monthly occurrence. This was because food programs generally limited their services to a particular category of client (poor children or pregnant mothers, for example) and sharply limited the quantity of food they provided (typically a two- or three-day supply). Most important, nearly every organization restricted the number of times a family could call on the program for help.

Even those families who had not run out of food once during the prior year generally had a very limited supply at the end of most months. During an end-of-the-month visit to a four-room apartment in The Courts, Lein talked with two mothers who utilized All Service. During their conversation, a toddler wandered across the room clutching a large chunk of government surplus cheese in her hand. "Is your child fond of cheese?" Lein asked. The mother smiled and made no reply. When Lein repeated the question, the mother looked at Lein in surprise. "You don't understand! That's all the food in the house right now. When anyone is hungry, they can eat as much off that hunk of cheese as they want to." Such situations were common among families residing in The Courts and other impoverished neighborhoods.

Using multiple agencies to get assistance in the food domain was thus a time-consuming chore that did not ensure avoidance of going hungry. To make matters worse, the complexities involved in getting assistance in this area were repeated in each of the other domains of family need: housing, clothing, health care, transportation, child care, and so on. This meant that families who had to rely on nonprofit social service organizations to get assistance expended a great deal of time and energy going from one agency to another to get the goods and services they needed. Thus, effectively mobilizing assistance from such organizations could be as time-consuming as a

part-time job, yet the return per hour expended was generally quite low and the stigma costs quite high. For example, several mothers in each site told us stories about spending an hour or more standing in line at a food pantry, only to be subjected to what they considered invasive questioning about their financial status and personal situations by agency staff. In one interaction we witnessed, a well-meaning volunteer gave a single mother of two a lengthy lecture in which the volunteer told the client that the client could “easily” live on her \$205 monthly welfare allowance if she just “learned some discipline.” The client’s rent exceeded her cash welfare allotment. In addition, friends and neighbors ridiculed mothers who they knew relied on an agency’s “charity” on a regular basis.

Because of the lack of effective coordination between agencies, there were areas of need that no agency in a particular community served, as well as communities without any nonprofit social service agencies at all.⁹ For example, of the two nonprofits we studied, only Community Cooperative provided dental care. Residents of The Courts had no such program. Furthermore, Community Cooperative’s dental care program served only a small portion of the Charleston Metropolitan area, and there were no such programs in most other portions of that area. On the other hand, neither poor residents of the Community Cooperative neighborhood nor poor residents of most San Antonio neighborhoods had any recreation or lunch program to send their children to in the summer, whereas All Service provided these services only to residents of their service area.

Finally, the real needs of families do not generally come in neatly packaged domains. The division of need into different areas is arbitrary from the point of view of families in need and does not necessarily address the systematic problems that families face or the nature of crises they experience. Household needs impinge on one another,¹⁰ so that meeting only one need at a time may have minimal impact on a particular family’s problem. For instance, a mother may not be able to take advantage of a free health or dental clinic if her children will not have adequate supervision while she is away, or if she cannot get transportation at the time of her appointment. Furthermore, the health care she may receive might do her little good if she cannot afford to purchase the prescribed medicines. Similarly, a mother may not be able to take advantage of education or

⁹ Lipsky and Smith (1989, 633) claim that targeting the resources of nonprofit social service organizations to particular communities is a common response to high demand for their services.

¹⁰ See Myrtle and Wilber (1994) for a description of the difficulties in meeting the needs of elderly people with multiple health problems. See also Brandon (1992).

training programs if she cannot get help with child care and transportation. One mother told us that she knew of a service that would provide her and her oldest child with transportation to visit that child's pediatrician, but the service would not permit this woman's other children (who did not have an appointment but needed her supervision) to ride along.

To what degree do nonprofit social service agencies actually contribute to families' cash and in-kind resources?

When we asked our low-income single mothers whether they had received cash or voucher assistance from a nonprofit social service organization during the prior 12 months, 27 percent said yes. The average family reported receiving \$36 (\$37 for welfare-reliant mothers and \$36 for wage-reliant mothers) worth of cash or voucher assistance in a typical month, whereas mothers needed to generate several hundred dollars worth of supplemental income each month to make ends meet—\$311 on average for mothers relying on welfare and \$441 on average for mothers relying on low-wage employment.¹¹ Thus, agency-based assistance constituted a small part of the average mother's monthly survival package. However, when we limit our tally to only families who received such assistance, these families reported \$136 in cash or voucher help per month on average—\$119 for welfare-reliant mothers and \$165 for wage-reliant mothers who received assistance.

To construct these tallies, we collected data on the cash and voucher assistance each family received in the past year and divided the totals by 12. The monthly average is somewhat misleading because most families that received cash or voucher assistance received one or two large lump sums for nonrecurring crisis situations.¹² Almost none of the nonprofit social service organizations mothers used had the resources to give cash to needy families on a monthly basis.

The type of cash or voucher assistance low-income mother-only families received varied from city to city and from neighborhood to neighborhood. In Chicago and Boston, families with a utility shut-off notice could approach a local program for help in paying their overdue electric bill. This payment alone often involved several

¹¹ Expenditures for the low-wage group averaged \$1,243, whereas income from work and the EITC averaged only \$802 per month.

¹² Those who argue that churches should be involved in meeting the needs of the poor generally emphasize services that meet crisis rather than recurring needs (Carlson-Thies and Skillen 1996).

hundred dollars worth of assistance over the course of a year. Boston-area families who knew of the program sometimes let their utility bills go unpaid while using their scarce cash resources to cover other bills. Low-income families living in some Boston areas could also receive vouchers from a local charity to pay for school clothing for their children, so poor mothers who were aware of the program could save several hundred dollars a year in clothing expenditure. In Chicago, several local charities assisted homeless families and families who had been burned out of their apartments with a security deposit and the first month's rent on an apartment, and a voucher for some basic furnishings—assistance worth well over \$1,000 in many cases. In Charleston, Community Cooperative and other agencies sometimes had the resources to assist families who had received eviction notice or utility shut-off notices with their overdue rent and electricity bills, and they could occasionally help mothers pay for prescription drugs that Medicaid did not cover. In San Antonio, the cash and voucher assistance agencies could provide poor mothers was more limited, but a small number of mothers reported receiving food vouchers and help with prescription drugs and eye care. Within specific neighborhoods in each city, low-income mothers sometimes knew of local church programs or small storefront charities where they could get help to purchase eyeglasses, false teeth, or hearing aids; pay an overdue rent bill or a security deposit; purchase a bus pass to get to work; or get money to be used toward some other purchase. These smaller programs, however, were very unevenly distributed both within and between cities.

Although less than one-third of families in the four cities had received cash assistance from a nonprofit social service agency during the past 12 months, nearly two-thirds had received in-kind assistance from such an organization during that period. The most common type of in-kind assistance mothers said they received was food, followed by used clothing. Mothers estimated that most food pantries gave out about two-and-one-half days' worth of food and that they saved about \$25 in food expenditure each time they visited a food pantry. Some families utilized food pantries once a month or more, and some only once or twice a year because of the stigma costs involved. Food pantry use was particularly heavy during holidays, when family get-togethers meant that food ran particularly low.

Mothers used soup kitchens far less frequently than food pantries. A meal at a soup kitchen was worth much less than a bag or two of groceries, both because the benefit was limited to the amount the mother and her children could consume during mealtime and because soup kitchens imposed far greater stigma costs than food pantries did. One mother's comments regarding a local soup kitchen

were typical. She told us, “I would be ashamed to go over there. That’s for the homeless, indigent, you know. I’m not that desperate yet.” This mother considered it a point of pride that she did not have to resort to using the soup kitchen at the end of the month but had other ways of getting extra food (her mother fed her and the children at the end of some months). In general, mothers generally used soup kitchens as a last resort at the end of the month, when their food stamps were gone and they had exhausted their kin and other organizational sources.

Getting used clothing from a charity or church allowed mothers to forgo purchasing clothes for themselves and their children. Mothers who knew of an organization that offered used clothing could generally find jeans, skirts, and dresses in their own or their children’s sizes. Winter coats, boots, and shoes were generally hard to find in the appropriate sizes. Mothers told us that as their children aged, it was more difficult to clothe them with used clothing. Older children often felt that other children would make fun of them in school if they wore someone else’s castoffs.

How do agencies distribute their resources, and what effect does this have on clients?

In this section, we discuss three practices we observed at both agencies we studied: targeting, rationing, and investing in short-term needs. We will show that these practices were reasonable and defensible from the agency’s point of view. They worked to the disadvantage of clients, however, who generally had to go to several different agencies to get the help they needed, either within or across domains. These policies also tended to breed mistrust and to favor clients with more advantaged social characteristics.

Targeting service groups and service domains. Because of their fiscal constraints, both of the organizations in the study targeted their funds to specific groups and within specific service domains. Such targeting is crucial to the success of small nonprofit social service agencies (see Kramer 1987, 246), for it is this high degree of specialization—the ability to do one or two things very well—that provides the agency with its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of both funders (Milofsky 1987, 284) and the community at large. Community Cooperative was very good at providing emergency food relief for virtually every eligible person (all those living in a two-county area who met the income criteria were deemed eligible) who came through their doors. All Service provided excellent recreation and literacy services to the children of families living in one very large public housing complex and its surrounding neighborhood. Each was widely recognized across the metropolitan area as provid-

ing exemplary services to their particular clientele within these specific service domains.

Beyond addressing the need to establish legitimacy to the outside world (funders and the larger community), agencies also targeted their services in such a way as to give their own staff, volunteers, and board members a sense that they were doing some good with their limited resources. The routine needs of clients in their service areas were simply too great for the agencies to meet. Each of the agencies discussed here was located within a neighborhood or area that was viewed by the larger metropolitan community as particularly needy. Each was anchored by a large public housing estate, which guaranteed a clientele. The high degree of need within these high-poverty communities helped agencies garner donations, win grant competitions, and attract volunteers. Yet the high level of community need meant that the demand for the services each organization could provide far outstripped the supply.

In the face of such need, agency personnel told us that it was easy to become overwhelmed and discouraged. Executive directors told us stories about the earliest days of each agency, when they “tried to do everything, and ended up doing nothing.” Without targeting, these informants felt it was difficult for agency staff, volunteers, or board members to feel like they were making a difference (see Kramer 1987, 250).

One can easily understand why nonprofit social service agencies with limited resources carefully target their resources. Yet our family interview data show that this type of targeting does not meet the routine needs of the poor adequately or efficiently. Whereas agencies had to target their resources to establish their legitimacy to the outside world and to give a sense of purpose to those within, this meant that poor families had to go to one set of organizations for food, others for clothing, and still others for housing assistance. Furthermore, the fact that demand for a given organization’s services often far outstripped its supply meant that each organization might require long waits, extensive and invasive intake interviews, and proofs of eligibility.

Targeting created a second problem for clients: it often resulted in a system of eligibility rules that cut between and within families in a given community. These variations often threatened community norms of mutual exchange that were essential to smoothing income flows over time. In the agencies we observed, targeting meant that some families in the community were needy but not eligible for assistance. Some family “types” (poor single mothers for example) could get help whereas others (such as two-parent families) could not. Eligibility also varied within families. For example, perhaps

only the children were eligible, but not the adult who lived in the household.

Our best examples of effects of variations in eligibility come from the All Service agency, where children who took part in a summer recreation program were not allowed to share their lunches with the adults and other children who often hung around the organization's outdoor eating area. All Service had similar rules about the food they gave away through their food pantry—only certain types of families were eligible and were supposed to take only what they needed for their own use.

The clients at All Service frequently violated these rules and shared food with hungry kin or neighbors. Community and kin norms of mutual exchange placed a strong expectation on eligibles to share the resources they gleaned with noneligibles within their community or household network. Such patterns of mutual exchange were essential to the survival of residents of these poor communities because they smoothed income and resource flows over time. If eligibles had followed organizational rules and refused to share their resources with noneligibles, they would have lost the ability to draw on the resources of noneligibles when their organizational contacts did not yield the cash or in-kind assistance they needed. This meant, however, that families often had to break or bend the rules of the organizations that assisted them. In sum, targeting, though entirely defensible from the agency's point of view, was often in direct conflict with community notions of mutual exchange that were so essential for preserving community members' survival networks.

Rationing services. Our agencies also rationed the resources that any single family could receive in order to maximize the number of families who benefited from their services. This practice was in the best interest of each agency, because each had to provide proof of effectiveness to funders, board members, and current and prospective volunteers. In particular, the donors and granting agencies these organizations dealt with were more likely to rank the organization as efficient and effective if it could claim it served several thousand families on a one-time basis, rather than several hundred families on a routine basis (see Kantor and Summers 1987, 156; Kramer 1987).¹³

For example, in the mid-1990s, Community Cooperative could claim it met the needs of 250 to 300 family cases per month on an annual budget of about \$136,000 and about \$150,000 worth of donated food

¹³ For a discussion of the accountability structures of nonprofit third sector organizations, see Ruckle (1993, 109–12).

and dental services.¹⁴ Based on these statistics, funders and the larger community viewed Community Cooperative as highly efficient in meeting the needs of a great number of needy families, even though the vast majority served received only about \$25 worth of services (the value of the items the food pantry gave out to needy families). Similarly, in 1985 the American Public Welfare Association (APWA) reported that 633,000 individuals in 23 states received services under the Social Service Block Grant (APWA 1988).

Again, one can easily see why an agency would ration its services. However, rationing can sometimes create problems for clients, and these problems can breed mistrust between clients and the agencies that seek to serve them. Because families typically needed resources more often than they were technically eligible according to the agency's rules, it was in their best interest to present their cases in ways that increased their chances of getting results. During the intake process (in which organizational staff or volunteers assessed the family's eligibility and level of need), clients sometimes exaggerated or even told outright lies to get benefits. One Charleston mother married the father of her youngest child but continued to claim she was unmarried so that she could receive agency services reserved for single mothers. Other mothers lied about their addresses because they lived outside the agency's service boundaries. Still others invented a series of dramatic crisis stories to explain why they appeared at the organization's door more often than they were supposed to.

During one visit to Community Cooperative in 1998, Edin conducted an intake interview with a client who gave her name as Lorraine Johnson. During the course of the interview, the agency director walked through the waiting area where the interview was taking place and greeted the client by another name. After Johnson left, the director confided that this particular client had claimed benefits under three names during the prior year in order to receive food more often than the agency rules allowed. Johnson received her two-day supply of groceries that day but was told she was barred from receiving any food for the next three months.

In the same year, Edin witnessed another incident that illustrates this point. A male client told staff he was a single father who was temporarily disabled and could not work (he was suffering from back problems resulting from an automobile accident). He had gotten behind on his rent and asked the agency for help, claiming the child's mother had abandoned him and the child and he had no

¹⁴ In a 1982 national study of 3,400 nonprofit social service agencies, 75 percent had operating budgets of less than \$500,000 annually, and 40 percent spent less than \$100,000 annually (Urban Institute 1983, 3-4).

other means of support until he could go back to work. When the agency director called this client's landlord to arrange payment, the landlord made an offhand comment about the client's wife, who lived with him and the children and was perfectly able (in the landlord's view) but unwilling to work. Because the client had misrepresented his situation to the agency, they denied his request for assistance.

The men and women who serve as staff and volunteers for nonprofit social service agencies generally do so because they want to help (Ruckle 1993, 121–27). One volunteer told us, "I want to do some good in the world." Another said, "I can feel like my life is worthwhile if I can make sure others have the same opportunities I did." Yet when the fiscal constraints of nonprofit social service organizations made it impossible to help everyone who needed assistance, stories of clients who "lied" and "cheated" to get benefits they were not technically eligible for took on exaggerated significance. And it is true that, all too often, recipients got what they needed only if they bent the truth. As these stories multiplied, staff and volunteers' mistrust of clients grew. For their part, clients were also quick to sense staff suspicions, and the mistrust became mutual.

The staff and volunteers with whom poor families interact are often bound in their behavior by the rationing rules of their agency. They cannot always adapt their rules to take into account individual clients' sense of family and household obligations or client needs that fall outside the scope of the organization's mission. Indeed, since client-staff relations are sometimes marked by mutual mistrust, the agency may have little notion of its clients' situations or worldview. Given these institutional restrictions, agency staff and volunteers must frequently turn down people who they believe are truly needy, must give inadequate assistance to families who clearly need more, and must punish what community members believe to be appropriate and responsible sharing among household and family members. Thus, agency staff and volunteers, as well as the more abstract policies they must enforce, can sometimes become the adversaries of those they passionately want to help.¹⁵

"Good investments" and short-term need. Both agencies we observed provided certain types of assistance to nearly every needy family who came through their door and restricted more expensive services to a few carefully selected clients. For example, at Community Co-operative, most of the food was donated by local grocery stores or purchased at cut-rate prices from the local food bank. Thus, the agency could provide a small supply of food to every eligible client.

¹⁵ See Lipsky (1980) for an account of how such phenomena occur among workers in government agencies.

Community Cooperative also had a small budget designated for paying overdue utility and rent bills, and for plumbing and electrical installation and repair. Although several hundred of the 3,500 families on the agency's books could have used help with their rent, utility bills, or plumbing, the organization could only help between 40 and 60 such families in the course of a year, depending on the expenses involved in each case.

Staff and volunteers were typically the most willing to invest their scarce cash and voucher resources in those families they viewed as "good investments."¹⁶ Families they deemed good investments were those who staff believed were in the midst of a short-term crisis but who could manage to make do without help in a typical month. At one of the agencies (Community Cooperative), the use of investment language was very common among agency staff, volunteers, board members, and donors we observed and spoke with.

At both agencies, staff generally reserved discretionary cash and voucher assistance for the nonrecurring needs of families in crisis. Organizational personnel tended to define families with crisis needs as good investments, whereas families who approached the organization's door again and again were defined as poor investments. As the director of Community Cooperative commented: "I used to think that we would get people up and out of poverty. But a lot of people come back again and again, and [for them], I'm not seeing that happening." Another Community Cooperative staff member told us, "We're here for the occasional hand up, not the continual handout." One board member confided that he worried that clients would become dependent on the agency, just as they had on the social welfare system. In this board member's view, "Making 3,500 people become dependent on this agency—that's *not* what I call a success." Another said, "We want to make them self-sufficient, not dependent." Discussions of dependence and self-sufficiency punctuated the discourse at all the agency board meetings we observed.

While Edin was conducting her participant observation at Community Cooperative, she observed the agency's response to a number of recurring family crises. When a family of five approached the agency for food, the volunteer handling the intake found out that they were living in their car in a remote portion of the nearby state forest. The father had been unable to find work for several months, and they had been evicted from their apartment for nonpayment of rent. The agency responded by helping the couple find employment and paid the security deposit and first month's rent on an apart-

¹⁶ See Lipsky and Smith (1989, 635) for a discussion of investing practices by agencies.

ment. This family quickly assimilated into the community and did not call on the organization for additional help.

The agency also expended considerable resources in meeting the needs of a white unmarried mother of a biracial child who was homeless because her parents had “disowned” her, a mother who had lost her furnishings due to a house fire, a Head Start teacher who had no money to pay her bills during the summer months because it took two months for her first unemployment check to arrive, a single mother who had to leave her job to care for a child with AIDS, a mother of five whose husband and infant died of AIDS and who was left deeply in debt, a middle-class housewife who was temporarily destitute after her husband had gone to jail on child molestation charges, a mother who had lost her job at a convenience store because her ex-husband was stalking her and making threats while she was on the job, and a disabled mother whose husband was shot and killed by a hunter while he was in the backyard chopping wood. All of these cases were viewed as “crises” by the agency and may appear extreme to the reader. That is precisely the point; the extreme and nonrecurring cases were the ones that Community Cooperative was most willing and able to meet.

One of the negative results of this strategy from the client point of view was that the more advantaged clientele (those also more likely to have short-term needs) generally received more of these discretionary resources than their less advantaged counterparts (those also more likely to have chronic needs). One of the organizations we studied was described glowingly by a large nationwide group as “an exemplary program which [meets] the needs of neighbors in *crisis* [emphasis added].” When this organization’s director was asked by a local journalist to describe clients the organization helped, she replied, “people who have been dealt unfortunate circumstances, including those who once lived a middle-class lifestyle.” These somewhat more advantaged clientele typically received most of the discretionary cash and voucher assistance these organizations had to offer (see Katz 1995; Weissert 1994; Lipsky and Smith 1989).

For example, although low-income mothers who worked were less likely to report getting cash or voucher help from an agency than those who relied on welfare, the workers who did receive help reported significantly higher amounts of cash or voucher help than their welfare-reliant counterparts. To offer another example, low-income single mothers from mixed-income neighborhoods reported receiving significantly more cash and voucher assistance from non-profit agencies than mothers from more disadvantaged neighbor-

hoods—especially those containing public housing projects.¹⁷ The result is that these somewhat better off families used up a considerable amount of the organizations' discretionary resources.¹⁸

Thus, whereas an organization's constraints led its staff to focus on clients' short-term, nonrecurring needs, the very low cash welfare benefits and wages available to residents of these neighborhoods meant that many families experienced economic crisis on a routine basis and were nearly always in need of the agency's services.¹⁹ Because the agencies we studied generally defined their service missions in terms of meeting "emergency" needs, families who came to their doors on a routine basis were seldom candidates for the discretionary cash and voucher assistance agencies could sometimes give, even if they were truly in need of such assistance.

Discussion

What should be clear by now is that relying on nonprofit social service organizations to meet the social service needs of those poor mother-only families who will hit the TANF time limit is risky business. Unskilled and semiskilled mothers who will be forced to work under TANF will have more children, younger children, less human capital, and less lucrative social networks than welfare recipients who left welfare for work under the previous regime. The assistance nonprofit social service organizations provide will thus be particularly crucial for these families. Yet poor single mothers will have to invest enormous amounts of time in order to get help—time they can ill afford if they are trying to combine solo parenting with low-wage work.

The low-wage working mothers in this study spent an average of 35 hours per week at work and about 10 hours per week commuting to and from work. If our analysis of their budget shortfalls is any indicator of the budget shortfalls one can expect for those who will leave welfare for work under TANF, mothers will have to spend a significant portion of their remaining hours taking side jobs and/or

¹⁷ These differences were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

¹⁸ Lipsky and Smith (1989, 631) argue that "creaming" allows nonprofit social service organizations to avoid clients who are the most disruptive and costly to serve. Handler (1996, 97) claims that creaming allows nonprofits to demonstrate positive outcomes. Our data suggest the practice might also help to enhance the psychic rewards staff, board members, and volunteers glean from their service.

¹⁹ This was true for both the welfare recipients and low-wage working mothers we studied.

going from agency to agency to get enough assistance in enough domains to make it through the month.

The already limited capacities of such organizations mean that the increased caseload they will probably face will make it necessary to impose even stricter targeting and rationing rules, and they will have to invest their discretionary resources even more carefully.²⁰ This means that the time families will have to invest in getting assistance from agencies will likely increase. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that organizations will coordinate their services so that needs in every domain will be met. Nonprofit social service groups tend to operate independently rather than in tandem with other groups. In some cases, nonprofit social service organizations duplicate one another's services. From the client point of view, duplication is good, because no one agency can generally meet a family's need in a given domain. However, duplication in one domain might mean that services in another domain are completely lacking. In the words of one observer,

Proponents of the voluntary sector often fail to appreciate that its strengths are at the same time the source of its limitations; for example, where there is pluralism, fragmentation and duplication are the inevitable costs of particularism and individualization. Furthermore, voluntary organizations are inherently narrow and exclusionary in their scope. Because the individual depends for social services on the initiative, resources, and capabilities of a particular group with which [s]he is administratively identified, the substitution of voluntary for government agencies can result in even greater unevenness, inconsistency, and inequality in the distribution of social services. (Kramer 1987, 253)

We observed no nonprofit or group of nonprofits within any of our communities that systematically attempted to cover every domain of need for all of the needy families within the community served. Interest in forming collaborative relationships across organizations has increased, yet the social science community knows little about the possibilities and pitfalls of forming and maintaining such relationships between nonprofit social service organizations. Furthermore, the administrative demands of maintaining such collaborations may be simply too great for small agencies to sustain (Bailey and Koney 1996).

The people who staff the agencies we studied are worried about the changes they believe TANF will bring and the impact that these changes may have on the demand for their services. One of the ex-

²⁰ Evidence suggests that agencies managed in a similar manner when confronted with reductions in federal funding in the early 1980s (Urban Institute 1983).

ecutive directors said: "I feel like we're throwing people in the water without teaching them how to swim first. I'm not sure what to expect from these reforms, but we'll know its impact this time next year." Some researchers predict that nonprofits will not be able to take on the added burden welfare reform will bring (Epstein 1993; Funciello 1993) and that families will suffer increased hardship as a result (Adams and Nelson 1995).²¹ Such hardship might be particularly acute for families living in very poor neighborhoods anchored by large public housing projects, whose needs are often chronic and thus may be regarded as poor investments for agency resources.

It is thus imperative that members of advocacy groups continue to demand improvements in those income-maintenance, nutritional, health, and other programs that provide a safety net for poor families on the federal, state, and local level. Currently, nonprofits expend only a small portion of their funds for advocacy work. Nonprofit social service organizations should also advocate for improvements in the social safety net for families who work, so that these agencies can be freed to do what they do best—helping families with short-term nonrecurring needs or needs that are too localized to demand a city, state, or federal policy response.²² If social service agencies try to take on the mantle the federal government has shrugged off, they might well be forced to target and ration their services to the point where they are worse than useless to those individuals they are committed to serving.

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²¹ In his review of several studies of private philanthropic giving, Christopher Jencks concludes that in the case of the federal funding cuts of the 1980s, private donors replaced some, but almost never all, of the money lost (1987, 337).

²² This division of labor between the government and voluntary social services was originally proposed by Linton Swift in 1934. Swift proposed that the government sponsor mass safety net programs that would provide routine services to meet subsistence needs, freeing the voluntary agencies to be more innovative, experimental, and specialized (Kramer 1987, 242).

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