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Understanding Social and Race Equity in Welfare-to-Work Programs in California: Challenges in Social Policy Implementation at the State-, County-, Frontline-levels

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The U.S welfare reform of 1996 introduced a punitive and devolved welfare-to-work (WTW) system. Previous research has shed light on racial disparities in sanctioning practices at the state and county levels. However, there is a dearth of research focused on understanding the processes, pathways, and levels of policy (state, county, or frontline level) discourses and practices in WTW shape social inequities.

For the case study, we chose California's WTW program because it is more generous, inclusive, racially diverse, and devolved than the other WTW programs in the U.S. We conducted a comparison of two county sites: Bay-county (urban, tech-industry) and Central-county (rural, agricultural -industry). County selection was based on the result of a cluster analysis of 58 county characteristics in California. The paper triangulates data at different policy-levels through statistics, interviews, observations, and documents at the state-, county- and frontline levels.

Utilizing critical discourse analysis of documents and interviews at the state and county levels, a first part of the study suggests that race-differences in WTW-sanctions and exemptions at local level are shaped by the embedded discourses and corresponding practices at the local level. While WTW in Bay-county is ruled by a race-blind equality discourse (equal treatment of all client's) and shows more race-disparities in the WTW-sanction and exemptions, Central-County is ruled by an equity discourse (differential treatment of different race groups, to facilitate access and engagement to WTW for specific race groups) and displays less racial disparities.

The second part of the study is based on a content analysis of frontline-workers interviews and observations in both counties in the WTW offices. We show how racial differences in WTW-sanctions and exemptions may be shaped by the practices of frontline-workers and beliefs in their respective organizational contexts. We display how discourses at local level shape the beliefs and practices of workers and how the discretion exercised by the workers in their interactions with clients can lead to (un-)equitable treatments if there are assumptions and prejudices.

Overall, the paper contributes to the welfare literature by shedding light on the challenges for social and race equity of implementing social policies at different policy levels. We also discuss various policy recommendations for improving racial and other inequities at the different levels of a WTW system.