

## Contextualizing Cash Assistance and the South

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**ABSTRACT** In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act creating the most recent welfare reform and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Unlike Aid to Families with Dependent Children, which was an income-based entitlement program, with TANF came time limits, sanctions for noncompliance, and requirements that recipients participate in “work or work-related activities.” TANF is also a block grant program. As a result, not only did program requirements change, but they can now vary from state to state.

This article provides a regional context for this special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology* by examining regional patterns in the provision of cash assistance. The South has a history of lower benefits and lower spending for cash assistance while at the same time having higher rates of poverty and persistent poverty. Under TANF, these regional patterns remain.

The 1996 welfare reform legislation brought many changes to cash assistance in the United States. Replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), cash assistance moved from an entitlement to a program that is contingent. As a result, recipients now face different requirements and expectations than before, and they do so within a larger changed context. Establishing cash assistance as a system of block grants to states resulted in a multiplicity of policy options, combinations of which vary from state to state.

Since its passage and implementation, researchers have sought to understand the impacts and implications of this new welfare reform legislation. This special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology* joins that debate. The goal is to examine a wide range of impacts and issues related to welfare reform and the rural South from a variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives. As a result, the topics included in this special issue reflect some of the broad range of changes made through the Personal Responsibility

and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This article provides a regional context for the articles which follow.

### **Welfare Reform**

The 1996 welfare reform legislation brought a myriad of changes in substance, form, and philosophy. The substance of cash assistance changed to bring new requirements for recipients. In form, intergovernmental relations were changed, increasing the role of states in meeting the needs of families, and reinforcing the role of nongovernmental actors through charitable choice. In philosophy, the 1996 welfare reform legislation moved from an entitlement to being characterized as having the twin strategies of “requiring work and responsibility and rewarding families” (DHHS 2000a:1). This shifted the policy emphasis from an “income oriented system” to a “behavior oriented system” (Corbet 1997:12). The goals of the legislation read (P.L.104-193 1996:Section 401:9):

In general — The purpose of this part is to increase the flexibility of States in operating a program designed to —

- a) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- b) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- c) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- d) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

No individual entitlement — This part shall not be interpreted to entitle any individual or family to assistance under any State program funded under this part.

Building on the federally-granted waivers to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) which allowed state experimentation in cash assistance programs, changes contained within the new legislation included the elimination of AFDC, JOBS, and Emergency Assistance (EA). In the place of AFDC, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant was created. Also included in the legislation were changes to other programs such as food stamps, funding streams for the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), and the introduction of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG).

Changes under TANF affected both requirements for recipients as well as changes to the system for cash assistance provision. Included among the federally required changes for recipients were the introduction of time limits for the receipt of cash assistance, required participation in 'work or work related activities,' and sanctions for noncompliance. The legislation also moved cash assistance from a federal program to a block grant program. In so doing, state decision making and latitude in policy making increased.

Moving to a block grant system included changes to the larger system such as fixing federal funding to states based on a state's funding under AFDC, as well as a new system of accountability. In order to maintain federal funding levels, states were required to meet caseload work participation rates and maintain their relative spending under AFDC (called maintenance of effort or MOE requirements). There were also funding bonuses for high performance and for reducing illegitimacy. In addition to the base TANF grant, separate Supplemental Fund grants were also available for states with lower than average funding levels or high population growth. Finally, along side the federally funded TANF programs, states could also choose to have their own separate state-funded program which would not subject recipients to federal requirements.

With the new block grants, states made a series of policy and program decisions surrounding the provision of cash assistance to recipients within their state. Some of the options available included time limits less than the federal 60 months, the form, timing and severity of sanctions, as well as the circumstances for exempting work requirements. States also had options such as

establishing a family cap or exempting vehicles from the asset limit, creating diversion programs or specialized assistance for victims of domestic violence, among many others (Zedlewski 1998; Gallagher et al. 1998; DHHS 2000b). While decision making could be devolved further from the state to the county level, most state programs are uniform within their states (DHHS 2000b). However, across the states, TANF programs differ from one another.

### **The Southern Region**

The South holds a particular place in the history of poverty and cash assistance (i.e., Quadagno 1994). For example, a southern congressional amendment to the 1935 Social Security Act included agricultural and domestic workers among those excluded from coverage.<sup>1</sup> This exclusion disproportionately affected African Americans. More overtly, southern resistance led the opposition to national standards of need and universal benefit levels; opposing federal intervention in state affairs (Weaver 2000; Davies and Derthick 1997).

Today, the South still holds particular importance, containing a disproportionate share of the intersecting populations of those living in poverty, African Americans, and rural residents. The region has had some of the highest poverty and child poverty rates, particularly in the rural South. By 2000, the South's poverty rate had declined to 12.8 percent, but the South still accounted for 36.5 percent of the nation's poor (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> The South is also home to a large share of persistent poverty, including areas such as

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<sup>1</sup> Others who were also excluded were the self employed, seamen, church and government employees as well as employees of colleges and hospitals (Davies and Derthick 1997:226).

<sup>2</sup> All regional calculations are by the author unless otherwise noted. For these, the Southern Region is defined as the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. East Region: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia. Central Region: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin. Western Region: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

the Black Belt, parts of Appalachia, Rio Grande, and the Mississippi delta region. Of the 535 persistent poverty counties in the nation, 443 are in the South.

The southern region is also home to a large share of the nation's African American and rural populations. In 2000, 48 percent of African Americans lived in the South.<sup>3</sup> Of rural African Americans, 83 percent reside in the 11 Black Belt states (Wimberley and Morris, this issue). In 1990, these same states accounted for 90 percent of rural African Americans who live in poverty (Wimberley and Morris, this issue). The South also contains a disproportionate share of the nation's nonmetropolitan population. In 1999, 41 percent of the nonmetropolitan population lived in the southern region. As a result, trends in the South can disproportionately affect these groups.

### Before TANF

Historically, states in the southern region have been characterized by low benefit levels for families and low spending levels for cash assistance while at the same time having a disproportionate share of those living in poverty. Using constant 1995 dollars, Wexler and Engel (1999) ranked states on their benefit levels per recipient comparing levels in 1940 with those in 1995 (1999:48). While individual states saw movement during this time span, average rankings by region reveal relatively little change (see Table 1). In 1940, states in the South had an average rank of 40.7, which was nearly the same in 1995 at 41.2, indicating that the lowest benefit levels were found in the South and remain the lowest 55 years later.

Along with historically low benefits, the South has also had a history of lower spending for cash assistance. Reflecting this trend, from 1987 to 1996, states in the southern region nearly consistently spent less per case than the other regions.<sup>4</sup> And, while differences amongst the other regions narrowed during this time, expenditures in the South remained low (Figure 1). As a result, the

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<sup>3</sup> See footnote 2.

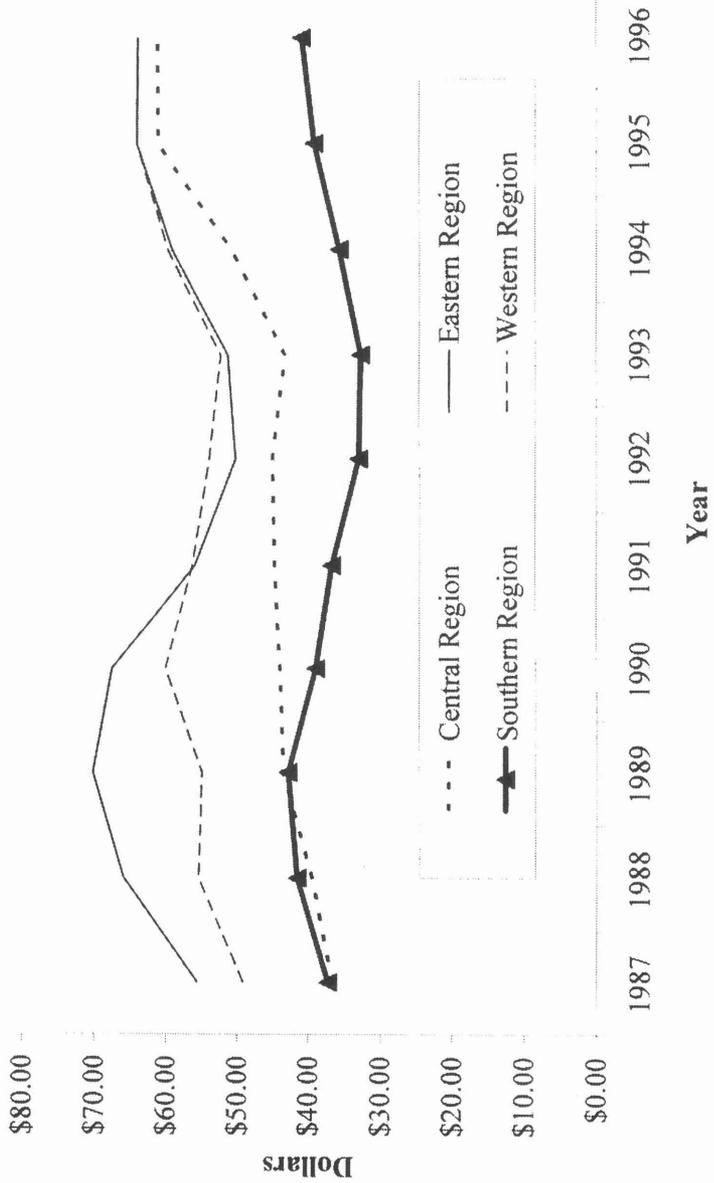
<sup>4</sup> Data Source: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov>. ACF-3637, Statistical Report on Recipients Under Public Assistance. ACF-231, AFDC 5 Year Line by Line Report, Adjusted, 03/27/97.

**Table 1. Poverty and Cash Assistance by Region.**

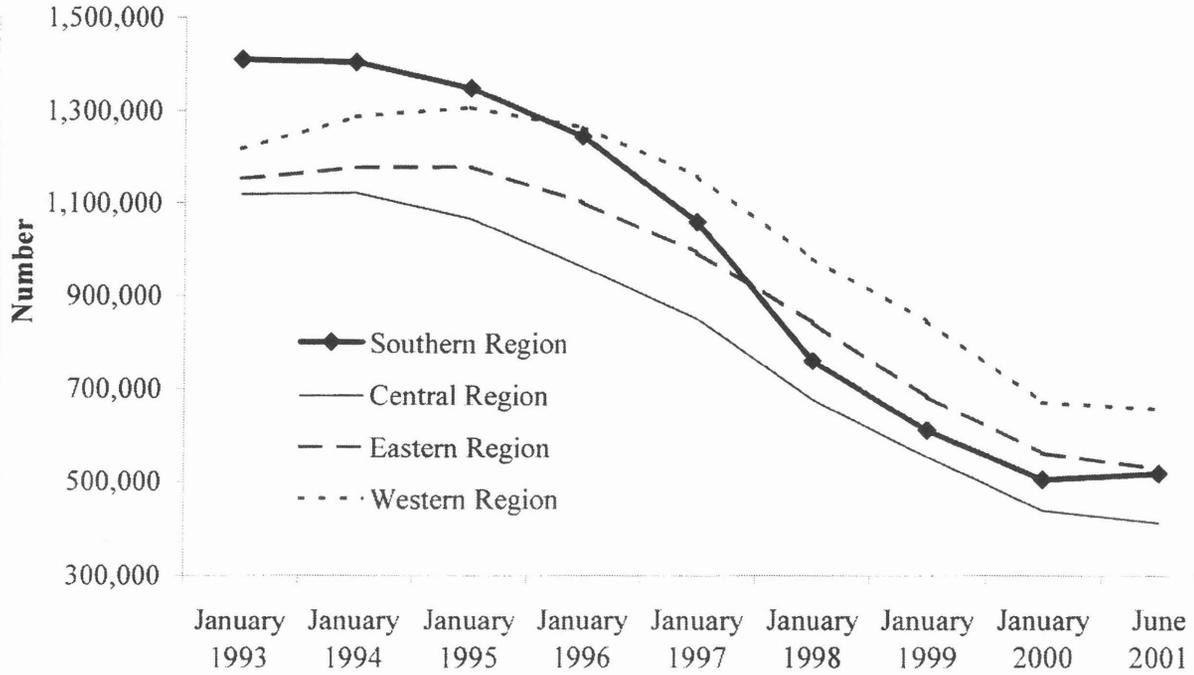
Region	Southern	Central	Eastern	Western	US Total <sup>1</sup>
Total Population 2000 (1,000) <sup>2</sup>	88,579	63,585	60,408	63,352	275,924
Number in Poverty 2000 (1,000)	11,323	6,036	6,144	7,549	31,052
Regional Poverty Rate 2000	12.8%	9.5%	10.2%	11.9%	11.3%
Regional Share of Persons Below Poverty 2000	36.5%	19.4%	19.8%	24.3%	100%
Regional Share of Total Population 2000	32.1%	23.0%	21.9%	23.0%	100%
Number of Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more other races 2000 <sup>3</sup>	17,432,771	6,838,669	8,652,369	3,495,625	36,419,434
Regional Share of Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more other races 2000	47.9%	18.8%	23.8%	9.6%	100%
Nonmetropolitan Population 1999 <sup>4</sup>	22,302,337	16,654,205	7,055,720	8,071,681	54,083,943
Regional Share of Nonmetropolitan Population 1999	41.2%	30.8%	13.0%	14.9%	100%
Average State Ranking of AFDC Payments per Recipient, 1940 (1995 Dollars). <sup>5</sup>	40.7	21.7	14.1	21.2	--
Average State Ranking of AFDC Payments per Recipient, 1995 (1995 Dollars)	41.2	22.8	12.5	20	--

<b>Table 1. continued.</b>						
Average Benefit Levels for Family of 3 (1 Adult, 2 Children) with No Income <sup>5</sup>	July 1995	\$223	\$396	\$466	\$468	--
	January 2000	\$232	\$414	\$477	\$479	--
Total TANF \$\$ Awarded FY1999 (1,000) <sup>6</sup>		\$3,003,645	\$3,456,299	\$5,035,816	\$5,216,845	\$16,712,606
Percent of Total \$\$ Awarded FY1999		18.0%	20.7%	30.1%	31.2%	100%
1. U.S. Totals without Territories.						
2. Data Source U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (U.S. Census Bureau 2000b). Table 21. Number of Poor and Poverty Rate, by State: 1980 to 2000. See Footnote 2 in text for regional definitions.						
3. Data Source: 2000 Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2000a).						
4. Data Source: U. S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates (U.S. Census Bureau 2000c).						
5. Data Source: Wexler and Engel (1999).						
6. Data Source: DHHS (2000b).						

**Figure 1. Total AFDC, Average Monthly Administrative Expense per Case, Fiscal Years 1987 - 1996, Averaged by Region.**



**Figure 2. Number of AFDC/TANF Families by Region, January, 1993-June 2001.**



gap between the national totals and the regional average for the South increased from a difference of \$8.05 to \$13.38 per case.

Mead (2002) argues that differences in states' approaches to the 1996 welfare reform correlate with both the institutional capacity of state governments and the historical roots of political culture across the states. Elazar (1966) categorizes states' political traditions as moralistic, traditionalistic, and individualistic; of these, traditionalistic states are primarily located in the South. Using this, Mead argues that traditionalistic states "have both low benefits and strong sanctions, reflecting their time-honored approach to limiting dependency – simply by keeping people off the rolls" (Mead 2002:43). With the increased role of states in policy-making for cash assistance, these historical patterns of poverty assistance have remained.

#### **After TANF**

After six years of implementing the 1996 welfare reform legislation, the southern region continues to evidence distinct trends. Following a decade of unprecedented national economic growth, poverty rates have declined. Despite this, however, the South retains the highest aggregate regional poverty rate and remains home to a disproportionate share of those living in poverty (see Table 1). In 2000, states in the South were home to 36.5 percent of those living below poverty. And, while the poverty rate declined to 12.8 percent for the southern region, this is still above the national rate (11.3 percent).

With the historic high in the number of families receiving cash assistance in the early 1990s, the South was home to nearly a third of all cash assistance cases. Since then, national cash assistance caseloads began to decline; predating the 1996 legislation. From January 1994 through January 1997, the number of families receiving cash assistance declined by 928,767 families or 18.6 percent (DHHS 2000a). After the implementation of welfare reform began in 1997, the number of families relying on cash assistance declined further and at a faster pace. Seen as resulting from a good economy, building on the pre-legislation waivers, and the impact of welfare reform (e.g. Blank 1997; Council of Economic Advisors 1997, 1999; Danziger 1999; Martini and

Wiseman 1997), despite recent increases, from January 1997 to June 2001, the number of families receiving cash assistance declined by 47.9 percent (DHHS 2000a).

Within this national trend of declining caseloads, the southern region displayed three key features (Zimmerman and Breazeale 2002).<sup>5</sup> From January 1994 to June 2001, the southern region saw the largest decline in the number of families receiving cash assistance (886,167 families) (see Figure 2). Caseloads in the South also saw consistently higher annual rates of decline than the other three regions combined (Table 2). As a result, the distribution of families receiving cash assistance also shifted. In other words, the South moved from being home to nearly a third (28.1 percent) of all families receiving cash assistance in 1994 to one quarter (24.5 percent) of all families.

For all four regions, the rates of caseload decline began to attenuate from January 2000 to June 2001. In this most recent time period, while individual states saw fluctuations, the South was the only region to see an aggregate increase in the number of TANF families (13,431 families) (see Table 2). Put another way, during this time, 21 states saw their caseloads increase. Eight of the states with increases in their caseloads were located in the South, more than in any other region, and 59.1 percent of the additional families were located in the South.

Despite having the option of changing benefit levels under welfare reform, only a few states nationally did so (DHHS 2000b:247-8). Between July 1995 and January 2000, 19 states increased their benefit levels ranging from an increase of \$1.00 in Colorado to a high of \$155 increase in Wisconsin.<sup>6</sup> Despite these increases, benefits within only eight states kept pace with the Consumer Price Index (DHHS 2000b:247).

Since benefit levels did not change much, benefits in the South remain the lowest in the nation; around half of that found in other regions (see Table 1). Across the South, In January 2000, benefit levels ranged from a low of \$164 in Alabama for a family of

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<sup>5</sup> This updates the trends documented by Zimmerman (1999) and Rowley (2000).

<sup>6</sup> During this time, Idaho, Oklahoma, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii, all decreased their benefits \$15, \$24, \$41, and \$71 respectively.

Region		Southern	Central	Eastern	Western	U.S. Total <sup>2</sup>
Number of TANF Families	January 1993	1,409,870	1,119,304	1,153,329	1,217,118	4,899,621
	January 1994	1,403,648	1,122,545	1,177,021	1,287,285	4,990,499
	January 1995	1,349,118	1,067,476	1,179,539	1,307,648	4,903,781
	January 1996	1,245,016	961,771	1,101,611	1,264,639	4,573,037
	January 1997	1,059,214	850,903	992,687	1,158,928	4,061,732
	January 1998	759,643	675,808	843,136	979,373	3,257,960
	January 1999	610,767	553,368	682,277	846,782	2,693,194
	January 2000	504,050	437,474	561,476	670,284	2,173,284
	June 2001	517,481	412,297	528,031	656,136	2,113,945
Difference in Number of Families, Jan. 2000-June 2001		13,431	-25,177	-33,445	-14,148	-59,339
Percent of all TANF Families	January 1993	28.8%	22.8%	23.5%	24.8%	100%
	January 1994	28.1%	22.5%	23.6%	25.8%	100%
	January 1995	27.5%	21.8%	24.1%	26.7%	100%
	January 1996	27.2%	21.0%	24.1%	27.7%	100%
	January 1997	26.1%	20.9%	24.4%	28.5%	100%
	January 1998	23.3%	20.7%	25.9%	30.1%	100%
	January 1999	22.7%	20.5%	25.3%	31.4%	100%
	January 2000	23.2%	20.1%	25.8%	30.8%	100%
	June 2001	24.5%	19.5%	25.0%	31.0%	100%

Table 2. continued		Southern	Central	Eastern	Western	U.S. Total <sup>2</sup>
Percent Change in the Number of TANF Families	Jan.1993- Jan.1994	-0.4%	0.3%	2.1%	5.8%	1.9%
	Jan.1994- Jan.1995	-3.9%	-4.9%	0.2%	1.6%	-1.7%
	Jan.1995- Jan.1996	-7.7%	-9.9%	-6.6%	-3.3%	-6.7%
	Jan.1996- Jan.1997	-14.9%	-11.5%	-9.9%	-8.4%	-11.2%
	Jan.1997- Jan.1998	-28.3%	-20.6%	-15.1%	-15.5%	-19.8%
	Jan.1998- Jan.1999	-19.6%	-18.1%	-19.1%	-13.5%	-17.3%
	Jan.1999- Jan.2000	-17.5%	-20.9%	-17.7%	-20.8%	-19.3%
	Jan.2000-June 2001	2.7%	-5.8%	-6.0%	-2.1%	-2.7%

1. Data Source: DHHS (2000a).
2. U.S. Totals without Territories.

three with no income to a high of \$303 in Florida. And nationally, all 10 states with the lowest benefit levels were located in the South.

With federal TANF funding to states being based on 1994 state spending levels, historical funding differences across states also remained in place. Consequently, under TANF, funding for cash assistance remains lower in the South (see Table 1). For fiscal year 1999, for instance, states in the South were awarded 18 percent of all federal TANF funding, the lowest of all four regions.

With increased decision making now possible under TANF, there also appears to be regional differences in state policy decisions. Using the original state TANF plans, Zedlewski (1998) categorized states' policies in terms of both providing incentives (amount of earned income that can be disregarded from determining income eligibility) and penalties (level of sanctions) in their approach to "encouraging" cash assistance recipients to work, ranking each as high, medium, or low intensity policy choices. Of the 19 states categorized as having high intensity penalties, eight of these are states in the South. Incentive or "carrot" policies were more evenly distributed regionally (see Table 3).

Pavetti and Bloom (2001) take a similar approach to analyzing state TANF policies comparing the levels of sanction and time limit policies.<sup>7</sup> Stringent time limits are those that contain either fixed or lifetime time limits of less than sixty months. Moderate time limits are those policies with the federal sixty month time limit. Lenient time limit policies are those that contain "a benefit reduction limit or no time limit" (Pavetti and Bloom 2001:249). For categorizing sanction policies, in addition to policies ranging from full to partial TANF benefit reduction, Pavetti and Bloom also incorporate the level of benefit reductions in medicaid and food stamps included in the sanctions (2001). Using this approach, a disproportionate share of states in the South chose stringent policies for both sanctions and time limits policies (see Table 4).

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<sup>7</sup> Both Zedlewski (1998) and Pavetti and Bloom (2001) note the importance of how these policy categories interact. For example, states with both stringent sanctions *and* stringent time limits means that in these states recipients subject to the time limits are more likely to be recipients who are "playing by the rules" (Pavetti and Bloom 2001:248).

**Table 3. Work-Related TANF Policies.**

Intensity of Policies	Penalties		Incentives	
	Total Number of States	Number of States in the South	Total Number of States	Number of States in South
High Intensity	19	8	19	4
Medium Intensity	18	3	19	5
Low Intensity	14	2	13	4
U.S. Total	51	13	51	13

Data Source: Zedlewski (1998).

**Table 4. TANF Sanction and Time Limit Policies.**

Policy Level	Sanctions		Time Limits	
	Total Number of States	Number of States in South	Total Number of States	Number of States in South
Lenient	13	1	9	0
Moderate	13	3	25	5
Stringent	25	9	17	8
U.S. Total	51	13	51	13

Data Source: Pavetti and Bloom (2001).

**Table 5. Sanction Policies and the Location of the TANF Caseload, the U.S. NonMetropolitan Population, African-Americans, and Persons in Poverty.**

Sanction Policies	Number of States	Number of States in South	Percent of TANF Caseload (January 1999)	Percent of Total US Nonmetro Population (1999)	Percent of all Black or African American alone or in combination with one or more other races (2000)	Percent of All Persons in Poverty (2000)
Lenient	13	1	45.2%	22.2%	22.7%	31.3%
Moderate	13	3	23.1%	29.8%	24.3%	29.6%
Stringent	25	9	31.8%	48.0%	53.0%	39.2%
<b>U.S. Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Data Source: Policy data from Pavetti and Bloom (2001), caseload data from DHHS (2000a), and population data from U.S. Census Bureau (2000a).

Regional differences in cash assistance policies are important as the South is home to a disproportionate share of those in poverty, African Americans, and rural residents. As a result, regional differences in policy choices has the potential of disproportionately affecting these groups. For example, while the majority of the national TANF caseload lives in states with lenient sanctions, the majority of the nonmetro population lives in states with stringent sanctions (see Table 5). The same holds true for African Americans where 53 percent are located in states with stringent sanctions.

### **Conclusion**

The 1996 welfare reform brought a sea change to cash assistance. In replacing AFDC with TANF, the new legislation shifted the program from being based on income support to one focused on labor market attachment. It also increased state policy flexibility and decision-making through block grants and federal policy parameters. As a result, state fiscal differentials were retained and the variability of policies across states increased. In this context, the southern region provides an important window into welfare reform as regional differences have remained in place. And, as different groups are differentially represented across the United States, policy choices and trends in the South affect some groups more than others; particularly African Americans, those living in poverty, and rural residents.

This special issue seeks to add to the knowledge base regarding welfare reform by focusing attention on the rural South. Topics examined reflect the broad range of issues raised by welfare reform such as understanding employment outcomes for recipients (Singelmann et al.), the role of charitable choice and nonprofit organizations (Bartowski et al.; Ferguson et al.), changing caseload dynamics and differences in rural areas (Parisi et al.; Klemmack et al.), food security (Duffy et al.), racial disparities in service provision (Moreland-Young et al.), the application of sanctions and time limits (Swensen et al.), family well-being (Braun et. al.), and the implications of regional persistent rural poverty in a state block grant environment (Wimberley and Morris). This volume includes state and multi-state analyses from a variety of methodological and

theoretical perspectives. But lessons from these studies not only reflect welfare reform in the South, they are also relevant nationally as researchers and policy makers seek to understand the larger impacts and implications of the broad range of changes that came in 1996.

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