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Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State

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against the broad conclusions of her work: that we should question authority; engage in critical thought; debate publicly and freely with one another. These are all valuable perspectives. The difficulty is, if we really are living in dark times do they serve as a foundation for practical philosophy in the public service?

Michael Macaulay

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Scott W. Allard

Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State

Yale University Press, 2009

There is an old saying among urban scholars that ‘geography is destiny’, meaning that where one lives determines access to opportunities that enhance social mobility including jobs, safe neighborhoods, and quality housing and public education. In his book *Out of Reach*, Scott Allard gives new meaning to this phrase by revealing new evidence that those who live in the poorest communities also have less access to the very resources they need most. Using an impressive set of data and a rigorous method of study, Allard compellingly demonstrates that the contemporary American safety net, largely comprised of local public and nonprofit service organization is spatially mismatched from areas where need is the greatest.

In many ways, Allard’s study reaffirms existing evidence that geography perpetuates inequities in the distribution of social welfare services. While previous work on this subject has emphasized the role of state-level discretion in setting welfare and Medicaid benefit levels (Peterson 1995), Allard makes a novel contribution to the growing body of evidence that ‘place matters’ by showing that place-based inequities in the safety net also exist at the community level – where the vast majority of social services are delivered today. The introductory chapter describes how the contemporary safety net has evolved since the 1960s, from one of federally administered cash based assistance to services designed to promote self-sufficiency that are now delivered through local organizations. Providing evidence of these shifts, Allard reports that roughly 93 percent of all federal social welfare spending today is used to finance job training, mental health, housing, child care, and other social services that are primarily delivered by nonprofits and to a lesser extent local public organizations.

In the second chapter, Allard reviews an expansive literature to make the case about the importance of service providers being located close to those who need them. He argues that the poor are less likely to access services that are outside their own communities due to time and costs of travel and child care, and they may be less trusting of providers outside their neighborhood, particularly if the staff are not reflective of the help seeker’s own race or ethnicity.

Chapter 3 provides the empirical foundation for the book. Relying on a dataset of unprecedented size and scope involving interviews with administrators from nearly 1,500 public and nonprofit service agencies in Chicago, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles, Allard produces a service accessibility score for every census tract in these cities. This is an innovative measure, accounting for the supply of assistance (number of low-income clients served by providers within three miles of residential tract) and potential demand for services (number of low-income individuals within three miles of residential tract). He then divides each tract score by the metropolitan mean in order to compare access to services across low and high poverty areas. Using this method, he finds consistent evidence across all three cities of a spatial mismatch in the safety net; higher poverty neighborhoods have much less access to service providers than low-poverty neighborhoods. As a helpful complement to his interpretation of statistical evidence, he also provides maps visually representing the service accessibility scores for two services (employment and emergency food assistance) in each of the three cities.

In Chapter 4, Allard examines the issue of budget instability and how it perpetuates inequities in service access. First, he examines how volatility in program funding negatively impacts client access to services; budget cuts mean that clients seeking services may be waitlisted, offered a level of service that is inadequate to meet their needs, or simply denied. Next, he shows that service providers in higher poverty neighborhoods are more dependent on a single funding source (whether public or private), rendering them less capable of meeting service demands during hard economic times, a phenomenon he describes as the 'subtraction ripple effect'. Using the same service accessibility metric, he proceeds to show that budget instability/service volatility is spatially concentrated into high-poverty neighborhoods – the very areas with the lowest levels of access. Moreover, his data reveal that this misallocation of resources is of particular consequence for racial minorities; service providers located in neighborhoods that are majority minority were three times more likely to have cut client caseloads because of funding losses than agencies situated in majority white neighborhoods.

Allard's study also sheds new light on the controversial, yet increasingly common trend toward government support of faith-based providers. Chapter 5 examines three types of nonprofits in the contemporary safety net: secular nonprofits; faith-segmented nonprofits which have a religious affiliation but do not incorporate elements of faith into their service delivery; and faith-integrated nonprofits which do. Using his service accessibility score, he finds that faith-based providers are spatially the most accessible providers. Faith-integrated nonprofits in particular are more likely to have caseloads of predominantly poor clients, and all faith-based organizations are more likely to maintain caseloads with higher proportions of African Americans. These findings may suggest an expanded role for faith-based in the safety net. However, Allard cautions policy makers that these organizations also suffer from serious capacity issues – less revenue, fewer staff, less professionally trained staff, all of which limit these organizations' role in the safety net. Allard also offers some useful insights as to other roles faith-based agencies

might play in the safety net in collaboration with larger, better funded secular nonprofits, including outreach, fundraising, and advocacy.

In Chapter 6, Allard argues that despite the fragmentation of the safety net, there are common attributes across communities that result in an inefficient, inequitable, and at times, unresponsive system. These include the increased number of access points in the policy-making process, jurisdictional and program-based ‘silos’ encouraging turf battles, and inter-jurisdictional competition to attract wealthier, as opposed to poor residents. In the final chapter, Allard offers a number of policy recommendations to reduce these fractures in the safety net. Some seem more plausible than others. For example, creating financial incentives for more nonprofits to locate in high poverty neighborhoods, and collocating social services in places low-income parents frequent such as schools or shopping centers, seem much better suited to addressing the immediate problem of a spatial mismatch than policy solutions focusing on housing stability and the list of reforms he proposes to current Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) regulations.

My one and only criticism is that Allard does not discuss the trend toward consolidations and mergers of nonprofits that has emerged in recent years, and how this might have played a role in his findings. This trend has been particularly prevalent among Community Development Corporations (CDCs), which are concentrated in high poverty areas and often provide job training, emergency assistance, and housing. Many view nonprofit mergers as a positive trend that not only promotes more efficient use of resources, but also strengthens capacity and improves performance. He also overlooks the fact industry norms prescribe some types of services to be brought to the client and delivered in his/her home, as with public mental health services for example.

Despite these omissions, this book holds great promise for informing policy makers, foundations, advocates, and federal, state, and local government officials working in social service bureaucracies. Moreover, this book is a ‘must-read’ for scholars of federalism, social welfare policy, and metropolitan inequities as it makes a major contribution to each of these fields.

REFERENCE

Peterson, P. E. (1995) *The Price of Federalism*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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John Brehm and Scott Gates **Teaching, Tasks, and Trust**

We live in an era of policy delegation. Over the past several decades, the US bureaucracy has been assigned more and more varied tasks than could possibly be