

# A Systematic Literature Review of U.S. Welfare Sanctions and Racial Equity

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In the United States, welfare sanctions are designed to enforce compliance with program rules and are the most tangible and, in some cases, detrimental enforcement mechanism for recipients of public cash assistance. Whether or not they are equitably administered is critical to our understanding of the program and of safety net enforcement mechanisms across the sector. Using electronic databases of peer-reviewed articles across disciplines, this systematic literature review resulted in a deeper understanding of the research conducted related to racial inequities and welfare sanctions. The 29 studies included in this analysis highlight different rates and effects of sanctions for recipients depending on race and ethnicity. Findings are synthesized and recommendations for future research are presented.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the financial challenges faced by families prompted governments across the globe to enact policies addressing poverty. Many of these programs and policies, however, were time-limited. Their end is marked by a shift back to policy debates about the deservingness of those experiencing poverty. In the United States and other countries with means-tested and limited welfare programs, debates about work requirements are also resurfacing. Public opinion on deservingness, poverty, and work is often intertwined with racial bias, making equity a critical consideration in safety net policies and their administration. These are not new debates, and lessons can be gained from a review of the literature on U.S. welfare sanctions, arguably the most tangible enforcement mechanism of the requirements associated with public cash assistance receipt.

The enactment of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in the United States in 1996, through the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), made national a growing trend of work requirement pilot programs. The final regulations require all eligible adults receiving assistance to participate in a work activity to maintain their benefits. At the same time, PRWORA changed public assistance from an entitlement program to a block grant to states with a large amount of leeway regarding implementation. Given the devolution inherent in TANF, states can choose the types of work require-

ments, how many hours recipients need to participate, and how to enforce requirements. Beyond state-level devolution, there is discretion at the caseworker level in determining how to implement TANF policies, with some showing more leniency or stringency with regard to program work requirements and enforcement.

The intended purpose of sanctions is to encourage recipients to comply with program requirements so they meet program goals. TANF goals include supporting families so children can remain in their homes; reducing government dependency through work, job preparation, and marriage; reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and promoting the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (PRWORA 1996). In practice, however, studies point to more harmful outcomes of sanctions that are not aligned with the legislation's intent. Studies of welfare sanctions have reviewed implementation issues such as who is sanctioned and for what, as well as the effects of sanctions on case longevity, recipient earnings, and other measures of well-being. However, few studies have evaluated TANF sanctions against their stated purpose of getting recipients to comply with program requirements.

Fewer studies have used an equity framework in their analysis to assess the structural inequalities that exist within the policy and practice of sanctions. This incomplete knowledge about the racial impact of sanctions is problematic. The global Black Lives Matter movement coupled with country-specific events from volatile presi-

dential elections to public calls for deep reform and reparations have had an impact on public policymaking and administration. All of these, along with a long history of systemic inequality, highlight the need to better study race equity in our systems to support more just social policy and practice. To document this gap in the literature, the current study conducts a systematic literature review of research on sanctions of TANF recipients that include race or ethnicity as a component of their analysis. The primary goal of the review is to understand what is known about whether sanction policy and practice is equitable. For sanctions to be considered equitable, race or ethnicity would not be a determining factor in the use and outcomes of sanctions. Furthermore, the review applies an equity framework to the discussion and implications of current research findings to practice, particularly in terms of the limitations and gaps in what is known.

## Background

### *Welfare Sanctions*

Individual and case sanctions are a financial penalty imposed on TANF recipients who do not comply with requirements. Sanctions are designed to be an enforcement mechanism and how they are administered can expand or limit access to public cash assistance. Sanctions were used long before the 1996 welfare reform, with states issuing partial financial penalties to those who were not complying with program requirements. Following criticism that penalties were too small to be effective, the federal government allowed states to experiment through waivers to impose full family and case sanctions (Bloom and Winstead 2002). In 1996, welfare reform formalized sanctions and required states to terminate or reduce benefits when recipients did not comply with work requirements.

As with most TANF policies, states set the guidance for sanctions, determining when they are used and their severity. Sanctions can include removal of the adult from the case—affecting benefit amounts; a partial or complete reduction in the case benefit amount; or a complete case closure. Sanctions range from one month to a permanent change in financial benefits, which states set from a 6% decrease to the case being closed. In the most severe cases, some states will permanently ban the adult on the case from receiving benefits, or place a long-term ban, such as 10 years, before they can reapply (Shantz et al. 2020). A full benefit sanction or case closure results in the family losing benefits for a predetermined period,

with a complete case closure requiring the family to reapply following the sanction period.

According to the Urban Institute's Welfare Rules Databook, 12 states reduce the benefit by a fixed percentage as the first sanction and eight states remove the adult. Thirty states close the case as the most severe sanction policy (Shantz et al. 2020). Monnat (2010) found that, between 2001 and 2006, 29% of TANF cases that were closed were due to a sanction. Of those whose cases were closed due to a sanction, most (65.4%) were due to failing to comply with a requirement. Recipients can appeal the decision through fair hearings. Lens and Vorsanger (2005) noted that although fair hearings became a right to clients in 1970, they are rarely used despite typically being beneficial for the recipient.

Although the goal of sanctioning is to motivate recipients to comply with program requirements, evaluations of sanctions typically show less successful outcomes. Sanctions can cause a full case closure, completely restricting families from receiving cash benefits. In addition, sanctions can lead to poor employment and financial stability outcomes (Wang 2020; Chang, Lanfranconi, and Clark 2020; Wu, Cancian, and Wallace 2014). These effects tend to be counter to TANF's goal of self-sufficiency.

### *Street-Level Organizations and Discretion*

Street-level organizations are the pathway to public services, including TANF. Street-level bureaucrats are those who administer public benefits and their practices have significant effects on policy implementation. Discretion is inherent in public policies, as vagueness within legislation increases the likelihood of passage and thus leaves some of the implementation decisions to those on the ground (Lipsky 1980). In addition, public service workers may use discretion to help process large workloads with limited resources, choosing for example, how much time to spend with specific clients. How discretion is used by frontline workers has implications across agencies and service delivery.

In the case of welfare services, discretion is exercised through several mechanisms which widen the divide between policy as written and as performed, including information sharing and requirement stringency. Several studies (Meyers et al. 1998; Meyers 1998; Selkman 2014) found that information sharing between caseworkers and clients was limited. This is a critical implementation failure, as caseworkers are a primary source of information for clients, and choices not to share infor-

mation may mean there are program features or services that clients never learn about. In addition, caseworkers can use their discretion to determine the stringency of program requirements, determining who to punish and who to offer waivers of work requirements (Fording et al. 2007; Keiser et al. 2004). Watkins-Hayes (2011) finds that the strict structure of street-level organizations often restricts workers from using discretion to benefit minority clients, concluding that it is important to address organizational inclusiveness, and that diversity alone is not enough to improve equity.

### ***Administrative Burden***

Differences in awareness of public benefits and the complexity of the bureaucratic systems that manage them make access more difficult for families. Herd and Moynihan (2019) describe these challenges as the administrative burden associated with complex government processes. They conceptualize and categorize the administrative burdens families face as three types of costs: 1) learning costs as related to finding information about programs, 2) psychological costs such as stigma and stress, and 3) compliance costs related to understanding and following regulations (Herd and Moynihan 2019, 15).

In addition to administrative costs associated with trying to access public benefits, Brodtkin and Majmudar (2010) find that these can result in administrative exclusion, with nonparticipation in public benefits attributable to organizational costs rather than eligibility or compliance. They found that those with more attributes related to disadvantage, such as dropping out of high school or experiencing deep poverty, were more likely to exit benefit receipt programs for procedural reasons. Their findings suggest that administrative exclusion contributed to welfare caseload decline, and that discretion and policy complexity contribute to a public system that is inequitable. Similarly, Cancian, Noyes, and Ybarra (2012) found that around one-half of TANF applicants did not enter the TANF program within 60 days of applying, and that there were important factors that decreased the likelihood of access including family composition and prior employment history. Hetling and colleagues (2022) validated these findings, with their study showing that 62% of TANF applicants were denied and that the most common reasons can be connected to administrative burden. Together, these studies point to a system in which access is inequitable.

### ***Equity in Public Policy and Administration Research***

Noting the public service gap that develops between policy as written and as performed (Hupe and Buffat 2014), street-level organizations seek to limit or monitor discretion. Riccucci (2002) points to two key pillars of public administration—efficiency and effectiveness, and adds that social equity has gained prominence in the field but may not yet be a pillar to which workers are held accountable. As John Dewey noted of government accountability, it is “only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness” (Dewey 1927, 110).

Recent work in the fields of public administration, public policy analysis, and program evaluation call attention to the need to systematically examine program outcomes by race and ethnicity. For policies and programs in which race can predict outcomes or for which no research on racial disparities has been conducted, analyses are critically needed. The need for equity analyses of social welfare policies, including TANF, is particularly great (McDaniel et al. 2017). Susan Gooden (2006), a leader in this field, explains “this lack of systematic examination is problematic because it significantly reduces our ability to access how well or how poorly our social welfare agencies assist clients across various racial and ethnic groups,” (2). Since Gooden’s early scholarship, a growing body of literature and reports encourages scholars to incorporate an equity framework into their analyses and provides concrete guidance on doing so (e.g., Andrews et al. 2019; Brown et al. 2019; Center for Evaluation Innovation 2017; Woodson 2021).

Thorough research on racial equity analysis is a complex and far-reaching endeavor. Recommendations go beyond just including race as a control variable, but rather to look historically and holistically at the causes and effects of inequity in the systems studied and to undertake more nuanced approaches to data and analysis. Most guidelines and best practice references discuss embedding equity in all aspects of the research or evaluation process, from project preparation to dissemination. Guidance on preparing for the project includes examining researcher biases (e.g., Andrews et al. 2019), engaging affected stakeholders (e.g., Brown et al. 2019), and forming research questions focused on equity (Woodson 2021). Although critically important in conducting equity-focused evaluation and policy research, many of these elements are difficult to assess in published work as they

often are not included in the background or methods sections of peer-reviewed articles or agency reports.

Other elements, however, are easier to assess when reading documents and research findings. First, related to the background section of an article, equity analyses should review and present information on the historical and institutional aspects of the program or policy being examined as it relates to racial impacts in its design and outcomes, both intended and unintended (e.g., Andrews et al. 2019). Second, equity frameworks call for deep and nuanced definitions of race and ethnicity, particularly in measurement and analysis (e.g., Brown et al. 2019). For example, using a dichotomous or dummy variable to measure race reduces unique and different racial groups to an overly simplistic “other” category (Brown et al. 2019), and consistently using white as the reference category may imply that this group is the standard or norm (Andrews et al. 2019). Lastly, applying an equity framework to public policy and administration research and analysis requires that empirical findings be discussed and critically assessed using an equity lens, relating findings to racial and ethnic group outcomes in relevant contexts (e.g., Andrews et al. 2019; Woodson 2021).

## Methods

### *Search Strategy*

Our search for peer-reviewed literature on welfare sanctions and race was conducted between February and June 2021. We utilized four electronic citation databases and limited our search to articles published after 1996, when TANF sanctions were implemented. After completing the search of academic databases through the university library, an additional search was conducted in Google Scholar.

With the support of our library staff, the research team identified four databases: EBSCO, Proquest, Hein Online, and Scopus. Within EBSCO, the search included Academic Search Premier, Business Source Elite, ERIC, EconLit, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, and Women’s Studies International. Within ProQuest, the search included Social Science Premier Collection with Social Service Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts. Within each of these databases, the team used the follow-

ing search terms: “(TANF OR “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families”) AND (sanctions) AND (race OR racial OR ethnic<sup>1</sup>).” Finally, to ensure a thorough review and to capture peer-reviewed work from journals falling outside of our databases, we conducted an additional search in Google Scholar using the same search terms. To ensure a more targeted result, the authors added an additional search parameter of “welfare sanction” as an exact phrase. The first 50 results were then included in the group of articles to review.

These five searches, the four academic databases plus Google Scholar, yielded 2,060 total results. Following initial review that included deduplication and removal of results that were not valid (such as book reviews and interview transcripts), the final sample was 1,271 results. These are detailed further by the database in Figure 1.

### *Inclusion Criteria*

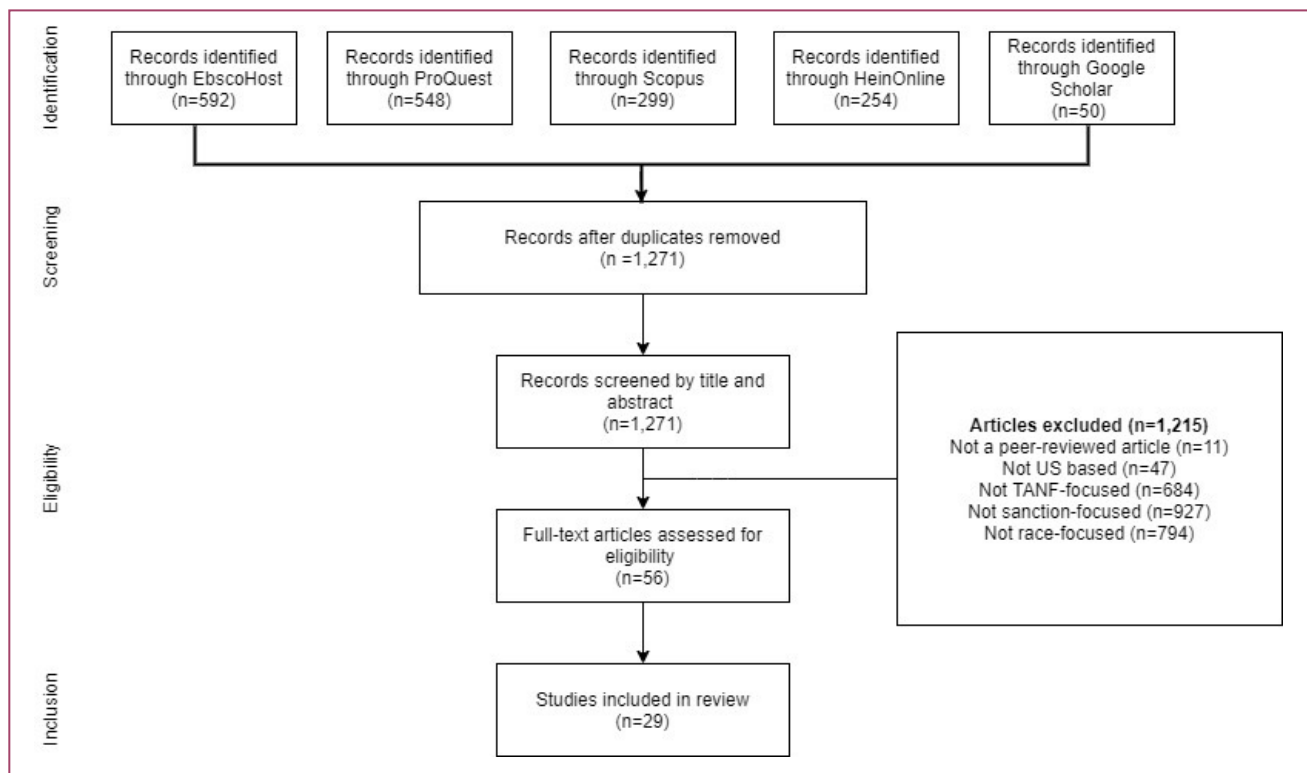
Authors reviewed the extent to which each of the 1,271 results met the six criteria categories, which included being 1) published after 1996, 2) U.S.-based, 3) TANF-focused, 4) peer-reviewed, and explicitly focused on 5) sanctions, and 6) race. The first four criteria were straightforward and were completely assessed with a review of the article title, abstract, and publication outlet. The determination of whether the article had an explicit focus on sanctions and race was a two-step process. First, using the article titles and abstracts, authors made conservative assessments of articles that did not meet the criteria as defined collaboratively by the team. The criteria that a study had a race-focus was defined as the inclusion of race in the analysis, whether qualitative or quantitative, and a subsequent mention of race in the findings or discussion of the article. The criteria for being focused on sanctions was defined as the inclusion of sanctions in the analysis and a subsequent mention of sanctions in the findings or discussion of the article. As illustrated in Figure 1, this screening process resulted in the removal of an additional 1,215 articles, many of which were excluded because they lacked more than one of the six criteria for inclusion.

The remaining 56 articles were read thoroughly by the authors with a focus on the methods, findings, and implications to complete the second step in determining the final two criteria. During this final step, the authors

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of consistency and unless otherwise noted, we chose to use the following terms throughout the manuscript, despite the terms used in specific studies reviewed: white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian. We recognize the diversity in use and opinions of correct terminology and that this approach is only one of many possible ways to address this.



Figure 1. Article Selection Process



considered the two criteria together, specifically whether the analysis included the intersection of race and sanctions, rather than the presence of independent mentions or inclusions of the two topics as separate issues. For this final step, studies in the sample must have discussed their findings on sanctions as they related to race, whether in severity, rates, or some other connection between the two. Our primary research question related to the equitable implementation of sanctions, and thus studies which briefly discussed race separate from sanctioning, or included race as a variable in their model but did not discuss the relevant findings anywhere in the article, were excluded. Following individual and team assessment of the search results and inclusion criteria, the final sample included 29 peer-reviewed journal articles.

#### **Data Extraction and Analysis**

Upon finalizing the sample of analysis studies, the research team developed a spreadsheet to extract key details from each of the sample studies. This information included: publication information such as abstract and journal; topic and sample information such as topic of analysis, sample size, and geography; analytical approach such as methods, outcome variables, definition of race, and data source; and outcomes related to several key ar-

reas such as equity and program performance. All team members met to review the common themes, methods, and findings. Table 1 is an abbreviated version of our data extraction file, and lists each of the 29 articles' authors, publication year, title, sample population and size, geographic scope, methodological approach, and definition of race and ethnicity.

#### **Results: Research Design and Sanction Literature Overview**

This literature review search resulted in 1,271 unique articles. Of those, 79 studies met the first five criteria before applying the criterion to be race-focused. Within those 79 studies, 50 did not meet that last criterion, indicating that they were articles about TANF sanctions, but that did not include race in a meaningful way in their analysis. By this we mean they either did not include race in their analysis, or, for a few excluded, had race as a control variable in their model but did not discuss the associated findings. The 29 studies in the final analysis were evenly spread chronologically, with 14 studies published between 2000 and 2010, and 15 published on or after 2011.

Most studies in this analysis (22) relied on quanti-

tative methods alone, while two studies relied on qualitative methods alone and three used a mixed-methods approach. Two additional studies were descriptive in nature, contextualizing the current literature while adding in some public data on sanction rates and experiences as background. Methodological approaches of the studies were diverse, ranging from descriptive statistics to difference-in-difference analyses, and on the qualitative side from interviews to critical discourse analysis. Data sources varied among original data collection such as surveys and interviews, state administrative data, and federal data collections such as the Survey of Income and Program Participation or the Fragile Families collection. Considering the outcome variables of interest in these studies, 10 measured the probability of being sanctioned. Others shared similar outcome measures of the severity of state and local sanction practices, while some studied other outcomes with the experience of being sanctioned as a comparative predictor in their analysis.

### ***Contextualizing Race***

Studies included in this analysis, by nature of the inclusion criteria, were focused on how recipients of welfare managed based on race, particularly as it related to the use of sanctions. One recommendation of an equity framework for research is connecting research findings to a broader context of race, embedding research in the historic and systemic inequities families have faced for generations. Of the 29 studies, 25 include a discussion of race in their background sections. This ranged from a brief mention about the historical racial inequities in welfare, to a thorough description of the systemic disparities particularly among Black and Hispanic families. Of the 25 including a discussion of race, 21 presented a more nuanced background while four included one sentence related to race in existing literature. There were only four articles that did not mention race in their background sections at all, though they later included race in their analyses.

### ***Defining Race***

Throughout the studies in this analysis, race and ethnicity are measured fairly consistently. Most studies (20) include variables for at least white, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latinx. Very few studies include categories for Asian (3); others used a category of “other” to capture multiple racial groups (9). A few studies (3) only used Black and white, or white and nonwhite as their measures of race. Three studies included only one

race category, using percent of population or recipients who are Black to analyze program features. In most studies, race was included as a control or independent variable measured as a dummy variable with white as the reference category. Qualitative studies either restricted their sample by race/ethnicity (i.e., Hispanic women) or used race to describe their sample population.

### **Results: Relationship between Sanctions and Race**

While it was an inclusion criterion for studies to have findings related to sanctions and race, the extent to which authors discussed this connection varied. For some, it was a simple mention of the significance or insignificance of a control variable. For others, there was an extensive discussion on how their findings differed based on race and ethnicity. Further, some studies were focused on other outcomes or contextual factors, such as local political ideologies or effects of sanctions on employment overall, rather than how sanctions and their effects differed by race.

A few studies in this analysis offered either a theoretical framework for analyzing welfare outcomes by race, or strongly encouraged future research based on their findings. Marchevsky and Theoharis (2008) conducted an ethnographic study with 14 Mexican immigrant welfare recipients, and conveyed experiences of discrimination within welfare offices, noting that the women they interviewed discussed their experience through the context of race and rights. Lanfranconi and colleagues (2020) conducted a critical discourse analysis and concluded that in the absence of a clear equity framework, the decentralized nature of TANF in some states complicates their ability to address equity. Soss and colleagues (2008) outlined a racial classification model (RCM) of social policy choice that was later employed by Fording and colleagues (2011) and others in their review of welfare sanctions. As the authors state, policy does not require overt discriminatory intent to produce racially inequitable outcomes. The next sections detail how studies in this analysis have observed such disparities.

### ***Sanctioning by Race***

A key finding across many of the studies (11) was that differences in the rate of sanctions exist based on race. At the aggregate level, studies pointed to the difference in rate of sanctioning and punitive measures for states and counties with a higher share of nonwhite populations (Chang et al. 2020; Ojeda, Whitesell, and Berk-

**Table 1. Articles Included in Systematic Literature Review**

Reference	Title	Sample Population and Size	Geography	Type(s) of Data	Race Definition
Caiola and Kneipp (2020)	Modeling Upstream Socioeconomic Inequities and Syndemic Conditions among Mothers over Time	Women with children (4,898)	20 large U.S. cities	Quantitative	Dichotomous: non-Hispanic Black as reference; Hispanic and White as comparisons
Chang, Lanfranconi, and Clark (2020)	Second-Order Devolution Revolution and the Hidden Structural Discrimination? Examining County Welfare-to-Work Service Systems in California	Review of service delivery indicators	California	Quantitative and Qualitative	Percent of population White, African American, Asian, and Hispanic
Cheng, Lo, and Weber (2017)	Racial Disparities in Welfare Dependence and Financial Independence: Links to Human Capital, Local Economy, and State Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Policies	Adults with children between 1996 and 2008 (6,737)	U.S.	Quantitative	Dichotomous: White, African American, Hispanic
Cheng (2009)	Racial Inequality in Receiving Transitional Support Services and Being Sanctioned among TANF Recipients: A Group Threat Hypothesis	Former TANF recipients (676)	13 states	Quantitative	Dichotomous: White, African America, Hispanic, Other
Cheng and Lo (2018)	Explaining Restrictive TANF Policies: Group Threat Hypothesis and State Economy Conditions	Longitudinal analysis of states; 765 state-years	U.S.	Quantitative	Percent of population African American, Hispanic, Other
Crewe (2003)	From Paper to People: An Analysis of Critical Welfare Reform Issues Affecting the Black Community	N/A; Conceptual	U.S.	N/A; Conceptual	N/A

Crewe (2002)	Motivated but Fearful: Welfare Reform, Disability, and Race	Households on TANF for two years after PR-WORA (268)	Urban county	Quantitative	African American, White
Fording, Schram, and Soss (2013)	Do Welfare Sanctions Help or Hurt the Poor? Estimating the Causal Effect of Sanctioning on Client Earnings	Unmarried female TANF clients with children (36,319)	Florida	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic, White
Fording, Soss, and Schram (2011)	Race and the Local Politics of Punishment in the New World of Welfare	TANF recipients (70,000 cases)	Florida; U.S.	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic, White
Fording, Soss, and Schram (2007)	Devolution, Discretion, and the Effect of Local Political Values on TANF Sanctioning	TANF recipients (60,045 clients)	Florida	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic, White
Kalil, Seefeldt, and Wang (2002)	Sanctions and Material Hardship under TANF	Current and former TANF recipients (562)	Urban Michigan county	Quantitative	Dichotomous: Black, White
Keiser, Mueser, and Choi (2004)	Race, Bureaucratic Discretion, and the Implementation of Welfare Reform	Women receiving TANF (66,330)	Missouri	Quantitative	Dichotomous: White, Nonwhite
Lanfranconi, Chang, Das, and Simpson (2020)	Equity versus Equality: Discourses and Practices within Decentralized Welfare-to-Work Programs in California	State and county-level policies and descriptive program statistics	California	Quantitative and Qualitative	Percent of population White, African American, Asian, Hispanic, Other
Lee and Yoon (2012)	A comparison of Sanctions in African American and White TANF Leavers	Former TANF recipients (2,243)	U.S.	Quantitative	African American, White, Other
Lens (2008)	Welfare and Work Sanctions: Examining Discretion on the Front Lines	Sanctioned recipients (28)	Suffolk County, NY	Qualitative	Black, Hispanic, White
Lindhorst, Mancoske, and Kemp (2000)	Is Welfare Reform Working? A Study of the Effects of Sanctions on Families Receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families	Former TANF recipients (347)	U.S.	Quantitative	African American, White, Other



Reference	Title	Sample Population and Size	Geography	Type(s) of Data	Race Definition
Marchevsky and Theoharis (2008)	Dropped from the Rolls: Mexican Immigrants, Race, and Rights in the Era of Welfare Reform	Mexican immigrant welfare recipients (14)	Los Angeles, CA	Qualitative	Sample: Latina Women
Monnat (2010)	The Color of Welfare Sanctioning: Exploring the Individual and Contextual Roles of Race on TANF Case Closures and Benefit Reductions	Female TANF recipients (959,388)	U.S.	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic, White
Ojeda, Berkman, and Plutzer (2019)	Federalism and the Racialization of Welfare Policy	US States	U.S.	Quantitative	Percent of caseload non-Hispanic Black
Pipinis (2017)	Punitive White Welfare Bureaucracies: Examining the Link between White Presence within Welfare Bureaucracies and Sanction Exits in the United States	Former TANF recipients (11,850)	U.S.	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic
Rodgers, Payne, and Chervachidze (2006)	State Poverty Rates: Do the New Welfare Policies Make a Difference?	US States	U.S.	Quantitative	Percent of caseload Black
Schram, Soss, Fording, and Houser (2009)	Deciding to Discipline: Race, Choice, and Punishment at the Frontlines of Welfare Reform	Case Managers (144 in survey experiment); Florida TANF recipients (6,214)	Florida	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic, White, Other
Schram (2005)	Contextualizing Racial Disparities in American Welfare Reform: Toward a New Poverty Research	N/A; Conceptual	U.S.	N.A.; Conceptual	Black, Hispanic, White, Asian, Other
Schram, Fording, and Soss (2008)	Neo-Liberal Poverty Governance: Race, Place and the Punitive Turn in U.S. Welfare Policy	TANF recipients (60,045)	Florida	Quantitative	Dichotomous: Black, Hispanic, White as reference

Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011)	The Organization of Discipline: From Performance Management to Perversity and Punishment	Florida Welfare Transitions Program participants (53,373)	Florida	Quantitative and Qualitative	Dichotomous: Black, Hispanic, White as reference
Spencer, Livingston, Woods-Jaeger, Rentmeester, Sroczyński, and Komro (2020)	The Impact of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Minimum Wage, and Earned Income Tax Credit on Women's Well-Being and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization	Female TANF recipients (3,545)	20 U.S. cities	Quantitative	Self-reported race: non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic African American, Hispanic, Other
Wang (2020)	State TANF Time Limit and Work Sanction Stringencies and Long-Term Trajectories of Welfare Use, Labor Supply, and Income	Female TANF recipients (10,209)	U.S.	Quantitative	Black, Hispanic, Other, White as reference
Wu, Cancian, and Wallace (2014)	The Effect of Welfare Sanctions on TANF Exits and Employment	Female TANF recipients (1,599)	Wisconsin	Quantitative	Black, White, Hispanic, Other, Unknown
Wu (2008)	Severity, Timing, and Duration of Welfare Sanctions and the Economic Well-Being of TANF Families with Children	TANF recipients (13,171)	Wisconsin	Quantitative	Black, White, Hispanic, Other, Unknown

man 2019; Rodgers et al. 2006; Schram et al. 2008). For example, Chang and colleagues (2020) found that Hispanic and female-headed households were overrepresented in sanction-oriented counties, concluding that Latina mothers in sanction-oriented counties were at greater risk of the worst disadvantages of the CalWORKs program, California’s version of TANF. Ojeda and colleagues (2019) found that as the proportion of Black or Hispanic TANF recipients increases in a state, its work hours, work sanctions, and time limits all become more stringent.

When studying specific TANF recipients, studies found that Black welfare leavers were sanctioned more frequently than white leavers, despite having fewer risk

characteristics on average (Cheng 2009; Kalil et al. 2002; Lee and Yoon 2012), and Black and Hispanic women are more likely to be sanctioned than white women (Monnat 2010). In a review of county-level sanctions by individual demographics, Keiser and colleagues (2004) found that it was difficult to measure exactly how, but that race played a significant role in predicting sanctions, finding differences in treatment between people of color and their white counterparts. Similarly, through a series of hypothetical vignettes posed to welfare workers, another study found that sanctions were more common and more severe when the clients being described had a Black-sounding name and a discrediting marker, for example, a prior sanction (Schram et al. 2009). Schram (2005) similarly

discusses how welfare reform allowed the program continue to contribute to and reinforce historic racial inequalities.

Studies that consider macro-level context add nuance to our understanding of disparities in sanctioning. Although Monnat (2010) found that Black and Hispanic women were at a greater risk of being sanctioned than white women, their study showed that Black women living in counties with a greater Black population were less likely to be sanctioned, whereas Hispanic women living in a county with a greater percentage of Hispanic residents were more likely to be sanctioned. Alternatively, Fording and colleagues (2011) did not find a significant difference in sanctioning based on the proportion of non-white residents in a community. Cheng and Lo (2018) reported a conflicting finding that the size of a state's Hispanic population was linked to an increase in restrictive policies, whereas the size of the Black population was associated with fewer restrictive policies. This finding is counter to many others in this analysis, but authors posit that it may be due to Hispanic populations increasing more rapidly than Black populations in recent years, triggering more dominant group resentment based on the group threat analysis used in the study.

Another nuance presented by Fording and colleagues (2007, 2011) was that duration of TANF receipt can have a large impact on sanctioning, and that sanctions in early months of receipt may be a form of "self-sanctioning" while later sanctions may be "true sanctions." A "self-sanction" refers to a recipient who begins a case without realizing all the related requirements to continue benefits, and thus perhaps having some alternative income source, exits the program by not complying with requirements. Monnat (2010) found that among cases that were closed due to sanction, Black women were more likely to receive a work-related sanction, whereas Hispanic women were less likely to receive a work-related sanction than white women. Alternatively, among active cases, Black women were less likely to receive a work-related sanction, but more likely to receive a sanction for an unidentified reason.

### ***Outcomes of Sanctions by Race***

Related to the primary outcome of interest for TANF, financial self-sufficiency, studies show that sanctions may in fact be a barrier to employment and long-term financial sustainability (Fording et al. 2013; Lee and Yoon 2012). Overall, nine studies looked at earnings,

employment, or poverty rates of those who had received TANF, using sanction experience as a variable in their models. Lee and Yoon (2012) found that the negative effects of sanctions related to employment were worse for Black welfare leavers who had been sanctioned than for white leavers, while Fording and colleagues' (2013) findings were significant across racial groups, though slightly more pronounced for Hispanic women. Wu and colleagues (2008, 2014) found that families who received sanctions were more likely to exit TANF without employment. Finally, Cheng and colleagues (2017) and Wang (2020) found that more restrictive policies led to less TANF dependency among Black recipients, though Cheng and colleagues suggest this outcome, caused by restrictive policies pushing participants off benefits, reflects an ability to earn enough to survive, not to thrive, or be financially stable.

Subsequently, experience with sanctions impacts a family's financial security. Kalil and colleagues (2002) found that those who received sanctions were more likely to experience financial hardship such as utility shutoffs. Lindhorst and colleagues (2000) found a similar environment in which those who were sanctioned were more likely to have unmet medical needs. While studies discussed the increased risk factors and differential treatment within the welfare offices and labor market based on race, these studies did not disaggregate these specific results by race.

In addition to the effects of sanctions on recipients' employment and financial well-being, studies have shown other impacts, including those on health and safety. Caiola and colleagues (2020) found that non-Hispanic Black women receiving TANF were more likely to have increased subsequent syndemic conditions, such as increased risk of substance use, intimate partner violence, and certain HIV risk behaviors. These increased risk conditions are partially explained by experiences of sanctions for non-Hispanic Black mothers, but not recipients of other racial/ethnic groups. In addition, when looking at risk factors of intimate partner violence, Spencer and colleagues (2020) found that in states with harsher worst-case sanctions, Black women were less likely to experience coercive victimization, defined as experiencing one of several forms of coercion, including: isolation from friends and family, work prevention, withholding money, and sexual coercion. The authors note the relationship between financial benefits and experience of intimate partner violence is complex and requires additional research.

### ***Frontline and Contextual Factors***

In addition to examining the rates and outcomes of sanctioning, some of the studies assess frontline practice or contextual factors as predictors of sanction outcomes. An examination of these environmental factors aid in our understanding of institutional constraints which allow for, or sometimes exacerbate, inequitable outcomes. These include health problems, level of devolution and discretion prescribed to caseworkers, caseworker characteristics, and local political and demographic environment.

Studies highlight lower or similar levels of employment and income among those sanctioned and lower levels of safety and mental health among those sanctioned. A few of these studies reported these outcomes by race. Crewe (2002) shows how recipients with disabilities are more likely to be sanctioned, and points to the need for additional resources for these recipients. This study also highlights increased prevalence of this experience for Black recipients. Crewe (2003) further argues this point, noting that welfare reform allowed for systemic barriers to be “camouflaged by the labels justifying sanctions, thus negating the need to examine the underlying reason an individual’s lack of movement toward self-sufficiency” (77).

Related to devolution and discretion, the practice of distributing program authority to lower levels of government and individual caseworkers, studies in this analysis show that there were significant differences in sanctioning rates and racial disparities based on local ideology and administrative decentralization of TANF (Chang et al. 2020; Fording et al. 2011). Due to the nature of service delivery, TANF relies heavily on the discretion of frontline caseworkers (Lens 2008). Studies showed that more white welfare workers correlated with higher rates of sanctions among all recipients when work requirements are involved, while increasing the likelihood of sanctions for Black recipients only when nonwork requirements are involved (Pipinis 2017). Further, the imposition of performance measures on caseworkers may increase their use of sanctions to improve their caseload and overall performance (Schram et al. 2008).

Schram and colleagues (2008), as well as Soss and colleagues (2011), show that this increase in the use of sanctions may be more prevalent in conservative areas, which have higher use of sanctions overall. For example, studies found that the political ideology of an area affects sanction rates for Black and Latino clients, while conservatism of an area increases the likelihood of sanctions for all recipients (Fording et al. 2011; Soss et al. 2011).

### **Discussion**

This systematic literature review shows that there are differences in sanction administration and experiences based on race and ethnicity. Studies demonstrate disparities from different perspectives and data sources, analyzing individual-level administrative records, or state-level policy variables, to highlight these differences. They show that recipients who are not white are more likely to be sanctioned, and that the severity and effects of those sanctions are more severe. These effects were present both for individuals and at higher geographic levels, showing an increased use of sanctions in local areas or states with a more diverse population.

While TANF sanctioning policy as written may appear to be without bias, offering guidance for program requirements and enforcement mechanisms, our review raises concerns. Several studies discuss the level of discretion and variation in practice as the mechanism by which racism is embedded in the TANF sanctioning process. Research further exploring various reasons for these differences was at times contradictory. For example, Monnat (2010) found that while there were racial differences in sanctioning rates for individuals, the demographic makeup of their community mattered as well. Alternatively, Fording and colleagues (2011) did not find an effect on the rate of sanctioning based on the proportion of nonwhite residents in a community. These differences may be related to data sources, geography, definitions of race, or statistical methods used. These nuanced differences reflect the diverse local network of TANF operations across the country, operating within local organizations with discretion at the caseworker level. Such differences lead to varying experiences that depend on where a recipient lives, including the demographic and political composition of their area.

As such, future research is needed with an embedded equity framework to explore the mechanisms by which these inequities occur. Future research may benefit from widespread guidance on how to incorporate a detailed view of race in their analysis given various data sources and their limitations. Our conceptualization of welfare would also benefit from more analyses into the differences in need among different groups, and analyses that are rooted in both differing rates of need for program access as well as a nuanced understanding of the inequitable history of social programs. Due to the nature of data included and statistical limitations with small sample

sizes, most studies focused primarily on white, African American, and Hispanic populations. Future research would benefit from disaggregating groups such as Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and exploring smaller categories within larger identities, such as those within Hispanic populations. In addition, broadening the geographical contexts of research would support validation of existing research. Studies included in this analysis note important limitations, including an inability to generalize beyond their study area, data limitations, inability to include additional barriers such as experiences of domestic violence or substance abuse, and restrictiveness of their calculation of a sanction or their sample. Future equity-focused research that replicates existing research would strengthen our knowledge of the administration and effects of welfare sanctions by investigating the potential consistency of program effects across time and place.

The field would also benefit from additional qualitative research to better understand the nuances of welfare and sanctions from recipients and caseworkers themselves, as this study included only one study using qualitative methods and four mixed methods studies. Building on studies done in other areas (Barnes 2021; Barnes and Henly 2018), future research could focus on TANF recipients who have experienced sanctions and caseworkers who issue sanctions, such as that of Watkins-Hayes (2011) examining the limits of caseworker discretion. This work may also allow research to uncover recipient understanding and perception of sanctions as it relates to their own goals, and the extent to which they are effective in motivating recipients to comply with program requirements.

Beyond future research, policymakers and TANF directors should assess the effectiveness of sanctions and their role in service delivery. As Kalil and colleagues (2002) offered, there may be race-specific barriers to program compliance that need to be identified and addressed to reduce racial disparities. Further, given the findings related to caseworker discretion, bias, and inequitable sanction rates, states should develop mechanisms by which to monitor and react to biases within their programs. One example of this is the Office of Equity within California's Department of Social Services, which seeks to make its department more equitable, and use their data to highlight inequities within their programs.

Our study has several limitations worth noting. In addition to reviewing research on U.S. welfare sanctions

and racial equity, our approach also sought to summarize the use of equity frameworks in studies of welfare sanctions. However, there are several components of an equity framework that would not be presented in a written manuscript. Rather, an author confronting their own biases occurs before and during their research and is reflected in their conceptualization and approach. As such, this analysis is unable to fully assess studies by their use of an equity framework, but rather components of such a framework. In addition, a review of a manuscript does not always account for the makeup of data used; that is, a scholar may not be able to choose to include nuanced definitions of their race variable because the data themselves are limited to two categories. This is particularly true of studies that used administrative data, which may not be collected in a way that is conducive to secondary research.

Finally, this study includes a relatively small sample of manuscripts compared to the larger body of research on welfare or social services more broadly. The scope of this analysis was limited, focusing on a specific feature of a relatively small public assistance program. Therefore, this study is unable to draw larger conclusions related to chronological changes in methods and approaches, as such patterns were not apparent within the limited sample size here, or to draw conclusions across the field more broadly.

## Conclusion

Policy conversations in the United States have shifted from awe at the bravery and commitment of our frontline workers serving in a pandemic, to uncertainty regarding deservingness of government assistance for those who are out of work or living in poverty. This viewpoint is familiar to those who have studied welfare reform and its administration, particularly studies of welfare sanctions, which were included in the 1996 welfare reform legislation as the punitive measure to encourage work participation. Contrary to their intended purpose, welfare sanctions are correlated with greater financial instability and worse outcomes for recipients, with often varying levels of sanctions and their unintended consequences based on race.

In 2008, Marchevisky and Theoharis concluded their study with a call to action for future scholars: "PRWORA must be understood as an explicitly anti-civil rights policy. It has eroded most of the protections hard-won by the welfare rights movement, including greater transparency



and fairness in the application process, a universal system of eligibility standards and benefit levels, increased accountability on the part of caseworkers along with an expanded set of rights for welfare clients to grieve unfair actions, and a disentangling of welfare policy from local economic interests and politics” (91). A lot has changed in the 13 years since their study, including the development of the Black Lives Matter movement and a wave of recent global protests. In addition to many other positive outcomes of this movement, research organizations and scholars have assessed their ability to incorporate equity into their analyses, with many organizations publishing commitments to do so and toolkits to guide others to do so. In sum, progress has been made, but more work needs to be done. Gooden (2006) and many others since have offered guidance for how to conduct a study using an equity framework, and this analysis highlights the need for further research guided by that framework around welfare sanctions.

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