Street-Level Decision Making in Elder Mistreatment Policy: An Empirical Case Study of Service Rationing*

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**Objective.** This study examines street-level decision making in the elder mistreatment policy area. Four types of social workers' decisions are investigated with regard to the importance of degree of discretion permitted, case load, and level of resources. **Methods.** This research analyzes individual allegations of elder mistreatment collected during 1987–88 by Alabama counties. The four types of decisions are modeled using logistic regression. **Results.** The findings suggest that movement from gatekeeping "compliance" decisions to substantive "regulatory/distributive" decisions produces greater rationing of services of the sort predicted by Lipsky. Also evident were racial differences in the filtering of allegations and the level of intervention. Unexpectedly, low case loads produced more cue-taking behavior than high. **Conclusions.** These findings reinforce the importance of decision context in the explanation of street-level decision making. The results will be of interest to researchers in street-level cue-taking behavior and issues of equity in service delivery.

Michael Lipsky (1980) has suggested that "public service workers currently occupy a critical position in American society" (p. 3). Their positions in the organization allow them both considerable discretion in the determination of "the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies" (Lipsky, 1980:13) and relative autonomy from organizational authority. Street-level bureaucrats also operate under work conditions characterized by inadequate resources, few controls, indeterminate objectives, and discouraging circumstances (Lipsky, 1980:82). The combination of discretion, autonomy, and unique work conditions produces implementation behavior that rations services, controls clients, protects the resources of the individual worker, and manages the outcomes of bureaucratic routines.

This study examines the impact of street-level decision making (specifically, service rationing) in elder mistreatment policy. In this analysis we examine empirically if the discretion and caseloads of adult protective services workers affect key administrative decisions in the investigation and service delivery process. The analysis focuses on the initiation of an investigation, the filing of a final report, the determination of an allegation's validity, and the final placement of the alleged victim. These actions vary in the discretion permitted the investigating social worker. Compliance with the deadlines should reflect available resources and administrative constraints. Determination and placement decisions, on the other hand, should force social workers to differentiate among clients to limit access to a very restricted pool of services. The differentiation will largely reflect professional norms and societal biases. These tendencies should be more apparent in high- than low-caseload situations.

Street-Level Decision Making and the Rationing of Services

The conclusion that most service bureaucracies operate with inadequate resources is relatively commonplace (Lipsky, 1980:29–39). Nevertheless, inadequate resources seriously limit the effectiveness and efficiency of agency operations and the achievement of long-term goals. One response to inadequate resources is client differentiation. Most service delivery programs have statutorily defined clientele. Welfare clients, for instance, generally must meet certain income eligibility requirements before receiving benefits. Because government policy mandates street-level bureaucrats to differentiate among applicants, client differentiation can be used as subtle means of rationing limited resources.

However, such differentiation is not straightforward. The same organizational characteristics that limit resources also maximize discretion at the level of the street-level bureaucratic employee. In most cases, social service policy directives are ill defined and subject to multiple interpretations. The combination of maximum discretion and limited information usually prompts the street-level bureaucrat to rely on decision rules to limit the range of decision options (Lipsky, 1980; see also Baumgartner and Jones, 1991; Jones, 1994). These decision rules play a crucial role in reconciling the exercise of discretion to the absence of information and resources.

Service rationing provides a context for the application of discretion-narrowing decision rules. Rationing can occur through several client differentiation rules. One such mechanism is class-based. The urban services literature has extensively examined the "underclass hypothesis" (Lineberry, 1977; Lipsky, 1980; Meier, Stewart, and England, 1991). This premise implies that "the poor and the black are consistently short-changed in the delivery of urban services" (Thomas, 1986). Although

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were the conflicting goals of cost reduction and service to dependent clients. The presence of inconsistent goals increased the level of discretion available to adult protective service workers. The lack of uniform development to the states. In addition, most state laws concerning elder mistreatment provided little or no additional funding for the service delivery component (Daniels, Baumhover, and Clark-Daniels, 1989; Clark-Daniels, Daniels, and Baumhover, 1990).

Elder Mistreatment and Service Rationing

This study examines the application of decision rules to service rationing in elder mistreatment policy. The policy area meets Lipsky’s (1980) criteria for street-level decision making. Elder mistreatment policy reached the national political agenda during the early 1980s, but there was a failure to develop uniform definitions and standards, leaving policy development to the states. In addition, most state laws concerning elder mistreatment provided little or no additional funding for the service delivery component (Daniels, Baumhover, and Clark-Daniels, 1989; Clark-Daniels, Daniels, and Baumhover, 1990).

Coupled with the varying state laws and lack of available services were the conflicting goals of cost reduction and service to dependent clients. The presence of inconsistent goals increased the level of discretion available to adult protective service workers. The lack of uniform standards also made the measurement of the performance of the social workers difficult. To complicate matters further, people who had been mistreated were nonvoluntary clients who became part of the process because of the reported mistreatment. Because bureaucratic success did not rest on client satisfaction, administrative performance became dependent on workers’ commitment to agency goals and professional standards (Lipsky, 1980).

The combination of discretion and limited resources make client differentiation an important strategy in elder mistreatment policy. Elder mistreatment policy, like other welfare policy, has traditionally differentiated between deserving and nontreating clients (Daniels, 1991; Katz, 1986; Patterson, 1986; Quadagno, 1986). Typically, elder mistreatment decision rules intervene in allegations with dependent clients (female, older, physically or mentally dependent), potentially abusive caretakers (male, older, physically or mentally dependent), or abusive situations (Filinson and Ingman, 1989).

The elder mistreatment process in Alabama provides a unique opportunity to test the impact of client differentiation under varying conditions. The investigation of alleged mistreatment by the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) during 1987 and 1988 generated four decision points. The first two of these decisions were compliance decisions. First, state law required adult protective service workers to initiate an investigation within 72 hours. The implementation provided little flexibility in compliance. Second, administrative regulations promulgated by DHR required the completion of an investigation and the filing of a report with the state office within 30 days. Although the regulations did limit discretion, the enforcement of the 30-day regulation by the state office was comparatively lax.

The remaining decisions were substantive, invoking the regulatory and distributive functions of the agency. Having initiated an investigation, the line social worker determined whether the allegation was founded, unfounded, or undetermined (regulatory). To judge a case founded, the situation must have involved dependence, valid allegations, an inability to provide self-care, and the absence of an individual or family who was willing and able to care for the victim. The absence of clear criteria for these determinations maximized the discretion of the individual adult protective service worker. After investigation, the adult protective service worker determined if clients should remain in their own homes or move to other settings, and if the client needed social services (distributive). However, the lack of up-to-date data on nursing bed availability and limited services reduced the flexibility of individual workers.

Thus, the four decisions varied by degree of discretion and type of decision: 72-hour initiation (low discretion, compliance), 30-day reporting (high discretion, compliance), foundedness (high discretion, substantive), and movement to other settings (low discretion, substantive).
Research Design

The Alabama DHR collects data on allegations of mistreatment of dependent adults. As part of an ongoing project, a research team successfully coded 11,544 reported allegations. Of these allegations, 9,871 were reported during 1987 and 1988. Allegations concerning adults 65 and over comprised only 4,979 of these cases. These data were the basis for subsequent analysis.

The four administrative decisions served as dichotomous dependent variables. For the compliance decisions, the researchers coded all cases as investigation compliant (coded 1) if the investigation started within 72 hours and not compliant (coded 0) if the investigation began after 72 hours. Similarly, the analysts coded all cases as report compliant if the report arrived at the state office within 30 days and not compliant (coded 0) if the report arrived after 30 days. Approximately 86 percent of the cases complied with the 72-hour deadline; only about 37 percent conformed to the 30-day reporting deadline, confirming a higher degree of discretion in meeting the latter deadline. For the validity assessment decision, the research team coded a case as 0 if it was unfounded or undetermined and 1 if it was founded. Slightly more than 56 percent of all cases were founded. For placement decisions, the analysts coded a case as 0 if the alleged victim remained in their own home, and 1 if they were moved to another setting. Movement to other settings occurred 29 percent of the time.

To evaluate the multiple decision rules, several classes of explanatory factors were necessary. First, street-level decision making in DHR took place in the context of varying resource and administrative constraints (Lipsky, 1980). Some counties had lower demand and access to more resources than other jurisdictions. To test demand-related constraints, the analysis included the county age dependence ratio as an explanatory factor for each allegation. This variable measured the elderly population as a percentage of the working-age population (16–64) in the county. To measure supply-based constraints, the study employed the urban-rural dichotomy (economies of scale) and county income (available resources) for each allegation. This variable measured the elderly population as a percentage of the working-age population (16–64) in the county. To measure supply-based constraints, the study employed the urban-rural dichotomy (economies of scale) and county income (available resources) for each allegation. If a county was part of a metropolitan statistical area, it was coded 1; otherwise, it received a 0 code. County per capita income served as an indicator of county income.

The primary indicator of administrative limitations in a street-level bureaucracy was caseload. The analyses introduced caseload interactively with the complete set of independent variables to explicitly test Brintnall’s (1981) interactive model of caseload and cue taking. In addition to caseload, our examination of the adult protective services process suggested that each of the four administrative decisions depended to some degree on decisions made earlier in the process. For that reason, each equation contained as an explanatory factor earlier decisions in the process.

The data set provided the opportunity to compare the competing client differentiation models in the context of these limitations. If the underclass hypothesis were at all relevant, decisions should have reflected class-relevant characteristics of the client and alleged perpetrator. In Alabama, the clearest indicator of class differentiation was race of alleged victim. (The race of the alleged perpetrator was identical in 99 percent of the cases.) If the hypothesis were true, African American alleged victims (coded 1) should have experienced a lower rate of compliance, limited access to the system (fewer founded cases), and fewer services (less movement to other settings).

On the other hand, if cue taking were more important in substantive contexts than compliance, substantive decisions such as foundedness and placement should have reflected the dominant cues of the agency. If Brintnall (1981) was correct, cue taking should occur primarily in high-caseload counties. Because the dominant cues in adult protective services assumed the dependence of alleged victim and potential abusiveness of alleged perpetrator, indicators of these characteristics were modeled in the equation. The characteristics associated with alleged victim dependence included female gender, greater age, and physical or mental dependence (measured as a six-item scale). The qualities identified with alleged perpetrator mistreatment consisted of perpetrator being male, perpetrator being younger, physical or mental dependence of the perpetrator (six-item scale), and self-neglect (dichotomous). The six-item dependence scales for both victim and perpetrator were the simple count of reports in the original allegation that the victim or perpetrator was physically dependent, mentally ill, mentally retarded, economically dependent, substance abusive, or otherwise dependent.

The possibility that adult protective service workers might be operating from neutral competence by reacting to the severity of the situation required indicators of the type of allegation and the type of reporter. The types included abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The analysis coded for the presence or absence of each type, and allowed each case to have multiple codings. The types also modeled severity because the dominant social service models considered abuse more serious than neglect and exploitation. Finally, because Alabama imposed mandatory reporting on physicians, osteopaths, and chiropractors, we included other medical workers (primarily nurses) in the mandated reporter category. All other types of reporters served as the reference category.
The statistical model used to assess client differentiation among the four decisions was logistic regression, which assumes dichotomous dependent variables. The analysis included all indicators plus interaction terms combining the indicators with caseload. The analysis used mean substitution for missing values on the independent variables, but used listwise deletion for missing values on the dependent variables.

Results

The summary statistics for the four logistic regression equations appear in Table 1. In general, goodness of fit measures the equations' deviation from a perfect model. In all models this deviation is significant; however, the result is not unexpected given the size of the sample. More important are the chi-square improvement, which is significant for all equations, and the improvement in prediction, which is substantial for three of the decisions. These statistics suggest that the logistic regressions model the data well.

Several of the caseload interactions proved significant. An accurate picture of the interactive effects of caseload can be had by constructing odds ratios for the independent variables at various levels of caseload. For this analysis (Table 2), we used the 1st (3.5 cases per social worker), 50th (32 to 34 cases), and 99th (57.39 cases) percentiles. The slight variations in caseload for each percentile were due to missing values on the dependent variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>72-Hour</th>
<th>30-Day</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Moved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N, cases</td>
<td>4,788</td>
<td>4,640</td>
<td>4,540</td>
<td>4,204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodness of fit</td>
<td>4,957.81*</td>
<td>4,530.24*</td>
<td>4,555.99*</td>
<td>4,201.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square improvement</td>
<td>160.73*</td>
<td>604.98*</td>
<td>404.94*</td>
<td>406.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Correctly predicted</td>
<td>85.78%</td>
<td>64.57%</td>
<td>63.39%</td>
<td>72.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent improvement in prediction (versus random)*</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>19.11%</td>
<td>23.18%</td>
<td>15.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The summary statistics were calculated by the authors from statistics provided by the Alabama Department of Human Resources.

*p < .025.

Resources had a clear influence on street-level decision making, but those influences varied substantially across caseloads. For the age dependence ratio (representing the influence of demand for services), the effects were mixed. Counties with high age dependence ratios had lower compliance with the 72-hour deadline, but greater compliance with the 30-day deadline. These effects became more pronounced as caseload increased. By contrast, age dependence had considerably less influence on substantive decisions, although increased caseload substantially reduced the effects on foundedness and increased the effects on movement.

The supply-based constraints also had significant effect. For counties with the lowest caseloads, urbanization tended to reduce compliance and increase the odds of determining a case founded. However, for high-caseload counties representing a majority of cases, urbanization increased the odds of compliance, reduced the incidence of founded cases, and greatly increased the odds of movement. County income had its greatest influence in low-caseload counties, reducing 72-hour compliance, increasing 30-day compliance, and reducing foundedness. As caseload increased, however, these effects began to lessen or disappear. For the one-third of the counties with highest caseload, county income decreased 30-day compliance and increased foundedness.

The equations confirm that prior administrative decisions affect later decisions. The effects of 72-hour compliance on later decisions was greatest for low-caseload counties, but declined substantially as caseload increased. Thirty-day reporting compliance increased foundedness for most cases, although the effect was greater in high-caseload jurisdictions. The on the other hand, reporting compliance reduced the odds of movement to another setting, with greater reductions in high-caseload counties. Foundedness increased movement, regardless of caseload.

Victim and perpetrator characteristics had little consistent effect on any of the administrative decisions. The exceptions involved African American cases, victim dependence, perpetrator age, and self-neglect. For most cases, African American status reduced compliance and increased substantive intervention. The effects were generally greatest for high-caseload counties. Allegations of victim dependence increased the odds of movement, although increases in caseload reduced the effects slightly. Older perpetrators had a greater probability of 30-day compliance in high-caseload counties, but greater odds of movement in low-caseload counties. Allegations of self-neglect increased the odds of foundedness.

Cases involving medical reporters of mistreatment had little effect on compliance, but increased foundedness and movement significantly. Finally, for low-caseload counties, allegations of abuse were less likely to be founded. Exploitation cases had significantly lower levels of 72-hour compliance and foundedness in high-caseload counties.
TABLE 2
The Interactive Effect of Caseload on Four Elder Mistreatment Decisions

| Variables | 72-Hour Odds | | | 30-Day Odds | | | Founded Odds | | | Moved Odds | |
|-----------|--------------|---|---|--------------|---|---|--------------|---|---|--------------|---|---|
|           | 1st | 50th | 99th | 1st | 50th | 99th | 1st | 50th | 99th | 1st | 50th | 99th |
| Resources | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Urban     | 0.63* | 1.07 | 1.72* | 0.73* | 1.21 | 1.90* | 1.45* | 0.71* | 0.37* | 1.04 | 1.39* | 1.74* |
| Age       | 0.79* | 0.66* | 0.84* | 1.72* | 3.26* | 1.31* | 1.00 | 0.79* | 0.90 | 1.06 | 1.21* |
| County income | 0.59* | 0.74* | 0.91 | 2.84* | 1.41* | 0.76* | 0.60* | 0.90 | 1.31* | 1.04 | 1.05 | 1.05 |
| Age       | 0.97 | 0.79* | 0.66* | 0.84* | 1.72* | 3.26* | 1.31* | 1.00 | 0.79* | 0.90 | 1.06 | 1.21* |
| Administrative investigation | 1.46* | 1.20* | 1.00 | 1.23* | 1.16* | 1.10 | 1.26* | 1.11 | 1.01 | 1.59* | 1.66* | 1.71* |
| Filed report | 1.11 | 1.08 | 1.05 | 0.98 | 0.91 | 1.11 | 1.08 | 1.05 | 1.09 | 0.91 | 0.80* |
| Victimized | 1.06 | 0.98 | 0.91 | 1.09 | 0.98 | 0.91 | 1.11 | 1.08 | 1.05 | 0.99 | 0.99 |
| Female | 1.11 | 1.09 | 1.05 | 1.08 | 1.05 | 1.03 | 1.04 | 1.01 | 0.99 | 1.24* | 1.17 | 1.11 |
| Female | 1.12 | 0.93 | 0.79* | 1.18* | 1.13 | 1.09 | 0.89 | 1.04 | 1.18* |
| Age | 1.09 | 1.05 | 1.01 | 1.11 | 1.08 | 1.05 | 1.04 | 1.01 | 0.99 | 1.24* | 1.17 | 1.11 |
| African American | 0.86 | 0.88 | 0.89 | 1.12 | 0.93 | 0.79* | 1.18* | 1.13 | 1.09 | 0.89 | 1.04 | 1.18* |
| Age | 1.19 | 1.04 | 0.92 | 1.04 | 0.97 | 0.91 | 0.91 | 1.00 | 1.08 | 0.91 | 1.05 | 1.17 |

NOTE: Logistic regression equations were calculated by authors from Alabama Department of Human Resources statistics. Cell entries represent odds of a one-standard-deviation variation in each independent variable adjusting for all others. Asterisks designate significant odds ratios.

*p < .025.
moved to other settings with higher probability in low-caseload counties, but had a lower probability of moving in high-caseload counties.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the data analysis suggest several conclusions relevant to service rationing in street-level bureaucracies. First, the analysis confirms that both compliance and substantive decisions reflect the supply of and demand for resources. However, resources interact in complex and unexpected ways with caseload. Low- and high-caseload counties react in opposite ways to the demand for and supply of resources. Nevertheless, common patterns do emerge. In general, urban counties have greater compliance. However, counties with older or higher-income populations start investigations later and complete them sooner. County income accounts for most of the effect in low-caseload counties; age dependence produces the effect in high-caseload counties. Counties with urban, older, or lower-income populations find fewer of the cases founded, but are more likely to move alleged victims to other settings. Again, county income produces most of the reduction in foundedness in low-caseload counties, whereas urbanization and age produce the result in high-caseload counties. Urbanization is the primary influence on movement. Hence, counties with low caseloads tend to respond to county income with higher-income counties keeping cases a shorter time and finding fewer of them founded. Counties with higher caseloads appear to respond to the economies of scale of urbanization and the level of demand.

Second, administrative constraints alter the dynamics of decision making. Not surprisingly, choices made earlier in a decision chain profoundly affect the choices made later in the process. However, the causal effect of previous decisions is related to low caseload. Compliance with the 72-hour deadline leads to significantly greater compliance with the 30-day deadline, more founded cases, and greater movement to other settings in counties where the workload of the adult protective service workers is relatively small. In counties with higher caseloads, the linking of decisions is apparent, but of much lower magnitude. The burden of extra cases apparently reduces the ability of protective service workers to single out cases for more intensive investigation. The only solid exception is reporting compliance, which tends to increase foundedness and reduce movement to other settings in high-caseload situations.

Third, the analysis does provide some confirmation for a limited application of the underclass hypothesis. Cases involving older African Americans in Alabama have lower compliance rates and higher intervention rates from adult protective service workers. These differences in compliance and intervention hold despite level of discretion or size of caseload. Cases involving African Americans are more likely to violate deadlines for initiation and completion. Once initiated, these cases are more likely to be founded and more likely to move to another setting. This latter outcome was unexpected because it means that African Americans have more, not less, access to the service delivery system. However, in practice, these differences in compliance may be a mixed blessing, because greater access also implies that street-level bureaucrats may intervene more in personal decisions. Foundedness and movement decisions involve a judgment of dependence and a high probability of lifestyle disruption. The reported patterns imply that African Americans have a greater risk of elder mistreatment, are more dependent, and have a greater need for services. However, what is not clear is the degree to which this greater risk and need reflects the state of nature in the population or expectations generated by existing stereotypes among adult protective service workers.

Fourth, cue taking does occur in this social service agency. Nevertheless, cue taking does not occur in all decision contexts. As expected, adult protective service workers looked for dependence cues more often in substantive than compliance situations. The degree of discretion had little effect. Unexpectedly, cue taking was also greater in low- than high-caseload counties. These findings suggest a fairly complex decision environment. Compliance decisions generally trigger only random variations on sociodemographic characteristics. These decisions have fixed, highly visible deadlines that highlight any demographically based failures of compliance. Moreover, American administrative culture places a much higher premium on strict equality in situations where the measurement standards are precise (for example, one person—one vote and the Voting Rights Act).

Substantive decisions introduce a more complex decision process. Both the regulatory and distributive functions of elder mistreatment policy imply the rationing of services. In fact, the decision to determine a case to be founded implies not only a judgment that the mistreatment took place, but judgments that the victim is dependent and unlikely to receive help from other sources. Thus, the agency is required to offer services to the most dependent clients. The importance of dependence cues for making this differentiation is apparent from the results of this analysis. Both foundedness and placement decisions reflect the dominant decision-making criteria of the agency.

The expectations are reversed for caseload. Contrary to the model generated by Brintnall (1981), cue taking in this regulatory/distributive social service agency occurs somewhat more often in low-caseload situations than in high. These results are especially clear for dependent victims, older perpetrators, and self-neglect. Brintnall's original analysis, based on case selection in a national sample of public prosecutors...
offices, suggested that cue taking occurred in high-caseload situations because it provided a means of reducing the workload while minimizing selection time. The prominence of cue taking in low-caseload counties implies different criteria. The lower caseload in these counties appears to allow adult protective service workers to explicitly pursue the agency’s dominant strategy. That is, they can shift resources to the most dependent by relying on all four decision criteria for foundedness. This conclusion is reinforced by the more direct linkages between the two compliance decisions and between compliance and substantive decisions in the counties with lower caseloads. Adult protective service workers in the low-caseload counties have the luxury of making current decisions match previous ones in the process. By contrast, in high-caseload counties the social workers have less time to investigate more cases. As a result, the workers appear to focus more on the validity of the allegation and less on the other three components of foundedness. As a result, their decisions reflect earlier decisions less clearly, and they rely on fewer demographic characteristics for cues.

Fifth, neutral competence does play some role in decision making, but again it appears more commonly in low-caseload counties. In all counties, reports from medical reporters increase the probability of foundedness and movement. In low-caseload counties, abuse cases are more likely to meet the 72-hour deadline, but are less likely to be founded. Neglect cases are more likely to move. In high-caseload counties, the effects are largely negative: exploitation and neglect cases have lower 72-hour compliance rates, workers verify fewer exploitation cases, and fewer neglect cases move. Interestingly, these significant effects are more common for substantive than compliance decisions, reinforcing the patterns identified among the sociodemographic variables. These results imply a significant blending of the cue-taking and neutral competence models in this social service agency.

These conclusions are necessarily limited by the fact that they are based on data from a single agency in a single state. However, Lipsky (1980) has suggested that the service-rationing model applies to most social service agencies whether they are regulatory or distributive in nature. The Alabama DHR implementation of elder mistreatment policy combines both functions into a single program. These combined characteristics may make the agency particularly sensitive to the service-rationing strategies associated with street-level bureaucracy. The combination of factors may make the results generalizable to the broad population of social service agencies. In addition, the selection of a southern state allows a sensitive test of the influence of the underclass hypothesis. Finally, elder mistreatment policy in Alabama yields several different decision points that allow the consequences of service rationing to vary by decision context. This represents a useful expansion of both street-level bureaucracy and cue-taking theory. SSQ

REFERENCES


