Welfare policy has been extensively studied by many social scientists. Political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, policy analysts, and lawyers have all contributed significantly to an understanding of the dynamics of the welfare “process”. However, most of these studies have focused exclusively on the influences which shape federal programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income/State Supplementary Program (SSI/SSP), Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps. The purpose of this research will be to examine a much less visible program, general relief.

General relief (also known as general assistance) is the “safety net” of the welfare system. If a potential recipient is ineligible for federal and state programs, or if considerable delays in processing are likely to occur, the recipient may receive some form of general relief. The amount varies from state to state, but usually does not exceed the amount available under AFDC, and is frequently much less. Those who do not qualify for even this minimal relief (because of eligibility requirements, employment restrictions or other impediments), often drop entirely from the system.

The objectives of general relief have varied little with the expansion of the state and federal roles in welfare. During the nineteenth century, welfare programs in most states were the responsibility of local jurisdictions and private organizations. The primary goals of the local and private aid programs were the provision of minimal resources to sustain life, the maintenance of social control over the indigent population, and the conservation of public funds. Unfortunately, these goals led to contradictory objectives. At one and the same time, relief policies were to provide sufficient resources to lift the recipient out of poverty, provide work to keep the indigent from idleness and preserve his self-respect, prevent the ineligible from receiving aid, and keep the welfare expenditures under control. The central strategies adopted to achieve these frequently incompatible objectives were categorization and restriction. Aid was given only to politically and socially “acceptable” categories of recipients (i.e., the aged, the blind, the disabled, and the young). In addition, highly restrictive and intrusive implementation techniques were designed in order to keep the population of recipients under control (e.g., residency requirements, elimination of unemployed individuals from the eligibility lists, property limitations, and low benefits.)

The expansion of the state and federal role in Welfare in the 1920’s and 1930’s shifted the responsibility for the “acceptable” categories of recipients away from local and private aid. General relief programs became the “safety net” for the persons ineligible for state or federal aid. However, the objectives of the program did not change. The same unstable balance of genuine charity, the work ethic, and cost-cutting continued to lead welfare decision-makers to strategies of limitation. As a result, the federal and state absorption of welfare functions did not liberalize the prevailing welfare ethic; rather, it reinforced its restrictiveness. A more detailed analysis of the consequences of this paradox on California general relief is examined in the next section.

In many ways, California’s general relief policies are similar to such programs in other states. For example, in its current manifestation, California general relief is clearly a residual program. The average monthly caseload of 66,515 in fiscal year 1981-1982 is only 4.3 percent of the average monthly AFDC caseload during the same period.

But, relief in California also possesses some unique features. Unlike the relief programs in most of the states that have them, California relief is funded and...
administered at the county level. While each county is required by the state to maintain a relief program, the costs of aid and administration rest with the counties. This local orientation produces benefit and caseload levels which vary markedly from one jurisdiction to the next.

The wide discretion is by no means a recent development. County discretion and responsibility have been tenets of the California welfare system since the passage of the Pauper Act in 1901. Under the act, relief of “all pauper, incompetent, poor, indigent persons and those incapacitated by age, disease, or accident lawfully resident therein” was mandatory. Program standards and funding levels were left to the discretion of county boards of supervisors. Despite significant alterations in the structure of the statute over time (especially in 1933 and 1965), the central principle of county autonomy has remained essentially unchanged.

The national government, the state legislature, and the federal and state courts have all displayed considerable reluctance to interfere with local autonomy, even in the face of widely divergent relief grants and caseloads in adjacent counties. The response of both the state and federal government has been to standardize “acceptable” categories of aid. Thus, in 1929 the California government instituted state programs for the blind and the aged. The national government nationalized these programs in 1935 and added a program for needy children, which California adopted in 1937. Finally, the federal government created a program for the permanently and totally disabled in 1950, which was adopted by California in 1957. The needy children program ultimately evolved into AFDC in September 1963. The remaining programs were consolidated into the Supplementary Security Income/State Supplementary Program in 1974.

These programs have standardized benefits across California counties and most California welfare recipients receive aid under one of the programs. However, the tradition of county discretion persists and the coverage of these programs varies dramatically. For example, the percentage of the poor population in each county receiving AFDC in 1979 varied from a low of 22.7 percent in San Luis Obispo county to a high of 74.6 percent in Sacramento county. It is not surprising, therefore, that general relief caseload and grants vary as dramatically.

The courts have shown a similar reluctance to restrict county autonomy. Prior to 1971, the courts interpreted broadly the legislative delegation of authority to county boards of supervisors. Indeed, of the 26 legal cases concerning California general relief to reach California and federal courts prior to 1971, only five or fifteen percent were decided for the recipient. Only since *Mooney v. Pickett* in 1971 have courts begun to limit county discretion. In *Mooney*, the California Supreme Court argued that counties could not restrict whole classes of eligible recipients (in that case, single, employable men). Subsequent court cases have limited economic justifications for eligibility exclusions, ordered a county to provide adequate benefits, excluded SSI/SSP benefits and food stamps from relief benefit calculations, and required evidentiary hearings during the application process. Overall, since 1971, 61 percent of the eighteen relief court cases have been decided for the recipient. However, one must place the changes in context. These decisions have affected relief policy at the margin. The courts still remain very hesitant to interfere with what they perceive to be a very broad legislative grant of discretion to the counties.

Only in the area of residency requirements have relief recipients won a clear-cut victory. In 1968 the Federal District Court in San Francisco issued a preliminary injunction against San Francisco, Marin, and Alameda counties to prevent their enforcement of the state’s three-year residency requirement. The final blow was administered by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1969 in *Shapiro v. Thompson*. The Court declared residency requirements for Social Security Act programs to be an impermissible restriction on freedom of movement and a denial of equal protection. Bowing to the trends and expecting a similar decision by the California Supreme Court on general relief, the California legislature repealed general relief residency requirements in 1971.

The actions of the California state legislature, the Congress, and the state and federal courts have left relief policy to the political judgments of the 58 county boards of supervisors. The counties have responded by enacting a broad range of programs. The total cost of direct aid by all 58 counties in the 1981-1982 fiscal year was $100,722,000. The administrative costs of the program added an additional 40 percent (or approximately $40 million) to that figure.

General relief is distributed in four ways. The largest proportion of the aid (66.1 percent) is given to recipients in the form of general home relief (an annual sum of $67,080,000 given to an average of 33,272 people per month in 1981-1982). General home relief is aid given to individuals who receive 94 percent of the total aid. This aspect of the program is what most often is referred to as general relief. The second category of aid is miscellaneous general relief (an annual sum of 69,165,466 given to an average of 6,152 recipients per month in 1981-1982). This category includes any special relief programs or expenditures which are maintained by the counties, such as programs for burial of indigents and emergency shelter.
The third category of aid is interim assistance ($24,465,921 given to an average of 27,091 recipients per month). This aid is given to potential recipients of SSI/SSP who would otherwise receive no support during the long application process. Although theoretically reimbursable, the county ends up footing a substantial percentage of the bill. The final category is Time Ineligible Refugees and Cuban/Haitian Entrants. These individuals receive aid under the relocation program. The county costs amount to less than one percent of the total general relief bill.

When the focus is shifted from aggregate data to the data from individual counties, considerable variation is apparent. In 1981-1982 the average county spent $126.19 per recipient on its clients in all four programs. The county figures ranged from zero in Alpine to approximately $235.00 in San Francisco. This variation in general relief expenditures can be itemized more succinctly by examining one-person caseload and average grant figures. Five counties (Alpine, Calaveras, Lake, Mariposa, and Sierra) reported no single individuals receiving relief at all during 1981-1982. On the other hand, six counties reported one-person caseloads in excess of 20 per 10,000 population (Alameda, Contra Costa, Merced, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Solano). Counties paying under $20.00 per person included the five zero-caseload counties noted above plus Glenn, Tehama, and Trinity counties. Some counties at the other end of the scale paid in excess of $200.00 per person (Colusa, Fresno, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Siskiyou, and Solano counties).

All counties develop limitations and restrictions concerning the type of individuals who may receive aid, the assets they may possess, the form in which payment is made, the work they may be required to perform, and the amount of aid which they may receive. These policies may be grouped under four headings: eligibility restrictions, disbursement restrictions, work requirements, and payment limits. Eligibility restrictions are generally of two kinds, residence requirements and property limitations. Since Shapiro, residence requirements have generally been limited to intent to live in the county. Most counties also impose restrictions on the amount of real property, personal property, and equity in an automobile which a recipient may hold and still be eligible for relief. Under current real property standards, nine counties allow no real property at all, 23 counties have standards varying from $1,000 to $34,000, and 26 counties exempt the recipient's home altogether. The average personal property limit is $311, but the individual county limits range from zero to $1,500. The average auto value limit is $880, with a low value of zero in twelve counties (in apparent violation of state law) and a high value of $2,500 in Marin county.

The second class of restrictions are disbursement restrictions. These include the conditions of the payment, the existence of a potential lien on real property, and the form of the payment. Counties condition their payments in three ways. Sixteen counties treat the relief as an outright grant to the recipient, 32 counties consider the payment to be a loan (although most rarely expect to collect), and ten of the counties regard the payment as wages for work performed on a county work project. In the same vein, 25 of the counties require the recipient to sign a lien on real property in order to guarantee repayment. The actual payment is made by cash or warrant (check) in 26 counties, by voucher or vendor payments in 16 counties, and by a combination of these approaches in 16 counties.

The third set of restrictions deals with work requirements. Forty-three of the counties require their general relief recipients to register with the Employment Development Department, actively seek work, work in the county work program, or a combination of the above. The final restriction concerns the size of the payment. The counties set an average ceiling of $172.73 on individual grants. Individually, six of the counties set no standard because they have no program (Alpine, Colusa, Glenn, Inyo, Sierra). Of the remaining counties, the lowest maximum grant is $40.00 in Calaveras county and the highest is $357.00 in Santa Barbara county.

What explains the differing relief outputs and standards adopted by the various counties? Are they the result of independent political judgment or structural factors beyond the counties' control? Research by the authors suggests that the factor which distinguishes most clearly among the various levels and standards of county relief is urbanization. In this context urbanization is a surrogate for county population size, county revenue per capita, county unemployment, and county Democratic advantage.

An examination of Table 1 shows clear distinctions across a three-fold breakdown on the urbanization factor. In general, counties which are highly urban have higher general relief expenditures per capita, higher individual caseloads, and higher average and maximum grants. In addition, they are more likely to rely on lower personal property limits (and higher real property and auto value limits), more likely to pay cash, more likely to require a lien on real property, and more likely to emphasize work. The only variable which does not follow the pattern is type of program. Approximately 35 to 39 percent of counties under 50 percent and over 90 percent urban treat relief as a grant, while only 9.5 percent of intermediate counties so treat them.
Overall, Table 1 suggests that relief policy is heavily influenced by the structural factors which produce urbanization in California. If this is true, the scope of decision-making available to county decision-makers may be narrower than the standard of county discretion implies. To fully test this conclusion, we need to examine the influence that county policy decisions have on important general relief policy outputs while adjusting for the influence of urbanization.

The model chosen for this analysis is a multiple regression model. The units of analysis are the 58 California counties. The dependent variables are caseload per capita (logged to the base 10 to adjust for skewed distribution), and average grant per recipient. Both variables refer to single-person cases. To explain variations across counties, each of the dependent variables was regressed on percent of the population living in urban places, logged (base 10) general relief expenditures per capita, and indicators of each of the access limitations and restrictions discussed above. General relief expenditures per capita was selected as an explanatory factor primarily as an indicator of county commitment to general relief. The other indicators attempt to assess the influence of more specific policy tools.

The results of the regression are presented in Table 2. The coefficients in the caseload column represent changes in the log of caseload produced by unit changes in each of the independent variables adjusting for the others. The coefficients in the average grant column represent dollar changes under similar circumstances. In both equations urbanization has considerable influence. A one hundred percentage point variation in urbanization is associated with a 270 percent difference in caseload (translated from logarithms), and a $53.00 fluctuation in average grant. Not surprisingly, general relief expenditures are also significant in both equations. A ten-fold difference in relief expenditures per capita is positively related to a 322 percent variation in caseload per 10,000 and a $49.62 difference in average grant.
TABLE 2
THE REGRESSION OF LOGGED CASELOAD AND AVERAGE GRANT ON ACCESS RESTRICTIONS, URBANIZATION, AND LOGGED RELIEF EXPENDITURES PER CAPITA.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Logged Cases per 10,000²</th>
<th>Average Grant³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Urban</td>
<td>.00431* (.00197)⁴</td>
<td>.53# (.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logged expenditures per capita - relief</td>
<td>.50831* (.15421)</td>
<td>49.62* (24.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of program:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - wages for work</td>
<td>.10279 (.20729)</td>
<td>4.72 (32.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - loan program</td>
<td>.11375 (.17560)</td>
<td>4.65 (27.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of payment:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - voucher payment</td>
<td>-.07554 (.11784)</td>
<td>- 9.37 (18.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - cash and voucher payment</td>
<td>-.10866 (.11563)</td>
<td>- 5.34 (18.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - lien on real property</td>
<td>-.11591 (.11218)</td>
<td>8.66 (17.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - eligibility exemption on home</td>
<td>.02829 (.11282)</td>
<td>-10.73 (17.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility limit on auto value in dollars</td>
<td>.00018* (.00009)</td>
<td>- .00 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility limit on personal property</td>
<td>-.00017 (.00015)</td>
<td>.00 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dummy - requirement to seek work</td>
<td>.02112 (.18685)</td>
<td>- .40 (29.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum grant</td>
<td>.00024 (.00083)</td>
<td>.33* (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.08470</td>
<td>17.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R squared</td>
<td>.60245</td>
<td>.53392</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Cases per 10,000 population and expenditures per capita were logged (base 10) to account for skewed distributions. Seven counties (San Francisco, Alpine, Colusa, Glenn, Inyo, Sierra, and Trinity) were excluded from the analysis because of missing data on revenue per capita or maximum grant limits.
²The coefficients represent the extent to which a unit increase in the independent variable will bring about an increased in logged cases per 10,000, adjusting for the other variables in the equation.
³The coefficients represent the extent to which a unit increase in the independent variable will bring about an increase in average grant, adjusting for the other variables.
⁴Figures in parentheses are standard errors. Coefficients with asterisks are significant at the .05 level. Coefficients with pound signs are significant at the .10 level.

Few of the other policy standards are significant. Only the influence of the limit on the value of the auto on caseload and maximum grant on average grant are significant. A $2,500 variation in auto limits across counties is translated into a 275 percent variation in caseload. A $100.00 difference in maximum grant is positively associated with a $33.00 difference in average grant.

In general, county discretion appears to be limited. Much of the variation in both caseload and average grant is accounted for by the urbanization of the county, a structural factor over which the county has no control. The primary weapon available to the county would appear to be adjustments in total general relief expenditures. However, even here county discretion is limited. A primary factor in any
decision about current budget will be past expenditures, caseloads, and grant levels. These figures often have little flexibility. The other forms of restriction and limitation have little independent influence on the dependent variables with the exception of auto limit on caseload, and maximum grant on average grant, and these influences are not overwhelming.

Conclusions

What conclusions, then, can be drawn about county general relief policy in California? First, county discretion and local autonomy are key components of the system. The state and federal government have been reluctant to interfere with that autonomy. Over time, they have acted to limit the scope of that autonomy, but not its operation. Only recently have the California and federal courts stepped in to limit some of the excesses. Second, a major consequence of this hands-off policy has been a wide variation in welfare policy outputs across the counties. This is especially the case for general relief, but it is also true for AFDC coverage of the poor population. Third, and paradoxically, county discretion reduces county effectiveness in relief policy. Because the counties are required to fund and administer general relief relatively independent of state influence, their policy decisions in this area are sensitive to the economic and social factors surrounding urbanization and to past decisions concerning the size of the relief budget. In short, the counties’ statutory independence produces conditions which limits their capacity to act on their discretion.

What is the solution to the counties’ dilemma? Clearly, continued reliance on county autonomy will not reduce relief disparities in either the short or long run. The severe limitations placed on the scope of county decision by structural factors only guarantees that counties will continue to place the goals of cost conservation and social control over the goal of adequate resources. That these punitive goals are effective is shown by the fact that general relief caseload is generally only 4.3 percent of AFDC caseload even though AFDC recipients only amount to 58 percent of the persons listed as being below the official poverty level.27 Clearly, while the access restrictions and limitations do not explain cross-county differences, their presence underscores the philosophy which limits general relief across all counties.

However, state acquiescence to county discretion is not an immutable fact of political life. The state legislature has directly altered the scope of the program in the past by removing categories of individuals from its purview. The legislature has also considered state funding and administration. In 1976 and 1977, the California Senate passed general relief reform acts (SB 1661 and SB 382) with state funding as a central feature. These bills never cleared the Assembly.28 The court system has shown an increasing willingness since 1971 to intervene in program operations on behalf of the recipient. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the greatest chance of rationalization of the general relief program lies with the state government.

Unfortunately, any momentum in the direction of state standards generated by SB 1661 and SB 382 was halted by the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. While the passage of the proposition produced a flurry of research studies, little or no legislative activity has been generated since in this area.29 Neither the state government nor the counties have been willing to pay the long-term costs necessary to upgrade the program.

The permanence of this situation is unclear. The potential response of policymakers to future budget surpluses or deficits is difficult to predict. But, the current unpopularity of welfare programs does not bode well for future increases. Thus, the ultimate attainment of a more equitable general relief program will require a considerable commitment of resources, and, more importantly, a distinct change in philosophy on the part of all concerned. Certainly, leaving the program in the hands of the counties will not achieve any standards of equity soon. At a bare minimum, the program requires state funding to reduce cross-county differences. Beyond that, the entire program requires expansion. Given the obstacles, such changes will require considerable lobbying effort. It is clearly to the advantage of both the counties and the recipients to pursue that effort.

NOTES


California, Statutes and Amendment to the Codes, 1901, chap. 210, pp. 636-637.

Ibid.

California, Statutes and Amendments to the Codes, 1929, chap. 529, pp. 910-913; California, Statutes and Amendments to the Codes, 1929, chap. 530, pp. 914-919.


California, Statutes and Amendments to the Codes, 1937, chap. 369, pp. 1061-1076.

U.S., Statutes at Large, 1950, vol. 64, pp. 555-558; and California, Statutes and Amendments to the Codes, chap. 2411, pp. 4156-4166, 1957.

The figures are calculated by taking the average monthly AFDC caseload from California, Department of Social Services, Public Welfare in California, Series AR-1, 1978-1979, and dividing it by the total number of persons below the Department of Agriculture's poverty level in each county taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of the Population, Vol. I Characteristics of the Population, Chapter C, General Social and Economic Characteristics, Part 6, California, Sections 1 and 2, Tables 180, 181, pp. 1181-1192.

See, for example, County of Los Angeles v. Board of Social Welfare, 41 Cal. 2d 455 (1953), and Patton v. County of San Diego, 106 Cal. App. 2d. 467 (1951).

Mooney v. Pickett, 4 Cal. 3d. 669 (1971).


California, Statutes and Amendments to the Codes, 1971, chap. 578, p. 1171.


20 The percentage was calculated on the basis of 1980-1981 figures since budget cuts forced the discontinuance of the annual compilation of Public Welfare in California (Series AR-1).

21 The focus of the detailed analysis was placed on one-person caseloads and grants under general home relief because many counties do not have family cases under home relief, miscellaneous general programs, or interim assistance. The total expenditures for single recipient general home relief amount to 62 percent of the total bill for general relief.

22 The California Welfare and Institution Code, section 17111, allows a recipient to keep an automobile of reasonable value in order to seek employment.

23 The definition of urbanization used in the paper is the census definition: the percentage of the population in an area living in urbanized areas of over 2,500 people.

24 If percent urban is regressed on county population size (logged), county revenue per capita (logged), county unemployment, and county Democratic advantage, approximately 77 percent of the variance is explained. In general, highly urban counties have high population, low revenue per capita, low unemployment, and are heavily Democratic.

25 The equations in Table 2 are reported in their logarithmic form. In the text, the figures will be translated back into raw numbers to make them more understandable.

26 See note 12.


28 See Committee on Human Resources, Impact of Proposition 13. Conversations with Brian Uslan of the Assembly Office of Research suggest that this impasse may be broken. As of June 1984, the Office was helping to develop new legislation creating a state-wide general relief program.

APPENDIX A
The Questionnaire
The telephone survey of all 58 counties in California was conducted during December 1982 and January 1983. Welfare departments were contacted and the following questions were asked concerning their general relief programs.

1. Considering a one person household, what is the maximum grant available?
2. Are grants paid by check, cash or voucher system?
3. Does your county have a work program for the able-bodied? Please explain—for instance, is a job search conducted and are grants to be worked off before they are given to the recipient?
4. What are your residency requirements?
5. What are the upper limits on liquid assets, personal property, real property and automobiles that can be retained by an applicant for general relief and still qualify for aid?
6. Do you consider general relief to be an outright gift or a loan in your county? Does your county take a lien on real property?

R. STEVEN DANIELS is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. He has also taught at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, the University of California at Riverside, and Canisius College in Buffalo, New York. His research interests include welfare policy, congressional voting behavior, and research methods.

CAROLYN LEA CLARK-DANIELS has been a management intern for the City of Vancouver, Washington, and an auditor for the Department of Health and Human Services and the Army Corps of Engineers. She is currently conducting research on welfare policy and the sociology of marriage and is writing books on both subjects.