

CALL FOR ARTICLES

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

Issue on:

Administrative Burdens as a Mechanism of Inequality in Policy Implementation

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Editors

This special issue invites empirical papers that seek to enlarge our understanding of how administrative burdens contribute to inequality in policy implementation processes and outcomes, and potential solutions to these problems. Administrative burdens are people's experiences of policy implementation as onerous. Burdens include learning costs, i.e., the time and effort it takes to find information about public services and what is required to access them; compliance costs, which include the paperwork needed to demonstrate eligibility, and the time and financial costs required by administrative processes. Administrative burdens also take the form of psychological costs. Psychological costs include the experience of stigma from applying for and participating in an unpopular program. They might also arise via a sense of a loss of autonomy when people feel they are subject to intrusive or coercive state power, the stresses from not knowing whether one can negotiate administrative ordeals where critical resources hang in the balance, or the accumulation of frustrations that come with burdens, especially those seen as unjust or unnecessary.

Social scientists have grappled with this issue from specific disciplinary perspectives. Economics has focused on 'take-up' or how these barriers impede access, for eligible populations, to social welfare policies. Political science has explored how politics can shape the creation of burdens and how the experience of burdens can influence beliefs such as political efficacy and trust in government. Sociology has emphasized how these burdens, within the context of organizations, are both a function of and a contributor to gender, race, and class inequality. Public

administration has clarified the organizational basis of administrative burdens, including the use of bureaucratic discretion. The goal of this issue is to bring insights from multiple disciplines to grapple with the broader implications of these burdens for inequality.

To provide an organizing framework, we draw on *Administrative Burden* (Herd and Moynihan 2018, published by the Russell Sage Foundation, see also Heinrich 2018; Sunstein 2019). Such burdens might facilitate inequality in a variety of ways. First, race, class, and gender inequality can drive which groups are targeted by administrative burdens in their encounters with government, whether trying to vote or to access means-tested benefits, which may further exacerbate inequality. Second, individual level resources, such as human capital, internet access, or financial differences, mean that some people may struggle more with administrative hassles (Christensen et al. 2020). For example, those with lower literacy levels will struggle with complex bureaucratic language, those with lower technological knowledge struggle with online-only interfaces, or those with poorer health have lower executive functioning to manage administrative processes. Those with more financial resources, or strong networks of support, are better able to overcome burdens.

What are specific examples of burdens and their effects? These can include confusion or lack of information about programs as learning costs. For example, the trend toward marketization of public services increases choice but also increases learning costs, e.g. parents trying to find the right school, or older adults trying to figure out a Medicare insurance plan (Zhou and Zhang 2012). The mere announcement of the public charge rule reduced participation in some welfare programs among immigrant communities by increasing both confusion about the policy, and psychological costs such as fear tied to immigration status (Barofsky, Vargas, Rodriguez and Barrows 2020). And sometimes reducing learning costs, like providing information to people eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit, can increase their likelihood of receiving it (Barghava and Manoli 2015; Hoynes 2019).

Examples of compliance costs include delay, paperwork, financial costs incurred, or physical barriers such as distance. The closure of Social Security field offices reduced applications from potential disability benefit recipients (Deshpande and Li 2019). The process of recertification in the SNAP program leads to significant loss of benefits and a less targeted program (Homonoff and Somerville 2020; Unrath 2020). Compliance costs also include eligibility requirements or fines and fees which are experienced in ways that exclude participation. Medicaid participation in Arkansas declined after the state introduced work requirements that did nothing to increase labor force participation (Sommers et al 2019). In the COVID crisis, many states required applicants to the new Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program to apply for, and be rejected by, the regular unemployment insurance system before being allowed to apply for PUA.

There are numerous consequences of these burdens. The most obvious is limiting access to needed income and health supports that are designed to reduce inequality and offset large economic shocks (Herd and Moynihan 2020). Burdens can also limit access to political rights or give rise to a sense of political exclusion or distrust in government. For example, Michener's (2018) *Fragmented Democracy* examines how people's experiences of programs, including the hassles involved, shapes their democratic citizenship. Administrators may use their discretion to impose more burdens on some groups over others (Olsen, Jeppesen and Moynihan 2020). Clients

make sense of these encounters, and the street level bureaucrats who impose burdens in ways that might shape their long-term understanding of their relationship with governments (Barnes and Henly 2018). The politics of burdens also extends to their creation, making it important to understand the degree to which tolerance for burdens is associated with factors like political ideology and perceived deservingness of clients (Baekgaard, Thomsen and Moynihan 2020).

While research shows that low-cost informational nudges can sometimes help, many burdens require more intensive interventions like the provision of direct help, or general policy and process redesign (e.g., Linos, Quan and Kirkman 2020; Lopoo, Heflin and Boskovski 2020). For example, the FAFSA student aid form is notoriously complex (Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2006). Simply telling students they are eligible for benefit or directing their attention to the form does not change participation, but helping people to complete and submit the form does make a difference (Bettinger et al. 2012; Bird et al. 2021). Similarly, providing information to older adults eligible for SNAP slightly increases their participation, but also providing assistance with the application process has a much larger effect (Finkelstein and Notowidigdo 2019). One of the strongest predictors for individual enrollment in the Affordable Care Act Marketplaces was receiving application assistance from health care navigators (Sommer et al. 2015).

These processes can emerge across many areas (examples include welfare and the broader social safety net, voting, policing, health, but these are not exhaustive). While the call for papers is not centered on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (see [related](#) RSF calls), we are interested in examples of how burdens played out during the crisis, and their implications for the welfare state moving forward.

We welcome research from across disciplines and specific policy fields, including but not limited to economics, political science, sociology, public health, social welfare, public administration and behavioral science. Empirical research can be qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods and can use a variety of types of data or research designs (RCT, field experiments, quasi-experimental). The journal seeks work in US settings, though it could have a comparative dimension.

Questions to be addressed could include, but are not limited to, the following topics:

The effects of burdens and how people respond:

How do burdens affect individual access to public benefits and services? Who is screened in and out of program receipt due to administrative burdens?

How does the experience of burdens, such as within a social welfare programs like Unemployment Insurance, Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program influence political beliefs, support for these programs, and/or actions? Do political outcomes change for potential recipients, the general public, or both?

How does the experience of burdens generate psychological costs?

How do administrative burdens pattern inequality? What is the role of race (or racism), class, and gender in shaping burdens?

How do people experiencing administrative burden respond? Under what conditions do they resist (individually or collectively) or acquiesce? How can peer networks or third parties help to buffer people from burdens? How do social resources (like whiteness) shape peoples' responses? What are the consequences of their responses?

The role of organizations:

How do organizational actors justify burdens, especially those that fall heaviest on particular groups, like the disabled or Black Americans?

How do organizational practices and policies shape bureaucratic discretion in ways that either relieve or exacerbate administrative burdens?

How do organizational actions that give rise to burdens become embedded and normalized in organizational practices?

To what extent are burdens the result of intentional administrative choices? If yes, what explains organizational creation of burdens? To the extent that burdens are unintentional, what organizational processes account for them? Does making the effects of burdens visible and salient change the decisions of bureaucrats?

The politics of burdens:

How are burdens with inequitable outcomes created? What is the role of policymaker beliefs and actions?

To what extent are burdens the result of intentional political choices? If yes, what motivates support for state actions that create burdens? To the extent that burdens are unintentional, what political processes account for their creation and continuity? Does making the effects of burdens visible and salient change the decisions of policymakers?

What are other sources of administrative burdens?

Do factors like public opinion affect decisions about administrative burdens?

Potential solutions:

What policy or design solutions can reduce burdens, especially for groups most negatively affected by them?

How does incorporating the voices of the people most affected by administrative burden affect the solutions proposed to address those burdens?

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Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, references that don't fit on the proposal pages, etc.) no later than **5 PM EST on April 21, 2021** to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline. All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org and **not** to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **February 25, 2022** (with a group dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 1/25/22**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 6/1/22. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 11/1/22. The full and final issue will be published in the fall of 2023. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.