Flawed Assumptions of Welfare Participation: A Comparative Analysis of Ohio and North Carolina Counties

Kasey Ray
Kent State University, Geauga, kray17@kent.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol47/iss1/2
Flawed Assumptions of Welfare Participation: A Comparative Analysis of Ohio and North Carolina Counties

Kasey Ray
Kent State University, Geauga

Welfare participation has been a longstanding issue of public debate for 50 years but remains largely understudied in welfare literature. The purpose of this research is to challenge the flawed assumptions of welfare participation by examining the varying spatial inequalities that influence U.S. welfare participation rates among eligible poor. This comparative analysis uses spatial inequality theory to examine welfare-to-work participation rates in all North Carolina and Ohio counties. I find that Ohio county welfare-to-work participation rates are most affected by region, race and gender, while North Carolina county rates are most affected by politics, industry and race.

Key words: Welfare participation, spatial inequalities, poverty, race, gender, welfare policy
Introduction

The welfare-to-work program is intended to serve as a safety net for our nation’s most at-risk populations (i.e., women and children living in poverty) but getting them to participate is the first step to providing that support. Despite the commonsense assumption that everyone living in poverty is actively seeking welfare assistance, we know very little about welfare participation rates among the eligible poor. Stark differences between welfare offices make it nearly impossible for any kind of uniformity in program implementation and/or expectations. Therefore, it is equally difficult for eligible individuals to know and consider all variables that are unique to their county when they consider participating in the welfare-to-work program. Who participates in welfare-to-work programs, and which factors impact their decision to participate, will fluctuate from one location to the next. In addition to these inconsistencies, Reagan-era rhetoric has negatively skewed public opinion of the U.S. welfare system. Even now, over forty years later, assumptions of welfare participation continue to reflect the idea that the program is overused and abused by everyone eligible. With such a persistent and negative stigmatization of welfare participants, the reality of welfare-to-work participation may be that it is adding to the strain of living in poverty instead of alleviating it.

The goal of this quantitative study is to utilize spatial inequality theory to examine the impact of locational factors on welfare-to-work participation rates across place. Understanding the differing intersection of inequalities unique to a location is essential to assessing the distinctive challenges faced in those areas. The varying impact of the spatial inequalities on poverty, welfare policies, and welfare-to-work participation is examined at the county level in two focal locations: Ohio and North Carolina. While this study cannot tell us why each individual makes the decision to participate in welfare-to-work programs, it provides important county- and state-level information essential to understanding welfare participation rates as a unique phenomenon.
The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) welfare-to-work program was created in 1996 as a result of bipartisan passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) welfare reform. The goal of the new program was to enact clear guidelines, restrictions, and requirements which would govern the revamped welfare-to-work program (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Hansen, Bourgois, & Drucker, 2014; Parisi, McLaughlin, Grice, Taquino, & Gill, 2003; Ridzi, 2009). The expectations and implementation of the TANF welfare program, however, have been inconsistent across place. For example, the TANF program sets federal minimums and maximums for work requirements and time limits, yet there is no requirement that states adhere to them. Each state can deviate from federal guidelines and choose to enact shorter time limits and/or stricter work requirements. While the creation of new and innovative programs varies by county, the programs tend to be similar in that they are overly punitive and more effective in decreasing welfare participation rather than assisting those living in poverty (Hansen et al., 2014; Lichter & Jayakody, 2002; Riccucci, 2005; Shaefer & Edin, 2016).

Spatial inequality theory predicts that there are inequalities unique to differing geographic spaces (Lobao, 2004). One of the broad research questions that concern scholars of spatial inequality entails how markers of stratification (e.g., racial composition, industrial composition, etc.) vary across space, and how geographic spaces themselves become stratified due to the presence of varying markers of stratification. Spatial inequality theory highlights the importance of place and geographic differences when addressing issues of poverty and (dis)advantage (Lobao, 2004; Lobao & Saenz, 2002; Weber, Duncan, & Whitener, 2001).

The TANF welfare-to-work program continually fluctuates and evolves to varying degrees depending on location. Geographic variations and inconsistencies impact the ability of the welfare-to-work program to serve as a safety net for those in poverty (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Monnat & Bunyan, 2008; Ridzi, 2009). Likewise, welfare-to-work participants are not a homogeneous group, and the inequalities that impact their experiences, their decisions to participate in
the TANF program, and their unique barriers to success vary by location. Utilizing spatial inequality theory, this article focuses on the importance of location while examining welfare-to-work participation rates.

**Assumptions of Welfare-to-Work Participation**

The creation and subsequent adaptations of the TANF program have been made with the goal of correcting the flawed entitlement welfare programs of the past. While many tout the success of the TANF program, studies have found that benefits to welfare participants are minimal during and after participating in the welfare-to-work program (Hansen et al., 2014; Jensen, 2014; Kilty & Segal, 2008; Monnat, 2010; Pavetti, 2018; Shafer & Edin, 2016). For example, there is little evidence of employment stability or upward mobility among TANF participants upon completing the program (Pavetti, 2018; Shafer & Edin, 2016). This, coupled with the increased stigmatization welfare participants encounter, undermines the perceived success of the welfare-to-work program.

The stigmatization of welfare participation has increased over the past 20 years. This increase is due to derogatory media portrayals, greater sanctioning of welfare participants, and greater medicalization of poverty (Hansen et al., 2014; Jensen, 2014; Kilty & Segal, 2008; Monnat, 2010; Shaefer & Edin, 2016). Skewed media depictions of the poor have been effective in creating an unflattering “commonsense” archetype of welfare participants (Jensen, 2014; Ridzi, 2009). The resulting social effect is a general distrust of those who seek welfare-to-work assistance and the assumption that welfare participants are deviants or outright criminals (Hansen et al., 2014; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Secombe, 1999). Pervasive assumptions insist that most people living in poverty not only receive welfare assistance but seek it out so aggressively that they will lie, cheat, and defraud (Jensen, 2014; Ridzi, 2009). This belief assumes that those living in poverty will use assistance to become rich, or at least live in greater financial comfort than even middle-class families can afford.

The PRWORA welfare reform drastically changed the cash assistance welfare program based partly on these misconstrued assumptions (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Hansen et al., 2014;
Kilty & Segal, 2008; Parisi et al., 2003; Seccombe, 1999; Soss & Schram, 2007). Democrats and Republicans alike believed that by enacting new restrictive policies the program would become more “successful” and more appealing to the masses (Lichter & Jayakody, 2002; Parisi et al., 2003). However, public opinion of the welfare program and welfare participants has not improved (Hancock, 2004; Hansen et al., 2014; Jensen, 2014; Soss & Schram, 2007). Criteria for program success have been perverted by simply equating success with decreased rolls (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Shaefer & Edin, 2016). Inconsistent standards and varying program requirements, in addition to misconstrued assumptions of exaggerated welfare participation rates, may be partly to blame for continual program dissatisfaction.

The Gendered and Racialized Aspects of Welfare-to-Work

Though stratification markers vary based on geographic space, the current welfare-to-work program cannot be free from the overarching influence of race, privilege, and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The U.S. welfare program has been plagued with racist imagery of “welfare queens” (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Hancock, 2004; Monnat, 2010; Quadagno, 1996; Seccombe, 1999) and racist rhetoric used when making welfare policy changes (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Schram, 2005). Through the differential treatment of Black welfare participants, the program actively promotes racial disadvantage (Monnat, 2010; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Schram, 2005). Critical race theory is the analysis of the impact of race, racism, and power within the broader social context (i.e., economics, history, laws, groups, etc.) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory drives this research by underscoring the importance of this persistent phenomenon in understanding the obstacles and unfair (dis)advantages for people of color, ranging from the U.S. capitalist labor market to the welfare office itself.

Women, specifically mothers, are the group most likely to seek welfare cash assistance (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Parisi et al., 2003; Ridzi, 2009). The risk of poverty for single mothers in the U.S. is more than 35% (Brady, Finnigan, & Hubgen, 2018; Misra, Moller, Strader, & Wemlinger, 2012). The higher rate of poverty for women as compared to
men, coupled with their childcare responsibilities, places an inequitable burden on low-income and under- or unemployed mothers (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Parisi et al., 2003). Racial and sexist prejudices intersect to impact mothers of color in their experience of welfare cash assistance programs (Hancock, 2004; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Monnat, 2010; Monnat & Bunyan, 2008; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Quadagno, 1996; Schram, 2005; Taylor, Samblanet, & Seale, 2011). The overtly racist rhetoric which facilitated the 1996 welfare reform has been replaced by more covert racially and gender charged references (Hancock, 2004; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Taylor et al., 2011). Some such references include the inability of women to make decisions regarding their work, home, and family options due to their missing or insufficient “family values” or “work ethic.”

Following spatial inequality theory and critical race theory, the current research examines the effects of place, race, gender, and other county-level differences on welfare-to-work participation rates in Ohio and North Carolina. The focus of this study is on contextual and compositional differences, such as region, population density, politics, gender, race, and family status, that may impact participation. The goal is to provide a comparative analysis of welfare-to-work participation rates at an intra-state and inter-state level. In addition to challenging welfare participation assumptions, these findings will highlight important implications for welfare policy, funding, and program implementation that have the potentiality to influence participation rates from one unique welfare office to the next.

Methods

This paper serves as an interstate comparison building upon my prior intra-state research examining 2010 county level welfare-to-work participation rates in North Carolina only. County characteristics, demographics, and welfare program effectiveness for each county in North Carolina were examined as they pertain to welfare-to-work participation rates. Results were that while a number of variables had an impact on welfare participation rates in North Carolina counties, welfare participation was overwhelmingly a story of "race“ and "place." While critical race theory underscores the universality of racism and
race-based power relations in the U.S., spatial inequalities theory posits that inequalities (including the impact of race, class, gender, etc.) vary from one geographical location to the next. This current examination therefore serves as an opportunity to utilize these theories at the interstate level and further examine the varying impacts on welfare-to-work participation rates in different geographic regions.

Data

For this research, data were primarily collected from 2010 U.S Census data (see Table 1). Focusing on county-level statistics, Census data were compiled from all counties within both states (Ohio N = 88 and North Carolina N = 100) to create a comprehensive dataset to examine the various facets of welfare participation rates. Supplemental data were gathered from The University of Akron Bliss Institute and the State Board of Education of North Carolina, respectively, to determine appropriate regional distinctions within states.

The dependent variable for this research is calculated as the percentage of qualifying households in a county that were financially eligible to receive welfare and which did receive welfare cash assistance at any point in 2010 (also referred to throughout as welfare-to-work participation rates). In order to construct this dependent variable, eligibility was determined if, (1) a household income for 2010 was below the poverty threshold and, (2) households had children living in the home under the age of 18. This variable (“%EligibleOnRolls”) is an approximate rate of qualifying households that received welfare-to-work benefits in 2010 in both North Carolina and Ohio counties.
Model 1: County Characteristics

Unemployment Rate is the unemployment rate of the county population. Industrial differentiation ("IndustryDiff") measures industry variation/concentration in paid employment in each county. This variable is calculated as the percentage of total employment accounted for by the two largest industries (of the 10 possible industries based on two-digit NAICS industrial sector codes) in each county in 2010. The figure is calculated such that the higher the number, the more differentiation in employment by industry. Possible scores for industrial differentiation range from 50 (no differentiation) to 100 (high differentiation). Human Services Expenditures is measured as the percentage of a county’s total budget that was used for Human Services programs (i.e., welfare programs). Political climate of each county is calculated using the majority voting behavior
of each county for U.S. Senator Elections in 2010. The dummy variable ("Republican Winner") indicates counties in which the majority voted for a Republican U.S. Senator, with counties that voted for a Democratic U.S. Senator as the reference category.

Model 2: Measures of Place

Population density is used to measure region by determining how rural or urban a county is. The population density measure best allocates the detailed variation in urban/ruralness within small geographical units (i.e., counties) (Long, Rain, & Ratcliffe, 2001). There are three distinct regions in North Carolina and five in Ohio. In North Carolina the three regions are: the Mountain (western), Piedmont (central), and Coastal (eastern) parts of the state (Luebke, 1998; as categorized by the Department of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education in North Carolina; Figure 1). The five distinct regions of Ohio are: Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Central (as categorized by The Ohio State University’s College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences; Figure 2). For the region variable in both states, region is measured as a dummy variable. For the sake of parsimony, in both states the region that has the most rural counties is chosen to be the reference category (Mountain region in NC; Southeast region in OH).

Figure 1. Map of North Carolina's Three Geographic Regions
Model 3: Demographics

Gender is measured as the percentage of all households in a county that are in poverty and headed by single mothers ("Poor Single Moms"). For the purpose of this research, race is measured as the percentage of the county population that self-identify as Black ("% Black"; NC mean = 20.75%, OH mean = 5.74%) and the percentage of the county population that self-identify as any non-white and non-Black race ("%Other Race"; NC mean = 3.83%, OH mean = 3.22%) on the 2010 U.S. census.

Analytic Strategy

The method of analysis for this study is ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. This method is chosen due to the relatively small population size (North Carolina N = 100; Ohio N = 88) and the continuous dependent variable (Noreen, 1988). Eligibility and welfare participation are analyzed inductively,
with a final focus on the following three groupings: county characteristics, region/rurality, and gender and race with each grouping layered in sequentially. There were no missing data in either state.

In all models, the standardized coefficients and indicators of statistical significance have been included. There is debate about utilizing statistical significance when examining a population, however, reporting statistical significance is the best choice for this current research. Not only is reporting significance when examining a population “standard procedure” in the field of social sciences (Leahey, 2005) but the goal of reporting significance is to link the findings to theoretical analyses. In order to do this, Rubin (1985) argues that using significance testing and examining “whether independent variables help explain why the differences among the subpopulations exist” (p. 518) is still appropriate and necessary. While the debate continues, there does seem to be “increasing sentiment in favor of [using significance testing]” (Leahey, 2005, p. 12) when examining a population. Therefore, it is appropriate to include significance testing in this current examination.

Results

Table 2 shows the standardized ($\beta$) coefficients of the OLS regression analysis for both North Carolina and Ohio. With only the inclusion county characteristics in model 1 (NC F = 6.68, sig. = .000; OH F = 2.26, sig. = .069), there is a clear difference between North Carolina and Ohio in regard to what aspects impact welfare-to-work participation. Overall for model 1, the explanatory power is greater for North Carolina (R-square = .22) than for Ohio (R-square = .098). This first model can explain 22% of the variation in the participation rate of eligible people in North Carolina counties and 9.8% of the variance in Ohio counties.

In North Carolina, model 1 highlights a story of politics and industry. In counties that had a more conservative political leaning with the majority of voters voting for the republican U.S. Senate candidate, welfare-to-work participation among the eligible population was lower ($\beta$ = -.358; $b$ = -3.9, p = .000). Industrial differentiation also had a significant relationship with welfare participation rates. In areas with more industrial options
for employment there are higher participation rates ($\beta = .261$; $b = .229$, $p = .008$). In areas that are more urban, industrialized, and have more options for employment, there are also more resources and access to assistance.

Table 2. Regression Estimates for North Carolina and Ohio Counties; Welfare-to-Work Participation rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County Characteristics</th>
<th>NC</th>
<th>OH</th>
<th>NC</th>
<th>OH</th>
<th>NC</th>
<th>OH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>.287**</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>-.180</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>-.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry Diff.</td>
<td>.261***</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.224**</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.210**</td>
<td>.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Expenditures</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>.109</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Winner</td>
<td>.358***</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>-.297***</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.157</td>
<td>-.021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population Density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC-Coastal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC-Piedmont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OH-Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OH-Northwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OH-Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OH-Southwest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>NC</th>
<th>OH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor Single Moms</td>
<td>-.122</td>
<td>-.280*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%Black</td>
<td>.397**</td>
<td>-.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%Other race</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.416**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>88</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>88</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>88</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>.220</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.284</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.324</td>
<td>.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-Squared</td>
<td>.187</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>.248</td>
<td>.113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Numbers are reported as standard coefficients (Betas)
***$\alpha$<.01, **$\alpha$<.05, *$\alpha$<.10
In Ohio, politics take a back seat to the lack of jobs in the paid labor market. The variable with the largest effect in Ohio (significant, negative relationship) is between the unemployment rate and welfare-to-work participation among those eligible ($\beta = -.287$). This significant negative relationship highlights the fact that in Ohio, when the percentage of people on unemployment is higher, the welfare program participation rates are lower ($b = -.949; p = .012$). Here unemployment seems to be a more desirable alternative to the welfare-to-work program.

Model 2 introduces measures of place: population density (ln) and geographic regions. When examining a topic through a spatial inequality theoretical lens, the inclusion of these variables is essential. The inclusion of additional variables in this model increases the overall fit (NC F = 5.22, sig = .000; OH F = 1.43, sig = .189), and model 2 can explain over 28% of the variation in North Carolina and over 14% of the variation in participation among eligible people in Ohio. In North Carolina, region variables were coded as “Coastal” and “Piedmont” with the “Mountain” region as the reference groups. The Coastal region has the largest effect of any place measure ($\beta = .307; b = 2.9; p = .01$).

In North Carolina, counties that had a higher population density (more urban, less rural) saw an increase in eligible person’s welfare-to-work participation rate ($\beta = .083$). The Piedmont region had higher participation rates ($\beta = .229$) and the Coastal regions had significantly higher participation rates among the eligible persons in reference to the more rural and often geographically isolated Mountain region counties ($\beta = .307$). In this second model, the county politics in North Carolina and the industrial differentiation remained significant. In counties where the majority of U.S. Senator votes were for a Republican ($\beta = -.297; p = .002$) and in counties where there are less industrial options, there is a significantly lower welfare-to-work participation rate among eligible persons in North Carolina ($\beta = .224; p = .029$). Again, more politically conservative counties that are less industrially diverse have lower percentages of eligible families participating in welfare-to-work programs.

In Ohio, region variables were coded as “Northeast,” “Northwest,” “Central,” and “Southwest,” with the “Southeast” regional counties as the reference group. In Ohio, however, locality does
not seem to play as important a role as it did in North Carolina. The inclusion of the population density and region variables causes all variables to be non-significant in explaining welfare program participation rates. Of all variables included in this second model, the largest effect is the positive relationship of central regions on OH participation rates ($\beta = .216; b = 3.22; p = .114$) as compared to the Southeast region. The state capital and the area’s largest city is located in the Central region of Ohio, which may explain this effect. While all are non-significant, the Northeast ($\beta = .052$), Northwest ($\beta = .159$), and Southwest ($\beta = .088$) all had higher participation rates among eligible persons in reference to the more rural and often geo-socially isolated Southeast Ohio counties. The next largest effect was the negative association of unemployment rate ($\beta = -.180; b = -.593; p = .176$) and welfare-to-work participation as discussed in the model 1 results.

Model 3 includes the population demographic variables for the counties: the percentage of households that are headed by single mothers in poverty ("Poor Single Moms"), the percentage of the population in each county that are African American ("%Black"), and the percent of the county population that are other non-white, non-Black racially marginalized ("% Other Race") with the percent county population that is white serving as the reference category for the race variables (NC F = 4.27, sig = .000; OH F = 1.92, sig = .045). The explanatory power of this model increases again for both NC (R-squared = .324) and Ohio (R-squared = .235). Of the variance in welfare-to-work participation rates among a county’s eligible families, this final model explains over 32% in NC and 23% in Ohio.

With the inclusion of these variables, coefficients for several variables change. First, the effect of county politics diminished drastically in NC ($\beta = -.157; \text{sig} = .22$). The percent of the county population that is Black had a large significant effect ($\beta = .397; \text{sig} = .04$) on welfare-to-work participation rates among eligible persons in North Carolina. In Ohio, the variable with the largest effect is also part of the racial demographic make-up of the county. The percent of non-white, non-Black other racial groups has the largest association with the participation rates among Ohio’s eligible people ($\beta = .416$). The positive associations of both indicates that counties that have higher percentages of Black populations in North Carolina and counties that have higher
percentages of other racially marginalized groups in Ohio have higher participation rates among their states’ eligible families.

Industrial differentiation remained significant with the inclusion of all variables in North Carolina ($\beta = .210$). This shows in North Carolina in urban counties that have more industries available for employment, there are higher percentages of eligible persons who participate in the welfare-to-work program. In Ohio, gender (more specifically the percentage of families headed by impoverished single mothers) has the second largest effect on the welfare-to-work participation rate among eligible individuals ($\beta = -.280$). This negative relationship indicates that in Ohio counties with higher percentages of low-income single mother-headed households have lower welfare participation rates. When controlling for county demographics, the effects of the Coastal region ($\beta = .110$) in reference to the Mountain counties decreased dramatically, painting a picture that emphasizes industry and race over region in North Carolina. In Ohio, however, the final model shows that region does matter. The Central region had significantly higher participation rates among their eligible persons in reference to the more rural, mountainous Appalachian counties located in the Southeast region of the state of Ohio ($\beta = .225$).

Key Findings

There were several key findings in this work: (1) the impact of each independent variable varied between the two focal states, and between the counties within each state, supporting spatial inequality theory; (2) The overall welfare-to-work participation rate among those eligible is low; (3) Region and population density differentially impact participation rates in each state, therefore both were essential to uncovering spatial inequalities at play; (4) The impact of race on participation varied among the two states, where the inclusion of race variables (% Black) became the most important factor in NC, whereas in Ohio “%OtherRaces” was the only significant racial relationship (+) between eligibility and participation; and (5) North Carolina was largely a story of politics, industry, region, and race, whereas in Ohio gender, race and region were the dominant factors impacting participation.
Discussion

Welfare participation is an under-examined and largely misunderstood aspect of the U.S. welfare system (see Parisi et al., 2003 for a notable exception). In the research on welfare, participation is often assumed, and that assumption centers on the belief that most people who are eligible for assistance become welfare participants (Jensen, 2014; Ridzi, 2009). However, I find the assumption that welfare participation is a given among the poor to be flawed and unsupported in both Ohio and North Carolina. In general, the welfare-to-work participation rates among those eligible are low in both focal states: North Carolina (11.5%) and Ohio (16.6%). This finding, that the vast majority of eligible members of the impoverished population are not being served, is important because it highlights the ability (or lack thereof) of the welfare program to assist families struggling with poverty.

This analysis supports the spatial inequality theoretical prediction that place and geographically distinct markers of stratification differently impact the experience of poverty (Lobao, 2004) and subsequently affect welfare-to-work participation rates. I find that population density (rural versus urban) and region impact welfare participation rates, but methods vary depending on location. I also find that race plays a key role in understanding welfare-to-work participation rates, but the degree varies depending on place. These variations alone indicate the most enduring assumptions regarding welfare participation to be flawed. Welfare participation among the poor, and therefore financially eligible, is not a given, and there are a number of factors that impact participation rates in both states.

In Ohio, the variations in place are encompassed more in the regional differences while in North Carolina it is more about the rural/urban divide. The urbanization of poverty has been largely studied (Carter, 2005; Massey, Gross, & Shibuya, 1994; Wilson, 1996), but the impact of rural poverty on welfare-to-work participation rates is an area in need of further examination. In North Carolina, the effect of population density was significant in the full model, showing that welfare participation among those eligible is lower in rural areas. This was not the case in Ohio, so this finding may point to the relative isolation
that exists in rural North Carolina that may not be as present in Ohio. North Carolina has a history of building communities in rural areas that center around one economic entity (Luebke, 1998). In such places, with less industrial differentiation, there may be fewer resources and/or access to assistance compared to more urban and industrially diverse areas.

For people concerned with lessening poverty, my findings illustrate the essentiality of utilizing spatial inequality theory to examine welfare-to-work participation rates. For instance, it may be common knowledge that welfare participation is less in rural areas than urban (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Parisi et al., 2003), but the degree to which that phenomenon is felt varies by location. My findings show that families experiencing poverty in rural North Carolina are experiencing different hardships than those living in rural areas of Ohio, and that relative differences cause them not to participate in welfare-to-work programs. When attempting to devise local welfare programs and policies, the emphasis placed on the barriers associated with rurality (i.e., limited transportation options, increased stigma in these areas, less familiarity with welfare eligibility requirements) should also vary to reflect relative impact (Brown & Lichter, 2004).

The use of spatial inequality theory offers the potential to highlight the differential experience of poverty and better determine areas in which more funding and services would be best allocated. Every region and county is faced with unique barriers that may need to be addressed differently (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Lobao, 2004; Parisi et al., 2003). For instance, in Ohio, I find that there are significantly higher rates of welfare-to-work participation in the more urbanized central region than the more rural and geographically isolated southeast region counties. However, in Ohio, region is significant even when controlling for population density. Further research is needed to examine the distinct and/or related impact of region and rural/urban poverty on welfare-to-work participation rates.

In addition to place and spatial inequalities, race matters. In both states, Ohio and North Carolina, race had the largest impact on welfare-to-work participation rates among the eligible population. While the percentage of a county’s population that is Black was important in North Carolina, the percentage of a
county’s population that is non-Black racially marginalized in Ohio had the largest effects on welfare-to-work participation. These findings could be due to a number of factors, including the continual disenfranchisement of racially marginalized people in the U.S. (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Kirshenman & Neckerman, 1991; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991; Quadagno, 1996; Seccombe, 1999).

Women of color, particularly single mothers, are more likely to experience poverty, in addition to having less access to higher education and healthcare than their white counterparts (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Quadagno, 1996). In combination with the sizeable effect found for population density in North Carolina and the central region in Ohio, people of color in urban areas often live in more undesirable neighborhoods that lack adequate education and affordable housing (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991; Quadagno, 1996; Seccombe, 1999). With greater relative need, and greater obstacles to attaining stable gainful employment, it is logical that a county’s eligible racially marginalized population would have higher rates of welfare participation.

While both states highlight the importance of race in examining welfare-to-work participation rates, there is a concentrated emphasis on Blackness present in North Carolina not found in Ohio. North Carolina has a long history of racial deprivation and denial of liberties that may continue to plague the Black population in that state to this day (Luebke, 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey & Roscignio, 1997). For example, all North Carolina schools did not become integrated until well into the 1970s. This resistance to integration was purposeful, as the state provided financial assistance for white children to attend private schools, while leaving Black children segregated in public schools (Luebke, 1998). Also, gerrymandering of voting districts diminished the voting power of Blacks, and legislative steps were taken to inhibit Black candidates from taking state political office in North Carolina (Luebke, 1998). The differential influence of race on welfare-to-work participation rates in North Carolina and Ohio highlights the need for a spatial analysis of the importance of race.

The study of welfare program participation is an area worthy of further examination. This comparative analysis challenges
the preconceived assumptions regarding welfare participation by incorporating the theoretical focus on the importance of place in an intra- and inter-state comparison of welfare-to-work participation rates. However, there are many program and policy nuances still in need of examination in regard to participation. For instance, further examination of the influence of labor market discrimination that may impede the viable alternatives to welfare-to-work program participation is necessary.

In conclusion, if the goal of the welfare program is to reduce the rolls, they are doing extraordinarily well (Collins & Mayer 2010; Riccucci, 2005; Shaefer & Edin, 2016). However, if the goal of the program is to serve as a safety net for women and children battling poverty and provide assistance to those in need, they are failing (Pavetti, 2018; Shafer & Edin, 2016). The assumption that welfare participation is out of control or used recklessly by everyone eligible is inherently flawed. Nevertheless, the welfare program continues to fail in the realm of public opinion (Gilens, 1995, 1996; Hancock, 2004; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Jensen 2014). Welfare reform, policies, and innovative programs have been unsuccessful in changing the negative view of welfare assistance (Gilens, 1996; Hancock, 2004; Hansen et al., 2014; Jensen, 2014; Soss & Schram, 2007). This negative perception has not escaped those struggling with poverty and, in general, welfare-to-work participation among those eligible is extremely low. If welfare assistance is designed to reduce the strain on families in poverty, it cannot assist those who do not participate. Nearly 90% of families in North Carolina and 84% of families in Ohio that are struggling with poverty and financially qualify for welfare assistance are not participating. Instead they are struggling alone. Welfare programs and policy makers would benefit from understanding the unique spatial inequalities that impact welfare participation rates, rather than also buying into flawed assumptions of welfare participation.
References


