



Book Review: Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Book Review: Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State</i>
Author(s):	<i>Amber Moodie-Dyer</i>
Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 13 No. 1</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>131047</i>
Page Number:	<i>47</i>
Year:	<i>2010</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

Copyright © by The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work’s Center for Social Work Research. All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

Book Review: *Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State*

Amber Moodie-Dyer

As more and more families are turning to safety net services because of the economic downturn, it is at exactly this moment that the safety net itself is facing so many hardships because of decreased availability of government funding and private giving. In the current economic crisis, Scott W. Allard's book, *Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State*, becomes even more relevant as it attempts to show how environmental factors --such as geographic location, types of services offered, and types of clients served --influence the institutional decisions of safety net organizations. Moreover, his assessment of the problem of geographic mismatch between needs and services has permanent implications for the field of social work in any economic environment. Social workers make up a large portion of the staffing for safety net services, which Allard defines as a "bundle of government and nongovernment antipoverty programs." It is, therefore, critical that social workers be exposed to this type of analysis and that they are able to apply its implications for improved practice, advocacy, policy, and research.

Allard begins by pointing out that despite increased academic and public attention to cash welfare programs since welfare reform in 1996, safety net services are predominantly provided through non-cash assistance, such as job training, child care, housing and food assistance, and other programs which address barriers to employment. Unfortunately, these services are not as adequately understood in terms of their aggregate affects as a safety net on working poor families. The implications of this new type of safety net are profound for many families who must now find ways to connect the dots across large geographic areas to access the services they need. This brings Allard to his primary argument: geography is a critical issue affecting the ability of families to access needed services. The corollary is that it also affects the

ability of safety net programs to succeed. His examination of this issue leads to an exploration of how revenue sources, public opinion, local environmental conditions, safety net provider networks, and government policy choices contribute to this problem.

To explore his argument, Allard utilizes the Multi-City Survey of Social Service Providers (MSSSP) for which he collected data from 1,500 social service providers in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., from June 2004 to August 2005. A technical appendix is provided in the book to give further information about the MSSSP, including the full text of the survey and several tables with detailed findings on the dimensions of characteristics of providers, sources of funding, service delivery responses to decreased funding, and access to services by racial composition, and poverty tract by city. In terms of factors shaping the choice of location of service providers, Allard names affordability and space constraints, zoning restrictions, access to resources, community characteristics such as civic engagement and NIMBYism, and perceptions of service providers about what is best for clients. It is the last piece that has much relevance to social work training and continuing education. Through interviews with providers, Allard finds that proximity to clients is only one consideration while others include safety and anonymity as well as moral decisions on the part of providers that the challenge of finding transportation to work-support programs should emulate the reality clients will face in getting to work every day.

In terms of the geography of the safety net in the three cities studied, findings indicate that safety net providers are more likely to locate in low-poverty census tracts even though the majority of poor families live in high-poverty census tract areas. This creates difficulties for many poor families in accessing services since needs far out-

Amber Moodie-Dyer, MSW is a doctoral student at The University of Missouri, Columbia.

weigh availability, and transportation options are also limited. In addition, Allard finds that race plays a role since areas with higher concentrations of racial minorities also have lower access to needed services, even when controlling for poverty level.

Allard next explores how funding patterns contribute to unequal service accessibility and how this also relates to spatial inequality. Again, findings support a mismatch in that providers in high-poverty tracts are more likely to experience a decrease in funding availability than those located in low and moderate-poverty tracts. Providers in high-poverty tracts also face more difficulty in replacing lost income. Allard's implications are clear: we should be paying more attention to the flow of funds into local nonprofits instead of focusing solely on aggregate social service revenues at the federal and state level. Allard then turns to a comparison of faith-based and secular service providers and their differences in terms of funding streams, location in relation to poverty levels, and client characteristics. Recent attention to faith-based organizations (FBOs) has focused on former President George W. Bush's efforts to increase the role of FBOs through the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and how this may interfere with separation of church and state and increase competition between faith-based and secular non-profits. However, Allard explores how service provision varies across the organizations, whether different communities or populations are served, and implications for how to strengthen the safety net based on these findings.

Out of Reach ends with two chapters which first discuss the consequences of a fragmented welfare state and finally, how service providers, policy makers, researchers, and communities can help to repair the safety net by working under the rubric of its current realities. Allard warns against simply throwing more money at programs, although he emphasizes the importance of, at the very least, maintaining current public funding. He does offer several possible solutions which could work in

tangent with one another to increase access to services for those most in need without a considerable increase in funding. These recommendations include, among others, the following: increased flexibility in the social service sector (i.e., hours of operation, outreach efforts, foreign language capacity, application procedures), more relevant data collection and sharing among providers, increased access points frequented by low-income parents, better public transportation in areas of concentrated poverty, funding streams that encourage service location in places of highest need, and TANF policy changes allowing more flexibility in defining work.. All of these solutions provide areas in which social workers can play a role in service provision, advocacy, research, and community outreach. Allard concludes by saying that in times when budget dollars are tight, it is important to spend social service dollars effectively, and target those most in need. By increasing efficiency and effectiveness, advocates can build more support for increased public investment and more public support for antipoverty programs.

Out of Reach illuminates an important argument for place-based inequality in social service provision. Although Allard explores several factors affecting the spatial mismatch of safety-net need versus location, the book lacks a theoretical discussion about physicality being used as an exercise of power and social control, which is often a tenant in postmodern organizational and institutional theory. This may be beyond the scope of Allard's research; however, it is an important aspect of place-based analysis, especially in light of the debate around the role of social work in promoting social control and maintaining the current social order. Allard also does not address differences in cultural dynamics among social service providers and clients and the possible role this may play in decisions of physical location. However, *Out of Reach*, supplemented with other sources providing this theoretical context, would be an excellent contribution to any social work practitioner or researcher's library.