



# Punishment, Religion, and the Shrinking Welfare State for the Very Poor in the United States, 1970–2010

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## Abstract

The U.S. social safety net for the very poor has been shrinking for several decades. Two factors stand out as potential drivers of this transformation: a neoliberal turn in poverty governance that favors incarceration and other punitive policies and “religious neoliberalism,” which melds neoliberal, anti-statist political ideology with conservative Christian ideals of compassionate assistance administered not by government but through local congregations. Yet these two streams have not been studied simultaneously in relation to welfare retrenchment. Analysis of the demise of state General Assistance (GA) programs using Cox regression models and a unique longitudinal data set shows that higher incarceration rates and higher church density both contribute to the decline of public assistance over time. Findings support the theoretical perspective of religious neoliberalism.

## Keywords

incarceration, religion, welfare, punishment, poverty

## Introduction

Sociologists have chronicled in vivid detail the growth in severe deprivation among the U.S. poor in recent decades (Desmond 2015; Edin and Shaefer 2015). Although overall welfare spending has grown since the 1970s, safety net resources have been substantially redistributed to people just *above* the poverty line (Danziger 2010; Edin and Shaefer 2015; Moffitt 2015). Such policy skimming means that poor populations deemed deserving of aid—such as the elderly, disabled, and working poor—have experienced increases in support while those at the rear of the welfare queue—especially employable, childless adults—have suffered significant cutbacks in income transfers over the same period (Danziger 2010; Moffitt 2015).

Two factors stand out as potential drivers of this welfare state transformation: a neoliberal turn in poverty governance that favors incarceration and other punitive policies over public assistance (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Wacquant 2009) and “religious neoliberalism,” which blends this neoliberal, anti-statist political ideology with conservative Christian ideals of local congregations rather than government as the primary and preferred sites for service to the poor (Hackworth 2012). Both trends tap into longstanding cultural beliefs about *who* deserves state-based welfare support and

*where* the needs of those who do not deserve it should be met instead (e.g., prison or church).

Incarceration, beyond any crime control function, serves as a means of governing socially marginal and dangerous populations, like the unemployed, the homeless, and the mentally ill (Feeley and Simon 1992; Rusche and Kirchheimer [1939] 2003; Wacquant 2009, 2010). Research demonstrates that in the era of mass incarceration, states have traded more generous public assistance budgets for greater incarceration (Beckett and Western 2001; Fording 2001; Greenberg and West 2001; Stucky, Heimer, and Lang 2005). At the same time, religious congregations, long considered a more appropriate provider of charity and mercy to the “undeserving poor” than the state, have been afforded explicit prominence in welfare reform policies over the same time period (Fox 2010; Hackworth 2012; Trattner 1999). In the context of neoliberal policy reforms, such as increasing incarceration and diminishing public assistance, presenting compassionate churches as an alternative

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source of support for the poor may help “soften the hard-edged language of neoliberal social policy” (Hackworth 2012:3) and provide policymakers ideological cover for policy changes that reduce the social safety net. In fact, Hackworth (2012) argues that neoliberalism cannot exist without the support of concurrent nongovernmental social movements, including the revivification of conservative Christianity.

Scholars have examined the relationships between incarceration and public assistance (Beckett and Western 2001; Fording 2001; Greenberg and West 2001; Stucky et al. 2005) as well as those between religious congregations and public assistance (Chaves 2004; Gruber and Hungerman 2007; Hungerman 2005, 2009; Parisi et al. 2002), but to my knowledge, no studies of the decline in state-based welfare for the very poor have examined these factors together. Given their convergence within neoliberal welfare reform, this gap leaves any understanding of the decline in cash welfare for the poor in the United States incomplete. As a first step, this study examines how state-level incarceration rates and church density affect the decline of public assistance for the very poor using the empirical case of state General Assistance (GA) welfare programs from 1970 to 2010.

GA programs were initiated in every U.S. state during the Great Depression of the 1930s (sometimes under the banner of General Relief, Home Relief, or Direct Assistance) and terminated in 22 states between 1970 and 2010. GA programs present an ideal case for examining welfare retrenchment because they are neither funded nor administered by the federal government and so they are particularly sensitive to state-level forces like incarceration and religion. In addition, they have historically provided cash and other benefits (e.g., rental vouchers, medical care) for those at the very end of the welfare line, including single men, homeless persons, and those with disabilities who do not qualify for federal means-tested public assistance programs (Amenta 1998; Anderson, Halter, and Gryzlak 2002; Soss et al. 2011; Trattner 1999; Uccello and Gallagher 1997)—some of the very populations most at risk of criminal justice involvement.

To address my central research question—How are incarceration and religious congregations associated with the decline in public assistance for the very poor, as evidenced by the effect of incarceration rates and church density on the duration of GA welfare programs and the timing of their demise between 1970 and 2010?—I employ a novel, longitudinal state-level data set that reveals the statistical associations between incarceration rates, church density, and the termination of GA programs nationwide using multivariate Cox regression techniques.

## Theoretical Background

### *Neoliberal Poverty Governance and General Assistance Programs*

Previous scholarship argues that the decline in income supports for the very poor is linked to a rise in incarceration,

alongside other punitive policies, as a dominant mode of disciplining or punishing the poor into the low-wage workforce (Soss et al. 2011; Wacquant 2009). This scholarship has characterized the relationship between the welfare state and incarceration as either a *trade-off* between two means of managing marginal and dangerous populations (Beckett & Western 2001; Haney 2004; Wacquant 2009) or a *blurring* of the two systems, in which both punishments and incentives are used as tools of social control toward enforcing participation in low-wage work (Soss et al. 2011).

Some empirical studies support these theoretical frameworks by examining states’ increasingly punitive welfare policies, including time limits and sanctioning (Gustafson 2009; Soss et al. 2011), as well as longitudinal shifts in state-level spending patterns away from welfare and toward incarceration (Beckett and Western 2001; Fording 2001; Greenberg and West 2001; Stucky et al. 2005). Two state-level factors are consistently associated with these trends: the proportion of the total population that is African American and the strength of conservative politics (Beckett and Western 2001; Fording 2001; Greenberg and West 2001; Soss et al. 2011; Stucky et al. 2005). As each increases, states become more likely to diminish public assistance and increase incarceration.

One significant limitation in this line of research is that it has largely focused on welfare programs aimed at serving women and children—Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—even though prisons are overwhelmingly populated by men. Wacquant (2009) argues that these two highly gendered state institutions are two sides of the same neoliberal coin—“prisonfare” for poor men and “workfare” for poor women (Wacquant 2010:200). Yet this research does not account for the decline of public assistance programs like GA, which have historically served higher proportions of low-income, single men of working age, many of whom rely on GA due to spotty work histories brought on by spells of incarceration (Kost 1997). Kost’s (1997) in-depth interviews with 20 men enrolled in GA in Madison, Wisconsin during the early 1990s illustrate how GA served justice-involved men in particular. As one respondent put it:

The only reason I am on it [GA] is because I had a problem, fell back, lost my job, I had a good job, I liked it and everything. But I went to jail. They couldn’t hold that position open for no three weeks. So Bam! Lost my job. Then that’s where welfare came in. (Kost 1997:104)

Demographic data on GA caseloads are not collected uniformly, but existing state-level reports support the assertion that GA programs serve a very different population than other public assistance programs, such as TANF. In several states, men make up 60 percent or more of GA recipients (Danziger and Kossoudji 1995; DeMaster 2012; Ifcher 2010; Washington State Department of Social and Health Services

2012) as compared to 15 percent of TANF recipients nationally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012).

In light of these statistics, I argue that the disappearance of GA programs from many states since the 1970s has left a critical gap in public assistance for socially marginal men, especially those with chronic problems such as homelessness, chemical dependency, and criminal justice involvement (Danziger and Kossoudji 1995; Halter 1996; Kost 1997; Noy 2009).<sup>1</sup> Without understanding the state-level factors that have contributed to GA's decline over time, scholars cannot draw rigorous conclusions about the theoretical relationships between public assistance and incarceration. My study fills this gap by examining the decline of GA programs within the framework of neoliberal poverty governance. After considering prior theory and research, I propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* States with higher incarceration rates will be more likely to end GA programs.

### *Churches and the Welfare State*

As neoliberal welfare reform and incarceration have grown, policymakers on the right and the left have consistently presented religious congregations as appropriate alternative sources of support for the poor. Indeed, sociologists have long argued that religious institutions and deep-seated religious assumptions act as powerful reflections of or justifications for political and economic structures (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Weber [1904] 2001). Thus, in the United States, religious and private charities have held cultural prominence as a preferred mode for meeting the needs of the undeserving poor (Fox 2010; Trattner 1999).

Hackworth (2012) goes further to assert that proponents of neoliberal welfare reform would not have gained the necessary political traction to enact such reforms without the

legitimation provided by other conservative movements, including the rise of the Religious Right. Even if policy initiatives do not actually increase churches' involvement in welfare provision or congregants' support for government antipoverty programs (Chaves and Wineburg 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010), their symbolic appeal provides ideological cover for policymakers pushing punitive reforms to public assistance programs and incarceration policy. As Hackworth (2012:3) argues, "Demolishing public housing, cutting social security, eliminating food stamps, and cutting Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) all sound harsher than relying on the compassion of churches to serve the poor." Melding anti-statist political ideology with evangelical Christian ideals, including prioritizing religion in social policy, forms what Hackworth (2012) terms "religious neoliberalism."

Most conspicuously, the Charitable Choice provision in the Personal Responsibility and Work Reorganization Act (PRWORA) of 1996 explicitly allowed states to contract with religious organizations to provide social services. Democratic President Bill Clinton stated in his 1995 State of the Union address,

I'm proud of the fact the United States has more houses of worship per capita than any country in the world. These people who lead our houses of worship can ignite their congregations to carry their faith into action, can reach out to all of our children, to all of the people in distress, to those who have been savaged by the breakdown of all we hold dear.

These initiatives were heavily critiqued by liberal political and religious sectors, which cited threats to the separation of church and state (Chaves 2001; Owens 2006; Sager 2010). Nevertheless, conservative policymakers espoused a transformational vision for the role of faith-based organizations generally and local congregations specifically as sites of holistic, personal, neighbor-to-neighbor service to the poor.

At least rhetorically, "compassionate conservatism" aimed to access a perceived untapped well of energy, creativity, and human resources embodied by local congregations' "armies of compassion" to provide life-changing care for the poor in ways that the state could or should not (Bush 2001; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Sherman 1995). Policymakers stated that the wide geographic dispersion of religious congregations—nearly 350,000 congregations nationwide (Cnaan 2002; McKeever and Pettijohn 2014)—made them ideal sites to provide for subsistence needs and connect people with broader social networks and supports (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Cnaan 2002). President G.W. Bush referred to churches and other faith-based organizations as "lonely outposts" and "neighborhood healers" readily available to provide compassion to people in need (Bush 2001). Both President Clinton's and President Bush's remarks evoke the geographic density of religious

<sup>1</sup>Homelessness and hunger increased following state reductions in General Assistance (GA) programs in the 1990s, including in Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio (Hauser 1994). More recently, San Francisco replaced its GA program with "Care Not Cash" in 2002, which promised to provide homeless GA recipients with housing in place of cash benefits. While the homeless proportion of the GA caseload fell between 2002 and 2005, only 38 percent of this drop was due to placement in housing (Noy 2009). The remainder simply dropped off the rolls altogether. Shut offs for utilities and evictions nearly doubled for former GA recipients in Pennsylvania after cutbacks in the 1990s (Halter 1996). Health problems also emerged or intensified for those terminated from GA. In Michigan, about 60 percent reported at least one chronic health condition, including hypertension and asthma, two years after GA for employable adults ended (Danziger and Kossoudji 1995). At the same time, only half of these former GA clients were able to maintain health insurance coverage, especially those in Wayne County (Detroit) who were unemployed.

organizations as a signal that welfare supports are more appropriately located in such organizations than in the state.

Local media accounts from throughout the 1990s lend credence to this assertion: State lawmakers explicitly advocated for churches and other community organizations to replace GA programs. For example, in pushing for reductions in Virginia's General Relief program in 1995, then Governor George Allen (Republican) said in *The Washington Post*, "Folks will not suffer from this. . . . Whether it's the Lions or Rotary or churches, there are many organizations that can be involved and are involved" (Baker and Barker 1995). Likewise, Patrick Fallon, a Libertarian candidate for governor in Pennsylvania in 1994, told *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Those unable to support themselves through employment will be forced to rely on family, church, community or private charity. . . . End government welfare, encourage private charity" (Moran 1994).

I submit that constituents hearing such appeals in states with higher church density might be more responsive than others to the argument that state aid is redundant in light of their own charitable efforts through church involvement and private giving. Nationally representative surveys of religious congregations show that at least half offer short-term assistance for the poor, such as housing, clothing, and food (Chaves 2001; Chaves and Wineburg 2010), providing an estimated \$13 billion in subsistence aid nationally every year (Allard 2009). And recent survey data find that religious people are more generous and more civically involved than their secular peers, with higher rates of volunteering and charitable giving fueled by "religious belonging" in congregational social networks rather than by theology (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Moreover, churches may be one of very few sources of financial or in-kind support available beyond family members, especially in rural areas where poverty rates are high, churches are widespread, and social service nonprofits and state support are sparse or absent (Allard and Cigna 2008; Milbourne 2010). As a result, in less population-dense areas, charities operate from "the basement of houses of worship" "on a wing and a prayer" (Edin and Shaefer 2015:101) and may seem, to locals, like the only option for helping the poor. Many local congregations provide volunteer labor and space for other nonprofit organizations seeking to meet the needs of the poor or address allied issues such as chemical dependency (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous meetings) and reentry of former prisoners (Flores 2013). Thus, in geographic areas where churches are more prevalent and religious belonging is more concentrated, the appeal to faith-based aid will be salient to local constituents.

In light of this prior theory and research, I argue that religious congregations, whether in symbol or substance, represent a visible alternative source of aid to which state actors may appeal to dismantle public assistance. In particular, I argue that church density (number of churches per 10,000 people) serves as a signal to policymakers and constituents

that there are in fact "armies of compassion" available and that they are perhaps more appropriately suited than even state-level government to meeting the needs of the very poor. In states with a higher density of religious congregations, state-based welfare programs like GA face elevated risk of termination. As a result, I hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 2: States with higher church density will be more likely to end GA programs.*

## Data and Methods

I estimate Cox proportional hazard models predicting states' termination of GA programs using a first of its kind data set with annual, time-varying data on the presence (or absence) of state GA programs from 1970 to 2010. Event history models are appropriate for answering questions related to timing of events, such as termination of GA programs, in that they use longitudinal data to assess the duration (survival) and risk for a given event to occur (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). Further, Cox proportional hazard models allow me to identify the state-level factors associated with GA programs' survival for longer periods in some states as well as those factors that put GA programs at greater risk of termination in others. Unlike other time-series models, event history models are explicitly comparative (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).

The unit of analysis for this study is state-years. I draw the data for each state and year in the analysis from several sources, including government publications on state GA programs, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the Association of Religion Data Archives. Table 1 provides descriptive information on each variable in this analysis.

## Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is whether a state ends its GA program in a given year, indicated by a dichotomous variable (1 = ended GA, 0 = retains GA). I use a dichotomous measure for two reasons. First, this measure fully captures state actors' policy decisions to end GA programs (or not) and is appropriate for event history models. Second, reliable data on other indicators of GA's presence in a state—including caseload numbers, benefit levels, and client characteristics—are not available at the state level, making longitudinal analysis of these factors untenable for the full time period of interest (Anderson et al. 2002; Soss et al. 2011).

I coded GA present only if the state has a statewide mandate for GA and a functioning program in more than just one locality (Schott and Cho 2011). States with a statewide GA mandate either have uniform eligibility guidelines for the whole state or require that local governments have a GA program but allow such localities to determine their own eligibility and benefit levels. States without a statewide mandate



**Table 1.** Summary Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables, 1970–2010.

Variable	Description	Coding	Mean (SD)	Range
No GA	Termination of GA program	0 = no, 1 = yes		
Incarceration rate	Number of prisoners per 100,000 state population	Rate per 100,000	239.19 (159.48)	20–865
Church density	Number of churches per 10,000 people	Rate per 10,000	12.33 (5.45)	2.00–26.00
Citizen ideology	Average location of active electorate on conservative-liberal continuum	Scale	48.27 (16.01)	6.53–95.97
Republican governor	State has a Republican governor in office	0 = no, 1 = yes	.485 (.500)	
Percentage population African Americans	Percentage of state's total population that is African American	Percentage	9.65 (9.33)	.17–37.44
Population density	Population per square mile	Rate per square mile	166.27 (232.97)	.50–1,189.39
Percentage unemployed	Percentage of the labor force that is unemployed	Percentage	5.93 (2.203)	2.20–44.00
Gross State Product	Sum of the value added by each industry within the state	Millions of dollars	124,143.50 (193,353.80)	1,943.00–1,900,000
SSI recipient rate	Number of SSI recipients per 100,000 population	Rate per 100,000	1,633.42 (1,075.22)	.00–5,245.41
Education spending per pupil	Total spending on K–12 education per pupil	Dollars (in thousands)	7.42 (2.71)	2.60–18.04

Note. GA = General Assistance; SSI = Supplemental Security Income.

for GA are counted as having no GA program. To corroborate the presence or absence of GA in each state and year, I consulted historical government sources, including the *Public Assistance Statistics*<sup>2</sup> (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1970–1989) series (a quarterly federal publication produced from 1966 to 1989) and an unpublished data set from the United States Department of Health and Human Services for 1990 to 1997 obtained from Anderson et al. (2002). For 1997 to 2010, I examined state-level human services reports available online. If such reports were not available, I corresponded via email and phone with state human services employees. I further confirmed each end date using a series of five reports that surveyed states on the presence and characteristics of GA programs periodically between 1969 and 2010 (Gallagher 1999; Nichols, Dunlap, and Barkan 1992; Schott and Cho 2011; Uccello, McCallum, and Gallagher 1996; U.S. Department of Health, Education

and Welfare 1970, 1978).<sup>3</sup> If the presence of a GA program remained unclear in any state-year after consulting these sources, I searched media and legislative sources; in most cases, lawmakers do not remove defunct GA programs from states' legal codes but rather simply defund them, often with little public debate.

Figure 1 maps those states that had a GA program (gray shaded) as of 2010 and those that did not (white shaded). By 2010, 13 Southern states, along with 5 Western states (Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Wyoming) and 4 Midwestern states (Kansas, Missouri, North Dakota, and Wisconsin) had ended GA, while all states in the Northeast retained GA.

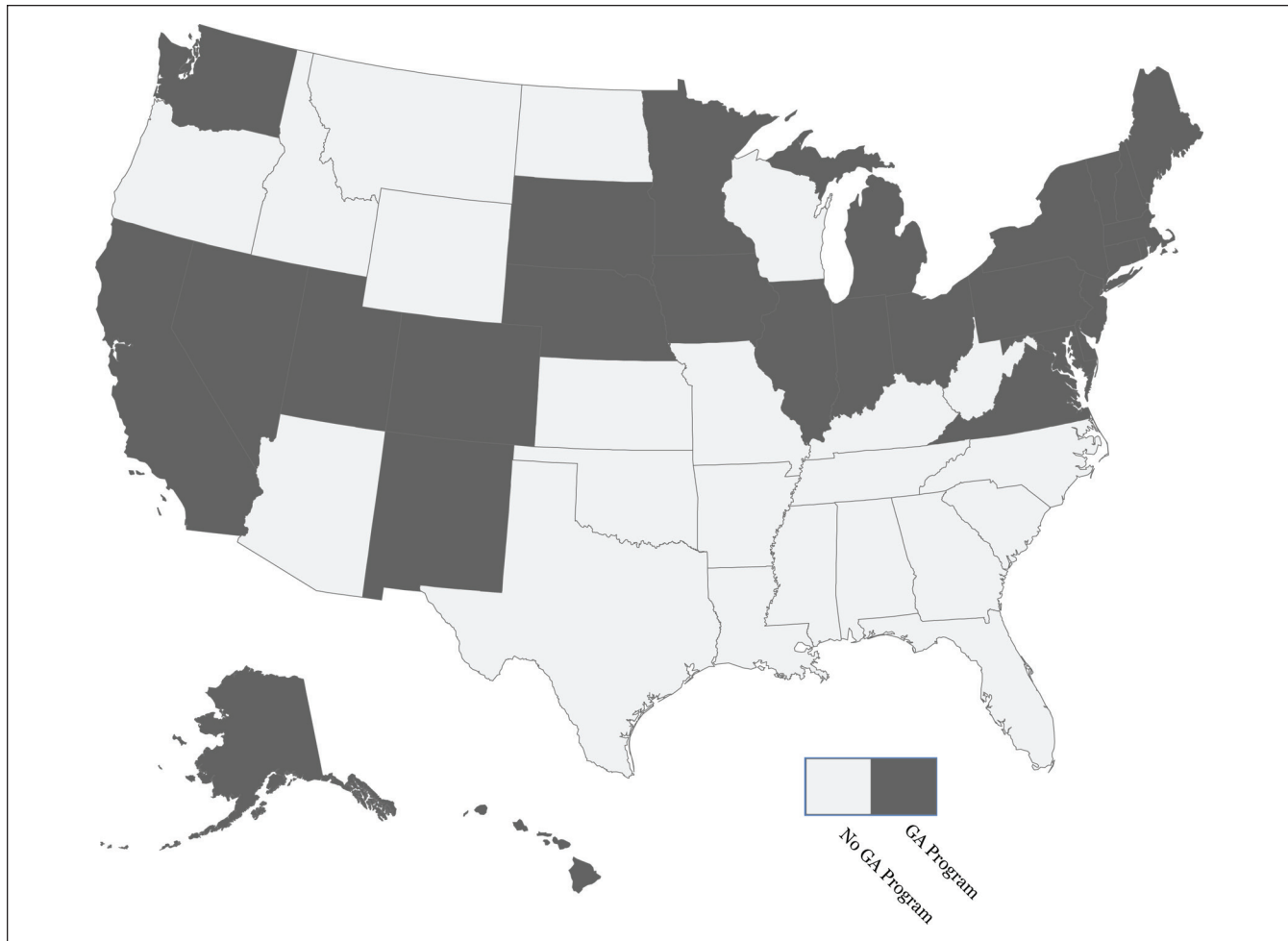
### Independent Variables

There are two focal independent variables in my analysis: incarceration rates and church density. Together, these variables allow me to assess the associations between incarceration, church density, and GA's demise. I use state-level incarceration rates as measured by the number of persons incarcerated in state prisons per 100,000 state residents obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics annual *Prisoners* series reports (U.S. Department of Justice 2005–2010) as well as the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* (U.S. Department of Justice 1973–2004) and *National Prisoner Statistics* (U.S. Bureau of Prisons 1948–1971).

I use church density as my second measure because policymakers have argued explicitly that churches are expected

<sup>2</sup>The title of the publication and the government agency publishing it changed several times over the time period. Early reports were titled *Advance Release of Statistics on Public Assistance*, later changed to *Public Assistance Statistics*, and finally *Quarterly Public Assistance*. For simplicity, I refer to the second title since it was in use for most of the time period as published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

<sup>3</sup>While the authors and agencies responsible for these reports changed over time, the method of data collection remained relatively stable, making them a reliable source of information on the presence of GA in states over time.



**Figure 1.** States with General Assistance programs in 2010.

Source. Schott, Liz, and Clare Cho. 2011. "General Assistance Programs: Safety Net Weakening Despite Increased Need." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved May 16, 2013 (<http://www.cbpp.org/files/10-26-11/pov.pdf>).

to serve as alternative sources of assistance where state aid is cut and that the widespread geographic distribution of religious congregations makes them especially well-suited to the task. Given that this is an institutional-level argument about the geographic distribution of religious organizations, using a state-level measure of the density of such organizations is most appropriate. Moreover, church density is highly correlated with other measures of religious participation, such as the number of adherents and individual charitable giving (Blanchard, Stroope, and Tolbert 2014).

Church density is measured by the number of religious congregations per 10,000 people in each state obtained from the Association of Religion Data Archives's 1971, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 surveys (Grammich et al. 2012; Jones et al. 2002). Because these data are only available at decennial intervals, I perform a linear interpolation to provide annual estimates in the intervening years (adding the average difference between two decennial time points successively to each individual year in between), as is common in generating intercensal estimates for census and other variables (see e.g.,

Clouston et al. 2016; Frimmel, Halla, and Winter-Ebmer 2014; Phillips 2013). For example, Phillips (2013) has employed similar data from the Association of Religion Data Archives to measure the effect of state religious adherence on suicide rates over time by using a linear interpolation for the intercensal years.

### Control Variables

Because research on the neoliberal turn in poverty governance has identified race and conservative politics as key predictors of the rise of more punitive policies to address poverty, I incorporate several measures of those state-level factors as controls. These include two measures of state political climate: citizen ideology (as constructed by Berry et al. 2007) and a dichotomous indicator of Republican governor. The citizen ideology scale ranges from 0 to 100, in which higher scores indicate more liberal citizenry, and was created using data from interest group ratings of members of Congress, election returns for congressional races, and party

affiliation of governors and state legislators (Berry et al. 2007). In addition, I construct a dichotomous indicator of whether a state had a Republican governor in each year as reported in the “Elections” section of the annual *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1 = Republican governor, 0 = not a Republican governor; U.S. Census Bureau 1970–2010). I also include state African American population size as indicated by annual percentages of state African American populations from the decennial census between 1970 and 2010 (using linear interpolation for the intercensal years).

I further control for demographic and economic factors that may be correlated with state-level changes in public assistance. Because prior studies have associated higher rates of unemployment with expanded welfare rolls and higher incarceration rates (Beckett and Western 2001; Fording 2001; Greenberg and West 2001), I include the annual percentage of the state’s population that is unemployed, obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1970–2010). As a measure of a state’s overall fiscal capacity, which may impact incarceration rates and the availability of public assistance, I include Gross State Product (GSP), indicated by the sum of the value added by each industry within the state from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (1963–2010) (Greenberg and West 2001; Stucky et al. 2005). I also include U.S. census estimates of population density, interpolated linearly to produce annual estimates from 1970 to 2010.

In recent years, many states have begun using GA programs as a source of transitional aid for people awaiting eligibility determinations for federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for disabilities (Schott and Cho 2011). To account for this trend, I obtained the rate of SSI recipients per 100,000 people in each state and year from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and the Social Security Administration’s *Annual Statistical Report on the Social Security Disability Insurance Program*. Finally, to account for the possibility that competition among other social welfare programs may affect GA programs’ viability, I include a measure of state K–12 education spending per pupil as collected from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (1970–2010) reports on revenues and expenditures for public elementary and secondary schools from 1970 to 2010 (measured in thousands), standardized in constant 2010 dollars.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Ideally I might also control for state Medicaid spending, however, these state-level data are not readily available over the full time period of this analysis. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services makes state-level tables available from 1991 forward. In a supplemental analysis (not shown, available on request) from 1991 to 2010, Medicaid spending per enrollee is positive and significant in predicting GA termination in the bivariate but not once controls for state demographics are accounted for. Similarly, state-level measures of overall nonprofit density are not readily available until 1995 (National Center for Charitable Statistics). In a supplemental analysis (not shown, available on request) from 1995 to 2010, state-level nonprofit density is not significant in either bivariate or multivariate models predicting GA termination.

## Statistical Methods

Event history models provide advantages over other statistical techniques by explicitly incorporating time and time-varying covariates to analyze why an event (e.g., eliminating GA) occurs within a given unit of time (e.g., a year) and by appropriately modeling censored cases (only including states in the analysis when they are at risk for ending GA). The ability to use time-varying predictors is particularly important in the focal question here because some key predictors (e.g., incarceration rates) have changed significantly over the decades under study. Cox models assume that covariates have a proportional and constant effect such that each observation’s hazard function holds the same pattern over time (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004; Cox 1972). That is, unlike parametric models, Cox models do not specify a baseline hazard rate but instead infer one using the data at hand. Particularly when there is little or no theoretical reason to believe the duration dependency takes a particular form (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004), Cox models are versatile tools. Here, I specify Cox regression models using the following equation:

$$\log \left[ \frac{h_i(t)}{h_0(t)} \right] = b_1 \text{incarc}_i + b_2 \text{church}_i + b_3 \text{citizenid}_i + b_4 \text{repgov}_i + b_5 \text{AfAm}_i + b_6 \text{popdens}_i + b_7 \text{unemp}_i + b_8 \text{gsp}_i + b_9 \text{ssi}_i + b_{10} \text{educ}_i$$

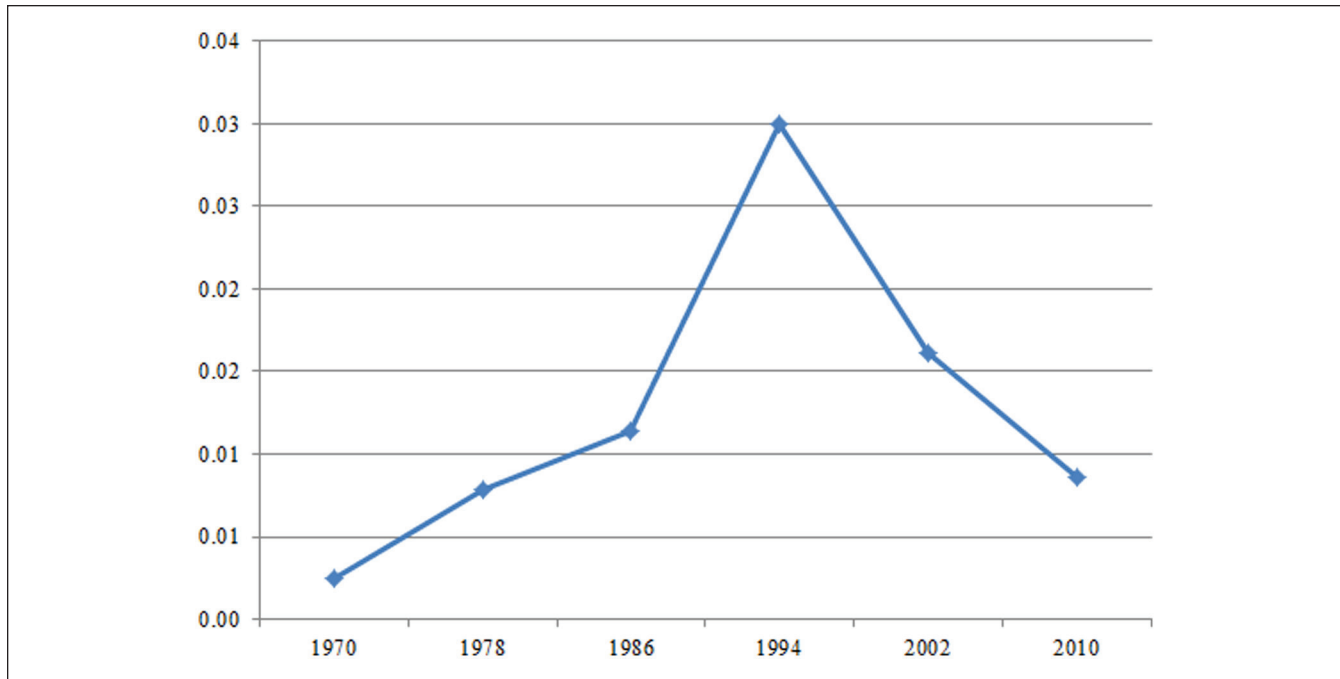
where  $h(t)$  is the hazard rate, and  $h_0(t)$  is a baseline hazard function to be inferred from the data.

The resulting hazard ratios can be interpreted as the percentage change in the hazard of GA ending given one unit change in the predictor variable.<sup>5</sup>

## Results

I begin with demographic life table analysis of GA’s demise from 1970 to 2010 to identify periods of stability and change. These results are displayed in the noncumulative hazard plot in Figure 2, which shows a steady increase in the hazard of

<sup>5</sup>Censoring of observations occurs in these models when their full event history is not observed, either due to failure occurring before (left censoring) or after (right censoring) the analysis period (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). Left censoring is not of concern in this analysis since all states had a GA program in 1970. In 2010, 28 states retained a GA program and so are right censored. Right censoring can be problematic if censored and uncensored cases are treated the same, in which case parameter estimates will be misleading (over- or underestimating the effects of covariates on duration time) (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). By specifying when cases are right censored (using the failure option with the `stset` command in Stata), right-censored cases only contribute information on GA survival until the known censoring point.



**Figure 2.** Hazard plot for General Assistance program termination, 1970–2010.

Note. Noncumulative hazard rate displayed in eight year increments.

GA programs ending between 1970 and 1986. Four states ended their GA programs during this initial time period.

A sizable peak is observed between 1986 and 1997, during which time another 13 states ended their GA programs. Over half of all the states that terminated their GA programs between 1970 and 2010 did so in these 11 years. These coincide with the most active period of federal-level welfare reform, bookended by the 1988 Family Support Act, which emphasized work programs and greater enforcement of child support for AFDC recipients, and the passage of the 1996 PRWORA, which ended AFDC by turning the program over to the states and adding work requirements and time limits to benefit receipt under the new block grant program, TANF. Five more states terminated their GA programs in the late 2000s, bringing the total of non-GA states to 22.

I next estimate a series of Cox models of GA's decline, beginning with bivariate models. All variables are lagged by one year to establish temporal order.<sup>6</sup> Table 2 displays a correlation matrix for all variables in the study in all state-years.

<sup>6</sup>Existing scholarship on the relationship between state public aid programs and incarceration asserts that rising incarceration rates have caused states to disinvest in welfare programs. However, it is plausible that the relationship might be the reverse, such that declining GA availability may increase incarceration. To test this, I included a lead incarceration variable ( $t + 1$ ) in models not shown (available on request). This lead variable is not significant in either bivariate or multivariate models, indicating that it is higher incarceration rates that have contributed to GA termination and not vice versa.

All of the independent and control variables are significantly correlated ( $p < .05$ ) in the expected directions with GA program termination, except for unemployment and education spending, which are not significant. Both incarceration rates and church density are positively associated with GA, ending at .488 and .386 ( $p < .05$ ), respectively.

Among the control variables, citizen ideology is negatively associated with having no GA program ( $-.191$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that states with more liberal-leaning citizenry are less likely to end GA. Likewise, having a Republican governor is positively associated with ending GA (.050,  $p < .05$ ), as are larger African American populations (.312,  $p < .05$ ) and higher SSI recipient rates per 100,000 (.498,  $p < .05$ ). Citizen ideology is negatively correlated with incarceration rates ( $-.103$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while having a Republican governor and larger African American population are positively associated with incarceration rates (.172 and .436, respectively,  $p < .05$ ). Together, these results are in line with prior theory and research: More conservative states with larger African American populations are more likely to curtail state-funded public assistance and have higher incarceration rates.

Moving beyond simple correlations, I estimate bivariate Cox models for each variable to examine how these factors are associated with the timing of GA termination, as shown in Table 3. Each additional person incarcerated per 100,000 state residents increases the hazard of a state ending its GA program by .5 percent ( $p < .05$ ). Likewise, every additional church per 10,000 people increases the hazard of GA ending



**Table 2.** Correlation Matrix.

	No GA	Incarceration	Church	Citizen Ideology	Republican Governor	Percentage African American	Population Density	Unemployment	Gross State Product	Supplemental Security Income	Education
No GA	1.00										
Incarceration	.488*	1.00									
Church	.386*	.001	1.00								
Citizen ideology	-.191*	-.103*	-.370*	1.00							
Republican governor	.050*	.172*	.007	.054*	1.00						
Percentage African American	.312*	.436*	.032	-.267*	-.051*	1.00					
Population density	-.162*	.004	-.514*	.523*	.044	.151*	1.00				
Percentage unemployed	-.044	-.165*	-.058*	.012	-.145*	.100*	.001	1.00			
Gross State Product	.092*	.431*	-.303*	.169*	.126*	.178*	.204*	-.051*	1.00		
Supplemental Security Income rate	.498*	.536*	.232*	.003	.034	.425*	.045*	.068*	.3278*	1.00	
Education	.031	.486*	-.264*	.463*	.178*	-.050*	.397*	-.230*	.399*	.269*	1.00

Note. All variables lagged by one year. GA = General Assistance.

\*p < .05.

**Table 3.** Bivariate Cox Models of General Assistance Program Termination, 1970–2010.

Variable	Hazard Ratio	N
Incarceration rate	1.005* (.002)	1,588
Church density per 10,000	1.134*** (.039)	1,588
Citizen ideology	.950*** (.013)	1,588
Republican governor	.618 (.280)	1,588
Percentage population African American	1.057** (.019)	1,588
Population density (per square mile)	.995** (.002)	1,588
Percentage unemployed	1.146 (.140)	1,588
Gross State Product	1.000 (.000)	1,588
Supplemental Security Income recipients per 100,000	1.001*** (.0002)	1,588
Education spending per pupil	.570** (.097)	1,588

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses All variables lagged by one year. Education spending adjusted to 2010 dollars.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

by 13 percent ( $p < .001$ ). In both cases, states with higher rates end their GA programs more quickly over time.

State political and demographic factors are also significantly associated with GA's decline. Citizen ideology is significantly and negatively associated with GA termination. For every one-point increase in the citizen ideology scale (recall that higher scores correspond to more liberal ideology), the hazard of GA termination decreases by about 5 percent ( $p < .001$ ). A Republican governor, however, is nonsignificant in association with GA ending.<sup>7</sup> Every 1 percent increase in a

<sup>7</sup>Models run with alternative measures, including Republican legislative control and Berry et al.'s (2007) measure of government ideology, produce the same nonsignificant results in both bivariate and multivariate models, although government ideology is in the expected (negative) direction. This nonsignificant association may be due at least in part to the complicated history of conservative politics in the South, where the Democratic Party was the more conservative party during the early years of this analysis, while the "Republican Revolution" in state governorships nationwide was not solidified until the mid-1990s. A closer inspection of the data shows that timing is important since only 9 out of the 22 states that ended GA during the study period did so with Republican governors in office (Alabama, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin). It is also possible that eliminating GA programs has not been politically detrimental for Democratic governors given that these programs serve the least deserving poor and are relatively inexpensive. Politically speaking, GA programs may be seen as low hanging fruit.

state's African American population is associated with a 6 percent ( $p < .01$ ) increase in the hazard of ending GA programs. A one-unit increase in population density is associated with a .5 percent ( $p < .01$ ) decline in the hazard of GA termination, meaning that more populous states are less likely to end GA. This fits with the regional pattern displayed in Figure 1, in which less population-dense states in the South and West have ended GA but all of the population-dense states in the Northeast have retained it.<sup>8</sup> Neither percentage unemployed nor GSP is significantly associated with GA's decline in bivariate models.

Looking to other social welfare variables, we see that each additional SSI recipient per 100,000 state residents is associated with a .1 percent increase in the hazard of GA programs ending ( $p < .001$ ), while each additional \$1,000 in education spending (in constant 2010 dollars) decreases the hazard of ending GA programs by 43 percent ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that states that spend more on education are more likely to retain GA.

Table 4 presents a multivariate Cox model that examines how the focal variables of incarceration rates and church density fare net of each other as well as controls for politics, race, and other state-level factors. This model shows robust, significant, positive associations between the hazard of GA termination, incarceration rates, and church density net of all other variables. Every additional person incarcerated per 100,000 people is associated with about a 1 percent increase in the state's hazard of ending GA, and each additional church per 10,000 state residents is associated with about a 15 percent rise in the hazard of GA termination.

Associations between theoretically relevant demographic and political factors, like state African American populations and citizen ideology, are not significant in this multivariate model. In models not shown (available on request), I investigate how the addition of each variable individually affects the magnitude and significance of others in the model. Notably, when the percentage of the population that is African American is added, citizen ideology drops from significance. Population density, when added to the models, renders both the percentage of the population that is African American and citizen ideology nonsignificant.

This multivariate model shows that the associations between GA termination, incarceration, and church density are remarkably robust even when other influential state-level factors are accounted for. For example, the association

<sup>8</sup>As Figure 1 shows, many of the states that ended GA are located in the South and West. Including regional dummies in the multivariate model renders all other variables insignificant (models not shown, available on request). However, this modeling approach is uninformative about the underlying factors driving such regional differences. Analytically and theoretically, it is more instructive to understand the mechanisms underlying such apparent regional effects. In this case, high church density and incarceration rates stand out as key institutional mechanisms driving GA termination, both of which are prevalent in the South and West.

**Table 4.** Multivariate Cox Models of General Assistance Program Termination, 1970–2010.

Variable	Hazard Ratio
Incarceration rate per 100,000	1.008* (.004)
Church density per 10,000	1.146* (.072)
Citizen ideology	.992 (.019)
Republican governor	.455 (.278)
Percentage population African American	.987 (.040)
Population density (per square mile)	.998 (.003)
Percentage unemployed	1.075 (.196)
Gross State Product	1.000 (.000)
Supplemental Security Income recipients per 100,000	1.000 (.0004)
Education spending per pupil	.786 (.140)
Observations	1,588

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses All variables lagged by one year. Education spending adjusted to 2010 dollars.

\* $p < .05$ .

between church density and the hazard of GA ending cannot be reduced to conservative ideology or population density but rather has an independent, robust association. Likewise, the association between incarceration and GA termination is not simply a factor of race and political partisanship.

The relationship between church density and GA termination warrants further probing since religious denominations differ in the likelihood of providing social services for the poor (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Cnaan 2002). On the whole, conservative denominations (e.g., Evangelical Protestant) are less likely to engage in social service provision, instead emphasizing spiritual conversion in their outreach efforts (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Cnaan 2002). Evangelical church density also varies geographically in ways that mirror the geographic pattern of GA programs as depicted in Figure 1. In 2010, evangelical church density was highest, on average, in Southern states (101 per 10,000), followed by Midwestern states (71 per 10,000), Western states (55 per 10,000), and Northeastern states (30 per 10,000). If, as Hackworth (2012:3) argues, “religious neoliberalism” helped fuel the decline of state-based welfare for the very poor, then given the rise of religious conservatives’ political influence since the 1970s, Evangelical Protestant denomination densities should show a particular association with GA’s absence.

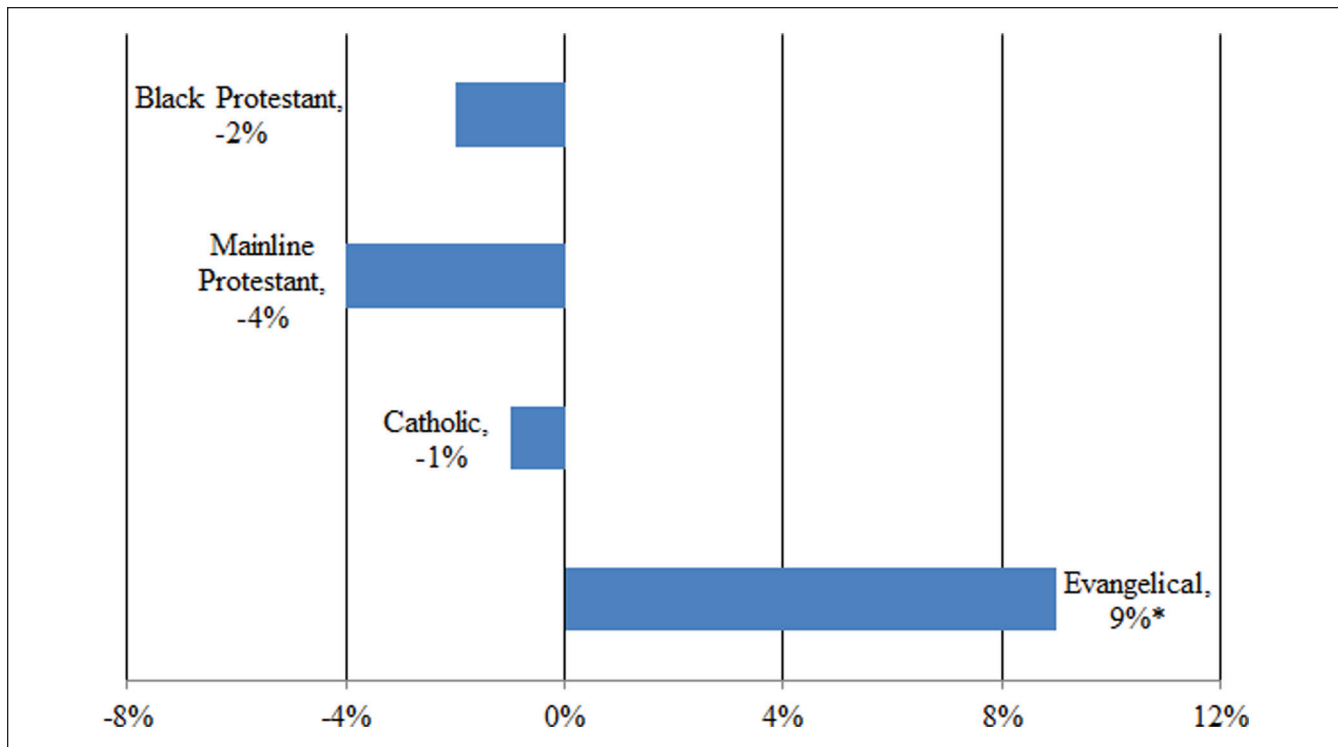
Longitudinal state-level measures of church density by denominational categories (e.g., mainline Protestant, evangelical) are not readily available. Thus, in lieu of a time-series analysis, I perform a cross-sectional logit analysis for 2010 using denomination-specific measures available in the 2010 U.S. Religion Census to examine whether the density of specific denominations are differentially associated with the availability of GA. In this subanalysis, the dependent variable is binary, where 1 = state has no GA program in 2010 and 0 = state has a GA program in 2010. Given the small sample size ( $N = 50$  states), this logit model controls for a smaller set of covariates: citizen ideology, percentage of the state’s population that is African American, and percentage of the population that is unemployed.

Figure 3 displays the results of this cross-sectional logit. States with higher density of evangelical churches are significantly more likely to have no GA program in 2010. Each additional evangelical church per 10,000 residents is associated with a 9 percent increase in the odds of having no GA program in 2010. All other denominations are negatively but not significantly related with the absence of GA programs in 2010. This pattern lends some provisional support to the premise of religious neoliberalism. Policymakers in states with a higher density of Evangelical Protestant denominations may have had greater political traction for diminishing the state-based social safety net, as posited by Hackworth (2012). Put differently, the impetus to dismantle public aid programs may have been buttressed by visibility of conservative religious bodies deemed a reliable and more appropriate mechanism for extending “compassionate neoliberalism” to the poor (Hackworth 2012:49), though the current data preclude making a causal claim in this regard.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to the sociological understanding of recent transformations in the U.S. welfare state in several ways. First, its results provide further evidence of an inverse relationship between state public aid programs and incarceration rates as identified by previous scholarship on the rise of neoliberal poverty governance favoring punitive policies directed at marginalized populations (Beckett and Western 2001; Fording 2001; Greenberg and West 2001; Soss et al. 2011; Stucky et al. 2005; Wacquant 2009). The robust association between higher incarceration rates and the increased hazard of GA termination in bivariate and multivariate Cox models provides support for my first hypothesis. Like other means-tested public aid programs, GA programs are demonstrably vulnerable in states where incarceration rates are higher.

This is also significant new knowledge because the loss of GA programs is consequential, in particular, for those populations at the greatest risk of criminal justice involvement: low-income men, the hard to employ, people with criminal histories, and the homeless. Given these overlapping social



**Figure 3.** Associations between church denominations and General Assistance programs in 2010.

Note. Displayed is the change in the odds ratio of having no General Assistance program in 2010 given a one unit increase in church density for each denomination net of citizen ideology, percentage African American, and percentage unemployed.

problems—including criminal justice involvement, mental health, and substance use (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014)—the disappearance of GA programs from states with higher incarceration rates has further diminished state-based safety net resources available to the highly marginalized. My study provides the first ever longitudinal analysis of the demise of these baseline safety net programs.

Second, my results show that the density of religious congregations, consistently acknowledged as a vital part of U.S. civil society, is implicated in the transformation of the state-based safety net. The hazard of GA termination was highest during the 1990s, as shown in Figure 2, coinciding with an intense period of welfare reform in which national and state policymakers argued that churches were better suited to the provision of welfare services because of their geographic spread and demonstrable charitable work. My event history analysis using Cox regression models shows that higher state-level church density hastened GA's demise over time, even when taking into account other influential state-level covariates like incarceration rates, race, and politics. Although the data are limited, the cross-sectional logit analysis depicted in Figure 3 suggests that the density of Evangelical Protestant congregations is significantly associated with the absence of GA in many states as of 2010, while other denominations are not. These findings support my second hypothesis.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the relationship between the religious sector and GA's demise is not simply reducible to other variables, like conservative ideology or population density. There are at least two possible explanations for why this is the case. First, it could be that churches do in fact provide enough aid to the poor to rival the offerings of GA programs—that is, GA programs truly are redundant where churches are present and active in social welfare efforts. Indeed, GA programs have historically provided rather modest supports, though this varies a great deal by state (Schott and Cho 2011). Yet this explanation is unlikely given that prior research has shown that while religious congregations are an important part of the constellation of non-state institutions that provide assistance to the poor, the resources provided by congregations are too limited to constitute a sufficient and reliable alternative to the government safety net (Chaves 2001; Chaves and Wineburg 2010; Wineburg 2001; Wuthnow 2004). Conservative churches in particular are significantly less likely than mainline churches to engage in social service provision (Chaves 2001; Chaves, Stephens, and Galaskiewicz 2004; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001), though in my logit analysis for 2010, conservative evangelical church density is significantly associated with a lack of a state GA program in 2010. If church-based social services and GA programs were redundant, one would expect to see a significant relationship between a lack of GA and denominations



that typically provide more aid to the poor rather than conservative churches.

A more likely explanation is offered by Hackworth's (2012) concept of religious neoliberalism. While it is unlikely that churches actually serve as an adequate substitute for state-based aid, constituents in states with high church density may be more likely to believe policymakers' assurances that they are. The widespread physical presence of "houses of worship" in such states may serve as a symbolic indicator to residents that, as President Clinton (1995) put it, churches "can reach out to all of our children, to all of the people in distress" in ways that the state cannot or should not, making citizens more receptive to the message that "armies of compassion" are firmly in place, perhaps bolstered by their own involvement in churches and private charitable work.

The evidence from my analysis of GA's decline, then, suggests that for policymakers and citizens in states with higher church density, churches may plausibly represent what Hackworth (2012:27) calls "idealized replacements for the 'failed' state," however inadequate they may be in practice. That is, the role of church density in decreasing state welfare supports like GA may lie in their symbolic resonance with a long-standing ideological preference for private charity (Fox 2010; Hackworth 2012). If true, this resonance is all the more important in a landscape of growing income inequality and ongoing curtailment of state-based welfare programs. Questions continue to arise as to how constituents in poor, rural states can support policies and policymakers that appear to be at odds with their own economic interests. Given that 81 percent of white evangelical Christians voted in the 2016 election for President Trump (Smith and Martinez 2016)—who has already proposed deep cuts to welfare programs like food stamps and disability—the role, perceived or real, of the religious voluntary sector in the social safety net cannot be overlooked by social scientists studying the welfare state.

There are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, there are some variables in the analysis for which longitudinal data were not available or were interpolated to annualize my data set. I made reasonable assumptions in interpolating intercensal estimates for population density and African American populations, but they remain interpolations. Second, I cannot precisely identify the mechanism underlying the association between church density and GA's decline using the current data. The relationship is robust, and I have described potential mechanisms based on prior theory and research, but further multimethod study is needed to fully understand this connection. Multimethod case studies that examine how congregations provide for the poor "on the ground" would be informative, particularly in rural or suburban areas where poverty rates have grown in recent years but social services tend to be more scarce (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2012; Murphy and Allard 2015). Denominational differences are also likely to shed light on the association given that the results of my supplemental logit analysis that

indicates Evangelical Protestant denominations may be most salient in GA's demise.

Limitations notwithstanding, my analysis demonstrates the salience of both state-level incarceration rates and church density in recent transformations of the U.S. safety net, especially for poor people who fall outside the reach of federal programs primarily associated with the support of mothers and children. These transformations leave a considerable—and arguably most desperate—population without access to state aid (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Moffitt 2015). Future research should engage more fully the role that these factors play in the landscape of welfare provision, particularly given the rise in the share of the poor population that is living in extreme poverty and the concomitant demise of state-funded cash welfare for the very poor.

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**Sarah K. S. Shannon** is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Georgia who studies law, crime, and deviance, with a focus on how social institutions like the criminal justice and public welfare systems affect social inequality. Sarah's work has been published in top-ranked journals including *Demography*, *Social*

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