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NEGOTIATING PRIVACY IN THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY: POOR MOTHERS AND
THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADC: Aid to Dependent Children

AFDC: Aid to Families with Dependent Children

CSFP: Commodity Supplemental Food Program

DMV: Department of Motor Vehicles

HCVP: Housing Choice Voucher Program

HERO: Houston Equal Rights Ordinance

HFB: Houston Food Bank

HHSC: Health and Human Services Commission

IRS: Internal Revenue Service

LIHTC: Low Income Housing Tax Credit

NSA: National Security Agency

PROWRA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SSI: Social Security Insurance

SSMC: Sunnyside Multi-Service Center

TWS: Texas Workforce Solutions

WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine how poor African American mothers negotiate privacy given the surveillance they face in seeking help from the social safety net. Whether to establish eligibility for benefits and services or to monitor adherence to program conditions, those seeking public assistance must disclose extensive personal information, submit to unannounced home inspections, and in effect surrender aspects of privacy in exchange for assistance. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 67 poor mothers in a high-poverty neighborhood in Houston, Texas and supplemental ethnographic observation over a three-year period, I explore how these mothers interpret and respond to this surveillance in three domains of life where privacy is thought to be paramount: the home, personal information and intimate family relationships. In each domain, I explain how and why mothers perceive their privacy to be compromised and reveal the strategies they use to carve out pockets of privacy and resist state involvement in these areas of their lives.

I show that in making decisions about if and when to engage with the surveilling safety net, mothers face difficult moral trade-offs in balancing the material needs of their families against their own desires not only for privacy, but also for dignity, respect, and autonomy. I find that in some cases mothers, including those in deep poverty, choose privacy over public assistance. Some turn instead to secular or faith-based non-profits to seek help despite their own disadvantages. Others omit or misrepresent information they wish to keep private or use concealment tactics to resist requirements they experience as emblematic of an unjust and invasive system. Yet given the punitive nature of welfare delivery, these strategies incur consequences for mothers' ability to care for their families and for their self-understanding as mothers and as citizens. I argue that the deprivation of privacy is one overlooked way in which poor mothers are punished for their poverty and denied full social citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a group of residents in Seattle filed a lawsuit against the city, claiming that a new policy was violating their privacy rights through “massive and persistent snooping” (Richardson 2016). They initiated the suit just over two years after Edward Snowden’s revelations that the National Security Agency had been conducting surveillance of American citizens’ routine phone calls and e-mail correspondence (Greenwald, MacAskill, and Poitras 2013). The snooping charge thus evoked images of wiretapping, covert collection of personal information, or sophisticated data capture. These Seattle plaintiffs, however, wanted to protect their right to the privacy of their trash. The city had implemented a policy aimed at curbing the practice of throwing compostable food scraps into regular trash and recycling bins—for the purpose of environmental protection. To enforce the policy, garbage collectors were granted permission to inspect the contents of residents’ trash bins and assess fines to those that were not in compliance. The lead lawyer for the plaintiffs, Ethan Blevins, argued that this practice amounted to a violation of the Fourth Amendment, which protects U.S. citizens from warrantless searches. The plaintiffs summarized their point as follows: “Seattle can’t place its composting goals over the privacy rights of its residents” (Richardson 2016). The King County Superior Court agreed, ruling in April of 2016 that the enforcement aspect of the policy was unconstitutional.

Compare this Seattle case to a lawsuit filed in 2000 by Rocio Sanchez, a mother who, after leaving her abusive husband, applied for food stamps and cash assistance in the city of San Diego (Gilman 2012). San Diego County had recently implemented a welfare fraud reduction effort called “Project 100%,” which subjected all applicants—including those under no suspicion

of fraud—to unannounced home inspections at any time (American Civil Liberties Union 2017). The purpose of these inspections was to find evidence of an unreported boyfriend or other wage earner in the home. When a welfare fraud investigator showed up at Rocio’s new apartment in one such unannounced inspection, he searched through her apartment and inquired about her husband. A few days later, Rocio was at her old apartment gathering her remaining belongings when the same investigator arrived and searched the bathroom cabinets, the bedroom, and the dresser drawers. When Rocio’s lawyers appealed her case to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, the Justices ruled 3-2 that this inspection was not technically a search in legal terms because Rocio could have refused entry to the investigator—though such a denial would have meant that Rocio would lose welfare benefits in San Diego County. The Court went further and specified that even if the visit was a search, it was reasonable, and therefore not a violation of rights, because Rocio received public assistance. They concluded, “...a person's relationship with the state can reduce that person's expectation of privacy even within the sanctity of the home” (Gilman 2012). In other words, seeking public assistance obviated Rocio Sanchez’s right to privacy.

In both of these examples, individuals charged that state surveillance—the systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of regulating or governing behavior—had compromised their privacy rights. But the stark contrast between the rulings suggests that in the United States, individuals’ rights to privacy over their garbage is granted more legitimacy than poor people’s rights to privacy in their homes. Indeed, some privacy scholars and advocates have concluded that there is a class differential in privacy law, with some asking whether privacy is possible at all for the poor (Collin and Collin 1991; Gilman 2012). These two divergent cases also exemplify what surveillance scholar Torin Monahan (2010) has termed “marginalizing

surveillance,” in which disadvantaged groups face entire systems of surveillance that others with more material resources do not (98). Whereas all residents of Seattle—including the poor—would be affected by the garbage inspections, it is only poor people who seek welfare that are affected by the type of surveillance Rocio Sanchez faced.

A legal analysis of cases such as these can tell us something about how jurists interpret claims to privacy in a legal framework and the rationale by which the right to privacy is differentially adjudicated; however, I suggest that such an approach does not help us understand the multi-dimensional consequences of surveillance on its targets—people like Rocio Sanchez. Privacy scholarship and public discourse on privacy has been limited by its primary focus on topics of most concern to middle- and upper-class people, such as confidentiality in online shopping markets (Tsai et al. 2010), digital data sharing by advertisers (Goldfarb and Tucker 2010), and the privacy limitations of expensive home internet products (Bradley 2017). We know far less about the privacy experiences of the poor, who are less likely to have disposable income to shop online or to have reliable Internet access at all (Gilman 2012; Zickuhr and Smith 2012). Scholars of surveillance have theorized about the linkages between the criminal justice and welfare arms of the state, and the gendered and racialized mechanisms through which poor people of color are punished as a result of disproportionate involvement in both (Beckett and Western 2001). However, this research has centered mostly on the criminal justice system, tracing the ways mass incarceration, policing practices, and the stigma of having a criminal record diminish the life chances and constrain the everyday lives of poor men of color. My research brings sociological attention to the often-overlooked privacy experiences of poor African American women with children, who are surveilled largely by welfare caseworkers, not police officers. In this dissertation, I ask how the conditions of poverty shape poor mothers’

capacities to achieve privacy as they seek help from a social safety net that offers assistance at the same time it monitors and regulates their everyday lives.

I draw on interviews with 67 poor African American mothers in a high-poverty neighborhood in Houston, Texas, as well as supplemental ethnographic observation over a three-year period. I focus on how mothers interpret the demands of safety net institutions that they disclose extensive personal information, submit to unannounced home inspections, and countenance systematic monitoring to ensure that they are following the rules and adhering to program conditions. Through mothers' stories, I trace these experiences beyond the welfare office, to their homes, churches, and the intimate domain of their family life, and explain why some mothers report feeling as though they are treated like criminals for being poor. I also show how mothers respond strategically to these demands: they learn to navigate the system to secure the material benefits and services they seek but they also resist what they perceive to be an invasive, unjust system. For some, that resistance means opting out of getting public assistance altogether, seeking only select services or benefits, or turning to non-profits and churches for help despite their own disadvantages. In the context of deep poverty and given the punitive nature of welfare delivery, I show that mothers' engagement with the safety net involves difficult moral trade-offs that incur consequences for mothers' ability to care for their families and for their self-understanding as mothers and as citizens. And although I began this project with a focus on privacy, over time I realized that not only is mothers' privacy compromised when they engage with social safety net institutions, but also, at times, their sense of dignity, autonomy, and freedom. I argue that the deprivation of privacy is one overlooked way in which poor mothers are punished for their poverty and denied full social citizenship.

Towards a Sociology of Privacy

Reflective of the centrality of “rights talk” (Glendon 1991) and the dominant presence of the law in American society (Schauer 2001), social scientific scholarship on privacy has centered primarily on the conception of privacy as a right guaranteed by the legal system (Solove 2010). The trouble with legal treatments of privacy is that they are by definition hemmed in by the framework of the law (Lundsgaarde 1970). As such, they tend to be focused on how privacy claims fit within existing interpretations of the Constitution and historical precedence, normative questions of how much privacy should be granted to individuals and organizations, and philosophical questions as to what quintessentially liberal interests privacy is thought to serve (J. E. Cohen 2013). For example, legal scholars have argued variously that privacy is a prerequisite for dignity (Bloustein 1964), autonomy (Kasper 2007), and freedom (Westin 1967), and that without privacy, the very foundations of democratic society would collapse (Regan 1995). However, most of this work remains at the level of abstraction, focusing on philosophical premises and theories rather than on research with actual people. Further, there is no consensus in this literature as to what privacy is or how it should be analytically operationalized, making it challenging to import these ideas into an empirical analysis (Solove 2010).

Although I do not take up the question of whether poor mothers’ *legal* rights to privacy are violated as they engage with the social safety net, I briefly trace privacy’s conceptual foundations in the law here because as an idea—as a culturally salient symbol of what it means to be a rights-bearing member of American society—the way people think about privacy is imbued with traces of this intellectual heritage. Leaving aside the viability of the claim, for example, that privacy is a prerequisite for freedom, that connection is meaningful if many people

associate the two. If it is widely believed that privacy is deeply intertwined with personhood, it is understandable why Kelly,¹ a mother in this study, would conclude:

If you don't have no privacy, then you don't have nothing. You don't have yourself, because privacy is part of yourself, and if you all exposed then you don't have nothing, nothing really, cause you all exposed.

Kelly was embracing aspects of a cultural repertoire about privacy (Swidler 2001) that rang true for her, and as I later show, her conclusion about privacy shaped the way she responded to disclosure demands she found to be invasive.

In the first articulation of a constitutional right to privacy published in 1890, Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis argued that the legal right to privacy was defined as the “right to be let alone” (S. D. Warren and Brandeis 1890). Warren and Brandeis viewed privacy as a form of protecting personhood, and worried that the rise of instantaneous photography could result in a breach of individuals’ “inviolable personality” as pictures became easier to take and share without permission (205).² The idea of an individual’s defensive right to be “let alone” was eventually applied to individuals’ relationship to the state, as Brandeis later wrote that the Constitution had conferred “as against the government, the right to be let alone—the most comprehensive of rights and the most valued by civilized men” (Brandeis 1928). Other influential legal conceptualizations of privacy include what feminist scholar Anita Allen describes as a “restricted access” formulation (1988:3), such that having privacy means a condition of being relatively inaccessible to others. Social and environmental psychologists have taken up this definition in studies of how people navigate territorial space and adjust to spatial conditions ranging from overcrowding to isolation (Altman 1975, 1977; Schwartz 1968). A key idea here is that people

¹ I use pseudonyms for all research participants to preserve their anonymity.

² The relationship between technology and privacy concerns is a recurrent one. One could easily substitute 21st century technological developments such as keystroke capture or targeted internet marketing (Bast and Brown 2013) into Warren and Brandeis’ article and preserve their main argument.

are continually regulating their accessibility, both based on positive desires to be accessible as well as defensive moves to protect against intrusion by others. This point is especially important in the domain of the home, as I return to in Chapter 2. Because of certain conditions of poverty in Sunnyside—namely surveillance in public housing and neighborhood violence—mothers in this study are often preoccupied with the defensive aspect of privacy rather than its positive or productive functions. For people who do not rely on public assistance—for whom the state does not penetrate the walls of their homes—privacy may take the form of a preference rather than a necessity. For example, in sociologist Christena Nippert-Eng’s (2010) study of mostly middle- and upper-class people’s efforts to achieve privacy in everyday life, one of her respondents spoke of the ongoing “funny little dance” she engaged in with neighbors as she decided whether or not to greet them from the vantage point of her porch. But for the mothers in this study, there was nothing funny about their efforts to maintain a level of inaccessibility with regard to their neighbors—for them, it often was a matter of safety.

Related to the notion of limited access is the most common approach to privacy, which centers on control over personal information (Westin 1967). Political scientist Alan Westin (1967) defined privacy as, “the claim of individuals, groups, and institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others” (7). Critics of this approach argue that this information-based definition is too narrow and is unhelpful for understanding common issues related to privacy, including sexual behavior and bodily integrity. But in the age of Big Data and the increasingly sophisticated data collection techniques available to state and market actors, the appeal of conceptualizing privacy as control over one’s information is clear. And indeed, many of my respondents spoke in terms of a lack of control over their information when engaging with welfare caseworkers in particular, which I

take up in Chapter 3. This lack of control was in contrast to what mothers perceived as the state's outsized level of control over individuals' personal information, in large part because of their access to multiple state agencies' data.

While the legal literature on privacy tends towards an individualistic orientation “based on an image of the rights-bearer as a self-determining, unencumbered, individual, a being connected to others only by choice” (Glendon 1991:48), sociologists have approached privacy as a social construct that is relational (Foddy and Finighan 1980; Nippert-Eng 2010; Steeves 2009). For scholars in the symbolic interactionism tradition, privacy is thought to be achieved through social interaction—a process through which individuals demarcate the boundaries between self and other and also negotiate their own identity (Foddy and Finighan 1980). This approach is distinct from most legal theories of privacy and the self, which scholar Julie Cohen (2013) argues presume an “autonomous, precultural core” that exists prior to and separate from the social world (1908). Instead, a relational approach emphasizes how individuals “do privacy” (Nippert-Eng 2010) through a process of continually adjusting their boundaries to allow for “pockets of accessibility” (and inaccessibility) to others (6). These efforts at boundary regulation are central to the process of self-definition, in making a claim for oneself as an individual in relation to society (Nippert-Eng 2010; Schwartz 1968).

This shift to conceiving of privacy as relational and inherently social is especially critical for a study of poor African American mothers, who in their role as conduits for public assistance are often at the center of a web of interdependent social relations. Mothers in this study are often responsible for sharing benefits with loved ones who are ineligible for public assistance because of a criminal record. In engaging with the safety net, then, mothers are never only negotiating control over their own personal information; they are also facing hard decisions about whether or

not to disclose information about other family and household members, romantic partners, and their children as part of the state requirements for receiving welfare benefits. Not being able to control one's accessibility to others can have negative consequences (Altman 1975). Georg Simmel (1906) used the imagery of an "ideal sphere" that surrounds every person, and compared the desire to maintain control over one's ideas, thoughts, and feelings to the desire to protect one's material property, noting that any interference with one's "intellectual private-property"—through a violation of one's boundaries—is akin to a "lesion of the ego at its very center" (103).

Central to the notion of privacy as a process of boundary management is the idea that privacy is non-monotonic (Nippert-Eng 2010; Schwartz 1972). In other words, having too much privacy or too little privacy can be problematic; the ideal level is both person- and context-dependent. The importance of personal preference and social context is critical here. For example, a nudist's idea of the ideal level of physical privacy is full exposure—another individual might consider that to be not nearly enough privacy. Some mothers in this study found the required disclosures as part of the welfare application to be benign; others felt they were extremely invasive. Regarding context, what counts as a good level of privacy during a visit to the gynecologist's office will likely look very different than what would be considered good privacy at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), as the privacy norms governing each domain are different. In the former, one might expect to answer questions about sexual behavior—if the same questions were asked during a routine vehicle inspection, it would likely be interpreted as a violation of privacy. One of the chief complaints mothers in this study offered with regard to the questions posed during the welfare application process—in particular the questions about fathers' identity—was that they seemed irrelevant to the service or benefit

mothers were requesting. For them, the context was inappropriate, making the experience feel invasive.

The preceding section should make clear that privacy is multi-dimension and multi-vocal. Privacy does not mean the same thing across contexts, nor can it be reduced to set of necessary and sufficient conditions indicating that it is either present or absent. Sometimes privacy takes a physical form, connoting solitude and at the extreme, isolation. But privacy can also refer to control over personal information—indexing the extent to which individuals are able to manage how much information other individuals and organizations can have about them. Finally, privacy can express a person’s ability to be “let alone” to make intimate decisions free of government interference. Rather than bemoan the complexity of privacy, the approach I take in this dissertation most closely resembles that of privacy scholar Daniel Solove, who argues that privacy is best understood by taking a bottom-up, pragmatic approach that eschews a priori definitions of what privacy is. Drawing from Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances,” Solove (2010) calls on privacy researchers to avoid searching for a universal definition or conceptualization of an idea that has consistently proved irreducible (40). Instead, he implores us to be open to the multiple other concepts that privacy touches on, such as dignity, liberty, and autonomy. He suggests that we look to the concrete, situated social conditions in which privacy problems emerge to try to understand what they mean to people in that context. In conducting this study, I heeded his advice, and worked not to impose a notion of privacy on my respondents, but attempted rather to listen to and inductively learn from their experiences.

Poverty, Surveillance, and the Social Safety Net

A key limitation of existing privacy studies outside the legal domain is that they have not taken seriously the ways that enduring structural conditions—such as poverty—differentially constrain and enable people’s capacities to achieve privacy. The relationship between structural factors such as status, power, or class and privacy has been theorized in the literature on privacy, but rarely has it been studied empirically.³ Instead, there seems to be tacit agreement that being in a position with high status and high institutional power necessarily yields more privacy, or at least the capacity to achieve more privacy. This line of thinking rests on the assertion that privacy reflects and reinforces status hierarchies, whether expressed in terms of class, gender, or other dimensions of difference (cf. Coser 1965; E. Goffman 1959; Kasper 2007; Schwartz 1968; C. Warren and Laslett 1977).

In thinking through this question about privacy and status, I see two mechanisms through which poverty may constrain privacy. First, because they lack material resources, the poor are often less able than more affluent people to pay for tools that enhance opportunities for privacy. For example, internet providers now offer customers a service that eliminates “snoopvertising,” or the practice of collecting data on users’ browsing habits and then using them to target advertisements based on these data (Luckerson 2015). The use of private cars as opposed to public forms of transportation is another key opportunity for physical privacy that depends on having the resources to attain a car. Structurally, affluent neighborhoods often include yards and landscaping that shield homes from others’ view, security cameras that allow residents to control who enters their property, and treated windows that allow residents to look out but preclude others looking in—all privacy-enhancing amenities that require disposable income. Further,

³ Notable exceptions include (Bridges 2011; Gilliom 2001; Kissane 2003; Luckerson 2015).

within the home there was historically a lack of separation between the front and back regions of poor and working class homes, compared to upper class homes that typically included physical spaces where residents could seek refuge (E. Goffman 1959; Kasper 2007). Whether or not residents perceive overcrowding or limited space as producing a privacy problem is a separate question; however, some mothers in this study did nominate crowding as a reason they had little privacy within their homes, an issue I address further in Chapter 2.

The second key mechanism through which poverty may constrain poor people's privacy—and the one most critical to this study—is through their overexposure to surveilling institutions that collect and analyze information for the purpose of monitoring or governing (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Surveillance can take many forms, ranging from the covert collection of digital data without users' knowledge (e.g. the NSA) to overt, physical approaches like that used by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), in which airline passengers' bodies are scanned and sometimes searched. State and market actors use surveillance for myriad purposes, including the facilitation of efficiency, the enhancement of security, and the maintenance of social control (Lyon 2001). Historically, research on surveillance has faced similar limitations as that on privacy, in that it has focused on surveillance systems themselves, not their targets.⁴ Increasingly, however, surveillance scholars have begun to focus attention towards the types of surveillance that disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups, including the urban poor and racial minorities. These marginalizing surveillance practices constitute a separate system entirely, as opposed to surveillance systems such as the TSA, to which everyone is exposed (Monahan 2010).⁵

⁴ See Brayne (2014) and Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel (2014) as exceptions.

⁵ Certain racial and ethnic minorities, as evidenced most recently in the aftermath of President Trump's 2017 travel ban on passengers from majority-Muslim countries, often face a more extreme form of corporeal surveillance at

Such studies tend to focus on surveillance as part of the criminal justice system, including practices like stop-and-frisk (Brunson and Miller 2006), traffic stops (Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014), and police raids (A. Goffman 2009) which most directly affect poor African American and Latino men. The effects of these types of law enforcement surveillance practices include decreased community trust in police (Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014), avoidance of other record-keeping institutions including hospitals (Brayne 2014), and the restriction of movement for fear of encountering law enforcement (A. Goffman 2009; Stuart 2016). The comprehensive impact of routine, intensive criminal justice surveillance of poor communities of color is hard to overstate, particularly as its logics and practices have been incorporated into institutions such as public schools (Shedd 2015). But there is less research on surveillance as part of the welfare system, which takes a different form and most directly affects poor women of color, in particularly African American and Latina women who are disproportionately represented among welfare recipients relative to the overall population (Morin, Taylor, and Patten 2012; Parenti 2003). Whether applying for cash assistance, low-income housing, or subsidized childcare, applicants for public assistance must disclose a great deal of personal information to state bureaucracies. Further, such programs monitor and supervise recipients to ensure compliance with myriad rules and requirements. And because poor people's social networks tend to include others that are also financially strained and therefore are able to offer only limited material support, they are less able to avoid these surveilling institutions.

The welfare surveillance that I focus on in this dissertation is not a new phenomenon—since the earliest forms of “relief,” poor people have been scrutinized and monitored to

airports that constitutes a version of marginalizing surveillance. Transgender and gender-nonconforming people also face heightened physical scrutiny at the hands of the TSA (Currah and Mulqueen 2011).

determine whether and how much assistance they need as well as to ensure their moral worthiness (Eubanks 2006; Gilliom 2001; Katz 1989). These practices distinguish government subsidies made to the poor from government subsidies to farmers, corporations, and charities, whose need for assistance is not cast as dependency and for whom far less invasive tactics are used to verify eligibility (Fineman 2000; Handler and Rosenheim 1966). However, technological advances in data capture, analysis, and the capacity for agencies to share data have changed the surveillance landscape, extending the state's reach in ways that may impact privacy (Eubanks 2006).

Poverty scholars have amply documented the demeaning and degrading nature of welfare delivery. Included in these “rituals of degradation” (Piven and Cloward 1971:166) are surveillance practices (Gilliom 2001). Welfare recipients have long resisted what they perceive to be the invasiveness of the questions, the extent of personal information required, and the implicit presumption that welfare recipients are to blame for their poverty (Katz 1989; Levine 2013). Scholars have emphasized other onerous features of welfare including the long waiting times and overcrowded offices (Auyero 2012), the hassle of dealing with the complex bureaucracy (Watkins-Hayes 2009), caseworkers' poor treatment of clients (Levine 2013), and the punitive measures applied to those that do not follow the compliance requirements instituted as part of welfare reform (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Taken together, these features have been characterized as a way of punishing the poor and also disciplining them into the type of subject for whom such treatment is acceptable and appropriate (Auyero 2012; Gustafson 2011; Wacquant 2009). Yet, within these studies, privacy has not been a central focus (see Gilliom 2001 as an exception). Finally, this body of work often focuses specifically on the delivery of

welfare, rather than taking a more comprehensive look at people's experiences with other safety net institutions that increasingly include non-profit organizations and churches (Allard 2009).

My Study

This study focuses on African American mothers living in poverty, a demographic largely excluded from the earliest forms of localized welfare, “mothers pensions,” as well as from the Aid for Dependent Children program, the first federal welfare program established in 1935 (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Roberts 1997). Despite this initial exclusion, the word “welfare” has long since derisively evoked the image of African American mothers (Hancock 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). This complex of attributes—woman, African American, mother, welfare recipient—comprises an intersectional mix of marginalized identities that have historically been subject to coercive regulation by the state, especially in the domain of sexuality and reproduction (Hancock 2003). These practices have their roots in the institution of American slavery (C. J. Cohen 1997; Perry 2011) and evolved over time to include the systematic sterilization of non-consenting women in prison until as late as 2010 (Johnson 2013), the imposition of “family caps” that deny public assistance to additional children born to mothers on welfare (Roberts 2005), and the practice of providing monetary incentives for welfare recipients that use long-acting birth control methods (Flavin 2010). Of note, the repression of reproductive freedom among lower income African American women has persisted as efforts to facilitate reproductive technologies for wealthier and mostly white women have proliferated (A. Davis 1981; Roberts 2005; Shanley and Asch 2009).

The very architecture of welfare rests on the notion that poor families of color are deviating from a normative model. The logic is that the state must step in to fill the missing

bread-winning role of the absent father in a heterosexual nuclear family—the stereotypical deadbeat dad (Haney and March 2003). Reflecting this idea, one impetus for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the welfare reform legislation of 1996, was to curb the rising “illegitimacy rate” among African American families (Personal Responsibility Act, H.R. 4, sec. 100). The tethering of welfare receipt to child support enforcement, which I take up in Chapter 4, makes plain the pathway for poor families to make themselves “legible” to the state (Scott 1998:2)—only by accounting for fathers and pulling them into the system. And the state has relied on sticks, rather than carrots, as the way to coerce families into achieving this goal. This approach extends beyond the welfare office to other domains including subsidized housing and subsidized childcare, both of which include extensive rules and sanctions for noncompliance. At times the state may operate indirectly, for example through individual property managers who rent to tenants with Section 8 vouchers, and as such can be hard to see until it is made visible through tactics of punishment such as eviction. Further, non-state institutions sometimes adopt the logic of welfare in delivering services. So when the mothers in this study engage with social safety net institutions, they encounter a system that is regulatory—and punitive—by design regarding some of the most intimate domains of life (Flavin 2010). And this regulation and punishment is achieved in part through requiring mothers to overexpose themselves and their families through voluntary and involuntary disclosures. Yet, the extent of the state’s surveillance capacities to acquire clients’ personal data whether or not they disclose it is key, and makes this study a timely contribution to previous work in this area (Gilliom 2001; Watkins-Hayes 2009). As I show, as targets of this surveillance, mothers receive negative messages about their claims to privacy, dignity, and respect as well as their perceived worth as mothers and as citizens.

This study is primarily based on in-depth interviews I conducted with 67 poor African American mothers living in the Sunnyside neighborhood in Houston, Texas between 2013 and 2016. I conducted follow-up interviews with 17 of these mothers, with some mothers participating in up to four interviews over the study period. Sunnyside is a high-poverty neighborhood, with over 30% of residents living below the federal poverty line (American Community Survey 2015). In addition to interviews, I conducted supplemental ethnographic observation while volunteering at social service outreach programs in the neighborhood, including food pantries and events sponsored by non-profit organizations and churches. As part of my volunteering, I was trained by staff at the Houston Food Bank to assist food pantry patrons in filling out the initial application for public assistance. I also interviewed 13 social service providers, including those working in the welfare office, secular non-profit organizations, and faith-based organizations, and had numerous informal conversations with other volunteers. The observation and interviews with providers yielded key data on the application and eligibility processes across settings and also helped me triangulate mothers' stories and my own observations.

I describe Sunnyside in detail in Chapter 1. I do not conceive this dissertation as a classic neighborhood study, as my research question concerns a social process that I do not have reason to believe is specific to Sunnyside or any particular neighborhood. However, pursuant to my claim that achieving privacy is best understood as a situated, contextual process, examining the conditions under which mothers negotiate this process is important. I did not screen potential interviewees for their income, though I explained that I was interested in the experiences of mothers who had sought help from the safety net. Therefore, a few mothers in this study were not living in poverty at the time I interviewed them; however, all had been in poverty during

some period of their lives. These broad inclusion criteria allowed me to see a range of perspectives, including from mothers and grandmothers who had experiences with safety net organizations from many years prior.

Participants learned about this study in numerous ways. A key informant with deep ties in the Sunnyside neighborhood facilitated my early interviews. I also posted flyers in public venues throughout the neighborhood including at laundry mats, the library, fast food restaurants, apartment complexes, and churches, and, with permission, brought a stack of flyers to social service outreach events where I was volunteering. Flyers indicated that the study was about how mothers managed the day-to-day challenges of rearing children on a tight budget and on mothers' experiences with social service organizations. I conducted interviews in a range of locations, including a local McDonald's restaurant, the public library, and in participants' homes (see Appendix for more detail). At the start of each interview, I gave participants a \$20 gift card to Walmart as a thank-you for their time, a choice that I discuss further in the Appendix. Interviews ranged in length from approximately thirty minutes to two and a half hours and were intentionally open-ended and conversational. At the close of each interview, I asked participants if they were willing to recommend other mothers who might be interested in participating.

Because I did not want to presume that privacy was a salient issue for mothers, I did not introduce the word "privacy" when asking about mothers' experiences with social service agencies unless or until they used that term. Instead, I asked what sorts of questions they were asked when applying for assistance and how they felt about them, about their impressions and experiences with caseworkers and social service providers, and about how they managed the challenges of raising children under financial strain. Over time I became more interested in the idea of privacy at home after having interviewed several mothers living in subsidized housing. In

subsequent interviews I asked mothers directly whether they felt that they had enough privacy at home, then probed what that meant to them.

Sixty-three of the women I interviewed identified as African American, and four identified as Hispanic. Respondents were on average 35 years old and had between two and three children. Three-fourths of my respondents made less than \$15,000 per year, and over a third made less than \$5,000 per year, compared to the median household income in Houston which was \$61,465 in 2015. Many of my respondents experience what some call “deep poverty” or “severe deprivation,” meaning that they experienced hardship in multiple domains that was “acute, compounded, and persistent” (Desmond 2015:3). I provide more demographic details about my sample in the Appendix.

Chapter Outline

In this dissertation, I follow mothers through domains of their lives in which aspects of their personal privacy are compromised as a result of engaging with the social safety net to seek assistance. I begin in Chapter 1 by providing an overview of what the social safety net looks like for residents of Sunnyside, including the extent to which social service provision is available as well as accessible. I outline the basic requirements and program conditions for public assistance in Texas, as well as what is generally required for secular and faith-based non-profit service provision. I also describe the history and contemporary cultural fabric of Sunnyside and Houston more broadly, to situate mothers’ experiences in a longer view. In Chapter 2, I examine how the conditions associated with neighborhood poverty in Sunnyside—specifically the surveillance system in subsidized housing and the high rates of violent crime—together constrain mothers’ opportunities to achieve privacy at home. I show that mothers are overexposed by the constant

surveillance they face within and outside of their homes, which for mothers results in a sense of diminished freedom. At the same time, their preferred response to violence—staying inside with their children—makes achieving physical privacy within the home a challenge.

In Chapter 3, I compare how mothers' engagement with the welfare state differs from their experiences seeking help from secular and faith-based non-profit organizations, including churches. I demonstrate that in the welfare office, mothers object to the amount and depth of personal information they are required to disclose; however, what makes these disclosures feel like a violation of privacy has less to do with the content of the particular questions than the process by which caseworkers collect this information. Caseworkers' practice of asking the same questions repeatedly and pervasive reminders of the state's power to punish clients that do not tell the truth underscores mothers' perception that they are categorically treated with suspicion, and they resist being lumped together with others thought to represent the "undeserving poor." And while the welcoming atmosphere, the limited disclosure requirements, and the lack of a punitive element would seem to make seeking help from churches and non-profits more appealing in terms of privacy, I show that this is not the case. Instead, mothers do not want to be seen by other community members utilizing services meant for the "neediest" among them, which lead some to avoid seeking help from these sources in an effort to avoid stigma and preserve their sense of dignity.

In Chapter 4 I delve more deeply into the one disclosure requirement most mothers highlight as invasive of their privacy—fathers' identity—to reveal the practical consequences for poor mothers of being put in the position of trading personal disclosures for public assistance. This requirement is used to help the state enforce child support against non-custodial fathers, whether or not mothers wish to open a case. I argue that what drives mothers' resistance to this

question goes beyond the immediate privacy concern, and instead turns on at least three consequences related to this disclosure. First, mothers' informal support systems, including pooling resources from extended kin and exchanging in-kind forms of support like childcare, can become endangered if fathers and/or fathers' extended family members are angered by mothers' decision to let the state file a formal child support order. In addition, by exposing their [often poor] children's fathers to the welfare system, mothers risk being held responsible for ensnaring them in the criminal justice system either if fathers are unable to pay—and are thus punished with jail time—or by extending their time in jail if they are already incarcerated. Finally, since the child support requirement is not optional, mothers that do not wish to file a child support order, but do so to get public assistance, often feel as though their sense of agency in managing if and how they interact with the children's father is compromised.

In Chapter 5, I trace the various strategies mothers use to respond to the disclosure demands, program conditions, and the surveillance they face as they seek assistance from safety net institutions. These include: 1) intentional concealment, 2) performing cooperation, 3) agitating and advocating, and 4) opting out of seeking aid. I show that these strategies involve material and symbolic tradeoffs for mothers as they engage with the social safety net. Some strategies result in mothers gaining assistance at the expense of their sense of integrity, privacy, or dignity, whereas others lead to mothers losing out on needed material resources but preserving these symbolic resources. I argue that mothers traverse a tricky moral terrain as they negotiate these trade-offs.

CHAPTER 1: SUNNYSIDE'S SAFETY NET IN CONTEXT

Houston is a study in contrasts, especially viewed from the vantage point of Sunnyside. A 2013 *Houston Chronicle* newspaper article published two months prior to my first visit to Sunnyside illustrates this point, albeit perhaps inadvertently. Most of the article details a then-recently released report by a firm called NeighborhoodScout that named Sunnyside as the sixth-most dangerous neighborhood in the country (Stanton 2013). The report was based on data from the FBI and local law enforcement, and listed the violent crime rate per 1,000 people as 91.27, meaning that a Sunnyside resident had a 1 in 11 chance of becoming a victim of violent crime in a given year. The article described Sunnyside as a historically African American neighborhood and provided quotes from a man who grew up there about his fears coming back into the neighborhood to visit his mother. But the last two paragraphs abruptly switch gears, as the author segues into the next topic with the phrase, “But on a lighter note...” before reporting that the Houston metro area was listed sixth among the nation’s top twelve “Boomtowns,” as measured by population growth and growth in gross domestic product. This designation fits neatly into the narrative of Houston, dubbed by sociologist Joe Feagin (1988) as “The Free Enterprise City,” as it has always been known as a business-first city that, like the state of Texas itself, privileges entrepreneurship and commercial success combined with small government and minimal regulatory oversight.¹ But the article doesn’t exploit the opportunity to note the juxtaposition of these seemingly contradictory designations. The author doesn’t question why booming citywide growth (during the Great Recession, at that) didn’t seem to touch Sunnyside, a neighborhood

¹ In fact, the ideology of “small government” refers more specifically to low levels of investment in public services and a rejection of federal funding for welfare and related social services. Large government subsidies in the realm of building, transportation, and development have been instrumental in driving growth that is instead credited to a “laissez-faire,” small government approach (Vojnovic 2003).

experiencing declining population and persistently high poverty and unemployment rates—quite the opposite of a boom. Instead, as was the case in other articles written about the dangerous neighborhoods report, Sunnyside was painted simply as a ghetto.



Figure 1. Original wooden-framed house with an open ditch in front. Photo by the author, 2014.

But as I drove into Sunnyside for the first time—a short 12-minute drive from downtown Houston—I saw very little resembling the popular images or stereotypes of what a “ghetto” looks like (Small 2008). Having lived in Philadelphia, Oakland, and New York City and having done research in low-income neighborhoods across these cities, I was not a stranger to how urban poverty can shape neighborhoods. But I was surprised at what I saw in Sunnyside, which has fittingly been described as “rurban” (Longoria and Rogers 2008), given the mix of what are considered more typically urban features and those that are more common in rural areas. Driving into Sunnyside past the wooden sign designating it as a “Historic Houston Community,” this description immediately rang true. Wooden framed single-family homes with porches and spacious, albeit often overgrown yards, lined the street. Rusted out cars and pickup trucks



Figure 2. Wooden-framed house on a residential street; multiple cars parked in the front yard. Photo by the author, 2014.

that looked as though they had been parked there for years sat in front lawns buffered by open ditches instead of sidewalks. Churches, some of them just one-room buildings hoisted up onto cinder blocks to avoid the frequent flooding that plagues even the most affluent Houston neighborhoods, seemed to be located on nearly every block. And horses could be found grazing



Figure 3. Church of Christ on Sunflower Street, set up on cinder blocks. Photo by the author, 2014.



Figure 4. Grace Temple, a one-room church with one window covered in cardboard and bars on the doors. Photo by the author, 2014.

in the occasional backyard or in the open swaths of land that border Sunnyside to the south.

These images reminded me of the poor rural areas where my relatives live in Arkansas, not what I would expect to find near Houston's city center.

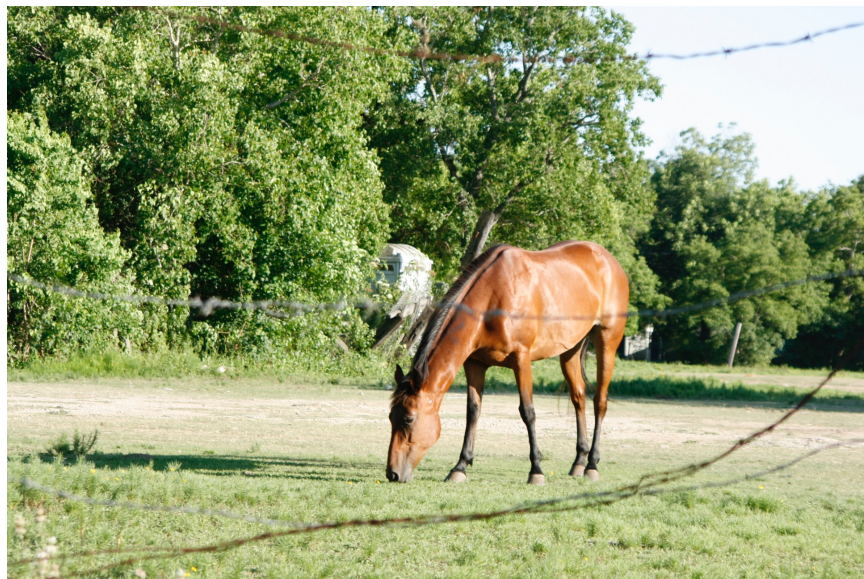


Figure 5. A horse grazing in the pasture across from the Sunflower Terrace project-based Section 8 housing complex. Photo by the author, 2014.

Yet, in a jarring departure to these rural features were reminders of why Sunnyside has been labeled a ghetto, and how it ended up on the dangerous neighborhoods list. Homemade memorials to victims of gun violence—teddy bears, balloons, and plastic flowers—sat on street corners throughout the neighborhood, highlighting the grim human reality underlying Sunnyside’s slot on that notorious list. Emaciated stray pit bulls roamed the streets,



Figure 6. Residential street with no sidewalks and open ditches. Photo by the author, 2014.



Figure 7. A man walking by a boarded up wooden-framed house with a “No Trespassing” sign on the front. Photo by the author, 2014.

scrounging for scraps, and I saw men who looked weathered from years of drinking passing their days walking the streets or sitting at bus shelters with bottles of beer masked in paper bags, shielding themselves from the usually blazing sun.



Figure 8. Rubble piled outside a vacant home, including couches and children's toys. Photo by the author, 2014.

On the narrower side streets, the open ditches provided a dumping ground for what often looked to be the guts of recently and rapidly vacated homes: tattered couches, children's toys, and mattresses. The scourge of eviction and forced relocation and the impact of depopulation were visible. Many homes looked as though they were barely standing, and a fair number were boarded up, with spray-painted signs deterring would-be trespassers from entering.

The commerce on offer along the two main thoroughfares in Sunnyside mirrors that in other poor urban areas: fast-food restaurants, check cashing and cash advance storefronts, and beauty supply stores. Only one full-service grocery store serves the entire area. Many of these businesses lack windows, and those that do cover them with heavy iron bars, signaling the reality of frequent robberies. The same type of bars cover the windows of one of the several project-

based Section 8 apartment complexes in Sunnyside, leading residents to nickname it “the Jail House.”



Figure 9. A one-room barbershop surrounded by a chain-link fence. Photo by author, 2014.



Figure 10. Signs advertising commercial shops in Cullen Plaza, the primary commercial strip in Sunnyside. Photo by Laurence Rice, 2014.

As I began interviewing people in Sunnyside, I found polarization, too, in how they viewed their own neighborhood. In the early days of my fieldwork, the dangerous neighborhoods list had just been released, and many people commented about it right away. Some used it as a way to justify their own dismay at the neighborhood conditions—it formalized what they experienced daily and what they wished would change about the neighborhood. Others told me the crime statistics used to develop the list were a fabrication, and that city developers wanted to cast historically African American neighborhoods like Sunnyside in a negative light so they could further drive down property values and then buy the land to redevelop it.



Figure 11. Commercial shops in Cullen Plaza, the primary commercial strip in Sunnyside. Photo by Laurence Rice, 2014.

One of the candidates running for city council at the time warned me not to believe what I had read about Sunnyside's crime rate for that reason. He and other critics of the negative press Sunnyside had received instead praised the strengths of the neighborhood: its network of civic clubs, strong faith-based community, and high rates of voting participation, particularly among the large and politically active senior citizen population. These conflicting narratives of Sunnyside reveal it as a complicated place. Neither picture is complete, and it would be a

mistake to assume otherwise. And these tensions—between rural and urban, between the material conditions of the neighborhood and its symbolic meaning, and between residents’ self-perception and the image ascribed to Sunnyside from the outside—are central to understanding Sunnyside’s past as well as its present. They also reflect some of the unique challenges facing the mothers in this study, as well as the opportunities available to them in terms of the local social safety net. In what follows, I give a brief overview of Sunnyside’s history and describe the neighborhood’s contemporary socio-demographics. Next, I outline what the safety net looks like for women with children in Sunnyside and offer a sketch of the types of resources available as well as the application process required to access these resources.

Sunnyside History and Culture

Established in 1912, Sunnyside is the oldest African American neighborhood in south Houston (Longoria and Rogers 2013). It was settled just north of Sims Bayou on what was then the outskirts of town, and designated as one of the few areas where African Americans could build and own homes. As more people moved in, it became known as Chocolate Bayou in reference to the color of the Bayou and its inhabitants. Sunnyside was not annexed by the city of Houston until 1956, before which point it had established its own school, the Sunnyside Colored School, as well as its own water district and volunteer fire department (Longoria and Rogers 2013). This independence is central to the neighborhood’s cultural identity, which also retains echoes of the Western cowboy culture that are visible throughout Houston but notable in Sunnyside. Traditions such as trail riding are still celebrated in Sunnyside, remnants of the rich history of African American rodeo and ranching in Houston. One spring afternoon as I drove down Airport Boulevard, the southern border of Sunnyside, the traffic slowed to a halt as a

procession of African American horseback riders of all ages took over the street. They were accompanied by cars driving slowly beside them blasting the “chopped and screwed” style of rap music that originated in south Houston in the 1990s, just a few miles away from the trail ride. This juxtaposition seemed to perfectly capture Sunnyside’s cultural complexity.

However, the ethos of independence and freedom emblematic of the Old West intersects with the realities of Houston’s geopolitical location in what some term the “western South” as opposed to the “Southwest” (Steptoe 2016). This designation foregrounds the history of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow that were central to states located the Deep South, adjacent to Texas’s eastern border, as well as Texas itself (Smallwood 1981; Steptoe 2016). The backdrop of *de jure* and later *de facto* racial segregation in Houston that forced African American neighborhoods like Sunnyside to be separate and in many ways independent of the city itself is necessary to understand its present-day conditions (Bullard 1987). Indeed, Sunnyside was founded during the era of Jim Crow. State and local ordinances forbade African Americans from voting and enforced segregation in transportation, education, housing, and public facilities, among other venues (Steptoe 2016). The first chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in Texas, and the first west of the Mississippi River, was founded in Houston in 1920 and was active in violently repressing African Americans and enforcing these laws. A City of Houston Planning Commission report in the early 1920s noted that, “Because of long established racial prejudices, it is best for both races that living areas be segregated” (Longoria and Rogers 2008:19), and local deed restrictions and restrictive housing policies bore out that logic. In response, as historian Tyiana Steptoe (2016) suggests, “Black Houstonians strove to create autonomous neighborhoods in order to forge a spatial—and psychological—distance between themselves and the white power structure” (23). In the face of oppression, these “self-contained” communities fostered the

growth of African American institutions including “churches, schools, newspapers, parks, restaurants, movie-theaters, and businesses” (Feagin 1988: 244). Neighborhoods like Sunnyside, by becoming relatively self-sufficient, were able to buffer themselves to some degree from white hostility.

This sense of separation obtains today. Sunnyside is one of a cluster of six historically African American Houston neighborhoods that form a horseshoe shape around the 610 Loop and share similar histories (Longoria and Rogers 2008). These neighborhoods are all geographically



Figure 12. Map of African American neighborhoods on the periphery of the city center. Source: Longoria and Rogers, 2008.

proximate to downtown but can look and feel very isolated, in part because of this legacy of segregation, which was followed by years of neglect on the part of the city (Bullard 1987). For example, these predominantly African American neighborhoods in Houston are home to a disproportionate number of the city's hazardous waste sites (Bullard 1983, 1994). There were two active landfills and an incinerator within Sunnyside until 1971, and its operations were ended only after residents organized a protest following the drowning death of an eleven-year-old boy at the site (Bullard 2014). However, the landfill continued to serve as a site of illegal dumping until 1977. Though this site has since been converted to a public park, there is ongoing concern in the community about the long-lasting environmental hazards the site poses to residents. These concerns came to a head in December 2016 when the city announced plans to move the Sunnyside Multi-Service Center (SSMC) to a new site directly on the grounds of the old landfill.

Sunnyside's infrastructure, like those other African American neighborhoods on what Longoria and Rogers (2008) term the periphery of the city center, has also languished over time. Most of the housing stock was built over sixty years ago and much of it is structurally unsound. Vacant storefronts and shuttered businesses dominate aging strip malls that struggle to sustain the few remaining shops, many of which appear empty because they do not have signs advertising their presence.² In 2015 alone there were 219 reported code violations in Sunnyside due to the presence of a dangerous building and 194 violations because a property failed to meet minimum standards (Texas Low Income Housing Information Service 2016). The same six neighborhoods noted above also have the highest concentration of tax delinquent properties in the city, complicating the designation of homes being "owner-occupied" (Longoria and Rogers

² City fees for commercial signage were increased in 2010, which angered local business owners who could not afford to comply with the new fee schedule (City of Houston 2010).

2008). These properties are vulnerable to being taken over by the city and sold to developers, a concern many residents voiced in our interviews, having witnessed the same process take over the historic Fourth Ward neighborhood, now known as “Midtown.” Fourth Ward, formerly known as “Freedman’s Town,” was the destination of the first freed slaves that settled in Houston, and like Sunnyside became a thriving self-contained African American community, with ultimately more than 95% of the city’s Black-owned businesses located there (Bullard 1987). But, just as has happened in Sunnyside, after decades of disinvestment in the neighborhood’s infrastructure and the persistence of high poverty, property values fell and developers were quick to take advantage, ultimately displacing many African American residents. Between 1990 and 2000, Fourth Ward’s African American population decreased by over half while the population of white residents increased by over 267% (Vojnovic 2003). Midtown is now dominated by luxury townhomes and condominiums, and Sunnyside residents see a similar land grab as a viable possibility. So far, however, new construction in Sunnyside has primarily taken the form of low-income apartments and duplexes, which residents blame for the rise in crime and drug activity (Palay 2015).

Sunnyside in the early twenty-first century in some ways bears little resemblance to the vibrant “self-contained” community elder residents recall (Lewis 2016). The range of commerce in Sunnyside is narrow, with fast food restaurants and check-cashing outlets dominating the landscape. Opportunities for leisure are slim, and most mothers report that they have to leave the neighborhood if they want to do something fun with their children. There is only one full-service grocery store in the area, but its prices are so high and the quality is so low that many people choose instead to travel to the nearest Walmart (a 10-minute drive or a 50-minute trip on two public busses) for discount groceries.



Figure 13. ACE Cash Express check cashing storefront on Cullen Boulevard. Photo by the author, 2014.

Poverty remains stubbornly high in Sunnyside, bringing with it associated problems. In 2014, 35% of Sunnyside residents were living below the poverty line, compared to the national rate of 14% (American Community Survey 2015). Nearly half of all children in Sunnyside are poor. The highest level of education for 28% of Sunnyside residents is a high school diploma or GED, whereas on average nearly twice that proportion have attended at least some college. Unemployment is also twice the national average, with 11% of Sunnyside residents out of work. Roughly 35% percent of poor households in Sunnyside are headed by a single mother with children (American Community Survey 2015). The era of mass incarceration of people of color (Alexander 2010) has also left a marked imprint on Sunnyside. Reliable data on where inmates were living prior to imprisonment is scant; however, the dispersion of inmates returning to Houston from Texas prisons is telling. As of 2005, Sunnyside and the aforementioned cluster of predominantly African American neighborhoods receive roughly half of all returning inmates in the city, even though these neighborhoods collectively comprise only 15% of Houston's total population (Moore 2007). These data certainly reflect my respondents' experiences: over half of

the mothers I interviewed had either been incarcerated themselves or had a partner or close family member that was either currently or formerly incarcerated. This level of contact with the criminal justice system has far-reaching consequences for employment, health, and the community as a whole (Comfort 2008; Pager 2003; Patillo, Western, and Weiman 2004; Western and Wildeman 2009).

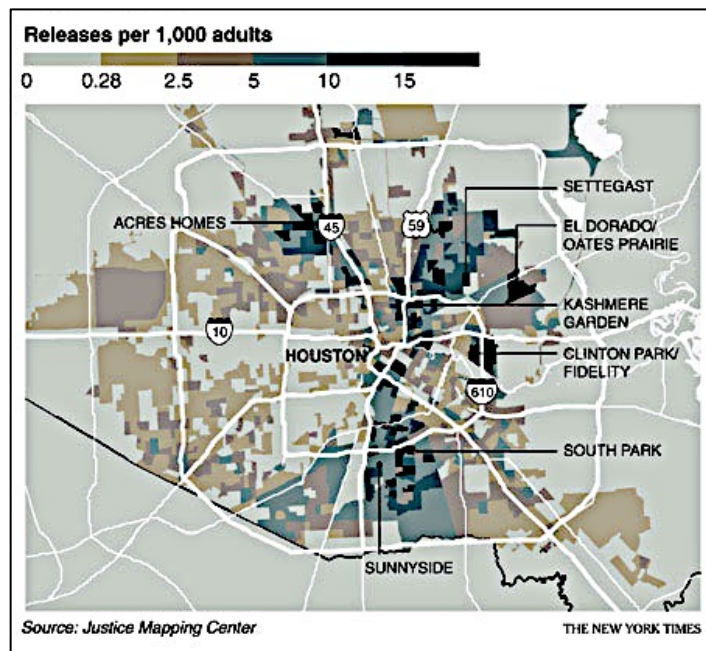


Figure 14. Map of the density of inmate re-entry destinations in African American neighborhoods in Houston, 2005. Source: The New York Times.

At the same time, the challenges that have plagued Sunnyside also inform its strengths. Much of what the city historically failed to provide was taken up by local organizations, such as civic clubs and community groups. For example, the Sunnyside Civic Club, founded in 1936 for the purpose of securing better lighting, drainage, and other necessary infrastructure improvements for the area—remains an important community institution (Longoria and Rogers 2013). The faith community in Sunnyside has always been central to the neighborhood’s identity, and Sunnyside has among the highest concentrations of churches in the city. I conducted

an organizational census in 2013 and counted 54 churches, which means that there are approximately three churches per 1,000 residents. These range from one-house wooden frame buildings to large multi-building campuses, and as I discuss in a later section, also serve as a critical piece of the safety net. Sunnyside residents, especially the large proportion of senior citizens, and clergy are also notably politically active. In 2015, Sunnyside pastors were instrumental in organizing for the repeal of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), a bill passed by the City Council to protect LGBT people from discrimination (Willey 2014). Local pastors have also been active in pressing for more police presence following a wave of robberies in 2015.

As I have shown, Sunnyside resists simple characterization as a “ghetto,” as do most poor neighborhoods that are similarly labeled (Small 2008). The neighborhood is more heterogeneous than most media representations of the neighborhood suggest. Yet, the structural problems typically associated with concentrated urban poverty continue to plague Sunnyside, and for the mothers I interviewed, made it a difficult place to raise children. And though many relied on friends and family for informal support, including a place to stay, a home-cooked meal, or childcare, mothers’ social networks were often comprised of others who had similarly limited economic resources. Therefore, mothers relied heavily on the social safety net to meet basic needs – a safety net that is, like Sunnyside, multi-dimensional.

The Social Safety Net

The safety net available to mothers in Sunnyside is a blend of public, private, and faith-based initiatives, and these are not easily disentangled. On one of the first days I visited Sunnyside I witnessed this multiplex social safety net in action. I had been speaking with the

director of the local library about my research and right away he suggested I try to get in touch with a woman named Linda who he said spearheaded many events in the community. Linda's name had already come up in a separate conversation, so I knew I needed to find out more. As ethnographic serendipity would have it, when the director asked a co-worker if she had Linda's number, the co-worker said that in fact, Linda was going to be right down the street at a church that afternoon doing an outreach program. The co-worker was already planning to attend and said I was welcome to join. When I drove up to the church mere minutes later, a crowd was already beginning to form in the large plot of land next to the church that served as an overflow parking lot on days where the food outreach program was in effect. An 18-wheel refrigerated Houston Food Bank (HFB) truck was parked in the grass, its side panels opened to reveal pallets full of avocados, cucumbers, eggplant, cabbage, and bread to be distributed into boxes, plastic bags, or whatever vessel patrons brought with them to carry their goods back home. Cars driving by the scene slowed and rolled their windows down to inquire about the truck, and some pulled into the parking lot in the hopes that they weren't too late to get a box. Those already in line called friends and family members to tell them to hurry up before the line got any longer or the food ran out. Linda, a tall, thin African American woman in her mid-40s, was easily identifiable as the person in charge, directing traffic and instructing everyone around her as to what they should do to help. As soon as I introduced myself, explained my project and offered to volunteer, I was quickly put to work as well.

Linda directed me to set up a folding table backing up onto a row of hedges separating the brick church building from the open parking area, and set down a huge stack of bright fluorescent-colored cards, each with a large black number printed on the front. I sat behind the table with another volunteer, an elderly African American woman who used a walker that

doubled as a seat, and was charged with passing out the numbers to people waiting in line for a food box. Linda handed me a stack of sign-in sheets and instructed me to have patrons fill in their name, address, signature, and also show me a photo ID before they were given a number. This task served as a crash course in the role that discretion plays in service delivery. I quickly confronted “problem cases,” like the homeless man who had neither an address nor a photo ID. Linda instructed me to take his name and give him a box anyway, but also yelled out a reminder to the remaining line that they should have their photo IDs out and ready to show, implying that it would make the difference between receiving a box and not. The fuzziness of the eligibility was partly a function of discretion, but it would be quite easy for patrons to be uncertain about the eligibility process because various regular food pantries in Sunnyside operate under different auspices—some more formal than others. Because this food outreach was hosted by the church, the eligibility determination was also up to the church—and in this particular case, it was up to Linda in her informal role as the organizer. But I attended other HFB food outreach events where the eligibility standards were different. For example, there is a monthly outreach event at the Sunnyside Multi-Service Center that typically serves over two hundred senior citizens. However, unlike the church outreach, the senior boxes are federally funded through the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which provides food assistance for low-income people over the age of 60. The eligibility rules for the CSFP are set at the federal level, but carried out locally through partner agencies like the HFB. Therefore, at the Multi-Service Center outreach it is HFB staff that oversees the more formal eligibility determination process and collects personal information to certify those enrolled in the program.

Donated food was also not the only thing on offer at the church that day. As I processed the people waiting in line, I noticed several other folding tables set up closer to the HFB truck. At one, a man sat with a sign that read “free cell phones.” He was there to promote the Lifeline Program, a federal initiative that provides subsidized (not actually free) monthly phone plans for low-income people (Federal Communications Commission 2016). Another table had an HFB banner draped over its front, and HFB staff called out to patrons on their way to the truck to ask whether they were enrolled in the food stamps program. Through a partnership with the Health and Human Services department and in an effort to boost food stamps receipt, HFB staff are trained to conduct the initial application and interview in order to expedite the process for applicants at outreach events such as this. Other vendor tables advertised discounted dental and vision care for income-eligible people as well as low-cost banking services. This example illustrates how it is possible to go to a church food pantry stocked by a private non-profit organization and complete an application for public assistance at the same time. These collaborative efforts are intended make the process of getting assistance easier for mothers—to create a “one-stop-shop” for services, as the director of social service outreach at the Houston Food Bank described it to me. However, as I show, making it easier to apply does not necessarily mean it is easier to *receive* assistance.

These overlaps in the source of funding for assistance, the jurisdiction over eligibility determination, and at times in who staffs these events can make it hard to tell who is in charge and also what the terms of engagement are for patrons. There is always a measure of discretion on the part of social service providers in terms of making determinations when eligibility rules are murky or when they feel as though certain clients’ unique circumstances warrant skirting a formal rule (Watkins-Hayes 2009). But the variegated nature of the SSMC outreach also reflects

a pragmatic reality for many poor Sunnyside residents—because the level of state-based public assistance available to poor Americans has declined in the twenty years since welfare reform, other safety net institutions, including non-profit organizations and faith-based groups, have stepped in to try to fill the gaps (Allard 2009). This trend is magnified in Texas, where the state offers minimal levels of public assistance relative to other states and also has more poor residents than most, with only 12 other states having a higher poverty rate (McNichol 2013). At 15.4%, the proportion of Texas households that are food-insecure is significantly higher than the national average of 13.7% (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2016). My respondents, many of whom were living in deep poverty (Desmond 2015) needed all of the assistance they could get, and whether that came from the state, from secular non-profit organizations, or from churches, they pieced it together however they could. Indeed, I realized early on that I was misguided in asking my respondents about how they chose whether or not to seek help from churches or non-profit organizations if they were already receiving government assistance—for many, it was less a function of choice than necessity, as welfare itself was simply insufficient in the state of Texas.

As I have shown, the social safety net in Sunnyside, like those in other urban areas (Allard 2009), is not neatly divisible into separate parts; however, for the ease of the reader, I now review separately the three broad domains of assistance mothers in Sunnyside access: state-based or public assistance (welfare), secular non-profit organizations, and faith-based non-profits or churches. For each category of assistance, I briefly describe the scope of benefits or services offered and outline the process by which people apply for this assistance, to give a sense of what is at stake in terms of privacy. I move loosely from higher levels of administration (federal and state) to local (county and city); however, for most programs these distinctions are not neat. For example, in some cases broad policy is set at the federal level, but states and cities have a great

deal of power to amplify or diminish aspects of the policies. I begin by describing the safety net available to residents throughout Texas—through statewide government programs including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or cash assistance, and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps. Next, I move to forms of public assistance administered at the county and city levels—public housing and subsidized childcare. Finally, I zoom in further to outline the more local forms of assistance that were available either in or near Sunnyside: secular and faith-based non-profits and churches.

Public Assistance in Texas

The suite of federal programs I refer to interchangeably as “public assistance” and “welfare” are federal programs implemented at the state level, which means that certain eligibility rules, program conditions, and benefit levels vary by state. These include TANF, SNAP, subsidized housing, and subsidized childcare.³ An exhaustive review of the eligibility rules and program requirements is beyond the scope of this project, but I offer a broad overview.

In Texas, there is one joint application for TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid, benefit programs administered by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (TX HHSC). The application can be submitted by mail, on-line, or in person at an HHSC office, one of which is located a few minutes’ drive from Sunnyside. Most mothers I interviewed used this location, and some noted its convenient proximity as a boon. Applicants are later mailed a notice indicating which documents they must provide to verify the information in the application. At this point,

³ I do not focus here on Medicaid because obtaining health insurance was mandatory under the Affordable Care Act at the time of data collection, meaning there is a different set of incentives and sanctions informing participation. I also exclude the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) because it is only available to pregnant mothers and those with children up to age three, which means its reach is much more limited (about 45 million low-income Americans receive food stamps in a given month, compared to 8 million recipients of WIC). I do not include programs and services specifically designated for people with disabilities, such as Social Security Insurance (SSI) for the same reasons.

either an in-person or telephone interview is required. Karen, a supervisor at the local HHSC office, told me that they encourage people to do a phone interview, as they prefer to keep people out of the office, both to reduce crowding and also—interestingly—she suggested that privacy concerns played a role. The open cubicle arrangement in the section of the office where clients sit with caseworker makes these conversations easy to overhear if there are multiple clients meeting with caseworkers at the same time. Most of my respondents also preferred the phone, especially for recertifying benefits, which can be required as frequently as every three months depending on the case.

TANF (Cash Assistance): Cash assistance—known colloquially as the “welfare check”—is still the popular image associated with public assistance, even as it has steadily declined nationwide as a proportion of overall government aid to the poor. TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—otherwise known as welfare reform—in 1996. This shift marked the most dramatic policy change in the welfare reform legislation, as it transformed the program from an entitlement to a discretionary institution (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2015a). Entitlement programs, such as Medicare, Social Security, and unemployment insurance, are guaranteed funding from the federal government and in turn, citizens are guaranteed to receive these benefits if they meet the basic eligibility standards. Under the entitlement structure, individual states receive funding depending on the number of eligible people in their state. In contrast, TANF is funded through the block grant system, which means that states qualify for a set sum of federal money regardless of the portion of their population that is poor. Because the size of the grant is independent of the level of poverty in a

given state, this means that states can deny aid to otherwise eligible people if they do not have sufficient funds. States also set their own program conditions for participation and can implement time limits beyond the federal 5-year lifetime limit⁴ that took effect following welfare reform legislation.

Welfare reform also gave states wide discretion over how the block grant is spent. The legislation indicates that states can use TANF funds “in any manner that is reasonably calculated” to meet the aims of the block grant. The four main aims include:

- 1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- 2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- 3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out of wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- 4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2015a).

Nationally, roughly a quarter of TANF funds are spent on the first aim—to provide basic assistance to poor families in the form of cash (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2015b). In contrast, in 2015 Texas spent only 6% of its TANF block grant funding on cash aid to poor families, and 7% on work activities. No other state spent less than Texas on the core activities funded by TANF, which include cash assistance, work activities, work supports, and child care (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2017a). In 2014, Texas used 3% of the grant on subsidized childcare, compared to the national average of 16%, and about ¾ of the block grant (73%) was spent on “other services,” which again can be related to any of the four stated aims (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2014).

TANF is aimed at low-income families that have at least one child in the home that is 18 or younger. Federal law dictates that states must use TANF funds to provide assistance to

⁴ The 5-year limit refers to the total number of years a person can receive benefits, not just consecutive years.

“needy” families; however, there is no federal definition of need for these purposes. Therefore, individual states set their own standards of eligibility based on income thresholds and other indicators of need. The Texas TANF website refers to needy families as those that “have little to no money or don’t have a way to get money” (TX HHSC 2017). In almost all states, the maximum earnings threshold is set below the federal poverty line, meaning that families eligible for TANF are among the poorest in the population. In 2012, the maximum monthly earnings that a single mother of two could make in Texas and still be eligible for TANF was \$401 (Urban Institute 2015). Only five other states had lower limits. In calculating the household income, many states choose to disregard a family’s liquid financial assets, such as money in the bank or property. However, Texas is one of nine states that continue to use what are known as asset limits. To be eligible for TANF, a family in Texas can have no more than \$1,000 in assets. In addition, applicants to TANF in Texas must report the value of their vehicle. Any amount that is greater than \$4,650 in estimated equity value is counted towards the asset limit, lowering the benefit amount a family is qualified to receive (Urban Institute 2015).

Applicants to TANF who meet the income and asset eligibility requirements may still be ineligible to receive cash assistance, depending on states’ use of additional criteria for participation in the program. For example, states may implement drug testing as an eligibility procedure, an effort the Texas legislature has repeatedly but unsuccessfully tried to pass (Ura 2015). PROWRA instituted a federal ban on states providing TANF to people who have been convicted of a drug-related felony; however, states can either opt out partially or fully from the ban. Texas is one of ten states that have kept the ban intact, meaning that anyone convicted of a drug felony after 1996 is ineligible to receive TANF. Federal legislation also bars “fugitive” or “fleeing” felons from receiving TANF. This designation refers to people who are actively fleeing

to avoid “prosecution, custody, or confinement after conviction for a felony” (McCarty et al. 2016). However, it also applies to people who have violated a condition of probation or parole, even if they are on either probation or parole for a misdemeanor. Of note, this ban applies to the entire household, so if a mother applies for TANF, everyone living in her household is subject to this ban. Many of the mothers I interviewed had partners or family members on probation or parole, some of whom were ineligible to receive benefits themselves, and so relied on mothers to share their benefits. In some cases the ineligible person was living in the same household. If mothers disclosed their name, they put their own benefits and their ability to help others at risk, as well as that person’s freedom.

The conditions for participating in TANF are spelled out in what is termed a “Personal Responsibility Agreement,” which all applicants must sign. This agreement lists the applicant’s responsibilities, which include:

[C]ooperation requirements such as with child support requirements, work participation, school attendance for minor parents and children, voluntary quit, compliance with Texas Health Steps and immunization schedules, attending parenting skills classes, and having no criminal alcohol or drug convictions (TX HHSC 2013).

The child support cooperation requirement refers to the mandate that all TANF recipients provide the state with the paternity and contact information of their children’s father for the purpose of child support enforcement, whether or not mothers wish to open a case. I return to this requirement in depth in Chapter 4. Work requirements vary depending on family composition, age and disability status and can include registering for work, not voluntarily quitting a job or reducing hours, taking a job if offered, and participating in other “work activities,” including community service, as designated by the state. Some of my respondents, ironically, were placed in understaffed HHSC offices to complete their community service hours. For able-bodied adults, 30 hours of work activity is the standard requirement. Pursuant to the

four aims spelled out in PROWRA, recipients must also participate in any supplemental parenting skills, marriage promotion, or drug and alcohol abuse programs to which they are assigned because of perceived deficits in these areas.

The amount of TANF assistance an individual family receives varies in part based on family size, with larger households receiving more than those with fewer members. The basic formula for determining the amount is to take income, assets, and any other resources coming into the household, and then deduct allowable household expenses (e.g. rent, child care). Families with no other source of earned or unearned income usually receive the largest amount. Texas offers the third-lowest average monthly TANF benefit to poor families nationwide (Lower-Basch 2016). The maximum monthly amount that a single mother in Texas caring for two children could receive in 2017 was \$286 (TX HHSC 2017), but most receive less. Even mothers who receive the maximum benefit remain at an income level that is approximately 17% of the federal poverty line (Stanley, Floyd, and Hill 2016). As Karen, the supervisor at the local welfare office explained it to me, these benefits are not supposed to cover all of a person's needs; rather, they are intended to "supplement." However, for mothers that are not working and have no other source of income, TANF may be the only money they have to use for daily necessities like toiletries and gas, not to mention extra food if their food stamp benefits are also insufficient.

SNAP (Food Stamps): The SNAP program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the most widely used anti-poverty program, serving nearly 14% of Texans and the same proportion of the entire U.S. population in 2016 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2017b). More than 81% of SNAP recipients in Texas are families with children, and over half are in working families; however, single men and women may also apply. The program is intended to provide

nutritious food for low-income families, and recipients are accordingly limited in what they can use these benefits to purchase. SNAP benefits cannot be used for tobacco, alcohol, already prepared foods (e.g. salad bar, rotisserie chicken), vitamins, or for anything inedible (USDA 2017). Benefits are loaded monthly onto what is known in Texas as a Lone Star Card, a debit card that allows for the direct transfer of money directly from government to authorized retailers. This change, enacted as part of welfare reform, increased efficiency and reduced the chance that a person might lose their paper coupons. But it also means that an electronic record is created each time a person makes a purchase with their Lone Star card, making it easier “to identify and document instances where food benefits are exchanged for cash, drugs, or other illegal goods” (USDA 2014). Despite pervasive myths about the extent of welfare and food stamps fraud, there are very few documented cases of fraud, and even in cases where overpayments have occurred, research shows the blame most often lies with the agency, not the client (Rosenbaum 2013).

Eligibility rules for SNAP are less stringent than those for TANF; therefore, if a household is qualified to receive TANF they are likely eligible for automatic certification for SNAP. For example, compared to the TANF maximum monthly income limit for a mother of two children (\$401), applicants for SNAP can have an income up to \$2,772 and still be eligible, as long as they don't have more than \$2,250 in “countable resources” such as a bank account (USDA 2016). The vehicle asset limit is also higher, allowing for a vehicle valued at up to \$15,000. In September 2015, Texas became the 45th state to end its policy of banning anyone with a drug felony from receiving SNAP benefits.

As with TANF, able-bodied recipients of SNAP are required to participate in work activities and, if employed, are not allowed to quit their current job. They are not subject to the same child support enforcement compliance that is associated with TANF; however, the joint

application can make it hard to tell exactly which pieces of information are required for which benefit program. Some of my respondents were unsure as to whether they had to file child support in order to receive food stamps. Like TANF, benefit amounts vary depending on household income and composition. For households with children, the average monthly SNAP benefit in 2014 was \$372. The average monthly benefit per household member in 2016 was \$117, which means approximately \$1.30 per person per meal (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2017b). Because these benefits alone are not enough to sustain a family, most mothers in this study who received food stamps also sought help from food banks or made a habit of eating meals with family members whenever possible, because they simply did not have enough food to last each month.

Texas Workforce Solutions: The program that supports employment and training in both TANF and SNAP is called “Choices,” and is administered by Texas Workforce Solutions (TWS), a statewide network that includes 28 workforce development boards, contracted service providers and community partners (Texas Workforce Commission 2016). However, TWS does more than support recipients’ required work activities, though employment is the primary focus. They also monitor adherence to other program requirements and report any violations back to the state. TWS thus serves as the surveillance arm for these programs, which is a central aspect of mothers’ experience of privacy in their engagement with the state. This surveillance process is facilitated by the use of a data broker contracted by HHSC to “provide financial and other background information about SNAP, TANF, and Medical Programs applicants and recipients” (TX HHSC 2015).

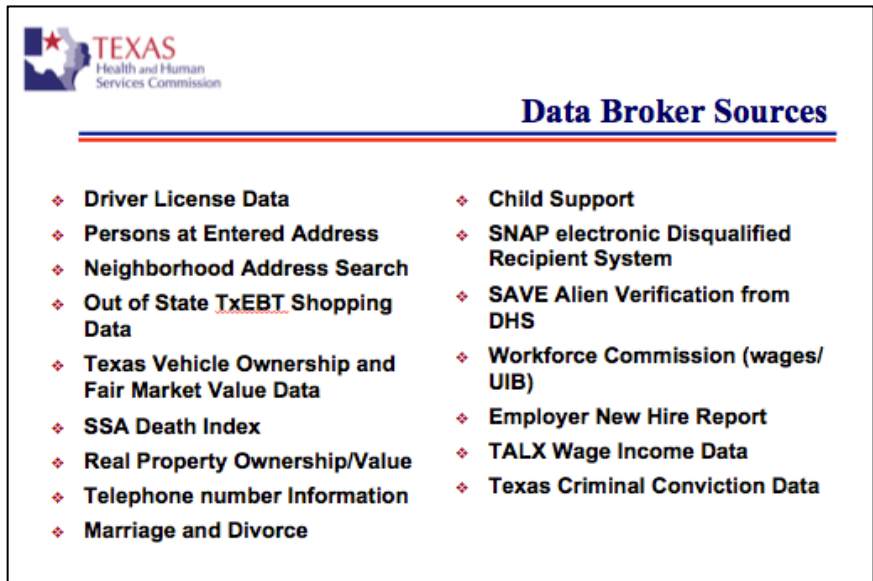


Figure 15. Sources of data available to HHSC and Texas Workforce Solutions through their contracted data broker. Source: TX HHSC, 2013.

Karen, the supervisor at HHSC, explained that these data are accessible to TWS and HHSC employees through a database that works “on the back end” to verify what clients voluntarily disclose in their application for public assistance. Populated with data pulled from agencies including the Department of Motor Vehicles, the United States Postal Service, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), credit bureaus, the Attorney General’s Office, and the prison system, Karen said that with the database, “We have pretty much everything.” TWS staff also use the database to flag a client’s case if, for example, they began working (which the database would “know” via the IRS) but did not report earnings. When a “customer’s” case is flagged because a program condition was not met or required paperwork is missing, TWS employment counselors send the customer back to the HHSC office for sanctioning and/or to resolve the issue. I discuss in more depth the role and impact of the surveillance aspect of TWS in Chapter 3.

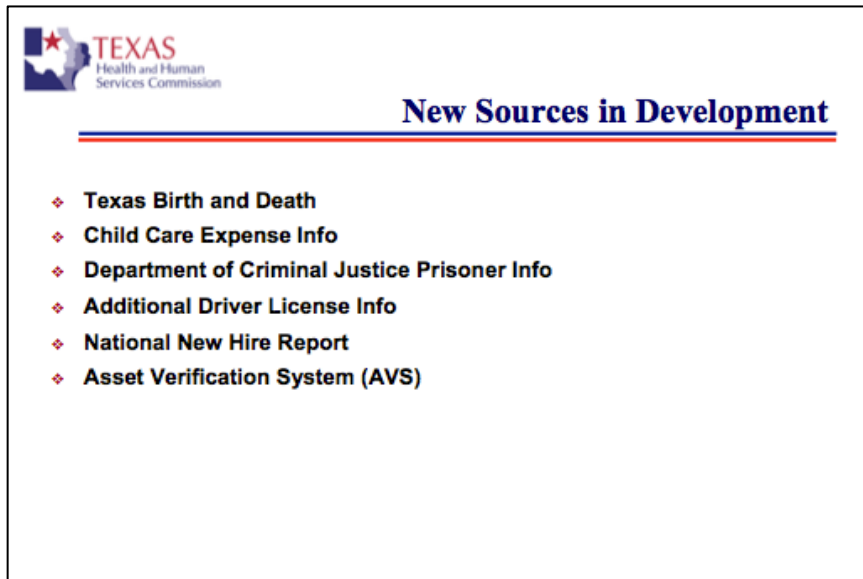


Figure 16. Potential sources of data available to HHSC and Texas Workforce Solutions. Source: TX HHSC, 2013.

Subsidized Childcare: Texas offers subsidized childcare for low-income families, which is also administered through Workforce Solutions for the Gulf Coast region. Recipients can apply the subsidy to a licensed childcare center, a licensed childcare home, or a registered childcare home. They may also use a relative, providing the relative passes a background check and is registered with the Department of Family and Protective Services (Workforce Solutions 2015). Eligible recipients must have a child under the age of 13 and be working or in school for at least 25 hours a week and/or be participating in the Choices program. A single parent with two children cannot earn more than 200% of the federal poverty guideline, or \$3,360 a month. Prior to October 1, 2016, in addition to providing information on citizenship, earnings, and household composition, single applicants had to provide evidence that they had filed a formal child support order (personal communication). This designation was specific to the 13 counties comprising the region covered by the Gulf Coast Workforce Board, as eligibility rules are determined by the regional board. Recipients of the childcare subsidy must submit a daily electronic attendance

card and their children are not allowed to have more than a designated number of recorded absences, otherwise the subsidy is terminated. Benefit levels are determined based on income and household size, with most recipients paying a co-payment.

State-Subsidized Housing in Houston

Historically, Houston has been hostile towards building affordable housing, and has been ranked last among major U.S. cities in providing low-income housing for the poor (Lozano and Espinosa-Oropeza 2014). The demand for subsidized housing in Houston continues to far outpace the supply. According to a supervisor I spoke to at the Houston Housing Authority, 83,000 people applied for a housing subsidy in 2012 and 20,000 of those people were put on a new waiting list that was open for one week. Until 2014 only 4,000 of those on the waiting list had been placed, and the waiting list was closed to further applicants until it was reopened for one week in September 2016. Thirty thousand applicants were placed on the waiting list that week (Affordable Housing Online 2016), with preference given to people who were homeless or those aging out of foster care. Once on the waiting list, applicants are chosen by a lottery, which means that a person who has been on the waiting list since 2005 has the same chance at getting a subsidy as someone who was put on the waiting list in 2016.

Subsidized Housing Options in Sunnyside: There are three main types of federal subsidies for housing available to low-income families in the U.S.: public housing, project-based Section 8 housing, and the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) (also known as voucher-based or tenant-based Section 8). Public housing refers to rental units that are publicly owned and publicly managed, and are often termed “projects.” There are 20 such projects in Houston,

but none in Sunnyside. The Wilmington House Apartments, located on the infamous corner of Wilmington and Scott in the census tract responsible for much of the violent crime recorded in the 2013 “most dangerous neighborhoods” study, were demolished in 2014 as the last public housing complex in Sunnyside. However, the two other federally subsidized housing options for Sunnyside residents that cannot afford market value rent comprise a large share of the housing mix in the area. In addition there are housing developments reserved for low-income tenants that receive federal and state funding through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program or other private-public funding partnerships.⁵ Similar to other aspects of the safety net, there is considerable overlap both in terms of the level of administration of these programs (federal, state, or local) as well as in the eligibility determination process and how recipients apply their benefits. For example, someone with a Section 8 voucher might live in a project-based or LIHTC unit, meaning they would need to meet eligibility requirements for both programs. Adding to the complexity is the fact that there are two housing authorities serving the Houston metro area—the Houston Housing Authority and the Harris County Housing Authority.⁶ Termed “quasi-governmental public housing authorities,” these agencies are federally funded but locally administered (McCarty et al. 2016). As with TANF and SNAP benefits, the housing authorities verify clients’ employment and income information through Texas Workforce Solutions.

The primary criterion for determining eligibility for subsidized housing is household income. Federal income eligibility rules stipulate that families eligible for subsidized housing must make no more than a set percentage of the local Area Median Income (AMI), which is

⁵ Another option is to leave Sunnyside if placed in public housing. Many people I interviewed had lived in public housing in other areas at some point in their lives.

⁶ The Harris County Housing Authority serves areas outside of the city limits but within Harris County; therefore, they do not administer properties within Sunnyside. However, mothers in this study commonly applied for both Harris County and Houston housing assistance to maximize their chances at getting a subsidy.

considered “very low” income. Here, income includes earned income as well as assets. The maximum “very low” income allowable for a single mother of two in Houston is \$31,150 (Office of Policy Development and Research 2016). Typically, housing subsidies—project- and voucher-based—are offered such that families won’t pay more than 30% of their adjusted monthly income on rent. Also set at the federal level are minimum restrictions based on involvement with the criminal justice system. Anyone listed on the sex offender registry may not receive any form of subsidized housing. Housing authorities across public housing programs are also mandated to develop policies to exclude potential tenants who are currently engaging in illegal drug use or whose illegal drug use or alcohol use is deemed by the administrator (either the housing authority or private landlord) to “interfere with the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the premises by other residents” (McCarty et al. 2016:18). Further, they are instructed to deny tenancy to anyone who has been evicted from public housing for drug-related criminal activity unless the potential tenant proves they have completed a rehabilitation program or addressed the reason for the eviction (e.g. if the person abusing drugs or alcohol is no longer part of the household). In the classic public housing and voucher-based Section 8 programs, housing authorities are federally required to deny tenancy to anyone who has been convicted of producing methamphetamines on the property of federally assisted housing (McCarty et al. 2016); however, this rule does not apply to project-based Section 8 housing.

Beyond these specific mandatory exclusions, federal law stipulates that local housing authorities may deny a household a subsidy if a household member “has engaged in or has, during a reasonable period of time prior to admission, been engaged in violent or drug-related criminal activity” (McCarty et al. 2016:19). What constitutes a “reasonable” period of time and how authorities determine one’s involvement in violent or drug-related criminal activity is not

specified. Further, individual housing authorities as well as property owners (in voucher- and project-based Section 8) have discretion to add more restrictive eligibility rules as long as they do not violate fair housing and civil rights laws. They may screen tenants for “suitability” using any criteria they wish. For example, they may deny applicants if they have an eviction for any reason, including those not drug-related. Texas law protects landlords and property managers against claims that they discriminate against a potential tenant’s source of income, meaning that it is perfectly legal for a property owner to deny a person because they receive Section 8 (Texas Low Income Housing Information Service 2015). Once a tenant is accepted into a subsidized program, the rules and requirements for tenants vary widely across programs and properties, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 2. The grounds for eviction or termination of assistance are also discretionary and variable, particularly in the case of the HCVP, where landlords and property owners have much more power.

Project-based Section 8 properties are privately owned and managed apartment complexes in which the housing subsidy stays with the unit as opposed to the Section 8 Housing Voucher program where the subsidy travels with the person who qualifies for it. There are four such properties in in Sunnyside and one just north of the freeway that borders Sunnyside to the east. In project-based housing, prospective tenants apply directly to the individual property, and the property manager or landlord may maintain their own waiting list. And although federal policies govern basic income eligibility rules and the amount of subsidy offered, individual property owners can set their own policies in terms of additional screening methods and determining whether or not to offer a unit to an otherwise eligible tenant, as long as these methods are in compliance with fair housing laws (McCarty et al. 2016). Because the private property owner administers the program and serves as the landlord, in effect they determine a

prospective tenant's suitability for the program (e.g. do they meet the eligibility requirements?) but also their suitability as a tenant (e.g. do I want to rent to this particular person?). In some project-based developments all of the units are reserved for people with low or (more commonly) very low incomes; however, some developments rent only a portion of the total units to those eligible for Section 8.

Unlike project-based Section 8, participants in the HCVP receive a subsidy that they may use at any rental property that accepts Section 8 and passes a mandatory inspection by the housing authority. In other words, the benefit is assigned to the tenant rather than the unit. This arrangement ostensibly gives recipients greater flexibility in choosing where they want to live and in what type of housing (e.g. apartment, single-family home). Mothers I interviewed spoke of getting a Section 8 voucher as the ideal option because they were not restricted to living in apartment complexes that were explicitly designated for low-income tenants. In reality, however, properties that accept Section 8 tend to be clustered in already low-income areas that are also racially homogenous (Texas Low Income Housing Information Service 2015). Two-thirds of Houston Housing Authority voucher-holders live in mostly African American neighborhoods with a poverty rate above 20% (Texas Low Income Housing Information Service 2015). Further, voucher amounts may not exceed 30% of a recipient's rent; therefore, if they wish to live in a higher rent area but have a very low income, they would be responsible for paying any additional amount not covered by the voucher. Sunnyside is one of five African American neighborhoods in South Houston that together contain 10% of all Section 8 voucher-holders in Houston despite comprising only a fraction of the total population (Texas Low Income Housing Information Service 2015), underscoring the growing racial and economic segregation in Houston (O'Connell and Howell 2016). This pattern has been amply documented, and was the subject of a Supreme

Court case decided in 2015 in which the state of Texas was found in violation of the Fair Housing Act for its disproportionate provision of tax credits for developers of low-income housing in minority neighborhoods and simultaneous denial of tax credits for low-income developments in predominantly white areas (Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs v. The Inclusive Communities Project). The Houston Housing Authority, to the dismay of local low-income housing advocates, was the only public housing authority in the country to submit a brief in support of the state's prerogative to build in minority areas even though this practice has been found to exacerbate racial and economic segregation (Texas Low Income Housing Information Service 2015).

Applicants for the HCVP apply directly to the local public housing authority. Once a voucher is issued, recipients are responsible for locating a unit that accepts Section 8. The application for Section 8 can only be filled out with pen and paper and mailed in except during the period that the waiting list is open, when an online application is required. Once a person finds a desirable unit, the housing authority inspects it to make sure it meets basic standards of "decent, safe, and sanitary" housing measured using 13 federal performance requirements (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2016). These include the thermal environment of the unit, the water supply, and the structure and materials of the building. The extent to which a unit is seen as meeting minimal standards of these requirements is at the discretion of the inspector, and depends in part on the tenant's willingness to accept the unit which, in turn, depends in part on how acute their need is. As the HUD inspection guidelines state, "Some less than perfect conditions, such as a water heater that appears too small for optimal use by the tenant, should be discussed with the tenant, but should not lead to denial of program assistance if the family is willing to accept the existing condition" (HUD 2016:10-2).

Other Low-Income Housing: In addition to the two Section 8 programs, there are also generic low-income apartment complexes that are not administered through the Houston Housing Authority. Seven of these properties in Sunnyside are at least in part subsidized by the federal government through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, which directs private capital towards developing and rehabilitating housing specifically for low-income people (Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs 2015). Others are funded through different public-private partnerships. These low-income developments operate with more discretion in terms of eligibility determination than the other programs, and for this reason are often the option of last resort for people who are ineligible for Section 8 either because of an eviction history or criminal background. Unlike the Section 8 programs, there are not specific guidelines regarding exclusions based on criminal history. Landlords and property managers at certain complexes are known to accept tenants with a felony conviction as long as they pay a higher security deposit or higher monthly rent. One mother I interviewed recalled a time that she gave her landlord a 16-inch television to secure an apartment, because her criminal background would have otherwise excluded her. As she put it, “It’s real grimy. There’s a lot of things you that you can get around. Money talks.”

These exceptions can lead to abuse on the part of landlords, as they hold the power over tenants who might otherwise not have a housing option at all. This dynamic was on display at Crestmont Village Apartments, a low-income complex that was shuttered by the city in 2015 after the property owners repeatedly failed to pay the utility company despite having collected tenants’ rent (McCulley 2015). The utility company responded by shutting off power to the whole complex for several sweltering days. Tenants, many of whom had received their monthly

food stamps allotment at the first of the month, watched their food spoil and their children sweat while the property owners refused to answer the phone or show up at the complex. After local activists contacted the media, the horrific conditions at Crestmont Village came to light: there were large holes in residents' ceilings, mold covered bathroom walls, and raw sewage bubbled out of one resident's bathtub when she flushed the toilet (Hinchliffe and Rogers 2015).

Management had ignored these severe maintenance and safety issues for months. Violent crime was also rampant at Crestmont Village; a UPS driver was shot and robbed while making deliveries two months prior to the power outage (Clemons 2015), and mothers I interviewed who lived there reported that burglaries and robberies were frequent. When I arrived early one day at the complex, before the other volunteers who came to deliver food and water had arrived, a group of young men threatened me, warning that, "we're killers around here" and mentioning the white rapper Paul Wall in apparent reference to my skin color. Indeed, a man was killed while sitting in his pick-up truck at the rear of the property the same week (ABC News 2015). Yet, respondents I interviewed who lived at Crestmont Village often felt they had no other place to go.

As I show in Chapter 2, having stable, affordable housing is critical for low-income families. It is also central to their experience of privacy in everyday life. However, the foregoing illustrates that there is wide variation in housing type, administrative authority, and in the program conditions by which tenants in subsidized units are required to abide. These differences, as I will elaborate, also inform mothers' sense of privacy in the home.

Non-Profit Organizations

Non-profit organizations in Houston—both secular and faith-based—offer many types of assistance for people in poverty, and the conditions for eligibility and process are extremely variable depending on the organization and the type of resources offered. There is also variability in which resources are offered at any given time, as funding availability goes up and down. Nearly all mothers who discussed seeking help from non-profits noted this uncertainty as central to the experience—the fact that an organization had offered help paying utility bills last month was no guarantee that they would offer the same assistance this month. Some noted that the availability of resources seemed to change by the day. Given this volatility, it is beyond of the scope of this study to give an exhaustive review of the various services available and the application process through which individuals seek this help. Instead, I focus more broadly on what distinguishes non-profit organizations from state programs in terms of eligibility determination and program conditions. I go into more detail about mothers’ experiences seeking help from non-profit organizations in Chapter 1.

Secular Non-Profit Organizations: Like public assistance, the primary eligibility condition for receiving assistance with basic needs from secular non-profit organizations was having few resources and low income. And in many cases, non-profit organizations, like the state, required some verification of income, either by reviewing check stubs or an award letter if the person was already getting public assistance. For example, the most common resource mothers sought from secular non-profits was help paying utility bills. To receive this type of help, they had to provide their unpaid bill (or in some cases the “pink slip” indicating that service was about to be shut off) and sometimes also show evidence of their income or public assistance receipt. Other basic

information such as household composition, mailing address, and usually some form of photo ID was also routinely collected. However, rather than cross-checking this information with other agencies to verify it—as does the state through Texas Workforce Solutions—these data were used internally, both to maintain records of the organization’s output (which might be necessary for grant reporting) but also to track individuals who may return to get help in the future. It was common for non-profit organizations to enforce limits on how often patrons could receive assistance—such as once every six months. But mothers emphasized that in general, non-profit organizations required far less information than the state as part of the application process, and the eligibility determination had less to do with their personal profile and more to do with the organization’s capacity.

Aside from limitations on the frequency with which individuals could seek help, non-profit organizations are distinct from state programs in that they restrict eligibility based on individuals’ residential address. Organizations commonly service residents of certain zip codes only; those outside the service range are ineligible. Part of the routine of calling around to each organization is learning whether—even if the funding is available—one’s zip code is included in the service range. Of note, there are few secular non-profit organizations in Sunnyside, echoing a pattern in other urban centers of spatial mismatch between poor residents and the safety net organizations on which they rely (Allard 2009). And even if non-profit destinations located far from Sunnyside were technically available, getting to them is a different matter. In an expansive, driving-centric city like Houston, it can be time-intensive to travel to other neighborhoods without a car, especially from the south side, which is underserved by public transportation. Mothers in Sunnyside commonly had to take two or three buses to get to destinations on the north side, if they had money for bus fare. I stress this spatial dimension because it distinguishes

“available” assistance from actually “accessible” assistance. For example, a favorite secular non-profit among mothers in this study was the Houston Food Bank, whose central food depository is located approximately 15 miles from Sunnyside. Patrons can go “shopping” in the large emergency food pantry for items they want, a feature that gives them more freedom and a sense of normalcy compared to the experience of smaller food pantries that typically offer less, if any, choice. In a car, it is possible to get from Sunnyside to the food bank in less than 25 minutes; however, it takes over two hours on two different city buses, making it inaccessible for many.

Mothers in this study got connected with secular non-profit social service providers in several ways. Typically, it was through a referral they received after calling 211, a nationwide social service helpline sponsored by the United Way that connects people with local community organizations. Sometimes mothers were also referred to a non-profit by a different service provider, such as a welfare caseworker at HHSC, a wrap-around service provider, or a teacher at their child’s school or Head Start. A third common route was to consult a flyer that lists multiple secular and faith-based non-profit entities in Houston. This particular flyer is handed out to patrons at local food pantries, at the welfare office, the local library, and various other locations. I was given several copies as I met with different social service providers, and many of my respondents referred to the frustrating process of going down the list calling providers on this same flyer, only to find that its information was not up-to-date. As noted, the range of assistance mothers were able to get from secular non-profit organizations is wide. It was most common for mothers to report getting help with housing (utility bills, rental payments, and furniture), help with basic needs (food and clothing), and help with employment.

Faith-Based Non-Profit Organizations: Faith-based non-profit organizations and churches (many of which have 501(c)(3) status) are densely concentrated in Sunnyside, which means that even though they often also use zip codes as a service area boundary, it is likely that there would be at least one church offering services within one of the two zip codes that split Sunnyside down the middle. But because the churches rely heavily on member tithing and donations, and because the population of Sunnyside has on the whole relatively limited resources, churches are also limited in what they can offer residents, as several pastors informed me. Food and clothing pantries are the most common offerings in Sunnyside churches; however, some report that they are sometimes able to help with utility bills and occasionally rent assistance. However, these are more costly services, and with limited funding, churches often keep running waiting lists or inform people that they should check back the following month to see if funds have become available—a frustrating prospect for mothers in my study who sought help from churches when they were facing acute crises such as eviction or the termination of their electricity. These findings support Allard’s (2009) research on the constraints facing faith-based organizations that provide poverty-related assistance, despite their geographic proximity to those most in need.

Like secular non-profits, these organizations usually require far less personal information from “applicants” than the state, and faith-based non-profits tend to have even looser eligibility requirements. At the church food pantries I visited, patrons were typically asked to show a photo ID and write down their address, but volunteers like myself were instructed to give them food regardless. This ethos of providing help because it is the right thing to do, or because it is God’s calling, distinguishes faith-based service provision. And some mothers remarked on this spiritual orientation as one reason churches did not seem overly interested in making them “prove” their need; the idea was that no one would be turned away from the church. But it also means that the

application process itself can feel more like myth and ceremony than an effort to actually determine who receives resources and who does not. I volunteered at one food pantry at a church that used a more formal process than any others. They required patrons to fill out a page-long information sheet that documented income, detailed household information, and any household member's participation in public assistance programs. They also required photocopies of patrons' driver's licenses and kept these records in large three-ring binders. On the days when the food pantry was open to the public, volunteers checked each person's ID against the information listed in the binder and updated the photocopies if necessary. Interestingly, there was a form at the bottom of each information sheet where volunteers could mark "eligible" or "ineligible;" yet, no one was turned away because of not meeting these eligibility criteria, which were not explained to me. It wasn't clear to me why these forms were collected or why this language was used except to simulate a bureaucratic structure in the service of enhancing legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

In addition to restricting services based on zip code, some churches and faith-based organizations also use fuzzier criteria in determining whether an individual can receive assistance, especially when it comes to services or resources beyond food or clothing. Some churches only offer assistance to members of that particular church, and others require that the members tithe regularly in order to be eligible for assistance. One mother recounted a time she unsuccessfully sought help from her own church only to be asked by the pastor whether she tithed each month. She recalled him saying, "You know the Lord will bless you if you pay your tithes." She scoffed at what she viewed as a paradoxical requirement, since, as she told him, "I'm a single mother. All of my money go on bills...I say sir we *walk* here every Sunday...we can't

afford to do anything, we don't have cable, we don't have internet, we have a roof over our head.”

Sometimes, more subjective criteria are used to decide who receives assistance. Mona, the director of a large faith-based organization that supports a network of over 40 member churches explained how they make decisions about a person's level of need: “We are the church's response to poverty, so we're going to err on the side of grace if we're not sure.” She noted that because they were a privately funded organization and received no funding from the state, they did not have anyone else determining the criteria for them and they were able to make decisions on a case-by-case basis, sometimes relying as she termed it on “a gut feeling.” For her, this flexibility helped her carry out the mission of the organization. And again, discretion is not limited to faith-based social service providers; welfare caseworkers and staff at secular non-profits also make subjective judgments about deservingness. However, because of the lack of formal eligibility determination processes in the faith-based setting these subjective assessments seem to carry more weight. This fact was not lost on mothers, who often felt as though churches prioritized helping certain people over others.

Conclusion

During the Great Recession, Texas experienced a level of economic growth that put it ahead of most other states in the nation and insulated many of its citizens from the negative consequences of the national economic downturn (Grofum 2015). Houston fared equally as well, boasting of job growth and new construction and earning its spot on the Boomtown list. The Texas Medical Center, which is about ten minutes from Sunnyside, laid plans for a multi-billion dollar building project that would further elevate the Center—and the city—as a destination for

young professionals and innovators (Sarnoff 2015). Indeed, Houston continues to earn its reputation as a business-first city. Yet, for people living in neighborhoods like Sunnyside, the benefits of this model are hard to discern. Economic inequality continues to deepen, and the proportion of the population living in poverty in Texas remains well above the national average (McNichol 2013).

As a result, the safety net in Texas, in Houston, and in Sunnyside has become even more important for those at the bottom. And because of the meager amount of government assistance available and the high eligibility requirements for participating, mothers in this study relied on a range of safety net institutions not only for cash assistance and rental subsidies, but also often for food, clothing, and other daily necessities. Whether or not they were successful at getting this assistance, the level and scope of mothers' needs meant that they exposed multiple aspects of their lives to social service providers and to the state, in order to demonstrate that they deserved the help and to prove that they were compliant with requirements. Because of segregation and the spatial organization of the city, the experiences of those living in pockets of deep poverty, like my respondents, often remain invisible to outsiders. Therefore, we know little about what this type of repeated exposure feels like for those experiencing it in their daily lives. In the chapters that follow, I pursue this question and highlight what the experience of seeking assistance means to mothers in terms of privacy and more broadly.

CHAPTER 2: PRIVACY AT HOME

I first met Tasha on one of the worst days she had had in a while. It seemed like everything that could go wrong was going wrong. The week before, Tasha lost her job as a home healthcare worker after having worked there for several years. It wasn't full-time to begin with, and they had been cutting her hours for a while. With no other source of income, Tasha had been unable to make her car payments, to the point that her car was about to be repossessed. Tasha has a misdemeanor on her record that makes finding a steady job challenging, so losing this one was especially tough. Her husband helped out when he wasn't incarcerated, but with a felony conviction on his record he wasn't able to find regular work either. Because of that, Tasha did not want to put him on child support, a requirement if she were to apply for TANF, even though that would have allowed her to receive cash assistance. So for the most part Tasha was on her own, and her eyes filled up with tears as she explained how hard it was to tell her eight-year-old son that she didn't have enough money for him to get a lollipop. To make matters worse, Tasha recently had to move back into her parents' home after a spate of housing disasters. The low-income apartment she had been living in for three years flooded twice, the second time on Christmas Eve. She lost all of her furniture, clothes, her son's toys—everything. With the addition of Tasha and her son, there were a total of eight people staying in their home, and Tasha and her son had to share a bed. The situation was not easy for anyone: Tasha's dad has cancer and her mom is his full-time caretaker, but as Tasha explained, "They're parents, so they're not gonna let their grandchild go hungry." The combined pressures of these setbacks coupled with the crowded living situation left Tasha feeling overwhelmed. She explained:

My son doesn't have a bedroom. He's eight, he need his own room. He's still in the bed with me. That's a lot for me...I need that piece of mind to focus on what I need to do next. And when you're in a house full of people and personalities, and you're dealing with your own, it's kinda hard to focus on just what you need to do.

Tasha's son was also growing frustrated, as Tasha noted, "Now he want privacy. He wants his own [space]... He needs his own space."

When Tasha and I spoke again over a year later, Tasha was like a different person. She was ecstatic, having just received notice that she was awarded a Section 8 voucher after being on the waiting list for eight years. She and her son could finally move into their own place. Tasha explained, "Last time we spoke I was in a dark place, but God is amazing." When she heard the news about her voucher, Tasha said she cried "like a newborn baby." This development was a beacon of hope in what had otherwise been a terrible period for Tasha. She was in the process of getting a divorce from her husband, who had beaten her so severely that she was hospitalized and he was sent to prison "forever." The doctors found what looked like a cancerous tumor on her mother's lung, and Tasha had taken responsibility for another child, a 15-year-old son her husband had with a different woman. After a cousin threatened to kill the teen, Tasha decided he should live with her permanently, even though it meant more crowding and one more mouth to feed. But despite these traumatic events, the opportunity to move into her own apartment gave Tasha hope for the future. Her son kept talking about how he was going to decorate his room, and Tasha mused about the possibility of living in a "beautiful townhome or a condo."

Tasha's story highlights the importance of home as an anchor in what for her is an otherwise chaotic world. Even the prospect of having a place of her own helped lift Tasha up during a difficult period. Indeed, people in many cultures and across socio-economic strata view the home as a sacred space, or a sanctuary (Solove 2010). In the U.S. context this idea is codified in the law. The Supreme Court has ruled that the home is "a place of retreat to the (not always)

protective sphere of family life...[the home] is reflective of, and a conduit for, familial and emotional intimacy”¹ (Solove 2010: 59). In a later ruling the Court stated, “In none is the zone of privacy more clearly defined than when bounded by the unambiguous physical dimensions of an individual’s home” (Solove 2010: 58). Outside the legal context, the common phrase that the home is one’s “castle” reflects the cultural weight assigned to having a dedicated place of one’s own where others may not enter without invitation and where one is free to behave however they please.

However, the conditions under which people attempt to achieve privacy at home vary widely depending on socio-economic status, as Tasha’s story revealed. When faced with hardships like losing her job or managing an abusive relationship, she was not able to retreat to a space of her own—a “castle” where she would might experience the relief from constant interaction with others that privacy can afford (Altman 1975). She was not even able to claim her own bed as a private space. As a result, as Tasha noted, it was hard for her to focus on improving her situation in a setting marked by overcrowding and friction between multiple family members. When Tasha moves into her Section 8 apartment, her privacy will be further compromised, as the property manager will be able to legally conduct random, unannounced inspections of her unit without her consent—searches that would be illegal on privacy grounds if she were not in subsidized housing (Gilman 2012).

In this chapter I examine how the conditions of poverty constrain poor mothers’ opportunities to achieve privacy at home, particularly for those whose housing is in some form subsidized by the state. I focus on two aspects: the surveillance in subsidized housing and the

¹ Feminist scholars have contested this notion, arguing that for many women, the home has historically been a site of violence and oppression rather than respite—and that granting the home special protection in terms of privacy can in fact serve to obscure and tacitly allow for domestic violence (MacKinnon 1987).

high level of violent crime in Sunnyside, and show how these factors shape mothers' home environment as well as the way they respond to these conditions. First, I show that mothers living in subsidized housing are subject to an intensive surveillance system consisting of rules, monitoring, and punishment. The existence of this surveillance system is justified by the perceived need for security, given the level of violence in the neighborhood. But for the mothers who end up the subjects of surveillance, this system created an environment that some likened to living in prison. Second, the high prevalence of neighborhood violence leads some mothers to adopt a posture of defensiveness—in order to keep their families safe, they try to avoid contact with neighbors and stay inside with their children as much as possible. These tactics may be successful at enhancing their safety, but because many of my respondents were living in overcrowded conditions as a result of poverty—sometimes with multiple people per bedroom—this strategy also diminished the possibility for physical privacy inside the home. As I show, the experience of feeling overexposed in their housing complexes and within their homes diminished mothers' privacy but also their sense of freedom in the very place many people expect to feel free.

Housing in Sunnyside

Mothers in this study live in a variety of housing arrangements, including in apartments, duplexes, townhomes, and single-family houses. Although the majority of housing units in the area are houses, rather than apartments, the proportion of units covered by housing subsidy of some form is considerably higher in Sunnyside than other areas of Houston (Palay 2015). The last public housing project in the Sunnyside area was demolished in 2014; however, there are several project-based Section 8 apartment complexes that offer reduced rent for low-income

tenants. I discussed the distinctions between the forms of subsidized housing in more depth in the previous chapter; however, a key difference is that project-based Section 8 developments are privately owned and managed, rather than being owned and managed by the public housing authority. This arrangement means that individual property managers and owners can set rules and conditions for residency that go beyond what is established by the housing authority—an example of a public-private partnership that is increasingly common in social service provision (Allard 2009; Marwell 2004).

An alternative to project-based Section 8 is the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which most people still term “Section 8.” This program allows for geographic flexibility, because the voucher can be used to pay rent at any property that accepts vouchers. There are major practical limits to this putative flexibility, however, because the voucher amount is typically not enough to house someone in an affluent area, and it is up to the individual landlord whether or not they will rent to tenants with vouchers. The properties that accept Section 8 in Houston tend to be clustered in economically distressed areas that are predominantly non-white. Still, getting a Section 8 voucher was reported to be the ideal option for mothers in this study, many of whom held out hope that they could move to neighborhoods they viewed as safer or that provided what they perceived to be a better environment for raising children.

There are also several developments in Sunnyside that receive state funding to build and rehabilitate housing units for low-income families. These complexes are often termed “all bills paid” because the cost of utilities is included in the rent, or are just referred to as “low-income.” These complexes are often the option of last resort for people with criminal records that make them ineligible for state subsidized housing (McCarty et al. 2016). Structural conditions at these apartment complexes tend to be worse, as tenants have little leverage to hold landlords

accountable for maintenance or security. Tenants are also often required to pay a non-refundable fee in addition to the deposit if they have a criminal record. Many mothers describe making the decision to take one of these apartments on the condition that the landlord would make needed repairs or address structural problems with the unit, only to later learn that these promises were empty. Finally, some mothers either live in rented homes or apartments where they pay full rent or live with family members in homes that are owned.

“You Can’t Do Nothing Here”: Everyday Life Under Surveillance

Given the level of crime in Sunnyside, one might expect to see the sort of surveilling police presence that characterizes other urban neighborhoods that face high crime: police cruisers parked at certain intersections, officers on foot patrol, or the ubiquitous “ghetto bird” police helicopter. I was surprised to see few marked cop cars and never saw uniformed officers walking the streets.² However, as soon as I approached Scott Plaza, a project-based Section 8 apartment complex, the surveillance apparatus—in the form of a security camera—literally looked me right in the face. And as I learned from respondents living in subsidized housing, the combination of intensive rules, surveillance practices including random inspections and security cameras, and the constant reminder of the possibility of eviction together created a home environment for mothers that some likened to living in prison. Importantly, these three elements work in tandem: without the surveillance practices, adherence to the rules would be hard to monitor, and without the threat of eviction, the rules and surveillance would lack the power that they wield. And,

² I did not spend time in Sunnyside at night, and respondents informed me that there were far more undercover police cars than marked; therefore, I may have unknowingly observed them. Also, as a “rurban” neighborhood with swaths of open land and little foot traffic, the policing strategy might simply be different than that I have observed in other high-poverty urban neighborhoods.

unlike forms of law enforcement surveillance like stop-and-frisk, the surveillance in subsidized housing penetrates the interior of residents' homes.

In this section, I draw primarily on the example of Scott Plaza, where seven of my respondents lived or had lived in the past prior to getting evicted from Scott Plaza, to illustrate how mothers' privacy and more importantly, their freedom, was constrained due to the state's presence in their homes. I draw on others' experiences in different housing areas where appropriate. Scott Plaza is located on Barberry Drive, a dead end street perpendicular to Scott Street, one of the two major thoroughfares that run through Sunnyside. A shuttered gas station sits on the corner of Barberry and Scott, with tall weeds growing up around the abandoned fuel pumps. On one side of Barberry are the King's Row apartments, among the most notorious in the area because of drug and gang activity. Early in my fieldwork I was warned by residents not to venture into King's Row, in part because it has only one driveway for people to enter and exit—what residents call a “one way in, one way out” configuration that presumably makes it hard to escape quickly if something violent happened within the complex. Opposite King's Row are the Scott Plaza apartments, which did not seem to receive the same negative attention as King's Row, though there were three murders within the apartments during the three-year period I spent interviewing mothers in Sunnyside.

Rules

Anyone who has signed a lease agreement or belonged to a homeowner's association knows that adhering to certain rules comes with the territory. Common examples among renters include prohibitions on pets, requirements regarding the disposal of trash and recycling, and in

some cases guidelines for allowable noise during certain hours. Mothers living in subsidized housing also have to abide by a set of rules, but these are far more extensive than what is



Figure 17. Abandoned gas station near Scott Plaza Apartments. Photo by the author, 2014.

typical for a tenant paying full rent. Depending on the type of housing and the preference of management, rules governing life in subsidized housing often go beyond the provisions set forth by the Houston Housing Authority and/or the federal Housing and Urban Development agency.

Rules and regulations at Scott Plaza govern the condition and upkeep of the apartment unit, the behaviors that are allowed within the apartment and in common areas on the property, and who can be in the apartment or on the grounds. Certain rules were seen as more onerous than others, but often mothers mentioned the sheer amount of rules as overwhelming. Candy had been living at Scott Plaza for six years, and badly wanted to move out of the complex. She and her three children slept in one of the two bedrooms, and her sister, who is not authorized to live there, slept in the other bedroom. During one of our interviews, Candy indicated that she was tired of sharing her space, saying, “I don’t want us staying together no more...that’s not

something I want when I move.” Candy was also tired of living in an apartment, and would ideally move into a house if she could. When I asked what exactly she was tired of, she replied, “Oh, baby, the rules. Everywhere you go, everywhere you go, there's going to be rules. I understand that. But like certain apartments...they don't want this, they don't want that, I ain't got time for all that.”

Olivia took particular exception to rules regarding cleanliness. She summarized these rules, saying, “Your apartment has to be clean at all times.” This requirement is distinct from the general guideline that any renter, in subsidized housing or not, must leave the unit in the same condition as it was when initially rented.³ Rather, Olivia is referencing more extreme expectations of cleanliness, as measured by specific rules. For example, tenants were required to clean underneath their refrigerators as well as the baseboards of the hallway, they could get a violation for having a dirty mop left touching the floor, and they were not allowed to keep dishes in the sink. Further, unlike the rules for homeowners in a housing association or a standard lease agreement, in subsidized housing random inspections and surveillance cameras to monitor adherence are both actively employed. And adherence to rules such as these is critical, as it can mean the difference between being able to stay in one’s apartment or getting evicted. In the year she has been living at Scott Plaza, Olivia was written up for having dirty dishes in her sink, for not having clean baseboards, and for the small light above her stove being dirty. She also received a violation for having her children’s bed too near the window (considered a fire hazard) and for having a shirt drying on the front gate outside her apartment. During one inspection, the property manager questioned why she had her kitchen lights on if she wasn’t in the kitchen.

³ It is worth noting that when I interviewed a supervisor at the Houston Housing Authority, he told me that not once in 15 years had a public complaint been due to a Section 8 renter who had damaged their apartment. He stressed that the idea that Section 8 tenants don’t take care of their apartments is a myth.

There are no specific guidelines for how many lights can be on at a time, but because the complex is “all bills paid,” tenants can get a violation for using what is considered an “excess” amount of utilities, and Olivia was warned to only keep lights on if she was in the room. The same concern with utilities use was the rationale for not allowing tenants to fill “kiddie pools” with water in the summer for their children to play in and to help them cool down. This rule was strictly enforced, even during the weeks when temperatures consistently exceeded 100 degrees. Although Olivia was excited to have her own apartment, she would prefer a house, in part because of the extensive rules and the ever-present potential for eviction. She said, “Everything they say has to go, or you got to go, basically.”

Other mothers at Scott Plaza echoed the view that the rules governing everyday life were overbearing. Mothers living in different project-based housing complexes shared similar perceptions about extensive rules, but the content of the rules differed, because they are applied and enforced based on individual property managers’ discretion. For example, tenants at Missionary Villages, another project-based development, are not allowed to have cable television hook-ups, whereas many tenants at Scott Plaza have cable connections. Tenants at Sunflower Terraces are allowed to have visitors park their cars in the parking lot, which is not permitted at Scott Plaza. Also unique to Scott Plaza relative to other project-based sites I visited were the surveillance cameras located within the complex, which I address in more detail in a subsequent section.

At Scott Plaza, the property owner, a white man named Mark (who tenants just call “the white man”), established the rules. Most of the time, however, the rules were enforced by the property manager, Ms. Johnson, who lived in one of the apartments in the front section of the

complex.⁴ Mark and Ms. Johnson were universally disliked by the tenants, who took exception to what they perceived as Mark's expectation that tenants would acquiesce to Ms. Johnson just because she was Black. Instead, tenants viewed her as pretending to be "on their side" when she was actually just doing the bidding of the owner. Ms. Johnson sometimes played into the dynamic, eschewing responsibility when she gave tenants a violation or eviction notice. Lonette explained, "You know Miss Johnson she gonna tell you, 'Well you know it's not me, baby.' That's her first words, 'You know it's not me.' I be like sometime it be her." Tenants also derided what seemed to be special treatment that Ms. Johnson received as a tenant in the complex. Several mothers noted that when their power went out unexpectedly or they had no hot water for days, Ms. Johnson's apartment still had working lights and they imagined that she was not going without a hot shower. Lonette recalled a time that there was no air conditioning in tenants' apartments, but the AC worked fine "in the front":

[Ms. Johnson] all cooling in the office, and we—I'll never forget that. Everybody air was off, and we could go in that office and it was so cool. I'll never forget you all did us like that. And we sitting here with no lights.

Lonette's comment, "you all did us like that" reflects the antagonistic "us versus them" relationship the property owner and manager had with tenants.

In addition to rules regarding cleanliness, there were also restrictions on who could be on the property or in residents' homes. Like many rules, these seemed to be enforced largely at the property manager's discretion. For example, before being forced out of Scott Plaza, Lonette's husband lived with her although he was not technically allowed on the lease because he had a felony conviction. Ms. Johnson told Lonette in person that it would be fine for her husband to

⁴ The front/back distinction is important, as it usually signals the part of the complex that is less dangerous and better maintained. Typically there are more aging tenants living in the front areas and younger people in the back, something that informal conversations with landlords confirmed. Across apartment complexes, mothers often referred to not wanting to be "in the back" or referenced what goes on "back there," and I was warned not to venture to the back of a particular complex where a murder had taken place the prior week.

stay there, that “as long as he don't get in any trouble you're fine.” Lonette stressed to me that her partner was not “...a thug out here on the corner. He's an electrician. He works.” And although he had been living there for months, one day Mark was “walking the property,” realized that Lonette’s partner was living there, and she subsequently received a violation. When Lonette protested, Ms. Johnson claimed that she had never agreed to let him live there, and it was Lonette’s word against Ms. Johnson’s. Lonette was given two weeks’ notice to vacate her apartment.

The formal rules regarding visitors were unclear to me, and again, seemed to be loosely interpreted by Ms. Johnson depending on the situation. For example, I interviewed Lonette again several months after she had left Scott Plaza. Her mother had continued living there for a period of time after Lonette left, but Lonette said she was not allowed to visit her mother because it was considered trespassing. Similarly, when Cassandra was living at Scott Plaza prior to being evicted, her mother used to visit from the north side of the city. Sometimes she would stay a night or two, and Cassandra reported that she received violations for having an “unauthorized occupant” living with her, even though it was only a few days at a time. In general, residents felt that the purpose of these rules was to keep them under control but also to punish them. Lonette emphasized, too, that there was a racialized element to the system:

That's why I would say here we understand there's rules. We understand that you have a way you want us to live, but some of the rules is not—they should not be there. I'm sorry. I just feel like a lot of things it is for him to keep us under control. He looking at us a whole bunch of hoodlums out there sitting... He's a racist. I don't care that I can't sugar coat it no other way. That man is a big racist, and he know he got us under control.

Lonette’s views were echoed by tenants at Scott Plaza and those at other housing complexes, such as Sherrod, the boyfriend of one mother I interviewed who described his belief that the

government's interest was in keeping African American communities contained. Sherrod explained:

It's really mental slavery, to the point where [the government says] 'OK, we don't have to help this community right now. We'll give 'em a little bit at a time, but the majority of the time we gonna beat 'em down to the point where they have to need us and we'll give it to 'em again, they'll be happy for a little bit, beat 'em down again, and that's just how it is in this community... You know, they are containing. Once you can grasp control over a situation, you have people to obey you... And that's how the police or the government is—they look at like OK well look: *We* are feeding *you*, we gave *you* Section 8 housing, cheap or minimal bills, so you won't disrespect us, you gonna do what we tell you to do.

In these comments, Sherrod highlighted the power of the state to enforce rules and exact punishment if tenants didn't "do what we tell you to do," a dynamic that persists because the state is offering conditional assistance to vulnerable people. Because this assistance could be retracted at any point, residents are in a precarious situation, in which they perceive they must perform submission to the rules or risk losing their housing.

Surveillance

There were three main surveillance practices used to monitor tenants' compliance with rules at Scott Plaza: the use of regulated electronic gates, security cameras, and physical inspections. The result of these practices was that the state effectively penetrated the inside of mothers' homes as well as the outside, rendering them overexposed.

Electronic Gates: Regardless of the official rules, in practice it was only possible to get into the Scott Plaza apartments by going through the electronic gates. The gates served as a regulatory mechanism, as it was impossible to get into the property without someone inside letting you in and surveillance cameras captured footage of anyone passing through the gates. Most tenants did not hail the gates as an improvement for safety, instead viewing them as inconvenient and

sometimes hazardous. Some tenants felt as though the purpose of the gates was to keep them in and control them rather than to keep unwanted trouble out—quite the opposite of how electronic gates function in affluent neighborhoods. And as I will show, the gates were also used to track tenants’ adherence to the rules.

There are two electronic gates per each section of Scott Plaza—one that pedestrians can walk through after being let in by a tenant either manually or via an electronic “clicker,” and a larger sliding gate for cars, which can only be opened using the clicker. Tenants voiced several complaints they had with the gate system. One issue was the cost and conditions associated with obtaining the clicker. The cost was \$50, which for many tenants was exorbitant, given that they were eligible to live at Scott Plaza because of having a very low income. Further, only tenants who had a car registered solely in their name were eligible to park in the lot and use the clicker. This requirement excluded tenants who shared ownership of a car with someone else or who relied on a borrowed vehicle. As I show in Chapter 5, one tactic used to skirt the welfare asset test was to put one’s car in someone else’s name so one’s level of assets appeared lower, and tenants with this arrangement would not be allowed to park in the lot. As a result of this rule, on many days that I visited Scott Plaza the parking lots were nearly empty, with tenants parking instead on the streets lining the complex opposite King’s Row. As Lonette noted, this arrangement was unfortunate for tenants who preferred to steer clear of what was happening “out there on the streets.” Additionally, car theft was common on the side streets, but property management eschewed responsibility for stolen or damaged cars since they were technically off of the property. Again, compare the function of these gates to those surrounding an affluent gated community—the gates there protect residents’ vehicles—they inhibit their cars’ vulnerability to theft, whereas at Scott Plaza, the gates do the opposite.

Tenants who wished to have a visitor park on the property had to pay an additional \$50 deposit for a visitors' pass that lasted three days. It was against the rules to let anyone into the parking lot who wasn't authorized to park there, even temporarily. Jamilah explained:

And if you see somebody out there and they got some groceries and they ask you to open the gate so they can pull in and get them, you better not open that gate, shit. You going to get a citation, cause you opened the gate and let them in. Sure enough right. That's how they doing it.

After she was forced to vacate her apartment on short notice, Ada's father brought his pick-up truck to help Ada move her possessions to a new apartment. According to Ada, he attempted to back his truck into the parking lot but was stopped by Ms. Johnson, who insisted that he park outside of the apartment complex, meaning that they would have to walk a distance with Ada's household goods, including beds and a heavy dresser. The strict enforcement of the rules around who was allowed entry to the complex struck mothers as unnecessary and also punitive. As

Candy put it:

You can't do nothing over here. You get caught on camera—if they said you let somebody up in here through the main, through the little gateway or whatever and they ain't supposed to be over here, or if [management] say something to [a tenant], and they say something back to them, you can get evicted.

Again, Candy's comments highlight the way that tenants' vulnerability to eviction made the rules and surveillance effective.

Tenants also noted the safety issues raised by having an electronic gate system as the only way in or out of the apartment complex, especially in a city like Houston, where serious thunderstorms and extreme weather events are relatively common. Jamilah noted that emergency vehicles often had trouble getting into the complex because there is no call box, so they have no way to get in touch with people inside who could let them through the gate. She also worried about what might happen if the power went out:

What if it's a power outage? Okay, there's a power outage. We don't have any lights in the house. What if this place catch afire and I go outside that door and guess what, I can't move my car off the lot, why? Because the electrical gate is not working, so bam, there my car going to burn up.... How we going to get our car out if this place catch fire?

Jamilah's comments call to mind Cee-Lo's lyric from the Goodie Mob song "Cell Therapy," in which he discusses an electric gate that was erected in his own low-income apartment complex: "But every now and then, I wonder if the gate was put up to keep crime out or to keep our ass in." Indeed, Candy recalled a time that the gate stopped working because of heavy rains, and pointed out that there were people living in the apartments who were sick and might need emergency assistance, but be unable to get help if the gates weren't working. Again, these issues with the electronic gates reinforced for mothers the notion that their purpose was not to keep them safe and secure, but to keep them contained.

Security Cameras: The first time I met Jamilah, I had barely made it through the electronic gate before she angrily pointed out several surveillance cameras to me, telling me in exasperation that living at Scott Plaza felt like being in prison. She had been living at Scott Plaza for nearly 8 years, and the surveillance cameras and electronic gates were a relatively new addition. In her view, the cameras were far worse than the electronic gates. She noted that the cameras were supposed to be for the tenants' protection, but to her they seemed to have a more sinister purpose. She explained that in the beginning, the cameras were pointed towards the entrance of the complex, which to her made sense if the purpose was to deter crime. Everyone seemed to agree that much of the crime in the immediate vicinity stemmed from drug and gang activity at King's Row, right across the street from Scott Plaza,⁵ so it was understandable that the

⁵ Again, this was a perception that was challenged by the spate of violent crime that occurred at Scott Plaza during the study period.

management might want to make sure that activity didn't spill over into Scott Plaza. Jamilah's own grandson had been shot in the chest at King's Row in 2012.

But as we neared Jamilah's apartment and she showed me the nearest camera, I saw that it was directed towards the apartments, not towards the street. Olivia, who lived in the rear section of Scott Plaza, which backs onto a dead end street bordered by an open field, agreed that the camera placement was odd. She did believe that the intention of the surveillance was to deter crime, and thought the cameras might have made things a bit safer, but she also felt as though the cameras were ineffectively placed. She noted:

Like if something was to happen... they might be able to catch them [but] they don't have [the cameras] everywhere, like the main parts where they need to be... Soon as you walk—where you was standing at the gate, they can see exactly up on that gate and right there in they little driveway, but they don't have them where I think they should have them. I think they should have one right here [gesturing in the direction of the parking lot behind her building], so you could see like they always back here hanging and shooting dice. There's not a camera right there, so they don't know what they doing back here, and then they be within the apartments.

When I asked Jamilah how it felt to her to have one of the cameras “within the apartments” so near her unit, she said, “It's depressing. It's frustrating when you can't -- Your house don't even seem like your home no more, cause every time you walk out the door you looking at a damn camera... What is the problem? What are you looking for? What are you looking for?”

For Jamilah, part of what makes a house a home is the fact it is supposed to be somewhat insulated from exposure to others. Jamilah's question – what are you looking for – is directed at the owner, Mark, who she believes is able to review the surveillance footage on his cell phone and who also has access to the footage from his home. Lonette share this perception, saying:

Oh, he look at [the cameras] all day when he's at home, over the weekend, they know everything we do, and you all office is closed on weekends, but you all know what we're doing because you're looking at us in the cameras. That's not no privacy at all.

Jamilah described an experience she had with Mark and the surveillance footage, which contributed to her sense that the cameras were more about controlling tenants than protecting them. Jamilah came home one day to find a violation notice on her apartment door, for “loitering and inappropriate conduct.” When she reported to the office to ask what the violation was for, Mark had her sit down. Jamilah recalled, “He said, ‘I’m going to back the camera up and show you and then you explain.’” Jamilah sat and watched as the footage showed her walking up to the electronic gate from the street and using her clicker to open the automatic gate. She had driven a rental car because her car was in the shop, and so had parked outside of the complex per the parking lot rules. Jamilah continued to describe her encounter with Mark:

Once I pushed the big gate open he stopped it right there. He say, ‘So what you see?’ I said, ‘I don’t know what you see, because I don’t see nothing. What you see?’ He said, ‘Well, let me rewind it again.’ So rewind it back and we went through it in slow motion. So when I pushed the button and I got to the gate, when I got ready to open the gate, there was a Coke can there in between the gate holding the gate open. So when I pushed it and I seen the Coke can I just threw it back on the ground inside the gate, so he say, ‘Now what did you see?’ I say, ‘Me throwing the Coke can down.’ He said, ‘That’s a violation.’

What this clip did not show was that the Coke can was already on the ground before Jamilah walked up—it had been placed there by someone else to prop open the gate. Jamilah continued, “I said, ‘Now what you’re going to do is you’re going to rewind that camera all the way back again until you see me get off that sidewalk.’ I say ‘Now you look at it.’” Jamilah directed the owner to rewind and view a different clip that revealed that she was not the person responsible for the litter. As Jamilah recalled, the owner apologized profusely, even knocking on her door later to apologize again. Yet the damage for Jamilah was already done. She said, “You saying you trying to make it better for us to live? No, that’s not. You are making us very uncomfortable over here. What is it for? You talking about for our safety this and our safety that, ain’t shit safety about none of this shit you doing, nothing.” Jamilah articulated the conflict between the state’s

claim (channeled through the property manager) that surveillance is necessary to protect residents from neighborhood crime, and the reality for tenants on the ground, which was that the surveillance harmed them. Her comments index broader questions about how to balance security, privacy, and freedom—central ethical concerns that animate public discourse about surveillance on a national scale (Rule 2007). However, these questions are rarely applied to the experience of the poor, particularly in what is considered to be the intimate sphere of the home. When I asked Jamilah whether she felt like she had enough privacy at home, she said emphatically:

No. And I ain't the only one say that either. Nope, what privacy we got? Damn, what if we got a boyfriend, want to sneak him in at night? Goddamn, y'all done seen it on the damn camera. Ain't that some shit? Come on, be for real. This is just a bunch of crazy stuff, and it's frustrating yeah, it is frustrating, and I pray every day, Lord, hurry up and get me some Section 8, some Harris County 8 or something so I can 8 up out of here, because this is not it. This is not it, not no more.

Jamilah's frustration with being monitored in the area outside of her home—what legal scholars term the “curtilage”—underscores the way that surveillance in public housing constrains opportunities for privacy in ways that would be unacceptable (and illegal) for people that are not in subsidized housing (Gilman 2012).

Inspections: Just as the surveillance cameras and gates are used to monitor tenants' behavior on the apartment grounds and outside of their units, in-person inspections give management a way to monitor tenants' behavior and adherence to rules within their homes. These inspections are distinct from the inspections the housing authority conducts to make sure the property meets federal standards in terms of structural integrity and safety. Whereas those inspections are intended to ensure that tenants are being housed in adequate and safe units (e.g. they must include fire extinguishers and have working plumbing) the internal inspections are more about

tenants themselves. In addition, the HUD inspections are planned and tenants are given advanced notice, but internal inspections seem intentionally designed to surprise.

Olivia described the “random pop-up inspections” she had experienced at Scott Plaza, where Ms. Johnson came in and “bang on the door like she the police...I didn’t get a notice on my door or nothing.” During the inspections Ms. Johnson appraised the cleanliness of the apartment. Again, this inspection was not used to assess the condition of the unit at the end of a renter’s tenure; rather, it was an ongoing, routine practice. The fact that the inspections were unannounced underscores what residents believed to be its implicit purpose – to “catch” residents who may be breaking rules. If the intent was truly to make sure the apartments were kept clean, management might institute inspections at regular intervals, which would encourage tenants to clean their units prior to the inspection. However, from the mothers’ perspective, these inspections were instead an opportunity to punish tenants, particularly those that spoke out against management or who were seen as having a “bad attitude.”

Olivia felt as though Ms. Johnson singled her out, explaining that she always seemed to be “picking” at Olivia. Olivia thought this might be because she had a “bad attitude,” though it was hard for me to imagine someone describing Olivia this way, as she was markedly soft-spoken and had a gentle demeanor. And although Olivia seemed to take Ms. Johnson’s “picking” personally, she also noted that her aunt and her grandmother (who used to live at Scott Plaza) warned her when she moved in that she should, “just keep your house clean at all times and stuff, because they will put you out for anything.” This threat was borne out in Olivia’s experience. Over the year she’d been living there, she noted, “I have seen so many people move in and out, in and out, getting put out, getting put out. I’ve seen so many people get put out of here.” She continued:

That's why I just—I try to keep my place clean as possible, because I don't want her to come in and give me a violation and put me out, because when she do that, then I'm really not going to have nowhere to go unless my boyfriend finally has his apartment and we can move in with him.

According to Olivia, Ms. Johnson used the threat of eviction during the inspections to remind tenants of their tenuous housing position. She recalled:

She always say like little smart stuff like, 'This is not your apartment, it's HUD's apartment, so whatever they rules are, you got to abide by them or you could be put out, you could be evicted.' I'm like living over here sometimes with how she acts and how she talks to people, it's like being in prison.

Jamilah also used the metaphor of a prison to characterize their experience living at Scott Plaza.

Jamilah continued, "It just feels like shit. Like I said, we in a concentration camp, shit. We got to abide by they rules or they going to kick us out. We got to abide by they rules or they going to kill us or whatever."⁶

Latrice, who lived at Sunflower Terraces, another project-based Section 8 complex, described the inspections and rules—such as keeping your windows clean—as strict, and as something she was unaccustomed to:

Well, when they do inspection they're really strict. Like I know I lived in apartments, I never cleaned my windows. They're like, 'Clean your window, clean your window sill.' That's strict for me. I understand sweep and mop the floor and stuff, but the window thing was kind of strict for me.

Sade was on the waiting list for Section 8 for years, and ended up finding an affordable house to rent before her name was ever selected. Although she struggled during that waiting period, she

⁶ Jamilah's statement here might seem hyperbolic, but it is worth noting that I first arrived in Houston to begin this study four days after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Over the course of the three years I spent interviewing mothers, a nation-wide conversation about the deaths of Black men and women at the hands of police was ongoing. Numerous mothers made comments about the fragility of Black life not only at the hands of police, but also the generalized lack of concern about the Black community. For example, one mother, Kelly, referred in passing to Sandra Bland—who in 2015 died under suspicious circumstances in a jail cell just miles from Houston—as "that Black lady who they killed and said she hung herself."

reflected on how happy she was that she never ended up in subsidized housing, in part because of the prospect of having to undergo inspections. She said:

That's also another entity that I know that comes into your home and—not that I had anything that they can't see but I'd rather the world outside, stay outside. You know, I don't need you looking in my cabinets and things like that. And they go through all of that as part of the housing process. To make sure you're maintaining the property. Which is something that the landlords did but you know, they notify you, 'Hey we're coming through' or whatever, y'all don't want to catch me with rollers in my hair in the middle of laundry or something, so.

In these comments, Sade touched on the implicit assumption that resistance to inspections (and more broadly a desire for privacy) necessarily indicates that one has something to hide—a recurrent theme in mothers' discussion of disclosing personal information to welfare caseworkers, which I take up in Chapter 3. Sade stressed that while she doesn't have anything to hide, she would not want to be subject to inspections of her home, particularly without prior warning, which is a courtesy her current landlords grant her. Tenants at Scott Plaza are not granted this courtesy, as Wanda explained: “They can come in your apartment when they want to. There's no privacy. [And] if I'm not at home, I feel like you have no right to go in my home.” Maxine described her perception that the HUD inspections of her Section 8 home reflected a lack of privacy, saying:

If somebody watching out on how you live every year...that ain't no privacy. [Referring to the rules] No loud, you know, can't no, no nothing. You can't... It's up to the landlord, too. So, you know, they do inspection, they come see how you live every year. Who wants that?

Latrice explained that as she understood it, abiding by rules—and losing not just privacy, but freedom—were the costs of needing help. She said:

I feel like if I had a home I would probably have more privacy, or maybe a different apartment complex I may have more privacy where they have like a closed in balcony, probably be more privacy as well. But a lot of times they say when you... They say a lot of times when your income is lower or what's the exact terminology I want to use? You can't get everything you want. So sometimes you give—you give up privacy to get help. Just like what my mother used to do when I was a kid when I was younger. I said 'Mama, I need money.' 'What do you need it for?' There go my privacy right there.

Latrice articulated the paternalistic dynamic in which the cost of requesting assistance is the loss of privacy when surveillance practices are involved. Even in the simple example of Latrice's mom giving her money, she specified that it was the monitoring or supervision—the questioning, “What do you need it for?” that eliminated Latrice's sense of privacy. The same dynamic exists when tenants in public housing are informed that they will receive a housing subsidy but are only able to keep it if they submit to inspections and follow rules, so the state can assess how they are using the assistance and also whether they deserve to keep it. In this and other examples in the chapters that follow, mothers encounter the expectation by the state that they meet these demands but also that they do so without protest. Through repeated interactions with safety institutions, mothers learn that they are expected to embody a deserving and grateful recipient of aid (Auyero 2012), which means accepting the terms of engagement even if they mean diminishing mothers' privacy and sense of freedom.

Threats of Eviction

The rules and surveillance practices I have reviewed are a daily hassle, annoyance, and in some cases a source of major consternation for mothers. However, they are made powerful because of mothers' economic vulnerability and the tenuousness of their living situations. It is this vulnerability that makes the state's power (channeled through property managers and landlords) so consequential materially and symbolically. It is the power that management holds

to evict, or to give tenants enough violations to keep them on the brink of eviction, that makes the rules and surveillance so upsetting and in turn makes residents feel powerless. Far from idle threats, the management at Scott Plaza has a record of regularly carrying through on the forceful relocation of tenants. Three of the seven mothers I interviewed at Scott Plaza were evicted during the study period. Perhaps more importantly, everyone I spoke to knew of others who had been evicted, which made the prospect very real. The multi-dimensional consequences of eviction have been amply documented (Desmond and Kimbro 2015; Desmond and Shollenberger 2015), and they were devastating for those of my respondents who went through it. For example, Ada had been evicted from Scott Plaza for not paying \$59 she owed in rent. I interviewed Ada in her mother's home on the north side, where she and her eight-year-old daughter moved after the eviction. She cried as she explained, "It's a hurtful feeling to know that someone could just like put you out... it hurted me to know that I stayed in those apartments, sir, going on two years and then they just put me out. So I feel like I have to start all over again." With an eviction from subsidized housing on her record, Ada would not be eligible for public housing for at least five years, and although she was immensely grateful for her mother's offer, she did not want to stay there long. She said:

I feel like my world was coming to an end when I lost my apartment. I don't want to have to call my mom and be like 'Hey, mom, I gotta come back home.' That's a hard thing to do when you've been gone for two years and you living on your own and that you have to come back into mom's house and follow mom's rules all over again.

Aside from the disappointment and shame Ada felt having to move back home, she also had to take her daughter out of school, find a new school that had space for her, and navigate a two hour commute to get to work. Ada said she "loved" privacy, and hadn't been able to enjoy that at Scott Plaza:

They have cameras and everything up, you have no privacy, no one can come into your house without her putting a letter on the door saying something like you can't have company or who is this or they just wanted to be in your business about every little thing...it's like no privacy, no nothing.

However, staying at her mother's house meant abiding by her set of rules and sharing space with her brothers, again limiting her sense of privacy: "Who doesn't want their own privacy and not want to stay with their mom...It's very important to me that I have that privacy and by me being in my mom's house and my brothers, it's really not a lot of privacy."

But even for mothers in this study who didn't actually experience eviction, having that possible outcome held over their heads made them worried about speaking up about maintenance problems or about issues they had with the management, because they were aware of the possibility for retribution in the form of eviction. Lonette, who was in the midst of being forced out of Scott Plaza when I interviewed her,⁷ explained that the rules and the threat of eviction created a climate of fear, where any protest on the part of residents could result in censure:

It's not about our safety or us being comfortable anymore. We're not comfortable being here. We're scared that if we walk outside [the property manager] going to think we did something wrong. We can't speak our mind. We better not say nothing to [her]."

These comments speak to the sense among residents that the purpose of the rules and surveillance was to keep them under control and also to punish them. They also highlight how state power can operate diffusely through actors such as property managers.

In addition to reserving the right to evict tenants, property managers of low-income housing know that most tenants have few alternative housing options because they are not able to pay full rent. This knowledge, according to Latrice, allows them to take advantage of tenants.

She explained:

⁷ Lonette was not formally evicted, but she was told her lease would not be renewed. This method of forcing tenants out did not require a court process and did not result in an eviction on tenants' record, which was positive for tenants. However, because this process was more informal, tenants were not sure about their rights.

People, when they feel like they're giving you something for free, they give you—I guess they feel like well, shoot. At these apartments, they don't take responsibility for anything, even for like—even the management they'll like spot or fix stuff, but they feel like you're not going to move. Your rent is cheap. Where are you going to go? You don't have a choice, so you have no choice but to take it, because where else you going to go? Because like these apartments have a long waiting list, so once I move they move somebody else in within a month.

Getting evicted adds another layer to what amounts to a vicious cycle of vulnerability for tenants, because they are then at the mercy of prospective landlords or property managers to accept them despite their eviction record. This exception sets the stage for abuse, since management can revoke their “generosity” at any given time, knowing that a tenant with an eviction record has even fewer alternative options. Or, they can break promises to make needed repairs, as reported by many mothers. For example, when Dominique moved into the Crestmont Village Apartments, the landlord promised her that she would replace the carpet, attend to the pest problems, and address multiple other maintenance issues in Dominique’s apartment. She did not, as Dominique explained:

The carpet was still a mess. My walls wasn't painted. I'm missing the little outlets that—the cover, all the plastic part. I'm missing those in every section of the house. I had roaches real bad. I had to bomb the house four times before I moved in... And I didn't have a doorknob, so I had to buy a doorknob and put it on and then my dad broke it because it was from the dollar store.

When the maintenance staff finally did come to fix a leak in her son’s bedroom, they created an even larger hole that they never filled in. Dominique eventually gave up on the room: “I've turned it into my dog's room now, like even the dog shouldn't be living back there, but I can't do anything.” Dominique stayed on at Crestmont until the complex was shuttered by the city and all residents were forced to leave, after which point she, like Ada, moved back in with her mom.

Neighborhood Violence

In addition to the surveillance system within subsidized housing complexes, the high level of violent crime in Sunnyside also shapes mothers' capacities to achieve privacy within their homes. Olivia, a 22-year-old mother of two boys, grew up in a rural suburb of Houston, and she was hesitant to move to Sunnyside. When she was younger, she used to visit her grandfather and an uncle that lived in the neighborhood, and Olivia recalled that each time she would think, "I want to go home!" because she wasn't accustomed to the violence and activities like shooting dice that she described as "new to me." She ended up at Scott Plaza because her aunt lived there and told Olivia that the apartments were getting better in terms of safety, having just installed security gates. At the time, Olivia was pregnant with her second child and her children's father had just gone back to prison, so she was intent on finding a place quickly. She submitted an application and moved in within two months, which was expedient compared to being on the waiting list for Section 8, which can take years. Although she was grateful for the reduced rent, Olivia was disturbed by the violence she observed in and around her apartment complex. She explained:

I don't go outside over here, because it's pretty bad over here. Like I just heard somebody got shot over here. When I first moved in, somebody—they found somebody in somebody's trunk across the street. I'm like yeah, I'm not...I'm not going outside over here. But it's okay, but it's just outside. You go outside your door, you never know what could happen over here, because people always shooting, people always fighting, and they always swanging up and down the street.

Olivia's comments about violence, in which she stressed that "it's just outside" underscore the importance for her of having a refuge inside her home—of being able to escape the noise and violence.

The prevalence of violence in Sunnyside and in my respondents' lives is critical to understanding mothers' habits of life at home. Mothers often mentioned the frequency of

shootings as the chief concern they had about where they lived. Candy described living at Scott Plaza, saying, “They shoot too much down here. Just the other day they were shooting...I don't want me and my kids to have to look over our shoulder at night or nothing like that.” Jamilah is a grandmother that has custody of two of her granddaughters, including one that is a senior in high school. While the high school is about a five-minute walk from their apartment complex, Jamilah never let her granddaughter walk to school because, “it’s always a killing and always a shooting.” In the months between the first and second times I interviewed Jamilah, two people were murdered at her apartment complex, including a cousin of hers. This was the second cousin she had lost to gun violence in recent years. When Tanara first moved into the Sunflower Terrace apartments, she described them as “still a lil’ bad, you know they had drugs everywhere.” Despite some improvements since then, she notes that her kids had seen “crackheads” walking around the complex and on the morning of our interview she told me she had seen a child around eleven years old smoking marijuana in the stairwell outside her unit. Tanara continued:

It was to the point where my kids sat in the house for months on end. All last summer my kids didn't even go outside. If we wasn't getting into the car and going somewhere else to have fun, we was in this house and that's where y'all was gonna be. I don't want you hanging out with them people out there... I don't want you around that, you know.

Jonelle was also concerned about her kids being exposed to other children in the Sunflower Terrace apartments where she lives, and noted that her daughter frequently got into fights with neighbors. She explained:

This place, we can walk outside and somebody'll break out into a fight. We sit on the porch and somebody start shooting. We see the cops. I mean, we've literally seen someone bleed half near to death, we had to call 911. [My children] not used to this kind of place. My daughter, the little one...she gets into it every time she steps outside.

In response to the violence, mothers like Tanara and Jonelle stay indoors with their kids most of the time that they're home, despite the fact that the warm Texas weather makes it

possible to be outside for much of the year. Jamilah explained, “I'm just trying to live right and do the best I can, and I don't even hardly go outside. I used to sit outside. I don't even go outside no more. I'm in the house all the time.” Although Cherise said she felt comfortable at home, she noted that, “[the] only time I come outside is when I'm going to work or...like I need to run errands. Cause I don't come outside, it's just too much going on. I don't come outside. Because I feel like you not safe nowhere no more...I just stay inside.” When I asked Candy how she coped with the violence, she said, “I don't even let [my kids] outside. And [my son] be like ‘Mama why we can't go outside?’ ‘Cause you not.’ If I'm not outside and I'm not watching y'all ride y'all bike or something y'all not going outside. And it hurts because it's like he's steady—if I tell him no he sneaks outside.” I went to Candy's apartment several times to interview her and also her mother, Jackie, whose three young adopted children come over frequently to play with Candy's three kids. We struggled to carry on a conversation because of the loud and chaotic atmosphere and frequent interruptions that come with having six young children playing indoors at once in a two-bedroom apartment—a testament to the tradeoff mothers make between achieving a sense of safety and a measure of privacy.

The strategy of staying indoors was also a way to minimize contact with neighbors that mothers regarded as potentially dangerous—either because they were seen as being a bad influence on their children or because mothers worried that they themselves might get into confrontations with them. In this sense, mothers engaged in a form of social distancing for the purpose of self-protection. The notion of neighbors as sources of danger loomed particularly large among mothers living in low-income apartments. For example, Dominique said she preferred to go straight from the car into her apartment to avoid talking to any of her neighbors:

I don't talk to anybody, and especially when I see them come from the back [of the apartment complex], I just turn my head, I go in the house, and don't even want to deal with it. A couple of days ago a guy got shot back there over a \$5 sack of weed. He got gunned down six times in the head. It was terrible.

Latrice had issues with the behavior of neighbors and the level of noise in her apartment at Sunflower Terrace. She said she was eager to move:

...because of the environment. A lot of people who live here don't work, so they're on a different schedule than I am. Like at night there's people out here on the sidewalk, in the parking lot hanging out, playing music, talking, laughing, joking, having a party right here. There have been times where at night my daughter and I had to walk upstairs when a drunk guy was laying on the stairs asleep and we had to walk over him, so I hate the environment.

In a subsequent interview, Latrice mentioned seeing a different man lying on those same stairs, but this time the man had been shot. He was the boyfriend of her nearest neighbor, and Latrice and her 2-year-old were eating dinner in her living room when they were interrupted by the sound the gunshots and her neighbor screaming. Latrice's complaints about noise were thus tied to very real threats to her family's safety and comfort, of which the noise is just a signal.

Vickie also cited noise and rowdy neighbors as plaguing her home life. I interviewed Vickie in an apartment at Landsborough, a low-income complex she moved into with her Section 8 voucher after her apartment flooded and she had to move in with her son for a period. She shared the view that her neighbors were less than ideal, describing them as loud and also rowdy:

People be kicking doors around here, they be cussing, they be fighting, whew... They just had two break-ins around here. It be break-ins around here all the time. They be stealing at the store, it was just a shoot—I mean a killing at the little restaurant, they said they always stealing from the store right there, the Dollar General, they always stealing from there, breaking in and stealing.

Vickie was careful to limit her outings to the daylight hours and kept her movement around the complex to a minimum. She noted, "Like I said I try to go out early, when daylight come and do what I need to do and come back in, I don't like to be out there in the dark. I like to come in

before it get dark, lock my door, and I be in here, long as I'm in here I'm fine. I'm fine." When I asked if she felt she had enough privacy at home, she laughed and pointed up to her ceiling, saying, "No, cause you see how thin that is? Whoever stay there they probably listening right now, cause they not moving. The minute you leave, they gonna start moving. That's how I know they listening." Vickie pointed to the way her lack of privacy operated as a two-way street: the thin walls meant she could hear the ruckus outside but also that her neighbors could listen in on her.

Both Latrice and Vickie's comments illustrate how the proximate neighborhood environment conditioned the way they experienced their home lives. They both complained about the noise as a nuisance in and of itself, but they also alluded to their neighbors' behavior as inappropriate or offensive. Vickie bemoaned not only the thin walls that do little to block sound, but also the source of the noise—neighbors kicking on doors and fighting. And Latrice attributed the high level of noise to people who were not working, then characterized them as partying too much, offering the example of the man passed out on the stairs right outside her apartment. These perceived threats motivated the primacy, for mothers, of distancing themselves—by staying inside—from the dangers they view as pervasive. At the same time, there was a discursive distancing as well, in the way mothers emphasized to me how not like their neighbors they were – a form of lateral denigration, or the application of “vituperative representations” held by outsiders to one's own neighbors (Wacquant 2010: 217).

But for many mothers, the strategy of staying safe by remaining indoors had the unintended consequence of diminishing their privacy. Many mothers in this study were living with other family members and sometimes multiple generations stayed together under one roof. Sometimes these were temporary living situations, as the level of residential mobility was very

high among mothers I interviewed. The frequency with which mothers moved became evident as I conducted follow-up interviews with the same mothers over a period of months and in some cases years between interviews. It was more common for mothers to be living in a different residence when I interviewed them a second or third time than it was for them to be in the same place. As I detail below, formal eviction or forced relocation (e.g. non-renewal of a lease) occurred frequently, and in the event of an unexpected move mothers turned to whomever they could for a temporary place to stay. Moving in with family or friends—who typically had limited space already—often meant sharing bedrooms, sleeping on a couch, and for some, ceding privacy in exchange for a roof over one’s head.

For example, Imani had “doubled up” with her sister while she waited for her subsidized housing application to come through so she could find an apartment of her own. Imani has a daughter and her sister has three children, and she described them as “all shackled up” together in her sister’s small apartment. Imani was grateful when she got the notice that her housing had been approved, because she said, “of course you know we would bump heads and stuff.” A big improvement when she moved into her own 2-bedroom apartment was the possibility for more privacy. She said, “The privacy is more because you know when you're cramped in, with other people and it's their stuff you know, it becomes a bigger issue you know and people want they own space and they own privacy.” Because Imani could not afford her own stable housing situation, she relied on family members to take them in, which meant living in crowded conditions that offered little in the way of physical privacy. Yet, the aspiration for privacy at home remained strong, even for mothers who were rarely able to experience it.

Take Terri, a 39-year-old grandmother with a two-year old son, who also doubled up with various family members because she did not have stable housing. She had spent 11 years in

prison, and since being released four years prior had not been able to find a steady job. Because of her felony record she was also ineligible for subsidized housing, which made it impossible to afford her own apartment. Terri explained, "I'm just staying back and forth with my mama, my other daughter, her [pointing to one of her daughters], it just don't matter." When I asked Terri if she had privacy at home she laughed, pointed to her daughter and two-year-old grandchild and said, "Nooo, cause they walks on down the stairs, or we have to go to the bathroom, you know so no not at all! Unless she at work, something like that." Her daughter, Amara, later confided to me during our interview that Terri's boyfriend was also temporarily living in Amara's apartment, bringing the total occupants to five in a one-bedroom apartment. Amara did not like the arrangement and hated the apartment because it was infested with bedbugs, did not have a working stove, and because of the environment, which she described as, "horrible... like shooting and stuff, they be shooting, it's really too much." When I came to her apartment for a follow-up interview, Amara insisted that we stay outside because she was embarrassed for me to see the inside of her apartment, which she called "ratchet." But she too had limited alternatives because of having a criminal record of her own. For Terri, who described herself as "not a people person," it was a big adjustment to be around family all the time, as she had been gone so long and had been accustomed to being, as she put it, isolated: "I've always stayed to myself in there so it was like real hard and then you know my family wasn't around so I was used to being isolated so it was like real hard. Because my grandchildren, my children and stuff, so it was a trying time to adjust but I did."

Safia had a relatively unique experience in that she could afford to rent a house without a rental subsidy. As we sat in the spacious living room, she recalled the violent incident that was the last straw for her in terms of apartment living. She and her grandchild had been staying in

apartments that were the site of frequent altercations between neighbors, but for the most part the fights were limited to a certain section of the complex. Then, one night Safia woke up to find her grandchild running into her bedroom, frightened awake by the sounds of broken glass and fighting. Someone had kicked in the front door of the unit next to theirs, and there was blood on Safia's own door. Safia explained:

They done pulled a gun, fixin' to shoot up in this woman house and stuff. That was too close to home. I went that weekend—this happened on a Thursday. That Saturday I went and I found this place, and that next weekend I was gone.

Safia was able to find a home to rent without much trouble, which was rare among mothers in my study. Even mothers who had a coveted Section 8 voucher often struggled to find an affordable and acceptable house as opposed to an apartment. And Safia felt safe there, even noting that she doesn't lock her windows at night, though she admitted none of her friends could understand why she wasn't scared. She had previously tried to get public housing and was ineligible because her felony record at the time was less than five years old; however, she was able to manage the monthly rent on the house with her income from a full-time job at the at a local university⁸ and by having a roommate. When I asked Safia to describe the biggest difference between living in an apartment versus a home, she did not hesitate: "Privacy." She continued, "Apartment is messy.⁹ The apartments we stayed in was totally messy. You could stay to yourself and you still be around all this, you know what I'm saying?" Here, Safia drew the connection between having privacy—in this sense, being able to be physically insulated from

⁸ Safia noted that the university disregards felonies that are at least seven years old, which is how she was able to pass the background check. I note this to highlight the ways that criminal justice system involvement and subsequent monitoring affects multiple aspects of the lives of poor people.

⁹ The term "messy" has multiple meanings, and is used to describe people—mostly women—who participate in gossip, stoke tensions between neighbors or friends, or who behave in ways that make them likely to be the *subject* of gossip. Visibility and the distinction between activities done inside versus outside (where others can observe them) is key here – getting drunk or smoking marijuana in the privacy of one's home might not be considered messy in and of itself, but if one is outside doing it, and is therefore making one's vices available for others to judge, that constitutes being messy.

neighbors in a house—and safety, since those neighbors were in her view, dangerous. In the apartments, Safia found that despite her best efforts to stay to herself, she and her granddaughter were unable to escape the violence around them even when they were inside. In her house, she did not feel the need to distance herself because she felt safer in general—but she also felt safer because she was physically insulated from others by virtue of the space being in a house afforded. She did not have neighbors stacked on top of her; her house was buffered from the street by a large yard and there was some distance between her house and the next.

Although I was aware of the aggregate level of violence in Sunnyside when I embarked on this study, it was only over time and through multiple interviews with the same respondents that I came to understand how routine violence was in my respondents' everyday lives. This insight took time in part because as mothers became more comfortable with me, they included me in discussions of violence that betrayed its ubiquity. In the beginning, it was common for mothers to talk abstractly about the presence or absence of violence (for example, to dispute whether reported crime statistics were inflated) or make a case for whether or not the neighborhood was “as bad” as outsiders made it out to be. This type of discussion seemed in part a performance for my benefit as a white outsider putatively unfamiliar with a neighborhood like Sunnyside. At times I felt as though respondents painted a more positive picture and downplayed the prevalence of crime in an effort to distance themselves from what they imagined to be my perception of “people like them” or a neighborhood “like this.” They used a similar distancing tactic in other contexts to distinguish themselves from neighbors and other Sunnyside residents they portrayed as among the undeserving poor, a point I take up further in Chapter 3. Alternately, there were times that it felt as though my respondents were perhaps presenting me with an exaggerated picture of the “urban jungle” they imagined someone like me might be expecting or

even looking for. Sometimes it was hard to discern what was going on in these conversations, for example, when residents expressed surprise that I was willing to spend time in Sunnyside at all. When people asked, “Aren’t you scared?” when I mentioned having done an interview at a notorious apartment complex, it wasn’t clear whether they were asking because they assumed I was, or because they thought I should be. Similarly, when I was sitting in the rental office of the Landsborough apartment complex talking with a group of young women about the neighborhood, they wrote down a list for me on a sticky-note indicating which apartments would be safe for me to visit and which I should avoid. They warned me that a man working for the census had recently been assaulted and had his laptop stolen as he was going door to door, and stressed that young men in Sunnyside are “crazy” and “just don’t care.”

Were these comments intended to sincerely inform me of the ever-present potential for violence? Or were they testing me, to see how I might respond—in effect, assessing me as an observer of them (Meadow 2013)? It is impossible to know; however, I tried to train my observational and interpretive skills on understanding how they experienced life in Sunnyside and be reflexive about noting my own bias, as it is true that I am not accustomed to living in a place where violence was so common. I worked to avoid falling into the sort of exploitative representational trap that has plagued scholars of urban poverty in communities of color (Cobb and Hoang 2015; Small 2015), a point I discuss further in the Appendix.

Over time, and as I developed relationships with some mothers, I began to notice that violence came up in different ways. Rather than the vague warnings about my personal safety or general assessments about the neighborhood that prevailed in initial interviews, mothers told me more personal stories about their own lives. They shared accounts of losing loved ones to violence and prison that resonated in their particularity—these were real people, not newspaper

headlines. But what was most telling was that these details—that a brother had been killed or a sister was in prison on an assault charge—were sometimes not shared as a weighty event or as a particularly intimate disclosure. Instead, these details about violence and incarceration were often peripheral to the primary story mothers were telling me. Indeed, it was the normalcy with which mothers treated this kind of information that helped me realize how ingrained it was in their lives.

For example, I interviewed Imani several times between 2013 and 2016, and she referred several friends and family members to me as well, including her aunt, Jasmine. Imani sat in on my interview with Jasmine, and they spent much of it entertaining each other and me. Jasmine told funny stories about Imani's daughter and Imani recalled road trips they had taken back home to New Orleans, where they lived before evacuating after Katrina. At one point, Imani burst into laughter as she tried to tell a story about a time that Jasmine was over at Imani's apartment with their mutual friend Janice. The point of the story was that while they were in the living room watching TV, someone started shooting outside the apartment and the three of them tried to run through the hallway door at the same time to get to the rear of the apartment. The image of them unsuccessfully squeezing through (Imani and Jasmine are both heavyset) had all three of us laughing. But it took Imani a while to get to the punch line because she and Jasmine were arguing over which time this was that they dove for cover in the midst of gunfire. Imani was sure it was the Fourth of July, because she said, "Of course we in the house cause, you know, we know that there's gonna be shooting or whatever," insinuating that they expected to hear gunshots on that holiday. But Jasmine thought it must have been a different time, because the kids weren't there that day and she remembered taking them into the bathroom when the gunshots started. Still chuckling about the doorway episode, Imani recounted a third time a few

days earlier that she, Jasmine, and her daughter were outside in the parking lot and heard gunshots. Imani stood up to pantomime her dropping to the ground by the car, laughing at how she must have looked. But Jasmine again corrected her, saying that was a different time—that Jasmine was in the house that day, not by the car. Imani then told the story of how two weeks earlier she was visiting her god-sister at Wesley Square when gunshots rang out. This time it was her four-year-old daughter, Destiny, that hit the ground first, and Imani couldn't stop laughing as she remembered the image.

I note this part of our interview because I think it sheds light on the complexity of mothers' responses as they raise children in the context of high levels of violence, as well as the extent to which its prevalence shapes their everyday lives. Imani and Jasmine were able to laugh about the physical comedy related to encounters that someone from my background might instead cast as terrifying or tragic. Of course, that doesn't negate the adverse effects of violence. The human toll of violence is no less devastating when it is routine, in fact quite the opposite. That mothers were not performing devastation for me as they talked about gun violence also doesn't mean that they accept it or that it doesn't heavily constrain their daily activities and those of their children. As I have shown, it does. However, it is also important to acknowledge my respondents as multi-dimensional people with room for levity and humor even in the face of violence that they strive to shield their families from.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how the conditions of neighborhood poverty shape mothers' ability to achieve privacy at home. I focused on two interrelated aspects—the surveillance that permeates subsidized housing and the ubiquity of neighborhood violence—to show how these

conditions constrained mothers' privacy in their home lives but also their freedom. For mothers living in subsidized housing, the prospect of achieving privacy in and around their homes was made even more tenuous because of a system of surveillance including rules, home inspections, and security cameras that pervaded subsidized housing complexes. But mothers protested also the loss of freedom they attributed to these surveillance practices. Just like more affluent Americans, they perceived that home was ideally a refuge from the external world—a place where they could be themselves without being observed, where they could truly be, in Erving Goffman's terms, "backstage" (Goffman 1959: 69) But instead, they were subjected to the state's gaze each time they entered the housing complex and, for some mothers, even as they walked through the door to their home. Further, they could face an inspection at any point in which their behavior and habits were evaluated in what is widely considered to be a highly intimate space. Importantly, it was not lost on mothers that people who are not living in poverty do not face the same constraints that they do, especially with regard to surveillance. This awareness heightened the sense of injustice among mothers who felt that they were unfairly monitored, controlled, and contained, simply because they were poor and African American.

I also demonstrated that mothers often responded to the prevalence of violent crime by "staying to themselves," avoiding contact with neighbors, and staying indoors with their children whenever possible. These defensive distancing tactics were aimed at enhancing their family's safety, and in that sense may have been successful. However, I show that because of overcrowding and residential instability—structural conditions also associated with poverty—mothers who employed these strategies sometimes found it hard to have privacy within the home. Unsurprisingly, mothers in this study aspired to have a measure of privacy at home, as do roughly 85% of all Americans (Madden and Rainie 2015). And the fact that it was very difficult

for the mothers in this study to achieve these aspirations did not obviate the desire, instead perhaps elevating it. I now turn to the question of how mothers negotiate privacy in domains outside of the home, specifically in their engagement with the welfare office and non-profit organizations.

CHAPTER 3: PRIVACY PROBLEMS IN THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

The welfare office on Scott Street, located on the back end of a partially vacant strip mall, could not be less inviting. The first time I went there I couldn't find the entrance, as there are no visible signs. There are also no windows, just a concrete wall with a double glass door covered in burglar bars and a security guard stationed just inside the entrance. The supervisor I came to interview, Karen, later told me that the office used to be located on the front end of the building, which opens onto the parking lot and has windows across the entire storefront. They moved to the rear—a smaller space—because they wanted fewer people coming into the office, both to cut down on the wait times for clients and also to encourage them to apply online instead, as the office is perennially understaffed.¹ Yet virtually every mother in this study who sought public assistance was familiar with the office on Scott Street. For those who applied for benefits online or over the phone, and even those who opted to complete the follow-up interview over the phone, there seemed to inevitably be some point at which they had to report to the office to turn in paperwork, sign a form, or dispute an issue with a caseworker. As I sat in the waiting room, there were about 20 or so people sitting in the institutional greyish plastic chairs that face the rear wall, and three more sitting at one of the six self-service computers available for clients to use. Periodically, a number and letter combination would flash on a flat screen TV and the client with that label would be instructed to walk up to one of the eight service windows to speak to a caseworker. In cases where more extensive personal attention was required, a staff person would

¹ TANF and food stamps recipients who are unable to find employment are assigned to complete “community service” hours instead, and a few mothers I interviewed noted that they were sometimes assigned to fulfill those volunteer hours at the welfare office itself.

call out for a client to come to the back to meet with a caseworker in the maze of cubicles behind the windows.

As I sat there waiting for my own call to the rear to interview Karen, I noticed that the gloomy tenor of the place was punctuated by several bright posters adorning the wall. But their messages belied the otherwise colorful promise of the black, red, and yellow signs: bold lettering warned clients against selling or trading food stamps, and noted that such practices constituted federal crimes. One poster used the iconic Uncle Sam “I want you” image of a white bearded man dressed in red, white, and blue with his arm outstretched, pointing a finger at the viewer. But the pointed finger was more accusatory than invitational, as it was attached to a warning against committing welfare fraud. That this warning is the primary message sent to potential clients sitting in the waiting area is telling, because it presupposes that such a warning is necessary—that welfare clients are potential law-breakers whose impulses must be monitored. Similar signs cautioning against auto theft typically do not decorate the walls of other state institutions like the DMV. And while these warnings were about misusing food stamps, not about telling the truth per se, their presence foregrounds the power dynamic central to information disclosure as part of welfare receipt. Because it is the state providing resources, the power of the state is also available to extract information about clients without their knowledge, to verify the information they voluntarily disclose, and also to punish them if that information is found to be false or if they violate the rules and conditions associated with welfare receipt.

The contrast between the environment at the Scott Street welfare office and the food pantry where I volunteered at one mid-sized church was stark. Though the entrance to the pantry was also at the rear of the church, in the multi-purpose room, it was church members and volunteers welcoming patrons, rather than a security guard. An unpaved parking area just outside

the door allowed for people with cars to drive up to the door and avoid a long walk with a box loaded down with donated food, and volunteers helped those who struggled with the weight of the heavy boxes. The director of the pantry, Whitney, had set up a small desk near the door where she sat and warmly greeted people as they came in, sometimes giving a more enthusiastic personal greeting to a familiar face. Whitney also oversaw the application process, which consisted only of putting one's name, address, and contact information on a sign-in sheet. One of the first things Whitney told me was that many patrons there would never try to get public assistance, but were willing to come to the church because they could open up to her about their needs in a way they wouldn't feel comfortable doing with a state caseworker. In the kitchen area, the other volunteers and I joined hands in a circle to pray before forming an assembly line to fill boxes for what would end up being hundreds of patrons waiting on folding chairs in the auditorium. As with other faith-based non-profit food pantries and outreach programs where I volunteered, volunteers were instructed to show God's love to patrons—to put ourselves in their shoes and treat them as Jesus would. We were told to reach out and say hello first, and to do whatever we could to make those coming to the pantry for food feel comfortable. The admonition that, "it could be you on the other side of that table" was almost always offered at similar events I went to as a warning against anyone who might be inclined to think less of the people in line to get food. Another common directive was to give the patron whatever they asked for: if they asked for a double portion, we were supposed to give it to them, no questions asked. That instructive alone underscores the differences in approach in these two settings—differences that shape mothers' experience of privacy.

These contrasting pictures of social service delivery seem to suggest that the church would be a more appealing source of assistance for mothers, particularly from a privacy

perspective. The personal information requirements are low, there are no posters advertising the potential for punishment if participants break the rules, and volunteers seem to approach patrons from a starting point of compassion, rather than suspicion. However, my interviews with mothers reveal that they were often hesitant to utilize churches and non-profit organizations, even as they complained about negative experiences with the welfare state *vis a vis* privacy. In this chapter, I explain why this is so.

I argue that in the in the process of eligibility determination for welfare, poor mothers experienced what I term *de-personalization*—a sense that they were categorically lumped in with others and as such, treated in ways that they interpreted as a lack of respect for their personhood. And while part of this experience is a function of the impersonal and efficiency-driven nature of bureaucracy—as anyone who has engaged with complex bureaucracies has likely observed—I argue that for mothers seeking welfare, there was an additional dimension at play. Because of the salience of the deserving versus undeserving poor distinction in the rhetoric and practice of welfare delivery (Katz 1989), mothers were especially resistant to the possibility of being classified as just one of many putatively undeserving welfare mothers. In seeking help from non-profit organizations and churches, mothers also worked to distance themselves from others, but for different reasons. In this context, they wanted to distinguish themselves morally from others who sought help from non-profits and churches, who they cast as “needy” or “greedy” for using resources that were thought to be only appropriate for the most destitute. But because of the individualized nature of service delivery and the spatial organization of these efforts in the neighborhood, mothers were unable to achieve privacy as anonymity when seeking help from churches and non-profits—they risked being seen by community members or churchgoers, and

being labeled needy or greedy themselves. As a result, they experienced a sense of *overexposure* that caused some mothers to avoid these institutions.

One of Many: The De-Personalizing Welfare State

In this section, I focus on how mothers interpreted the various demands for disclosure as they applied for assistance in the welfare context, and what the process meant to them. This analysis centers on whether, and under what circumstances, mothers considered these informational demands to constitute a privacy problem. I show first that in the welfare office, mothers objected to the amount and depth of personal information they were required to provide in order to get assistance. However, what made these disclosures feel like a violation of privacy had less to do with the content of the particular questions than the process by which caseworkers collected this information. The practice of asking the same questions repeatedly and mothers' awareness of the power of the state to uncover their personal information whether or not they voluntarily disclose it underscored mothers' perception that they were categorically treated with suspicion—as one of the undeserving poor. The pervasive reminders of the state's power to punish welfare recipients who did not tell the truth or who did not adhere to program conditions reinforced this perception. Taken together, mothers in this study interpreted these practices as both invading their privacy but also reflecting caseworkers' lack of respect for them as individuals—effectively de-personalizing them.

Required Disclosures in the Welfare Office

Mothers in this study used a variety of euphemisms to describe what it is like to apply for public assistance, most of which connote an arduous and unpleasant process. Tasha described the

process as “gut-wrenching,” and Donna poignantly remarked that before going into the welfare office, she had to put on armor, because, “it’s like a battle.” When I asked mothers about the process of applying for public assistance and the types of personal information they were required to disclose, I was often greeted with expressions of dismay and disbelief at the amount and depth of information. Tracy said, “they send me through the wringers, they ask me a lot of questions just to send me through the run-arounds.” These comments emphasize the oft-antagonistic relationship between welfare clients and caseworkers (Gilliom 2001; Levine 2013; Schram et al. 2009). And a key part of the “battle,” as Tracy pointed out, is answering the myriad questions on the application and gathering the documents to verify one’s answers.

The joint application Texas uses for TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid is 31 pages long (TX HHSC 2013). Safia described the application, saying, “It’s just a long, tedious process, a whole book, and for what? They want to know everything.” Kim similarly noted that the application is “like a book.” Mothers repeatedly used the phrase “too much” to characterize the information they are asked to provide to welfare caseworkers, and they spoke warily of caseworkers that seemed to want to “get in your business.” Most mothers felt that the welfare application process constituted an invasion of their privacy. In some cases, the reason given was fairly straightforward—the questions were simply viewed as too personal or too intimate, especially when asked by a stranger. Latrice commented that some questions, “make me feel a little uncomfortable, because it’s a lot of private questions that they ask, a lot of private concerns.” The phrasing that some questions go “too deep” was often invoked in reference to questions that were thought to index sexual behavior. Sade was appalled when she was asked at the welfare office to disclose the last time was she had been intimate with her children’s father (which she presumed had to do with confirming paternity):

The most disheartening thing... was like, when I say like personal information, like something you would discuss with your doctor, you know when is the last time you've had a menstrual cycle, when is the last time you been intimate with someone, I mean why would you need to know that if I can send you the paperwork from a MD that says yes I'm pregnant? I'm just saying you know that was just very uncomfortable and intimidating because I was young and I'm like, 'Why are you asking me this?'

These questions about paternity and mothers' intimate relationships are asked in part because recipients of TANF, subsidized child care,² and some forms of Medicaid are required to cooperate with the state's efforts to enforce child support. The state automatically opens a child support case against the father once the mother discloses his identity, whether or not the mother wishes to file a case. I discuss this issue in depth in Chapter 4.

However, aside from questions about paternity and sexual partners, which were widely considered to count as intimate subjects, there was considerable variation in terms of the specific content that mothers objected to disclosing as well as why they felt these questions were invasive of their privacy. Some mothers highlighted as problematic questions they classified as either unnecessary or irrelevant. April questioned why she was asked to provide an electric bill at the food stamps office, when they weren't offering to help her pay that bill:

Um, I just feel like I mean how is that supposed to be, you know, helpful to what I'm doing? Are you gonna help me with the services or not? You know, I mean you want the light bill, is there a service that's gonna help me pay it?

In fact, the electric bill is one of several documents that can be used to verify one's residential address, which is noted on the welfare application (TX HHSC 2013). However, April was either not aware of this fact or did not believe it. She continued, "It's kinda like intrusive," and asked rhetorically, "What are you gonna do with that information?" Angela explained, "some of the

² This requirement, set at the county level, changed in October 2016, after the period of data collection was over; therefore, my respondents had to comply with this requirement at the time I interviewed them.

information that they ask for, to me I think it's unnecessary.” She objected specifically to demographic questions about her level of education and race, saying:

What I call personal is tapping into anything outside what you need to determine my eligibility...if I got a college degree or a GED. That has nothing to do with you helping me... Cause in the end your ethnicity doesn't matter. If you gonna help me it don't matter if I'm Black, White, Chinese.

Angela was wary of the motivation behind collecting information that she believed would not be used to determine whether or not she would receive services. She reiterated, “It's not related to what I'm here for. If you take it [the demographic questions] out, you could still get my eligibility regardless of if you have these questions in place or not.” Though few mothers objected to the demographic questions in the way Angela did, it was common for mothers to frame other questions as irrelevant, unnecessary, and intrusive.

Some mothers felt that questions about people other than themselves, such as family members or others that contribute to the household, were superfluous to the benefit or service they were seeking for themselves and their children, and for this reason presented a threat to privacy. Because these items are used to calculate total household resources—a central component of eligibility determination—they comprise a major portion of the joint application for food stamps, TANF, and Medicaid (TX HHSC 2013). However, because the questions center on in-kind support, such as food, clothing, and shelter, these are also areas in which clients have more latitude in choosing whether or not to disclose such support. With a few keyboard strokes and the client's social security number, a caseworker can pull up a client's formal employment records; however, they are not easily able to verify whether or not a family member regularly provides meals for a client's family or provides childcare for their children. To verify this type of information, then, the state requires signed and, in some cases, notarized statements from the third parties indicating exactly how much help they provide and of what sort. Because of this,

some mothers balk at these questions because they worry about the privacy of the third party on whom they are relying for support. Others embrace the ambiguity because it allows them to inflate the costs of services like childcare and therefore get a higher level of benefits. I return to this strategy and other strategies mothers use to secure assistance and preserve privacy in Chapter 5.

Kim faced this issue because she was living temporarily with a family member who was a homeowner. When applying for state benefits, Kim noticed the section asking for an accounting of household expenses, including the cost of the mortgage and taxes on the home. She described her reaction:

And then they ask you about like okay, if you staying with somebody, if this person own this home, and do they do this. This is these people's home. I'm not fixing to go in here and ask these people 'Well, how you pay for this home? Are you paying taxes? How long have you been here? How much do you...' Because they want to know how much the people house is. 'How much is this house worth?' I'm not fixing to go ask them people that. Some of the questions like that I don't feel like you should be concerned about that, because...I'm pretty sure these people, like if you staying with someone I'm pretty sure these people don't want me to know their business.

Kim notes that her family member would likely not want her to be asking them about their housing expenses—much less the state. To do so would be an invasion of their privacy, and, as she states, she's "not fixing to go ask them people that." But she also resists this line of questioning because of her own interest in privacy. Regarding similar questions about whether "somebody helping you pay these bills, how you paying these bills, where you getting the money from," she explained, "That ain't [their] business where I'm getting this money from." Shontal was staying with her mother for a period of time after she was released from jail. When she applied for food stamps, she was required to get a letter from her mother indicating that she wasn't giving Shontal any money or food. This requirement was a burden for Shontal because she and her mother already had a volatile relationship; she described living with her mother as

“horrible.” Having to ask more of a strained relationship was not only emotionally difficult, but it also meant risking an already tenuous living situation. Cherise described a similar prospect with similar risks:

Like say you stay with a family member that you not getting along with but this is your only source of like household you can stay with? They have to—you have to get them to provide a letter. And you know some people don't be wanting to get in that—as your family, so that could be kinda hard too.

I return in the next section to the question of why disclosing information about other people is seen as particularly risky in light of information sharing practices between welfare, law enforcement, and other agencies. As I have shown, mothers interpret the content of required disclosures variously, and questions that pose a privacy problem for some mothers may not for others. I now turn to the question of how these required disclosures are solicited from mothers, and highlight the messages mothers receive through this process.

Presumptions of Prevarication, Promises of Punishment

Just as the presence of warning posters on the walls of the welfare office at Scott Street presupposes the existence of widespread welfare fraud, elements of the welfare application itself suggest that applicants may not be telling the truth. These embedded messages inform how mothers make sense of privacy in this context. Two full pages of the Texas application for public assistance are devoted to what is termed a “Statement of Understanding” that explicates clients’ mandate to “tell the truth” and outlines the consequences of not doing so (TX HHSC 2013: 17). For SNAP recipients, the consequences include a fine of up to \$250,000, serving jail time up to 20 years (or both), and a lifetime loss of benefits. TANF applicants are instructed that if they “choose not to tell the truth,” they may be face up to a ten year prison sentence, have to repay benefits, and potentially never get TANF again. A separate section, titled “My Answers Are

SNAP Food Benefits

Telling the Truth
 Anyone who applies for or gets SNAP must:

- Tell the truth.
- Never trade or sell SNAP benefits, Lone Star Cards, or other devices that allow people to get SNAP.
- Never use or have Lone Star Cards or other devices if they don't belong to them.

Anyone who chooses not to tell the truth might:

- Not get SNAP for a year or more.
- Be fined up to \$250,000, jailed up to 20 years, or both.
- Lose income tax refunds.
- Be charged with other crimes.
- Have to repay benefits.
- Never get SNAP again.

Figure 18. Statement of understanding: SNAP food benefits. Source: TX HHSC, 2013.

TANF Cash Help for Families
Child Support or Alimony

I agree to:

- Let the state keep any child support or alimony money owed to anyone during the time they get TANF.
- Let the state keep this money after TANF benefits end, if the TANF amount anyone got still needs to be paid off.
- Tell HHSC about money anyone gets.
- Work with HHSC to get this money; if I don't, I am breaking the law.

The state will keep only the amount allowed by law.

If I Give False Information
 If I choose not to tell the truth, I might:

- Be charged with and punished for a crime. (This could include going to prison for up to 10 years or community supervision.)
- Have to repay benefits.
- Never get TANF again.

Figure 19. Statement of understanding: TANF cash help. Source: TX HHSC, 2013.

True” requires applicants to sign in agreement with the statement: “I certify under penalty of perjury that the information I have provided on this application is true and complete to the best of my knowledge. If it is not, I may be subject to criminal prosecution” (TX HHSC 2013: 18). Importantly, applicants must also grant the state permission to “let HHSC and other state, federal, and local agencies check, share, and get facts about anyone on the benefits case” (TX HHSC 2013: 18). Not only can the state “get facts” about anyone on the case, they can also share facts with “law enforcement officials so they can find people on that person’s benefits case (the household) who are wanted for fleeing the law” (TX HHSC 2013: 18). This language underscores not only the state’s power to leverage its resources to acquire information about the poor, but also the concomitant ability to channel that power to punish those that do not comply.

By signing below, I agree:

- To let HHSC and other state, federal, and local agencies check, share, and get facts about anyone on my benefits case (the household).
- To let other people, businesses, and organizations share facts they have about anyone on my benefits case (the household) with HHSC.
- The facts to be checked and shared include anything that helps decide: (1) who can get benefits, and (2) the amount of benefits.

Figure 20. Statement of Understanding; agreement regarding data sharing. Source: TX HHSC, 2013.

The stipulation about fleeing fugitives is particularly important for the mothers in my study, many of whom were partnered with or living with loved ones and family members that have had contact with the criminal justice system. Over half of the mothers I interviewed either had close family members or partners that had been incarcerated or they had been incarcerated themselves. Further, the definition of a “fleeing fugitive” (interchangeably termed “fugitive felon”) includes people who have violated a condition of probation, even for misdemeanor offenses (McCarty et al. 2016). Mothers often took on the responsibility for sharing benefits with loved ones that were disqualified for public assistance because of having a criminal background. For example, until October of 2015, people with a drug felony conviction could not get food stamps in Texas. This policy disproportionately affected poor men of color, and in turn put added pressure on poor women of color who had access to public assistance. Therefore, mothers had an incentive not to disclose the identities of household members if it might put them at risk. At the same time, as the language in the application makes clear, by not disclosing—in other words not “telling the truth”—mothers’ own eligibility for benefits was put in jeopardy.

Finally, the added step of verification and the overlay of potential punishment distinguish the treatment of welfare clients from other recipients of state benefits, such as agricultural producers and corporations, whose demonstration of need is not subject to the same scrutiny for truth and who do not face threats of sanction (Fineman 2000). These beneficiaries of government assistance do not face the same assessment of deservingness as mothers applying for welfare. This differential treatment of welfare clients is not lost on mothers, and they repeatedly questioned why they had to answer so many questions to get a minimal amount of assistance. As I detail below, mothers also receive messages about their perceived deservingness through direct

interactions with caseworkers—messages that shape their perceptions of their status relative to the state (Auyero 2012; Soss 1999).

Facts Anyone Tells or Gives HHSC
HHSC uses the facts anyone tells or gives HHSC, including Social Security numbers to:

- Check if that person can get benefits.
- Check that person's facts with computer matching programs and credit reporting agencies.
- Make sure that person is following benefit program rules.
- Help other agencies check if that person can get other benefits.
- Recover benefits that person wasn't supposed to get.
- Share facts about that person: (1) with other state and federal agencies (for example, the Texas Workforce Commission, the Social Security Administration, and the Internal Revenue Service); (2) with law enforcement officials so they can find people on that person's benefits case (the household) who are wanted for fleeing the law; and (3) with federal, state, and private claims collecting agencies for food benefit overpayment claims collection action.

Figure 21. Statement of Understanding: agreement regarding data sharing with law enforcement. Source: TX HHSC, 2013.

Mothers perceived that in general, caseworkers treated them as though they were likely lying. One way mothers read suspicion into the actions of caseworkers is that between the paper or on-line application and the interview, mothers perceived that they were asked the same question multiple times. Sometimes the wording of the question might change slightly, leading mothers to believe that this was a technique caseworkers use to “trap” them in a lie, akin to what sociologist Forrest Stuart (2016) observed among police officers who sought to catch residents of Los Angeles’ Skid Row “slipping” (227).³ I interviewed Phenicia and Brenda together, and they recalled their experience with caseworkers:

³ Interestingly, neighborhood residents deployed the same tactics against police officers, to provoke *them* to unwittingly divulge “self-incriminating information and narratives” (Stuart 2016: 227)—a tactic similar to the strategy I term *agitating and advocating*, which I detail in Chapter 5.

Phenicia: Some questions they be asking you like they be trying to trap you in a—

Brenda: Trap you up, yeah. It just feels like they trying to catch you in a lie.

Phenicia: They'll ask you this question, they'll ask you another question, then they'll come back three or four questions later, asking the first question, to try to—they'll redirect it some kinda way. But your answer's still the same.

Bree recounted a similar experience with caseworkers at the food stamps office. She noted, “I just hate when... they repeat theyselves ... They trying to catch me in a lie.” Bree resisted this approach, as she explains:

That's how come when they ask me something twice I say, 'I just answered that.' They be like 'But I didn't ask you...' 'No you didn't ask me *that*, you ask me in a different way.'... Yeah I'm like I'm not stupid. I mean I say either you trying to catch me in a lie or you trying to make me feel like I'm stupid and I'm not lying and I'm not stupid.

Bree poignantly characterized what she saw as two equally abhorrent options—that the caseworker was either trying to expose her as a liar or that they were belittling her by treating her as though she was “stupid.” Either one demonstrated a lack of respect for her, and also situated her as a member of a disreputable category. April also described her desire to push back against what she considered to be irrelevant questions, but said that doing so would only enhance the caseworker’s suspicion. After posing the rhetorical question, “What do you need that information for?” which she would have liked to say to a caseworker inquiring about the whereabouts of her child’s father, she cautioned:

And heaven forbid you ask that question and get offensive, you know like... then they make it seem like as though you're hiding something. ‘I'm not hiding anything, you know, I just want to know what do you need that information for. Because, it serves no purpose to me or you...’ But don't make it seem like 'OK if you don't give me this information... then this is gonna prolong your services because we feel like you're hiding something... Like you better give me your information or else. Or else you not gonna get the services.’

April’s comment underscores the perceived threat that even the presumption that a client is “hiding something” could result in delaying benefit receipt. But she also makes a point about the tone of the interaction, noting that the caseworker’s sentiment was ominous: “You better give

me your information or else.” Others also focused on caseworkers’ demeanor and the way they treat clients as an indicator of caseworkers’ underlying beliefs about clients’ trustworthiness.

Catrina, who now works as a social service provider herself, had previously applied for food stamps after having been laid off from her job. She described her negative experience with caseworkers:

My experience has been you set down there and you know, sometimes the caseworkers are nasty, you know, they act like they giving you something out of their children's mouth or something to that effect, you know, to where you take like everybody's there just to get over or everybody's there to, you know, they don't need help.

Catrina suggested that part of the reason caseworkers felt justified in being “nasty” is that they assumed most people were there to “get over” on the system. But she also made the connection between being treated with respect and being asked to prove that she was not lying. She noted:

Each family is different so don't...I would like to be treated with respect because I'm gonna come in treating you with respect. Yes I am asking for assistance, yes I did lose my job, I have proof that I lost my job, it's not like I'm coming here lying to you or anything like that.

What Katrina perceived as the caseworker’s assumption that because she was asking for assistance she was categorically the same as others translated into a gesture of disrespect for her as an individual. Not only was the assumption a negative one (that welfare recipients are dishonest), but because it reflected an unwillingness to acknowledge that, “each family is different,” it effectively negated her individual experience. At the same time, Katrina implied that what made her family different was that she wasn’t lying, distancing herself from those that presumably were. Wilma echoed this idea in describing her experiences in the welfare office:

As far as the process, it's really difficult. I don't feel good receiving it. It's a little bit degrading I feel, but we do need help so I'm not too proud to accept it. They do require a lot of information... Like you know I'm telling the truth, so the people who aren't, you have to deal with them separately, but for me, don't deal with me with the attitude... It's just so much attitude, you know they're not really compassionate about what they're doing. And I feel like they could, you know, use a class on how to treat people coming in here cause like, we're not all crooks and you know trying to scam anybody.

Wilma and Catrina both expressed the desire to be treated as individuals with a particular story, but they also lamented being lumped in with other welfare recipients who they felt maybe were trying to game the system. This sense of de-personalization—as being treated as a member of a group rather than a unique person—combined with the stereotypes attached to those cast as undeserving, adds a negative dimension to the process of being asked multiple questions, and elevates the disrespect mothers perceive they are shown by caseworkers. The relationship between privacy and respect here is also highlighted, as mothers perceive that they wouldn't be interrogated about personal things (in other words they would be granted some level of privacy) if they were respected as individuals. Yet they learn from their interactions at the welfare office that, by virtue of seeking help, they are already members of a suspect class.

It's All on File: Myth and Ceremony in the Welfare Application Process

Underlying the belief that caseworkers used certain techniques to cause clients to “slip up” and reveal that they are lying or omitting information is the fact that many mothers were aware that the state already has access to a great deal of information about them before the process of determining eligibility starts—effectively creating a virtual identity (E. Goffman 1963) against which mothers' own disclosures are checked. In this sense, mothers saw the process of being asked to disclose their personal information as a bad faith effort on the part of the state. Mothers that had received benefits in the past or had an open case portrayed the process

of applying again or recertifying as one of simply updating past information. In these cases, they had already provided the state with their information, but it could still be surprising to learn what the state knew independent of what they had disclosed. Lashaunta had received food stamps for many years, but was surprised during one of her recertification interviews that her caseworker knew about a car she had recently purchased in cash. The caseworker waited for her to disclose the purchase rather than asking directly about the car because, in Lashaunta's view, "They wanted to see what I would say." She advised, "Be prepared. You gotta be prepared cause you never know. Pretty much, stick to your same story if you can, if you told the truth cause it's all on file."

Lashaunta is correct in suggesting that the welfare office already has a great deal of information about applicants that they have not voluntarily disclosed. As noted in Chapter 1, Health and Human Services (which administers welfare) contracts with a data broker that pulls "financial and other background information" from various public and private sources to create what surveillance scholars term a "data double" of each applicant (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 605). These data are gathered through partnerships with institutions including the Department of Motor Vehicles, the United States Postal Service, the Internal Revenue Service, credit bureaus, the Attorney General's Office, and the prison system. The data can include information about where applicants live and with whom, their bank accounts and credit history, employment history, and criminal background (TX HHSC 2013). When pulled together, these disparate data create a proxy for a real live person—a data double or virtual identity whose features can be quantified to determine eligibility. However, these data are also used to verify the information mothers disclose, as Lashaunta learned. The state's collection and combination of the data is automated and the profile produced is virtual; however, caseworkers can and do access the data

to check whether clients' disclosures match what they have on file, and the consequence is that mothers feel excessively scrutinized. Indeed, in general Lashaunta perceived that the point of the interview was to find out if clients were lying:

Tell the truth cause they gonna go back and ask you that same stuff over and over and have it right there from the first time when you told them the truth, so they want to see if you gonna switch it up. Pretty much I think that's what the interviews be about. Just to see if you gonna stick to that same stuff.

Henrietta remarked that in order to “stick to her story” she learned to keep careful notes about what she had submitted on the paper application, because she did lie about certain items she knew would affect the amount of food stamps she received, and she anticipated that the purpose of the phone interview was to verify her honesty. Henrietta also highlighted what she perceived to be the absurdity of having to answer questions during her recertification interview that she felt were self-evident. Henrietta had a one-year-old daughter, and she was the only other person on Henrietta's food stamps case. After reporting that fact, the caseworker went through the battery of questions required for each household member. As Henrietta recalled, this included questions like, “Have they ever been convicted of a felony? Have they ever worked for the railroad?”—questions that clearly did not apply to her toddler. That the caseworker insisted on asking each question left Henrietta feeling demeaned and de-personalized. As she put it, “It's just like you're not a person.”

Dominique agreed that the interview was mostly an attempt to uncover false information, and noted that the questions, including, “What's my address, my telephone number, am I still working at my old job, when did I stop working at my old job” were things that “they know...once you put the social. They just reading it back trying to see if you're going to tell the truth.” Importantly, mothers don't know exactly what the state knows and doesn't know, which adds to the uncertainty around which areas are possible to “fudge” one's information. This

uncertainty enhances the panoptic opacity of the system (Foucault 1975) and reinforces the power imbalance wherein state representatives have more knowledge not only about their clients but also about the rules of the game itself. As Jocelyn commented, “They have a way of looking and seeing. They know when you don’t think they know.” Renatta agreed that in general, the state already had access to the information they require of mothers, saying, “They know anyway, so I guess it's just a matter of if you're going to be honest with them or not.” On the other hand, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, there are “soft spots” in the welfare surveillance system where the state relies on clients to volunteer information the state cannot easily independently verify, such as how much they pay a neighbor to babysit or how much help a boyfriend provides. These soft spots serve as opportunities for mothers to misrepresent or conceal information in order to get the level of benefits they need, to preserve some measure of privacy, and to resist what they view as an unjust system.

Two additional points are worth noting here. First, I do not wish to suggest that caseworkers used these strategies purposefully to ferret out would-be abusers of the welfare system. They may do so, but I did not collect data from caseworkers,⁴ nor did I observe client-caseworker interactions in the state setting. Further, in several instances, mothers described the opposite scenario, in which certain caseworkers coached them on how to answer the application questions in a way that would make them eligible when an “honest” answer would not. For example, April, who worked in a childcare center, reported that a food stamps caseworker had a child that attended her center. Each time April got an appointment to recertify her benefits, she would consult the caseworker and tell her which caseworker April was scheduled to have an interview with. The caseworker would then, as April explained, “See who the person was, and to

⁴ I was not granted access to interview caseworkers or to observe in the welfare office. I was able to conduct an interview with a supervisor at the Scott St. office and a supervisor at Texas Workforce Solutions.

see if, you know, whether you say what you say or be careful of what you say.” April saw this as a fair exchange, as she noted:

It's like, I take care of your daughter, you're happy with my services, so you return the favor with like ‘Girl let me tell you’... so we kind of like, you know, watch each other's back. I got your prized possession (laughing). And you know that I need just small assistance, you know, just to help get us over just a little while.

Dominique’s ex-husband’s mother, Darlene, worked as a manager at a different food stamps office, and often helped Dominique with the recertification process. In a testament to the way that potential punishment is ever lurking, when Dominique began to describe this help to me, she paused, saying, “This is not going to get her in trouble though, right?” After I reassured her that everything she told me would remain confidential, she explained that Darlene would help her fill out “the whole income thing.” Again, she stressed that it was “nothing illegal, because I’m scared,” but it was enough help to get secure her food stamp benefits. Dominique also noted that even though her ex-husband was a two-time felon who should have been ineligible for food stamps, his mother was able to get him food stamps as well. A large literature has explored these welfare encounters, and has highlighted the complex and often contradictory workplace pressures that caseworkers face in their efforts to help the poor while working within a highly constrained and ever-changing bureaucratic system of rules and incentives (cf. Watkins-Hayes 2009). And although it would have been ideal to include caseworkers’ perspectives in this analysis, I stress the importance of understanding how mothers perceive these encounters and what this means for their sense of privacy.

The second point is that though mothers resented what they viewed as caseworkers’ unwarranted suspicion of them personally, mothers also repeatedly invoked the notion of the “undeserving poor” (Katz 1989) and the “welfare queen” mythology as they described others who abuse the system, getting benefits and services for which they were ineligible. This practice

is reminiscent of sociologist Loïc Wacquant's (2010) notion of "lateral denigration" (217). Many described neighbors and acquaintances that reported false information to get a larger share of food stamps, lied to the public housing authorities about the number of dependents in their home, or fabricated a child's mental illness to qualify for an SSI check. And indeed, many mothers admitted to me their own prevarication for the purpose of getting benefits that—were they to tell the truth—might otherwise have been out of their reach. Some mothers also felt that the state used such an intense screening process because they had been lied to so many times before, and expressed an understanding of that logic, even if it meant they personally had to undergo invasive questioning as a result.

Yet, even if some mothers took up the same language and imagery that animates the idea of the deserving versus undeserving poor as a valid distinction, effectively reifying it, they did so in an effort to distinguish themselves as individuals—to resist the de-personalization they experienced in engaging with welfare. By casting others as deserving of the label of the welfare queen, they bolstered their own individuality, which they felt deserved respect, as distinct from "those people" who ostensibly did not. This boundary work also helped them justify their own self-worth despite their economic precarity (Lamont 2000). The multiple ways mothers situated their own behavior within a moral hierarchy given these complexities will be considered further in Chapter 5; however, I turn now to look at mothers' experience of privacy in the non-profit setting.

The Burden of Visibility: Overexposure in the Church and Non-Profit Setting

In contrast to welfare, in the non-profit setting,⁵ very little personal information was required from mothers and organizations did not have the power of the state to extract information from clients if they did not disclose it. Mothers welcomed these low information disclosure requirements. They also appreciated the difference in how staff and volunteers in non-profit settings treated them for the most part, in particular the way they made an effort to personally address each family's individual needs with compassion. But a lower threshold for informational disclosures and kind treatment on the part of staff did not negate the salience of privacy; instead, privacy took on a different meaning here. However, I argue that it was the same underlying process of avoiding stigma through social distancing that elevated mothers' investment in privacy here. In the non-profit setting mothers feared being seen by other community members utilizing church food pantries or non-profit services because of the stigma attached to being "needy" enough to use what was seen as a last resort. They also feared the judgment directed at those seen as "greedy" because they took charity for which others might have a greater need. It was not the disclosure of personal information during the application process that deterred some mothers from using these services in the name of privacy, but rather the possibility that they would be seen using them or that others might find out after the fact and gossip or judge them accordingly. Here, the difficulty of achieving privacy had the consequence of *overexposure*; mothers wished instead for privacy in the form of anonymity.

⁵ I draw primarily on examples from mothers' experiences with faith-based non-profits and churches because these were much more common than secular non-profits.

“You Don’t Have to Do Nothing”: Fewer Personal Information Disclosures

The reduced amount of required disclosures and the lack of scrutiny on the part of social service providers was part of the appeal for mothers of alternatives to state assistance. When I asked mothers what was required for them to patronize secular and faith-based non-profit organizations that provide social services, most indicated that these organizations required little more than a driver’s license or state ID card for purposes of identification. Takira used a church food pantry and described the straightforward application process: “On the application they ask about your income, ask you are you on food stamps. When you answer those two questions, you automatically get it.” Elisha told a similar story when I asked her what she had to provide to get donated food from a church:

Nothing. You know the trucks that be out there, they be at some of the churches. You don't have to have nothing. You just show up with your bags and you get some food. That had helped all of us over here like the food bank.

Wilma had also gotten food from a church, and reported that it was easy: “Well, you go, you just bring your ID and you stand in the line and they give you a box of food.” Dominique agreed that the process was simple, and said she wished more churches offered food pantries, because, “You show up, you show your ID and you pop your trunk, and they put food in and you go, and I think that’s a good idea.”

For some mothers, the decreased burden of required information and documentation was the primary reason they preferred to seek help from non-profits and churches. Latrice described her visit to the central Houston Food Bank, saying, “They don't even ask you all the questions, not intrusive, and then they show you how to do it, like you get a basket, like you're at the grocery store and you shop.” Latrice appreciated both the privacy she was afforded and also the way the experience helped her feel like anyone else shopping at the store. Raven said simply, “A

church is more helpful than the government.” Her reasoning had partly to do with the church’s vocation as a helping institution. She continued, “I see how they so polite, and they always have something throughout the week to help people. Like if you don't have a place to stay. ‘Well we have somewhere for you to sleep or we have clothes and we have food...’” But she also valued the fact that in faith-based settings there seemed to be an assumption of sincerity rather than one of suspicion, and she explicitly contrasted this approach with the state:

So I would say the church is more helpful than the government, cause with the government you actually have to 'OK I have to *show* you that I need help I have to *show* you that I don't have this I have to *show* you that I'm struggling to do this.' You have to prove it to them. If you can't prove it then they can't help you. But if you go to a church, hey, you say you need help I'm gonna say that God is telling me to help you. So I'm gonna help. If it turns out you don't, then that's between you and God, that's not between us.

Raven contrasted the state’s requirement that welfare recipients not only disclose information but also provide ample documentation to verify it with the church’s stance, which she suggested is rooted in a spiritual calling rather than an administrative imperative. April agreed, saying, “[Churches] not trying to get all in your business since they just trying to help, you know.” April’s comment suggests that the state has intentions to do something beyond “just trying to help,” and implies that getting “in your business” is the way to accomplish this implicit goal. Catrina stated simply why she prefers going to churches when she needs assistance, saying, “You know I use other resources like going to the food pantry who's not going to ask you for all your information.”

Churches that offer more comprehensive assistance, such as paying a portion of one’s rent or utility bills, sometimes required information about more domains than did those that just operate food pantries or host food outreach events, but these requirements were still relatively minimal. Tiana utilized a large church located outside of Sunnyside that was a favorite among

study participants, in part because they offered a range of social services, not just food. Tiana described her experience going to the church to seek help paying her utilities. She noted that though they did require her to pay at least a portion of the bill in order to qualify for the assistance, the church paid the remainder that same day. When I asked what she had to provide in terms of personal information, she said, “They asked me to bring my ID, a copy of the ID of all members of the household 18 and over.” Imani and her sister used a church that offered multiple forms of assistance. Imani was able to get her light bill paid and the church subsidized her sister’s rent for a month. She explained the process:

For my sister they just wanted her lease or whatever, for her rent and then they just contacted the apartments or whatever and then like for me they just wanted my light bill. And then the only other requirements was that you had to be - cause the church only helps like in certain zip codes, so our zip code, they had our zip code down. So that was really it for requirements of having anything.

Again, the ease with which Imani and others described getting help from non-profit organizations and churches was notable in contrast to their descriptions of the welfare application process.

“They’re Here to Help”: Perceived Compassion in Service Delivery

Beyond the differences in the type and extent of required information in the non-profit vs. state setting were the differences mothers described in the treatment they received from staff or volunteers in each setting in the process of seeking help. These differences made non-profits and churches more appealing than the state as a source of help for some. Most importantly, mothers noted that staff and volunteers at churches were for the most part welcoming and seemed to care about their individual needs—a key contrast to welfare caseworkers. When I asked April how her experience at church compared to going to the welfare office, she said, “Oh they sweet. They

sweet. I mean they're there to help. You could feel the genuine 'I'm here to help you.' So it's a totally different atmosphere from the government.” One way mothers felt staff communicated this sense of compassion was by treating clients as individuals with unique needs—humanizing them. By attending to patrons’ unique and immediate needs, non-profit organizations demonstrated to mothers that they did not see people experiencing material hardship as a monolith—they gave people the benefit of the doubt and erred on the side of trusting patrons’ claims of need. Phenicia explained:

Yeah they actually talk to you and try to find out your needs, your wants, and you know, your kids need school supplies. You need pampers, you need—they'll give you vouchers for clothes and things like that, I mean they're very good. Holiday time, they oh—we have a holiday meal, you get turkeys and hams and things like that. No they good.

Compared to welfare caseworkers who Phenicia perceived try to “trap” her in a lie, dealing with church staff who “actually talk to you” to figure out what her family needed was much more appealing. Imani had a similar experience at a church, saying:

They gave you a certain amount of food but if you felt like you needed extra or more food or whatever like that, because they asked you like how many kids do you have so they can try to bag you enough food. You know, if not, if you need extra they'll try to you know give you extra like that.

During a particularly rough period in her life, Hosanna had received money from her church to buy formula, and noted, “I can't call the food stamp people and tell them my situation and they take...they don't take into consideration the emergency type situations.”⁶ This flexibility and responsiveness to the stated needs of clients runs counter to the standardized bureaucratic approach of the state, which is constrained by strict eligibility criteria (though discretion is certainly exercised as well [(Handler and Hollingsworth 1971; Watkins-Hayes 2009)].

⁶ TANF and SNAP do offer emergency assistance, with stipulations. People with children under age 18 may apply for “one-time TANF” or “emergency food stamps” once a year if they can demonstrate that they are “in crisis” (Texas Health and Human Services Commission 2017).

Imani connected the kindness of church staff to their spirituality, commenting that they were, “very kind...very you know, God... church-oriented.” Brenda commented that church volunteers, “put more care, I mean they ask you, they put love behind what they do. You can feel the love and the respect from another human being to another.” When I asked Terri how her experience was seeking help from a church, she said, “They're nice and they're respectful and they're patient, you know. They better be in the church!” Terri underscored the expectation that anyone doing the church’s work “better be” respectful and patient, an expectation that certainly did not obtain in the welfare context. Yet, this spiritual orientation was also a source of concern for some mothers who resented the softer requirements some churches used, including the stipulation that one become a member of the church, attend services, or tithe regularly. Imani did not seem to mind the church’s invitation for her to join, noting, “They'll ask you to come to the church service, you know, if you can...Other than that they were very kind-hearted and genuine and stuff like that.” Elisha had also been asked to join a church after visiting their food pantry. She said, “They'll call you to come to church, you know they want you to come to church. I mean it's not a big—bad deal, if you gonna get help, at least you go to they church once or twice.” For Elisha, such a requirement was reasonable “if you gonna get help.”

Jonelle had a different take on using churches for help, noting that she was denied assistance at a church that she attended regularly because she did not pay tithes. She recounted, “That was very frustrating, and I’ve tried it over the years and I’ve never received help.” Tanara and her boyfriend, Sherrod, had also tried to get help from churches, and learned first-hand that membership was a requirement at certain churches. Tanara’s boyfriend explained:

They try to really get you to join their church, and if you don't want to join they church, they really not going to help you. And I have experience with it because I was homeless for three months, and for me to get assistance from a church I had to join they church.

Thus, the flexibility with which churches operate with regard to eligibility criteria and the limited required information disclosures can be positive because it often means clients have to answer few questions and provide little in terms of formal documentation. They also receive the message that their professed needs are accepted at face value. However, the same flexibility means that churches can attach membership or tithing stipulations to the receipt of assistance, which was a deterrent for some mothers. And the fact that these decisions were made on a case-by-case basis had the disadvantage for mothers of meaning that they had to divulge personal information directly to pastors or volunteers with whom they had ongoing personal relationships—exposing their needs.

Reputational Concerns

Mothers' depictions of what it is like to seek help from a church or secular non-profit are markedly different than how they describe the hassle of working through the lengthy welfare application and gathering all of the required documentation. Missing, too, is the thread of fear that runs through most accounts of applying for public assistance—the worry that one might barely miss the eligibility threshold by reporting too much income, that one's application could be denied for an unknown reason, or that a caseworker will uncover an error that could lead to sanctioning. But what makes non-profit organizations and churches appealing places to seek help—fewer application requirements, minimal efforts to verify eligibility, and a personal approach—can be the same things that deter some mothers from using them. At the same time mothers critique the welfare office for making them prove that they need help, they also share the view implicit in the welfare approach—that many people are trying to get help that don't really need it, and that strict eligibility and verification procedures are necessary to deter fraud.

As I show, this tension leads mothers to work to distance themselves from “those people,” much like they distanced themselves from the stigmatized category of the undeserving poor in the welfare office. In practice, this distancing can mean avoiding seeking help from churches and non-profits altogether.

Imbedded in the church’s practice of not asking extensive questions to establish a certain level of need is the altruistic notion that one wouldn’t ask if they didn’t need help—and that the church has a responsibility to help those that are at their “lowest.” One implication of the church’s de facto policy of using limited screening is that churches that provide social services do attract a fair number of homeless people, those with addiction and mental health issues, and others who are ineligible for public assistance because of their criminal histories. Indeed, these are among the most vulnerable members of society—the “neediest.” Mothers articulated two related reputational concerns regarding the use of these types of organizations. First, they expressed concerns about being seen as belonging to such a disadvantaged group, being identified as “low” enough that they need to seek what they view as “charity.” Second, they did not want to be aligned with those they considered to be “greedy”—people who took advantage of churches and other helping institutions because of their relatively easy application process even though they didn’t really need the assistance. It was not the disclosure of personal information in the application process that deterred some mothers from using these services, but rather the possibility that they would be exposed using them or that others would find out and judge or gossip about them as a result. In a sense, then, using non-profits involved a different privacy problem—one of publicity and identification. In this setting, mothers lacked privacy in the form of anonymity (Solove 2010). In contrast to the de-personalization in the welfare office, at the church it was an issue of being *overexposed*.

When I asked respondents if they had ever used non-profits or churches, many responded by saying they did not need that sort of help, or if they had in the past, they no longer did. There was a palpable social distancing in these comments. When I asked Cassandra, who lives with her grandmother, if she had ever gone to a church for help she explained, “I don't really need help cause my grandma and them, they have money they not like dirt poor like that.” The phrase “dirt poor” connotes extreme destitution but also as sense of being unclean, which carries a moral undertone. April had received food stamps and Medicaid in the past, but stated:

I didn't ever go to any churches because I never felt like the situation was, you know, that bad. To where I be like...the people who really need that, you know services, I will leave that for them, you know, who could really use it. When I know, you know, I do have some type of support where I can go if I need it like really bad, I can you know, go there.

Like Cassandra, she noted that she had “some type of support” she could turn to, underscoring her view that churches were only appropriate for those who had no support, or those that were “dirt poor.” Shontal echoed this sentiment, explaining why she had never before sought help from a church:

Not until now [have I gone to a church], whatever that church is we went to, to go do the city of Houston thing, but as far as going to those churches for food and stuff, I don't go on that side, I mean...I give someone else who really need it, and if I just really, really, really, really need it, that's something totally different. I don't never be need that much.

Some context for Shontal's comments is instructive. At the time of our interview, Shontal was in the process of moving out of Crestmont Village, the apartment complex condemned by the city after weeks of protest by community activists over the deplorable living conditions (Hinchliffe and Rogers 2015). Residents were without power for days on end after the landlord pocketed their rent checks but did not pay the utility company for the complex's power usage. The church Shontal referred to was located a few blocks from the complex, and volunteers there coordinated food donations and connected residents with staff from the City of Houston Department who

were tasked with relocating more than 200 displaced residents. Though Shontal noted that she never needs “that much” help, she also described to me severe disadvantages that have made it difficult for her to keep her family afloat. These include a stint in prison for a felony conviction, a history of mental illness that has resulted in several hospitalizations, a tenuous family support system, the premature death of her child’s father, and chronic diabetes. Before the Crestmont Village housing crisis, Shontal lost all of her household goods in the flooding that struck Houston several months prior, and was then evicted. She had also been robbed in the parking lot of the complex just after cashing an \$800 title loan for her car. Yet, for Shontal, none of these hardships constituted “really, really, really, really” needing help to the point where Shontal would have gone to a church prior to this latest emergency.

Lashaunta used similar language to describe why she doesn’t frequent churches for assistance anymore, though she did in the past, explaining:

I don't pretty much try to get things that if I don't need it or you know, I'm not in the need for, I don't bother it. Cause it's somebody out there that might really need that stuff and then you going and taking that stuff and don't need it. I don't get it unless I *really really* just need it and I been fortunate to just have it for me and my kids where I won't have to be begging on churches or stuff like that.

Like Shontal, she positioned herself as morally opposed to “taking that stuff” when others may have needed it more than she did. This moral stance is important, as it parallels the implicit logic in the administration of welfare—that it is wrong to misrepresent one’s level of need, for example, by not reporting gifts or support from a child’s father or overestimating one’s expenses—and that strict eligibility criteria are in place because people will otherwise do so.

Indeed, mothers recounted that they had friends and family members who did frequent churches and non-profit organizations that offered free goods or assistance even if they did not “really really” need the help. Such people were deemed greedy. Cherise distanced herself from

that group, saying that she doesn't use churches because, "I get food stamps so I don't be greedy." Yet, when I asked Cherise if her food stamp amount was enough, she said:

I think, you know they should give you a little more, because you know food is high now. And, you know you have kids, like my son like to eat. So, it's like you know I think they should give you more, but I mean I'm satisfied with what they give you cause you know I could not get nothing at all, so.

For Cherise, what she considered "enough" was measured against having nothing at all, and she admitted that she wished the state would provide more; yet, she was not willing to put herself in the category of those that sought help from churches. Further, mothers often suggested that it was because of other people's "greedy" behavior that resources at non-profits and churches were scarce or not available at all. Dominique discussed how she was recently unable to get free school supplies for her son because, in her view, others had abused the system:

You should have seen... I couldn't get the things that I needed because they had greedy people. I mean, they should make sure that you need help. I feel like if you have food stamps or something, some kind of government assistance showing that you all -- something, then you can get it. But people who don't need it, just don't want to spend the money and they have it, they don't deserve stuff like that. And they be having nice stuff. They have nice backpacks to give out and stuff like that. Don't take from the people who need it.

Dominique suggested that non-profits and churches should base their provision of services on the state's eligibility standards, only providing help for people who are already receiving government assistance and have therefore already been deemed in need. Such a move might deter those intending to "get over" on these charitable organizations; however, it could also reproduce the same type of informational privacy concerns mothers already voice regarding the welfare application process.

Mothers' desire to distance themselves from other poor people they considered needy or greedy was made difficult by the spatial organization of faith-based social service provision in particular. As I described in Chapter 1, Sunnyside is densely populated with churches, and many

of these offer social services like pantries and mobile food outreaches in partnership with the Houston Food Bank. Given that the average temperature year-round in Houston is roughly 70 degrees, these events are typically held outdoors. Even those that conduct the check-in process indoors and allow patrons to sit inside while waiting for their turn often have the food delivery truck parked outside. Therefore, when it is time for a person to fill their box, they are in full view of passersby, not to mention other people waiting in line to get their own boxes. It is in part this aspect of physical exposure that puts mothers' sense of privacy in jeopardy in this context, and leaves them vulnerable to the labeling they wish to avoid.

Sociologist Rebecca Joyce Kissane (2003; 2007) finds a similar aversion to the use of non-profit organizations among poor women she interviewed in Philadelphia, despite their high levels of material need. Her respondents highlighted the stigma associated with using such services, which was accentuated by the practice of having recipients stand outside in a line to wait their turn. As in my study, mothers contrasted the level of visibility in these settings to their experience at the welfare office, where they were able to have more physical privacy than at a food pantry. Monique explained her unwillingness to use a church food pantry because of the visibility issue:

I would never get that from a church, like no food or nothing cause we have that. We don't need that stuff. And for me it's embarrassing to like just sit up in a line and just wait to get stuff. It's embarrassing, I would never do that.

In refusing to patronize food pantries, Monique warded off the possibility that others would see her "sit[ting] up in a line" and therefore label her as needy or greedy when she didn't see herself that way. Similarly, Latrice described her feelings of shame in using a food bank, and recalled that she inherited her mother's sense of pride, which kept her mother from seeking any type of assistance, not just that from churches and non-profits:

There would be times we'd come to the fridge and there's no food in the refrigerator, and my mom would not go to a food bank, and she would not apply for food stamps. You just had to make it how we live, but she has so much pride, and I kind of got past that where I go to food banks, and I go and get food stamps, but I still have that little bit in me... You're kind of like ashamed, and then [social service providers] talk to you wrong, you want to just say forget you and walk out. You're like no, my daughter is hungry.

Latrice's comments highlight the tension she felt in making decisions to seek assistance: she was ashamed and didn't want to ask for help in a setting that would place her at the bottom of a moral hierarchy, but her daughter's needs motivated her to push past her feelings.

Mothers' desire for a measure of privacy—in the form of anonymity—as they sought help from non-profit organizations, particularly those located within the neighborhood, was bolstered by their fears of reputational repercussions if anyone they knew did find out that they'd accessed these services. This pervasive concern about gossip was one reason some of the mothers I interviewed often chose not to seek help from their own churches, instead venturing to congregations where they did not know anyone. Angela noted that, as a “private person” she would “rather go to a outsider before I come home sometimes. Because home is where everybody pretty much in your business and I'm not down with that, I'm sorry but I'm not.” Angela explained that the only way she would consider asking for help is if it was “set up where it was personal, private, confidential,” not the typical situation where she would be utilizing the pantry along with everyone else. Lashaunta, too, said, “I'd go to somebody else church maybe, but not my own.” Kim was also hesitant to use churches in general, in part because, as she noted, “I don't be wanting to ask nobody for nothing.” I probed whether she attributed this hesitancy to pride and she said:

No... A lot of times people tend to throw in your face things they have done for you...or tell other people, ‘Yeah, I had to do such and such [for her]. Because people have a tendency of doing that, ‘Mhm, girl, let me tell you, she called and I had to do this and that.’ And then that person be like ‘Yeah she had to go ask so-and-so to do this for her and her kids,’ and it go on and on and on. That's really why I don't like asking.

Here, Kim touches on a central worry for poor mothers: their image as a mother. The prospect of Kim reaching out for help carries the risk that other people will disparage her skills and competence as a mother, a central component of her identity.

Like Kim, Lashaunta worried about others talking behind her back if they knew she asked for assistance from her church, and her concerns also centered on her image as a good parent. She noted that the church had helped several times before, including a time they took up a collection to help her family pay for funeral expenses, and another time they paid for she and her children to take a church trip to Florida they otherwise could not have afforded. But Lashaunta drew the line at directly asking, saying, “I would never do it. I promise I wouldn't.” She explained that the church members would gossip:

They be like, ‘She can't help her daughter out, or she can't give...’ That church talks. No, no, I wouldn't dare. They'd have that all over. ‘Such and such daughter was...’ Oh no, I don't need that. I don't need them talking about me.

Lashaunta’s fear of gossip was heightened because she attended the same church as her mother, and she noted that her mother would be implicated if church members talked about “such and such daughter.” Again, at issue is the personalized aspect of service delivery in the church setting, and the reputational risks that approach carries for mothers.

As I have demonstrated, although non-profit social service organizations offer a more favorable terrain for some aspects of privacy, they present challenges in other respects. There are fewer and less detailed requirements regarding the disclosure of personal information from applicants in these settings, which mothers hailed as preferable to that required in the welfare office. Further, mothers perceive that staff and volunteers in the non-profit setting are motivated by a sincere desire to help, and that they take into account each family’s unique circumstances. Yet this individualized attention, particularly in the church setting, was sometimes a negative for

mothers, as they did not want to be singled out by a pastor or church-members who might not otherwise be aware of their material deprivation. Coupled with the spatial organization of social service provision in churches in particular that made it difficult for mothers to remain anonymous as they sought these services, mothers experienced a sense of being *overexposed*. Their inability to achieve privacy in this setting made them vulnerable to the stigma they associated with the type of people who access these services.

Conclusion

In this chapter I illustrated the distinct experiences mothers have in engaging with state versus non-profit social service providers with regard to privacy. These settings have very different application requirements and processes for establishing eligibility and determining the level of benefits or services a client will receive. I have shown that these processes produce distinct challenges to mothers' sense of privacy. In the state setting, mothers perceive that their privacy is imperiled because of the extensive personal information they are required to disclose and the techniques caseworkers use to extract that information. But mothers express more than just frustration with excessive red tape and the unsavory attitudes of caseworkers. One consequence of the ways in which mothers' welfare applications are processed is that mothers feel like they are categorically treated with suspicion, as though they have committed a crime—a result that leaves them feeling disrespected but also de-personalized because they are lumped into a morally derided category instead of treated as distinct individuals with legitimate needs.

Churches and non-profit organizations seem at first glance to offer an appealing alternative. Often requiring only a picture ID or a piece of mail to verify one's address, these organizations have simpler application processes and do not delve deeply into mothers' personal

lives. They also lack the power of the state to gain access to information mothers do not wish to disclose. Further, particularly in the church setting, mothers perceive that the employees and volunteers providing services do so in the spirit of generosity, with a genuine and spiritually inflected interest in helping others. However, getting help from a church or non-profit organization comes with a different set of drawbacks with regard to privacy. Mothers fear that being seen using such “last resort” resources will lead to them being exposed to the community as “needy,” as belonging to the most disadvantaged of groups, a designation they do not want. Further, they wish to avoid being labeled “greedy” for using resources that others hypothetically need more acutely. In part because the spatial organization of food pantries and outreach events is such that they take place in outside or involve standing in a long line, these settings offer little physical privacy, and thus enhance the chances that mothers might be spotted by someone in the community that they know. Mothers wish for more privacy in this context in the form of anonymity.

I have shown that in both contexts mothers do similar work to morally distance themselves from other poor people with whom they do not want to be associated. These findings highlight the way that privacy—if achievable—can aid mothers’ efforts to protect themselves against stigma. Importantly, mothers in this study reported that either outcome—*de-personalization* in the welfare context or *overexposure* they experienced in non-profits and churches—could dissuade them from seeking assistance. Yet many mothers felt as though they have little choice because their needs were so great. In the next chapter, I detail what is at stake for mother as they make these decisions and highlight the practical consequences of surrendering privacy to the state.

CHAPTER 4: DISCLOSING FATHERS' IDENTITY: BEYOND AN INVASION OF PRIVACY

Imani is a working single mother of a four-year-old daughter, Destiny, whose antics she is fond of reenacting. As I got to know Imani over the course of a year, I began to see where Destiny got her sense of humor, and Imani's infectious laughter was something I looked forward to when we spoke. During this time, Imani's childcare arrangement, employment, and general life circumstances went up and down, though she managed to avoid the sort of major crisis that many mothers in this study experienced at regular intervals. She did struggle, as she told me, to keep gas in the car and pay all her bills each month. But one of the things she attributed to her relative stability was family support: she was close with her parents and sisters, with whom she attended church and sang in the choir. She had moved in with her older sister at one point when she was waiting for her public housing application to be processed. Imani also got support from her ex-boyfriend and Destiny's father, D'Wayne, who she described as "always back and forth, back and forth, in and out of jail," as well as help from his extended family. When Imani struggled to buy clothes or school supplies or when she needed someone to babysit Destiny, she trusted that someone in either her family or his would step in to help.

When D'Wayne wasn't incarcerated, he offered various forms of support to Imani and Destiny—typically not money, but he would bring diapers, toys, or clothes. And most importantly to Imani, he spent time with Destiny. Regarding the material support, she said, "That part I don't even be worried about, I just want [D'Wayne] to make sure [he] doing the quality time and spending time and stuff like that. Cause that's what's more important." This informal arrangement was threatened when Imani decided to apply to the state for formal support in the

form of subsidized childcare. She discovered that one of the program conditions was that she had to file a child support order against D'Wayne, even though she did not want to. At the time, he was incarcerated and would therefore likely be unable to pay. Faced with the child support requirement, Imani was torn. She explained, "I didn't have any reason to go file child support. I only had did it for the [subsidized] day care cause that's the only way they let you get it if you file child support." In general, Imani did not object to the questions she had to answer when she applied for public assistance, except when they asked about her child's father. She said, "With the income, no [I don't mind] but then like when they have on the application like 'Oh what's your baby daddy name' and all that type of stuff I be like, 'Well, do I really want to put that?'"

Imani discussed her dilemma with D'Wayne's mother and grandmother, who suggested that she should, "Do what you need to do," even if that meant putting D'Wayne on child support. Imani was relieved at their support, but she worried that this action would mean that D'Wayne would come out of jail owing back child support and, with his criminal record, likely have a hard time getting a job in order to pay it back. Imani described D'Wayne as a "good dad," but continued, "I really don't want to do it because when he's not in jail he do what he supposed to do, but at the same time, [he] grown. And if [he] was here then you know, me and him could just go half and pay regular childcare or maybe she could be with [him]." Eventually, Imani went ahead with the application for subsidized childcare, saying, "I mean cause at the end of the day, it's really benefit my daughter. And at the same time it's helping me too...At the end of the day, you know, I had to do what I had to do."

Imani's story reflects the hard choices that poor mothers face when they encounter the requirement that they divulge fathers' identity in order to potentially receive public assistance. I stress the potentiality here because even if Imani disclosed her child's father's name on the

application, she was not guaranteed to receive childcare, as the child support requirement was just one aspect of the eligibility determination. For Imani, the consequences of “doing what she had to do” in addition to potentially getting a childcare subsidy, threatened the existing informal sources of support on which she and her daughter depended, including the time D’Wayne spent with Destiny. In addition, by filing child support against D’Wayne, Imani risked being held responsible for the accumulation of debt that would likely accrue for him, especially during the periods he was incarcerated. Further, this decision also challenged Imani’s sense of autonomy as a mother. Imani prided herself in being a strong, independent woman, saying, “I’ve always been independent and [haven’t had to] depend on no man to do anything for me or for my child.” She resented having to give up some of that autonomy in going along with the state’s requirements regarding child support, which she felt positioned her as dependent. Taken together, Imani’s story illustrates how this one disclosure decision can spark a wave of serious consequences in the lives of mothers and those around them—consequences that, rather than uplifting poor mothers, can instead make it more difficult for them to survive.

In this chapter, I examine in more depth the practical consequences for poor mothers of being put in the position of trading personal disclosures for public assistance, and I argue that these potential consequences help explain why mothers make a strong claim for privacy in this context. I focus on the example of fathers’ identity, which was the question mothers most often pointed to as the most invasive in terms of privacy, and which—if disclosed—had multiple effects on mothers, their children’s fathers, and the family unit, as Imani’s case illustrates. After briefly reviewing how child support became tethered to welfare receipt as part of federal welfare reform, I describe the child support enforcement policy environment for applicants in Texas, the contours of which are critical to understanding mothers’ decision-making in terms of disclosing

fathers' identity. I then show that mothers perceive the question about fathers as a privacy invasion, in part because of its connection to sexuality and the concomitant concern that honest answers may provoke stigmatization or feed into stereotypes.

But I argue that what drives mothers' resistance to this question goes beyond the immediate privacy concern, and instead turns on at least three consequences related to this disclosure. First, mothers' informal support systems, including pooling resources from extended kin and exchanging in-kind forms of support like childcare, can become endangered if fathers and/or fathers' extended family members are angered by mothers' decision to let the state file a formal child support order. In addition, by exposing their [often poor] children's fathers to the welfare system, mothers risk being held responsible for ensnaring them in the criminal justice system either if fathers are unable to pay—and are thus punished with jail time—or by extending their time in jail if they are already incarcerated. Finally, since the child support requirement is not optional, mothers that do not wish to file a child support order, but do so to get public assistance, often feel as though their sense of agency in managing if and how they interact with the children's father is compromised. These consequences illustrate why surrendering informational privacy in this context is so salient for mothers.

Child Support Under Welfare Reform

With the passage of federal welfare reform legislation in 1996, the experience of seeking public assistance changed dramatically. As I noted in Chapter 1, the most publicized goal of this welfare reform bill was to reduce the number of caseloads—to move people off of the rolls and into the work force. The architecture of the legislation included a shift from an entitlement program to “welfare-to-work,” the imposition of time limits, stricter eligibility criteria, and the

introduction of sanctions (Schram et al. 2009). As a result, the welfare application process became more restrictive, the requirements for participation were increased, and benefit amounts declined. At the same time, the system grew more punitive, featuring an increasingly complex set of rules that, if broken, would result in sanctions including the loss of benefits, fines, and jail time (Schram et al. 2009; Wacquant 2009, 2010). One aspect that changed significantly after welfare reform was the federal requirement that women with children who sought welfare benefits must provide information about the identity and location of their children's father in order for the state to open a child support case against these men.¹ In Texas, this requirement applies to TANF, subsidized childcare,² and some forms of Medicaid. This requirement was implemented in the service of two additional aims of welfare reform, which included increasing the marriage rate among the poor and reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing (Mead 1998). Enhancing the child support enforcement system was one mechanism used to reach this goal. The logic here was that strict child support enforcement “reduces the disincentives to marriage and cohabitation in welfare policy by increasing the costs (for fathers) of living separately” (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001: 5). At the same time, the child support program could reduce state spending on public assistance: the more absent fathers contribute to their children, the logic went, the less the state has to spend to support these children.

Welfare reform included several key changes to the child support system at the federal level. First, it simplified procedures to establish paternity and implemented monetary incentives and penalties to encourage states to increase their rates of paternity identification (Brito 2000). In

¹ Although the same requirement applies to non-custodial mothers, fathers are much more likely to be the non-custodial parent (only 17.5% of child support cases in 2013 were initiated by custodial fathers [Grall 2016]); therefore, I use the term “fathers” for the ease of the reader.

² As noted in Chapter 3, the requirement that mothers file a formal child support order to be eligible for subsidized childcare in Harris County, which encompasses Houston, was amended in October 2016, after the data for this study was collected; therefore, it applied to mothers I interviewed.

addition, states were granted new access to information from a range of private and public agencies that collect data on income and assets, including tax records, motor vehicle registration, cable television and household utilities information, and bank records (Brito 2000). The legislation also established national directories to track fathers' work activity and income streams across states, making it more difficult for "negligent" fathers to escape the system by crossing state lines.

States have a high level of flexibility in determining how to implement changes to child support, including the amount of fathers' payments that are retained to offset the costs of welfare administration rather than passed on to mothers (Waller and Plotnick 2000). Termed a "pass-through," this is the maximum monthly dollar amount that mothers will receive of a fathers' payment even if he pays the full amount ordered by the state. States also have discretion in determining how aggressively they pursue non-custodial parents, as well as whether and how to levy sanctions if the welfare recipient fails to comply with child support enforcement procedures (Urban Institute 2015). As I show below, in addition to offering low levels of welfare benefits in general, Texas adopted a relatively low "pass-through" amount of \$75 and implemented a very strict enforcement system, creating a policy environment that is particularly austere in comparison to other states (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016a).

Child Support Enforcement in Texas

Texas has consistently led the nation in the annual amount of child support money they collect, perhaps owing to the deployment of a range of enforcement tools (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016b). As noted, individual states have wide latitude in how they construct a child support enforcement system, including how they punish those that fail to pay. The suite

of enforcement tools used in Texas includes the right to intercept nonpaying fathers' tax refund checks, file liens against their property and assets, suspend professional, hunting, and driver's licenses, and sentence nonpaying fathers to jail (Attorney General of Texas 2015). In June of 2016, the Texas Attorney General's office announced a new policy that would block people who were at least six months behind in their child support payments from registering their personal vehicle (Mekelberg 2016). This new measure—in a driving-centric city such as Houston where over 80% of employees commute to work by car (B. Davis and Baxandall 2013)—has major consequences for people's ability to get to work. In addition, in Texas, those who do not make child support payments on time are charged interest at a rate of 6% on the amount in arrears. This interest charge also applies to fathers that are incarcerated, which means that their overall amount due will steadily increase over the course of their incarceration period (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016b). Further, fathers that are behind on their payments for at least 90 days can be found in criminal contempt of court for failing to pay, which can result in jail time for those not incarcerated and an extension of confinement for those that are already incarcerated.³ In Texas, it is a state jail felony to be found in contempt, and the penalty can be up to two years in jail and a \$10,000 fine on top of the amount overdue (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015). Although incarcerated fathers can petition to modify their child support order, most do not, often because they are unaware of the option or are unable to secure legal representation (Knowlton et al. 2016).

Identifying the father of one's child and thus pulling him into "the system" can put him in a vulnerable position financially, socially, and with respect to law enforcement, who have

³ A bill to modify this stipulation to exempt people who are already incarcerated—unless they were incarcerated because of failing to pay child support—and who are unable to pay, was introduced in the Texas legislature in January 2017 and is still pending in the House at the time of this writing.

unfettered access to welfare records. Law enforcement has used these data sharing provisions to locate and apprehend thousands of welfare recipients and household members based on data from welfare agencies (Gustafson 2011). Until 2006, through a program dubbed “Operation Talon,” 100 food stamp offices nationwide cooperated with law enforcement in coordinated sting operations to apprehend clients with open warrants, leading to the arrest of nearly 11,000 low-income people (Gustafson 2011). Federal benefit programs are also required to disclose information to law enforcement officials about any person suspected to be a “fugitive felon.” This information can include the current address, social security number, and if applicable, a photo of the person (General Accounting Office 2002). Of note, this federal requirement explicitly overrides any state policies intended to provide “safeguards against the use or disclosure of information about applicants or recipients of assistance”—effectively neutralizing any localized efforts to protect clients’ privacy (Social Security Act § 408). And, as noted in Chapter 3, the term “fugitive felon” refers not only to people actively fleeing to avoid prosecution, but also to people who have violated the terms of their probation or parole—even if these crimes were not felonies (General Accounting Office 2002).

Low-income fathers are particularly vulnerable to these enforcement tactics, and they have a disproportionate impact on those with limited resources, as the newest proposal to restrict vehicle registration reveals. Not being able to drive a car is a major barrier to employment, and without employment poor fathers are unlikely to be able to pay child support, much less additional late fees and interest charges, because they have limited material resources in the first place. And, the practice of jailing fathers that do not pay child support has been likened to a modern-day debtors’ prison, as poor fathers are more likely to be incarcerated for this reason (Patterson 2008).

At the same time, not identifying the father means mothers may lose out on public benefits that they desperately need, however limited these benefits may be. In Texas, the \$75 pass-through amount means that if a father is ordered to pay, for example, \$275 per month in child support, and he pays it, the mother will only receive \$75 of that, with the rest retained to reimburse the state for the administration of welfare payments (National Conference of State Legislatures 2016a). Still, given the level of poverty of most mothers in this study, \$75 is a substantial amount of money. And, for those applying for subsidized childcare, as opposed to TANF, the benefits go far beyond the \$75, as having affordable childcare can make the difference between maintaining a steady income and not being able to sustain a job at all.

I highlight these aspects of child support enforcement for welfare participants in Texas because they reflect the weight attached to this one disclosure in the welfare application process, both for mothers and for the people that often comprise their support networks. Below, I discuss the multi-dimensional implications of this disclosure for mothers.

Surrendering Privacy: Fathers' Identity, Sexuality and Stigma

When mothers in this study described feeling as though their privacy was violated when applying for public assistance, they most often used fathers' identity as an example of the question they felt went too far or was too personal. Some mothers perceived that caseworkers' probing about the father implicitly—and at times explicitly—touched on a woman's sexual behavior, which respondents, and the broader public, widely understand to be a private domain (Solove 2010). Yet what makes this question too deep or too much also has to do with mothers' expectation that the answer given is likely to be viewed in a negative light—as reflecting deviant behavior. Given the long history of associating poverty, particularly among African American

women, with promiscuity and the powerful symbol of the hypersexual “welfare queen” (Collins 1990; Hancock 2003; Roberts 1997), it is unsurprising that many mothers resented questions to which they felt that their responses could provoke judgment or moral censure. Terri commented on why she finds this line of questioning to be “too personal:”

‘Who's your baby daddy?’ Cause I was young, so maybe I had, maybe I was a tramp, you know. Maybe I was a tramp and had sex with different niggas, so. And then they be like ‘Well who is your baby daddy?’... Or if you apply for AFDC [TANF] then you have to know who the father is and if you don't know who the father is you then you got to fill out these papers and this and that.

The implication here is that by disclosing that they have had children with multiple men or that because they have had sex with multiple men they aren’t sure about the paternity—mothers risk facing shame at the welfare office. When I asked Terri how it felt to her to be asked those questions, she responded:

I be under a bunch of pressure. I be defeated, I feel defeated because...I feel like I can just fall back on TANF for a few minutes or whatever while I look for a job but then they start asking all that you know and it’s too much. So it just like discourages me all together.

What constituted “too much” for Terri was the prospect of answering questions about her children’s father. If Terri were able to avoid answering that question—in other words, to achieve informational privacy—she would be able to avoid the stigma she anticipates, and perhaps diminish the pressure and discouragement she describes feeling.

Jonelle shared a story about a caseworker asking a series of explicit questions about her relationship with her children’s fathers that demonstrates precisely the sort of judgment or stigmatization that Terri wanted to avoid. Jonelle recounted the dialogue to me:

Jonelle: They'll say, 'Do you still, have you seen the father?' I was like 'Yeah I've seen him a couple of months ago.' 'Did you sleep with him?' What? Like nooo.

Cayce: They ask you that?

Jonelle: Yeah, I've had one ask me that, I was like, 'No, I don't even like him.' 'So do you plan on marrying him?' *I don't like him.* 'So you have four kids with four different men?' 'Yes.' 'Is that good?' I was like, 'Is that your business?' Child support is the most nosy. TANF, when you ask for cash assistance, they really get in your business as well. And there's certain things they shouldn't even know, like the sex thing. No I'm not sleeping with anyone, no there's not anyone living in my house but me and my kids.

Jonelle's account of her caseworker's moralizing line of questioning lays bare the risks associated with mothers disclosing accurate information such as the fact that they do have children with different fathers. Asking her if she had recently slept with the father already crossed a line for Jonelle. But in instructing her to confirm that she had "four kids with four different men" and then asking her if it was "good" that she had no intention of marrying one of the fathers—who Jonelle had already indicated she was not fond of—the caseworker transmitted a message of disapproval. The insinuation was that this outcome was not "good" at all. Further, because this fact was already disclosed, the question took the form of a paternalistic accusation, a shaming, rather than a sincere quest for an answer. This type of moralizing and often racialized discourse has been observed in interactions between caseworkers and welfare clients (Masters, Lindhorst, and Meyers 2014).

Nekeisha had applied for government benefits many years prior to our interview, and still recalled similar feelings about the question regarding her child's father:

I remember one time they used to ask you, do you know where your kids' paternal father is...I was like I think you know that's a bit much, you know what I'm saying? Because what if you, what if you was a person that got raped or whatever and you don't know or you don't care to share that information I think that's kinda horrific for a lot of people, you know what I'm saying?

Nekeisha points to the possibility that in addition to simply not wanting to share that information, some mothers have been victims of rape, a traumatic experience she felt one should be able to

choose *not* to discuss with a bureaucrat. And Harriet found herself in the very situation. She does not receive TANF because, “They want you to tell...some people don’t know about baby daddies, cause I don’t know who my last son baby daddy is because I got raped so I don’t know who that is.” At the time of our interview, Harriet was facing imminent eviction because she did not have enough money to pay her rent. With three teenaged sons to feed and a job that paid just above minimum wage, Harriet was under intense pressure, and she spoke of her stress making it hard for her to eat more than once a day. Her sons worried that her level of stress might lead to a stroke. Yet, despite Harriet’s high level of material need, she drew the line at answering intimate questions about her child’s father, because that would require her to recount the traumatic experience of rape.

These examples highlight the ways in which the required disclosures regarding fathers’ identity and location produced privacy problems for poor mothers seeking welfare. In providing this information to welfare caseworkers, they risked disclosing details about their intimate relationships that, if known, could provoke stigmatization. Simply being poor and African American already carries the cultural mark of deviance (C. J. Cohen 2004); add to that single motherhood and welfare receipt (Sherman 2013) and it is clear why mothers in this study might balk at questions about their children’s fathers that could amplify that perceived deviance. The state has historically restricted the reproductive options and denied the reproductive autonomy of poor women of color, while simultaneously supporting the use of reproductive technologies to assist wealthier and white women’s efforts to procreate in numerous ways (Flavin 2010; Johnson 2013; Roberts 2005). These practices reflect and reinforce the presumed deviance of poor women of color and the state’s interest in controlling their reproductive capacities. They also help explain why poor mothers might approach questions about their children’s fathers with a

sense of mistrust, and why they might highly value being able to have privacy around this topic. But as I demonstrate below, mothers' resistance to answering this question was more than an issue of privacy—they were also motivated by a desire to avoid the practical and often far-reaching consequences of the state enforcing child support.

Practical Consequences

Compromised Survival Strategies

The immediate consequence of mothers disclosing fathers' identity was that the father would be put on child support, whether or not mothers wanted to pursue a formal order. This result was problematic for some mothers because the father was already helping in informal ways. Often this support came in the form of food, diapers, or childcare as opposed to cash, as approximately 21% of the adult men in Sunnyside are not engaged in the formal labor force (compared to 6.2% nation-wide) (American Community Survey 2015). Sherrie explained why she didn't receive TANF: "I [would] have to put his dad on child support. I ain't trying to go through all of that." She continued, "He help, buying Pampers and things and clothes. Yeah he help, so it wouldn't be necessary if I know [my son] still getting the stuff he needs." Lauren echoed this sentiment, and she explained her shock when she learned of the child support requirement. Lauren's daughter's father faithfully provided money and support when she went through periodic financial struggles, so it did not make sense to her why she would need to file a formal order:

They had told me to apply for TANF I think it's called and Medicaid for myself. And uh, they were like, 'Well in order to do that you have to file child support' and I'm like, 'Why would I do that when that's—this is the person who is taking care of me?' I was like 'Really? You have to file child support on somebody who's helping you?'

Candy felt the same way about her two daughters' father, who provided money whenever Candy let him know that the children needed something. Candy would have benefitted from getting subsidized childcare or TANF, but decided against pursuing it because of the child support requirement: "Because they dad helped me with them...I mean, why would I [file child support] if [he] helping me...That's crazy." Candy contrasted the behavior of her daughters' father to that of her son's father, who did not offer any help with her son. Candy had no qualms about filing a child support case against him.

But because Candy was not willing to file a formal child support against her daughters' father, she worked out another informal arrangement to maximize her public benefits and keep more money in the house. Candy had a neighbor that took care of her children while she was at work. The full cost of this service would be too much for Candy to pay, so she and the babysitter worked out a deal in which she paid the babysitter cash under the table (which the babysitter could choose not to report as income for tax purposes), and the babysitter provided a signed letter for Candy to submit to the food stamps office as proof of her childcare expenses. The signed letter indicated that Candy paid a higher amount than she actually paid, which made it look as though Candy's overall expenses were higher than they were, meaning she received more food stamps per month. Such an arrangement, of course, is against the rules, and both Candy and the babysitter would face sanctions if found out—a good example of the risks to informal arrangements mothers face when negotiating decisions to disclose their personal information or not.

Kim's daughter's father was unemployed when I interviewed her, and she described him as being in a "down" period. But he did sometimes buy her daughter small things such as shoes or clothing. Because he made an effort, Kim did not file a formal child support order against him,

which meant she did not receive TANF. But Kim did not see the point in filing, since she knew he wouldn't be able to pay anyway. She explained, "If you don't have it, I can't make you have it. Even if you on child support, if you don't have it, they can't make you have it. I'm still not gonna get the money." And for Kim, the fact that he spent time with her daughters meant more than the money. She said:

So he'll get [the kids] and I be telling him you can go to, they like to go to the park and feed the ducks... I be telling him like different things that you can do without money. And it is, you don't always have to pay money. It ain't always about the money. When you have money, then yes, you provide when you can. But they need time and stuff, too, cause you paid all the money in the world and that's not gonna fix the spot that they miss him spending time with you.

Ada felt the same way about her child's father, who she characterized as being a "great dad."

When she tried to apply for TANF and learned about the child support requirement, Ada balked. She said, "I told them no, mainly the reason why I don't put him on child support is because he is the type of dad that likes to buy [my daughter] Jordans and Levis and top of the line stuff... once she was able to start walking, she hasn't wanted for anything yet." When we spoke, the father had been in jail for five months. He was facing three charges, including one for violating his parole, which Ada hadn't realized he was on. And it was clear that Ada missed his support. Since he had been incarcerated, Ada was evicted from her apartment and had moved back in with her mother and brothers—an arrangement for which she was grateful, but also lamented. Her daughter missed a week of school during the move, while Ada took multiple busses back and forth to work and as she tried to get her enrolled in a different school. She said, "So I'm just praying and hoping that he does get out soon because when he was out, he was helping with, helping me with her, he was getting her on the weekends."

Tasha, whose story opened Chapter 2, also felt strongly that her son should maintain an emotional relationship with his father even if he does not provide material support, and she

worried about the adverse effects of child support enforcement on this relationship. Tasha's child's father had a felony conviction, which made finding stable employment challenging, and Tasha herself struggled with finding work because she had a misdemeanor on her own record, something that always seemed to trump what she felt were her excellent interviewing skills.

When her son was a baby she applied for TANF but stopped the process because she didn't think it was fair to punish her son's father:

So I'm wasting my time going to file child support when I know that he's not gonna pay it because he's going through what I'm going through...a convicted felon man, so it has to be harder, why would I make his life harder when he's present in his son's life he just can't financially take care of him. So that would be wrong for me to file on him and make his life harder and get him taken away from his son for not being able to pay me. It's just not fair.

Tasha empathized with her son's father, who she described as "not a bad father he's just having a hard time." And she also acknowledged and valued the effort he made to be "present" even if he could not provide financial support. Finally, Tasha indicated that the blame would rest on her shoulders if the father were to be "taken away from his son for not being able to pay me," which would endanger her own relationship with the father. Despite his abusive behavior towards her, Tasha had "faith that eventually he'll get it together" and she didn't want to be "spiteful," which for her, was exactly what filing child support would reflect since he was unable to pay.

Pragmatically, it makes sense for mothers like those described above to take the help their children's father provides rather than apply for TANF. The value of the in-kind help these fathers provide might exceed the \$75 pass-through amount mothers would receive if they filed child support while on TANF. Further, TANF is by definition temporary assistance, so even if they were able to get benefits they would be short-term, whereas the father might continue to provide support in the long term. These types of informal support could potentially cease, however, if he were forced into "the system" through child support. Some mothers expressed

fear that the father might respond to a formal child support order by ceasing to provide any support. Wanda experienced this first-hand, and explained that she had been concerned about putting her former husband on child support because, “That [would] hurt him, because he is trying his best, yeah, that's why I had hesitated about putting child support on him.” Wanda’s ex-husband received a disability check, and prior to the formal child support order he had shared it with Wanda and her children. She noted:

It wasn't much, but it was something, and I knew that whenever I needed something he would be there, his parents are there, his brothers and sisters. They're all there, so I never wanted to put child support on him, and ever since I did it's like the whole script changed now. Now he won't do nothing for me. The family [is like], ‘Well you receiving child support so why should we help you?’ So now it's putting a lot of hate towards the relationship between the father and my children, so yeah.

Unfortunately, Wanda’s worries ended up being well founded, and she now laments making the choice to seek TANF because she can no longer rely on the father or his extended family for help. Wanda’s experience, like many other mothers in this study, highlights the importance of extended kin support systems in poor African American communities (Domínguez and Watkins-Hayes 2003; Hogan, Hao, and Parish 1990; Stack 1974) which have always played a central role in sustaining families. Part of what makes mothers’ role so critical here is that—as the primary recipients of public assistance—they are often the conduits of formal resources, such as food stamps, within these informal networks. But on the other end are family members, such as Wanda’s ex-husband’s, that offer in-kind support like childcare, upon which mothers rely. Gaining formal support from the state can have adverse consequences on these loved ones. Mothers’ choices—whether to apply for subsidized childcare or TANF and whether or not to list the father’s name—are not simply transactions between the mother and the state. Instead, I stress the impact on extended relationships to illustrate the potentially far-reaching consequences of

mothers' decisions to disclose fathers' identity to the state. This situation left Wanda feeling as though she was, as she said, "Damned if I do, damned if I don't."

Exposing Fathers to the Criminal Justice System

An additional consequence of mothers disclosing fathers' identity and contact information is that fathers may then be exposed to the criminal justice system. The specter of incarceration and the criminal justice system looms large in Sunnyside as a whole. As noted in Chapter 1, Sunnyside is home to a disproportionate number of people returning from prison relative to its population, and mothers in this study are well acquainted with the criminal justice system (Moore 2007). These personal ties to the criminal justice system as well as the broader linkages between the criminal justice and welfare systems shape mothers' decision-making around the required disclosure of fathers' identity. On an individual level, mothers are often empathetic to the challenges faced by men in their lives who have a criminal history. Barriers to employment for people with criminal backgrounds, especially African Americans, have been amply documented (Pager 2003), but non-custodial poor fathers with these histories face a double bind. Because they have "a background," finding a job—and therefore having enough cash to pay child support—is daunting, and many mothers are sympathetic to this situation.

Moreover, if fathers are not able to pay the amount ordered, they face fines and ultimately jail time. Some mothers remarked on the fact that this system was unlikely to result in mothers seeing any money. Jocelyn explained, "My thing is, y'all want [me] to file child support, but if the father is not paying child support, then you all put them in jail, and when they, whatever little help they do give, you all put him in jail, and in jail they still can't do nothing, so what's the difference?" If the goal of enforcing child support was to channel material resources to

mothers, then putting fathers in jail when they could not pay did not seem like a good strategy to Jocelyn. Like Jocelyn, the women I interviewed were acutely aware of this revolving door to jail, and some sought to shield the men in their lives from this fate, even as they expressed frustration and at times anger at having to bear full responsibility for meeting their children's material needs. For example, the father of Latrice's daughter was unable to work because of a disability, and he had tried unsuccessfully to get federal disability benefits for several years. When Latrice applied for Medicaid for her daughter she was asked to provide his name and contact information for the purpose of child support enforcement, and she reluctantly obliged. I asked Latrice how she felt about this requirement, and she said:

Kind of two ways. I understand the reason, because I mean, we are responsible for our own kids, so I understand that somebody is paying [for my daughter's] healthcare, maybe you need to get a dad to pay some of it, I get that. But my issue was it's more to take care of a child than financial, and I was afraid that he would be sent to jail for not being able to afford child support, and then she wouldn't see her dad at all. So it's like do she see him and not get no money or do she not see him and not get no money?

Latrice continued, noting that when her daughter gets older, "She's not going to remember oh, daddy been taking care of me financially. She's going to remember when he was there."

Beyond the concern about fathers being sent to jail if they are unable to pay child support, mothers also worried about the cumulative financial impact of accrual of back-owed child support for fathers that were already incarcerated. Not only do the monthly payments accumulate, but as I note above, the 6% interest charge also applies over the period of incarceration. The average amount of arrears that an incarcerated person with a child support order owes upon release is \$10,000—a daunting level of debt (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2012). Cherise's son's father was serving a twenty-five year sentence in prison when I interviewed her. To apply for Medicaid, she had to identify her son's father so the state

could file a child support claim. She described her misgivings about making this decision, and her sense of injustice at the prospect of the long-term consequences for her child's father:

That was a big thing with me because, before he went to jail he always was supportive with my kid and I didn't really want to do...the Medicaid because you know I don't have insurance, so, I need Medicaid, and...you know when he get out of jail—he got twenty five years—when he get out of jail he gonna have to pay all that back. And it's gonna be a lot, on him, and I really didn't want to do that because I feel kinda bad, but that's the state of Texas. That's how they do it.

Cherise worried about the accumulation of back-owed child support that would accrue while her child's father was incarcerated, and noted that it she felt “kinda bad” about making that decision, but she needed healthcare, as she had chronic asthma. She explained, “I need this, cause you know I can't afford the medicine. You know, I have asthma and stuff, I can't afford you know afford this...so it's just a step that I have to take.” But she was upset about what this decision would mean for her son's father not only now but also in the future. She said:

I was kinda hurt by it [the child support requirement] because you know I don't want like...I know by him being in jail, and then when you come home, you really not gonna have nothing so you gotta start all over again. And then, you know, if he don't pay you gonna be ending up back in jail. So that's kinda like, was kind of on me a little bit too. But it's like I told him there's nothing I could do about it right now.

Cherise, like other mothers in this study, described feeling as though they had no good choices—that in divulging the father's name in order to get benefits, she traded one bad thing for another. This example reflects the way that Cherise, like others, felt forced to make trade-offs she saw as harmful to her family, in order to get benefits that were supposed to help her family. And Cherise's comment that, if the father did end up back in jail, it would be “on me a little bit too,” highlights the emotional burden mothers take on, since the decision to divulge the father's name is theirs to make.

Some mothers did not express empathy towards fathers who were poor, incarcerated, or both, and therefore were not able to make child support payments. Instead, they were frustrated

because they did not expect to receive the money they were owed, and some mothers, like Shontal, were angry with fathers for not supporting them. Shontal had filed child support against her oldest daughter's father but never received any. She said, "That man don't pay no child support... And he got like 30 kids. I'm serious. Literally maybe 23 or 24... he's close to 30 and he's still making babies. And he never paid child support." But others indicted the system itself for not pursuing "deadbeat dads" more aggressively. Latrice had gone back and forth to family court for years trying to get her children's father to oblige with his child support order, with limited success. She perceived that the state was not doing its job in collecting the payments:

They [the child support office] don't really care like they used to. Because one point in time they was on it. They was locking him up or whatever and making him pay, and after that, I don't know what happened, if things changing with them, their offices, and it's like they don't care. Like they just turning me around, and I don't want to mess it up because my kids, they need their Medicaid.

Safia did not trust that the welfare office actually processed child support orders after mothers disclosed the fathers' names, and she also thought they should put more fathers in jail for noncompliance. She described her daughter's experience:

My thing is, why are you asking me for his information or whatever where y'all not gonna file on him? You claim you do. Why [my daughter's] kids' baby daddies not paying child support. Y'all have they names or whatever. I know you can look them up in the system. Even if you do file and they don't choose to work to pay it, still put them in jail. That's the way I look at it. That's the consequences if you don't pay child support. But what's the point in asking when you all not doing anything about it?

Yet another frustration for mothers was the fact that even if fathers did pay, they would receive—at most—the \$75 pass-through amount. No one I interviewed used that term, and there did not seem to be a shared understanding of exactly how much money mothers were entitled to or how much the state would keep. Instead, mothers spoke more generally of how the state wanted to "get their money back" or discussed the state's ability to compel people to "pay back"

whatever benefits they provided. Lauren described her frustration with the child support requirement given that she would likely not receive the money. She said:

So I'm like you gonna make somebody file for child support? Okay, just because you filed don't mean you gonna get the child support...And the thing is when you start getting TANF or they [fathers] do start paying or whatever, they [the state] gonna take the money. Basically. Either way they gonna take money.

Kim believed that the state kept 10% of any TANF amount for which she would be eligible. She described how the state was, “going to take the little money that I am getting from the child's father by me putting him on child support? No.” Kim continued, explaining:

I can understand when some people are like no, I'm not going to put him on child support for this little bit of change when you put him on child support y'all get 10% of my money, so you crazy. I'm not fixing to give you 10% of my money when I could just get all my money that he's going to give me to myself. You want money. No, I'm not going to pay you for him to take care of his kids.

Kim's reference to the “little bit of change,” meaning the low amount of money she would receive through TANF, is important because it emphasizes what she and other mothers view as an unfair bargain given the potential negative consequences of filing child support. It is also worth noting that though Kim claimed that she “could just get all my money that he's going to give me” rather than involve the state, she didn't actually get any financial help from her children's father because he was unemployed. But her comments conveyed her sense that the structure of the system was misguided at best, a sentiment that accorded with other mothers' views. And this view contributed to Kim's decision not to pursue TANF at all.

Compromised Autonomy as Mothers

Some mothers in this study objected to the child support requirement not because they worried about the adverse consequences for fathers or because they doubted they would actually get the money; rather, the requirement resulted in them ceding autonomy to the state over a

relationship they did not want to continue in any form, or one over which they wanted control.

April felt as though her children's father had made a decision to abdicate himself from the role of father, and she wanted that to be the end of their contact. As she noted:

I can't force anybody to do anything they don't want to do. You know it's your child just as well as I do, and you and I both know that your child has to eat and he's growing and he needs things. So you don't want to do it? Don't worry about it, but you will not be a part of his life. That's just not gonna happen.

April resented the fact that applying for benefits required her to disclose information about him, as she explained:

If I go apply for a service and I have to have your information, for what reason? Because if you were doing what you needed to do, I wouldn't have to be getting this service. No, and I'm the type of person you know what, if he don't wanna do it I'm not gonna force it to do it. He will have no access to my kids.

In April's case, she did not want the state involved in her relationship with her children's father, even if it meant she could potentially receive child support. She wanted to make the decision about if and when she sought support from him on her own. Yet in return for the benefits she sought from the state, that sense of agency was compromised. Like April, Olivia did not want to file child support on her sons' father, even though he did not provide any help to her, which she needed. She explained:

I feel like I could take care of my kids on my own, basically like I don't need child support, like I need true enough I need food stamps and Medicaid to help me, but like as far as the father goes, he don't want to do his part, and if he don't want to step up and be a father, like I'm not going to be begging you. I'm not going to go to the [state] and make you do it. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to do it. I'm just that type of person.

Olivia resisted the image of "begging" him for help, but also the idea that she would turn to the state to "make" him provide support. To her, taking that action reflected a sense of self, a "type of person," that did not accord with her self-image. Bree also saw herself as independent, and for her, seeking welfare was exemplary of "doing it on my own" without the father's help, which

was why the child support requirement rankled her. She explained, “So I'm still doing it on my own, so why do you need to know anything about him cause he not fixing to do nothing no different from what he doing. I'm calling *you* to ask you to help me and my kids, not this man.”

Jackie also prided herself in resisting help, a value that she observed in her daughter as well. At the same time, she did encourage her daughter to seek child support from one of her children's father, who offered no help raising the child. Jackie recounted:

I said come on, you didn't make your babies by yourself, did you? But one thing about [my daughter], my baby's a very, very independent woman and she don't have to ask their dad for nothing. She will not. She will go to her dad, me or her sister or her brother before he got in trouble. She would not go to their dad. She will not. And they [the father] got jobs, good jobs.

Jackie noted that the father had a “good job”—he owned a barbershop—and would ostensibly be able to pay the full amount of child support were he ordered to do so. And her daughter, who lived in a low-income apartment and shared her bed with her children due to limited space, could have used the money. But the idea of pursuing formal child support seemed to be a symbol of weakness that neither Jackie nor her daughter were willing to take on. Conversely, not asking for help—making it on your own as a mother—was a badge of honor passed down from mother to daughter. Jackie described the dialogue between she and her daughter when Jackie would bring up the issue of child support:

When I say something about child support, [she says] ‘I don't need that.’ ‘Baby, you need some kind of help.’ ‘Mama, I don't need it. You didn't get it for us.’ I say, ‘No I didn't.’ And she'll tell you right now, ‘I listen to my mama, that's where I get my strength from,’ and I admire my baby.

This mutual admiration centered on both women's insistence that they could make it as the head of their family without the support of a father that was uninterested or unwilling to help—and also without the state intervening to coerce him into helping.

Some mothers perceived that by being required to comply with child support enforcement by divulging the father's name, they were being punished, despite the fact that as the custodial parent, they felt that they were the ones doing the "right" thing by taking on full child-rearing responsibilities. As I explained above, part of this perceived punishment had to do with the sense that disclosures about paternity might feed into stereotypes about promiscuity or evoke the image of the mythical "welfare queen" (Hancock 2003). However, mothers also expressed the sentiment that the government purposely made it difficult for women with children seeking welfare by insisting on compliance with child support enforcement. Tianna explained her reaction when she first applied for public assistance:

I mean, I get a feeling, it's like none of your business. Like I actually had them to say where your kids' fathers? Where is this one? And I'm like, I don't know. You know, I been taking care of my child. I'm the one—I can give you the information about *me*, wherever I work, I'll tell you where I work. Don't pressure me about the dad. I don't know where they at.

Tianna's comments offer a glimpse of what lies beneath the statement, "It's none of your business," that I heard so often from mothers when they spoke about the welfare state. With frustration in her voice, she insisted that she was the one who had been taking care of her child; therefore, she continued, why should she be the one facing pressure from the welfare office?

Wanda expressed the same sense of indignation at the process, and noted that she thought the requirement made it harder on single mothers. She tried to get TANF, but when she was told that she would have to put the father on child support, she recalled:

I was like oh no, I ain't fixing to go through that process, so I would rather just not get it [TANF], because I just feel like sometimes child support is very hurtful to even a man or a woman. Sometimes we need that extra help as women, especially if you're raising your child on your own, but for you to have to go through the government just to get some money or—I think they make it a hard time.

The idea of having to “go through the government” to get child support from non-custodial fathers felt to Wanda like a punishment that was hurtful, and it was enough to deter her from seeking help. Similarly, Jonelle described the process of having to locate one of her children’s fathers so that she and her children could keep their Medicaid:

They told me my kids were gonna be cut off if I didn’t reapply for child support and I was like, ‘So my application expires if y’all don’t [find him]?’ I did *not* understand it. So I had to reapply and my kids got it back and I had to locate someone in order for me to get it. And that was very hard and degrading. If you don’t want to take care of your child, I don’t want to talk to you.

For Jonelle, what was degrading was being forced to initiate contact with the father when he had already demonstrated to her that he was not interested in caring for his child. And like other mothers who were raising children without support from the father, she resisted having to make an additional effort to help the state when she felt she was already doing her job as a mother.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I unpacked the puzzle of why it is that mothers in this study resisted the requirement that they disclose fathers’ identity in applying for welfare, for the purpose of helping the state enforce child support. I showed that privacy was one piece of the puzzle. To the extent that this question connotes for mothers not only an inquiry about their sexual practices but an indictment of them, mothers expressed a desire to keep this information private. Sexuality and intimate relationships are widely considered to be domains that deserve privacy (Solove 2010), and coupled with the entrenched stereotypes about promiscuity and hypersexuality among African American women welfare recipients (Roberts 1997), it is understandable why mothers in this study would be reticent to discuss their relationship to their children’s fathers. Being able to

have privacy over this information helps mothers ward off being placed in a maligned category of the welfare queen (Hancock 2003) and thus serves as a protection against anticipated stigma.

However, I have argued that what underlies mothers' discomfort with this question are the potential practical consequences of disclosing the father's identity and therefore allowing the state to file a formal child support order against him. As I have shown, these consequences include hampering mothers' informal social support networks, exposing fathers to the criminal justice system, and compromising mothers' ability to manage if and how fathers engage with their family. Taken together, I suggest that the pushback from mothers reflects a resistance to the state taking on the role of surrogate husband for mothers on welfare. In having to account for their children's absent father, mothers applying for welfare are tasked with producing for the state a legible family, one that deserves assistance and approximates the heteronormative ideal of a nuclear family (Haney and March 2003; Sherman 2013). In this patriarchal model of the welfare state, poor mothers' need for assistance indicates the failure of a man to support his family as the primary bread-winner as well as the failure of the mother to keep her family intact (Collins 1990). And the punitive measures central to child support enforcement reflect the fact that deviance from the normative model will be punished (C. J. Cohen 2004; Wimberly 2000). What I have shown in this chapter is that in the context of welfare, when mothers are held responsible for disclosing the information that facilitates this punishment, they are adversely affected as well. In the next chapter, I discuss the various strategies mothers use to manage these conditions as they try to get assistance, to maintain a measure of personal privacy, and to retain a sense of dignity in the process.

CHAPTER 5: STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL, STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

As many stories in the previous chapters attest, mothers in this study had challenging, frustrating, and at times, demoralizing experiences when they sought help from safety net institutions. Some took issue with caseworkers' behavior and demeanor, like Tiana, who compared welfare caseworkers to those who work at church outreaches, saying:

The church people, they just seem more joyous and more eager to help. The other people it's like they just burnt out on work. Mounds of paperwork, tons of questions, so they bring they problems to work and they attitudes in how they deal with people, and I think they stereotype... Yeah, they too nosy for me. Too nosy!

Hosanna, who had also had negative previous encounters with social service providers, described how she had to motivate herself in preparation for going to seek services, and steel herself against potentially demeaning treatment:

I don't know about other people, but myself, like I have to pump myself up the day before. I have to say, 'OK tomorrow I'ma go. Tomorrow I'ma go.' Because like I say, if I get turned down or I get the wrong information and then sometimes people can be so nasty to you when you need some help, and it makes me just feel like oh wow, what can I do?

For Hosanna, it was the prospect of being denied as well as caseworkers' attitudes that pushed her to the limit. When I asked Hosanna what advice she would give other mothers who were navigating the system, she said, "... if you get turned down, don't try to go to other ones right away. Wait until you build yourself back up, where you can take it, you see? Because discouragement—constant discouragement, I can't take it."

Beyond the perception that caseworkers were rude or had a bad attitude, mothers recounted experiences with the welfare bureaucracy that resulted in them having benefits delayed or even terminated. Often, the issue was related to information disclosures, verification, and

documentation. For example, Kelly, noted that caseworkers purposefully waited until the very last moment to process a case if there was any missing information:

They ask you a lot of questions, and then if you miss one, like say you might have overlooked something on your application, they throw your application out. You've got to start all over again, and then they tell you they give you 30 days—they have 30 days to respond back. Well, for those 30 days my kids not supposed to eat? Because you taking 30 days to do it? And they will they will take their time, and they will do it at the last day.

Kelly went on to describe a time that her food stamps recertification interview had been scheduled for 9:30 in the morning, but the caseworker did not call until 10:00, at which point Kelly missed the call. She ended up having to reinitiate the application process from the beginning. Lauren recounted being sanctioned at one point because her caseworker claimed not to have received the paperwork she had faxed in, which verified her mandatory work hours for the week. Lauren had already learned that it was critical to get a confirmation of receipt, and she had done so this time, as she explained:

They penalized me once because [the caseworker] said, 'Oh well we didn't get any fax from you.' And I'm like, 'Well I have the fax I got the confirmation.' I come up there and she's like, 'Well this is on color paper.' It was on some light green paper that I faxed it on. 'Oh well this was on colored paper that's why it didn't come through.' So you make another copy of it, put in the system that I *did* turn the fax in, but I'm still penalized for it. So then my kids end up losing their daycare benefits because I was penalized.

For Lauren, the loss of daycare benefits for a month was a high price to pay for sending a fax on colored paper. She told another story of being assigned to complete community service hours to fulfill her TANF work requirement at a welfare office on the far side of town. She wasn't able to fulfill the requirement because she did not have a car and she had to get her children to school by 8:00 am, the time she had to report to the office for community service. Lauren recounted the message she received from her caseworker when she explained the issue: "Well you gonna do that or you just won't have your benefits." Indeed, Lauren lost her cash assistance.

Mothers in this study shared with me numerous stories like these over the course of this study. Many of these mothers were living in deep poverty, making less than \$5,000 a year and facing multidimensional markers of disadvantage, such as recent eviction, involvement with the criminal justice system, and struggles with mental health. When they made the decision to seek help, it was often from a position of acute vulnerability; therefore, being sanctioned or having benefits delayed could be a major blow—the stakes were high. But mothers responded to the extensive informational and behavioral requirements of this often-punitive system in very different ways. And the strategies they used during any given encounter depended on multiple factors, including their previous experiences, the amount of prior information they had about what to expect or what tactics might be effective in securing help, and also, as Hosanna described, on the emotional reserves they had available that day. Sometimes mothers used a combination of strategies. These strategies also served multiple aims. In some cases, mothers adopted a strategy explicitly to maximize their chances of securing benefits or services, or to elevate the level of benefits they expected to receive. But in other cases, mothers' strategies in navigating the system were more about preserving a measure of privacy or dignity.

In this chapter, I trace four key responses mothers adopted to navigate the disclosure demands, program conditions, and the surveillance they face as they seek assistance from safety net institutions. These include: 1) intentional concealment, 2) performing cooperation, 3) agitating and advocating, and 4) opting out of seeking aid. I show that these strategies involved material and symbolic tradeoffs for mothers as they engage with the social safety net. Some strategies resulted in mothers gaining assistance at the expense of their sense of integrity, privacy, or dignity, whereas others led to mothers losing out on needed material resources but

preserving these symbolic resources. I argue that mothers traverse a tricky moral terrain as they negotiate these trade-offs.

Intentional Concealment

I met Heather at the airport rental car office shortly after getting off my first flight from Chicago to begin this fieldwork. She was working the evening shift, and as she processed my rental she asked what I was doing in Houston. When I said I was doing research on how low-income women manage their personal information in the process of trying to get public assistance, she interrupted me and exclaimed, “They lie!” She teased me and said there was no need to write a whole paper on that because she already had the answer. Heather explained that she knew because she did it herself and knew lots of other people who did the same thing. In our later interview I learned that Heather had grown up in what she called a “lower upper class” neighborhood and had attended private schools. Her family had never needed food stamps or welfare. Yet, she found herself in poverty after fleeing her abusive husband with only the clothes on her back and her infant daughter’s diaper bag. She first applied for public assistance during the subsequent several months she spent in a homeless shelter. But she was initially denied cash assistance because she reported that she was employed. Only later did a friend at the shelter instruct her that she should not have disclosed that fact. The friend also instructed her that it was important to keep her reported expenses and reported income at around the same amount; otherwise, if the expenses look too high, the caseworker might become suspicious that there was some other source of income. By the time Heather later applied for food stamps, she had learned to take notes on exactly what information she disclosed on the application so that she could refer to them during the follow-up interview to keep her “story right.” She described “editing”

whatever information she thought would—if disclosed truthfully—make her ineligible or decrease the amount of food stamps she received.

Heather approached the disclosure demands of welfare using a strategy that sociologist Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2006) terms the “concealment strategy”—the practice by welfare clients of purposefully misrepresenting or omitting personal information to caseworkers (6). Watkins-Hayes observed clients using this tactic in her research on welfare service delivery, and it was common among mothers in this study as well. Building on this work, I demonstrate that mothers often accomplished intentional concealment by taking advantage of what I term “soft spots” in this surveillance system, where voluntary disclosures carry more weight and are less easy to verify than disclosures that can be automatically verified through the state’s database. These include informal income and expenses, the number of people living in a household, and various other items that can affect the amount of benefits for which one is eligible. I also demonstrate, following Watkins-Hayes, that at times mothers intentionally conceal information not to increase their benefit amounts, but to resist what they perceived as invasive questions—an interpretation that lends a different meaning to a strategy that has always been part of poor mothers’ toolkit of survival strategies (Edin 1991; Watkins-Hayes 2006).

Sherrie, like Heather, was matter-of-fact about how she misrepresented personal information to get more food stamps for herself and also for her ex-boyfriend, who is the father of her son. Sherrie explained that she put her ex on her food stamps case even though he lived with his mother because although he was employed, much of his income went to supporting his mother. Although they were separated, Sherrie described him as a helpful father, bringing her diapers and kids’ clothing when she needed it. But as the non-custodial parent, and with his steady income, he likely wouldn’t qualify for food stamps, so Sherrie shared some of her food

stamps with him each month. She noted, “Now if I take him off [my case] it deducts. It goes down.” To keep her level of benefits steady, she said, “I say he’s in the household but he’s really not. I be like, ‘He’s homeless and he needed a place to stay.’” This claim to homelessness is a good example of a “soft spot” in welfare surveillance, as it would take work on the part of the state to disprove it, because homelessness can be intermittent and therefore difficult to verify. Sherrie’s story also highlights the way mothers often act as resource brokers for public assistance that is distributed through kin and non-kin networks.

Sherrie also misrepresented her household size and income when she applied to live in the project-based Section 8 complex where I met her. She was not employed, but needed to demonstrate some income so that she could show how she got by each month. She explained:

Yeah so I made up something and so I could get the apartment. I needed my own [source of income], and I used his [my son’s] dad. I used his dad, saying that I was helping his mother. Cause she was sick, or needed help around the house cause she couldn’t do it herself. I made up that, and said he gave me like two hundred a month, just to have a little something in the house or, on the paper.

I asked Sherrie how she knew what amount would be the right amount to report, since having too high of an income might have disqualified her as well. Sherrie explained that her mother lived in the same complex with five of her eight siblings, and knew a lot about the system. She said, “Well, we were all on food stamps when we was little, we was living with her. She used to, she was getting like twelve hundred.” One of her mother’s neighbors had faced the same dilemma Sherrie did when she applied for the low-income apartment. Sherrie recalled, “She said, ‘Just put two hundred a month and say you helped uh, your [boyfriend’s] mom out. And he paid you two hundred a month.’ So I just did that and I think you have to get it notarized.” Again, this letter about side income—as one of the surveillance soft spots—represents an opportunity to shift the control over and direction of the flow of personal information in a way that gives mothers

relatively more power. Rather than the state being able to crosscheck this information in a database, mothers and those that sign these letters become the arbiters—to a degree—of the validity of the claim.

In Sherrie's case and others, there is a socialization process in which mothers with no previous experience with welfare learn from others how to manage the personal information required of them and how to navigate the program conditions—in other words how to “work the system.” Sherrie benefited from her mother's experience with public assistance as well as those, like the neighbor, that lived in her community. She noted, “I mean it's plenty of people around here that's on food stamps. I mean, I usually hear, or I hear somebody talking, like 'Oh if you put so-and-so on here they'll get more.'” Shontal also learned how to navigate the system from her peers. She was initially denied TANF and described why, saying, “Why didn't they give me TANF? Oh, they were saying because okay, as far as with my little boy, oh, his dad was working, because I was telling them the truth. I didn't know I was supposed to lie to get what I want.” Shontal tried to explain to the caseworker that whatever money her son's father contributed was just for her son, not for her own expenses, to no avail. I asked her how she realized that she was “supposed to lie” and she responded, “People were telling me... I just, I was like younger. I wasn't street smart like those kids.” Shontal noted that her mother didn't let her “run around and be wild,” so it was only when she started spending time with her boyfriend's friends that she learned the ropes. She recalled how other women seemed to have no trouble qualifying for TANF:

They was like, 'I'm fixing to go get my money off my [TANF] card', and I'm like 'How you all get that money?' And I was like, 'They won't give it to me.' And they was like, 'Why?' And I said, 'Because of my baby dad,' and they was like, 'Why do you tell them about your baby daddy?' And I'm like, 'I'm not supposed to tell them?' And they was like, 'No, tell them that he don't do nothing for the child, he don't do nothing, and he's gone away or whatever, or tell them you don't even know who your baby daddy is, just tell them, that's how you get it, so.'

Some mothers in this study, once they learned certain strategies to navigate the system, described teaching others how to do the same, including how to prevaricate about one's personal information to maximize benefits. Candy took a combative stance towards what she viewed as an oppressive welfare state in general, in part because she disagreed with the child support requirement associated with cash assistance. She did not identify her two daughters' father to the TANF caseworker because he was already helping her, and Candy was therefore ineligible for TANF. She explained:

I know they, basically what it was, they knew I was lying so they're trying to get all the information out of me. You not gonna play me, I'm gonna play you before you play me. I'm not stupid, I know how the system work.

Candy's comments reveal her resistance to what she saw as caseworkers tactics to catch her in a lie, as well as their presumption that she was "stupid." As described in Chapter 4, Candy also worked out an exchange with her children's babysitter where she inflated the cost of the childcare (meaning she qualified for more food stamps) and the babysitter signed a notarized letter verifying the cost. In exchange, Candy paid her cash under the table. For Candy, this tactic was necessary, since she would otherwise not get enough assistance to make ends meet: "You've got to help somebody out. Other than that, I don't be getting nothing." Candy shared her knowledge of these workarounds with others, including her son's elementary school teacher. As Candy recalled, the teacher told her that she had been denied when she applied for food stamps. Candy advised that the teacher should not have disclosed that she was married. She explained:

If you put on there that you married you are not going to get it. And you need help providing for your household, use your mama address. Tell them that you pay your mama bills and stuff. You need it. I mean, end the day, yeah, you're a teacher, but your check still not nothing to take care of your kids. They looking at what you making, they not looking at what you bring home. Use your mama address. And she got it.

Candy described giving one of her co-workers the same advice, also with success. For Candy, helping others work the system was the least she could do in her role as a mother: “You’ve got to. I’m going to look out. I’m a parent. If that was me, I’d want somebody to tell me.”

At times, mothers used the strategy of intentional concealment in defiance of what they took to be invasive questions, not because they thought it would elevate their benefit level or make them eligible in the first place. As I illustrated in Chapter 3, the range of questions mothers perceived as challenging their sense of privacy was wide, and mothers offered a number of reasons as to why the questions felt invasive. Here I focus on their responses to these questions, regardless of why they felt they threatened their privacy. Jonelle put it simply, saying, “Some of the stuff I don’t think they really need to know, so I lie.” Angela was quite protective of her privacy in general, describing herself as a “very private person.” She was skeptical of why the state required so much personal information from applicants, asking rhetorically, “Is this to qualify me and why is this to qualify me? ... 'Why you asking it?' Maybe some people just want to be nosy, maybe they just feel like they need this?” Angela then explained how she would respond to questions she felt were too personal:

Angela: OK, well as far as I’m concerned, if I feel like it’s too personal I would be very vague... You wouldn’t get what you need from me. I mean you would get what you need, but it’d be so vague until it could be somebody’s random answer...because I feel like you don’t need to go that deep and I’m not gonna let you go that deep.

Cayce: So for you, that would be your strategy, is basically, 'You can ask, but I’m not gonna’—

Angela: Yeah you can ask, but what you receive might not be what you want to hear and I don’t have a problem with that. You can ask all day long.

Angela's approach was to give answers that she felt wouldn't identify too strongly with her as an individual—as she said, “it could be somebody's random answer.” And she articulated that this tactic was self-protective; it kept the state from going “that deep,” which she felt was unnecessary. Interestingly, Angela seemed to prefer a sense of de-personalization here, which as I showed in Chapter 3 was most often an experience mothers lamented.

Kim used the strategy of intentional concealment not to protect her own privacy, but instead to shield those she lived with. At the time she was recertifying for food stamps, Kim was living with her grandmother in a home she owned. Kim described encountering the section on the application for public assistance that asked about housing costs, including the amount of rent or mortgage payments, utility costs, and the taxes paid on the property if owned (TX HHSC 2013). She balked at these questions because they were about her grandmother's expenses. She explained:

This is these people's home. I'm not fixing to go in here and ask these people, ‘Well, how you pay for this home? Are you paying taxes? How long have you been here? How much do you...’ Because they want to know how much the people house is. How much is this house worth? I'm not fixing to go ask them people that. So it's...some of the questions like that I don't feel like you should be concerned about that, because I don't know, and I'm pretty sure these people, like if you staying with someone I'm pretty sure these people don't want me to know their business.

Rather than take on the role of getting in her grandmother's “business,” Kim reported to the food stamps office that she was homeless. Referring to her grandmother, she said, “I didn't ask her. I put I am homeless...I'm homeless, I don't know none of this information.” When I asked if the caseworker accepted that response, Kim said, “They didn't have no choice, because...if I don't have no permanent home this is my mailing address, I'm going from here to there, then there's nothing you can do about it, because I don't -- It's not my home. I'm homeless.” Again, Kim's comments—that “there's nothing you can do about it”—emphasize the difficulty of verifying

clients' claim of temporary homelessness, which makes it less risky for clients to misrepresent this information. They also reveal once more the way that mothers' disclosures on the welfare application almost always involve other people, whether family members like Kim's grandmother, or in Candy's case, the babysitter who watches her children. Thus, in the role of resource broker, mothers are balancing not only their own interests—including in maintaining privacy, but also their interest in getting assistance—against others' interests as well.

Yet, submitting erroneous information is dangerous, as if it is found to be false it can result in sanctions and legal consequences. Indeed, this practice of prevaricating is precisely what clients are warned against in the application for public assistance, on the posters that line the walls of the welfare office, and in interactions with caseworkers. And as I return to below, mothers also blame other welfare recipients' dissembling—for the purpose of getting benefits—for what they perceive to be caseworkers' a priori expectation that welfare recipients are likely not telling the truth. It was common for mothers to lament that the reason they had to endure intensive questioning and provide such extensive documentation to verify their information was because those that came before them were dishonest about their needs. For example, Donna expressed her frustration when she only qualified for a small amount of food stamps after answering the questions accurately. She recounted being told by an acquaintance that she should have lied:

I'm kind of beginning to wonder, is the system designed to help you or to fail you? You know, do they want to see you, you know, get out of the system and do better for yourself? I said, but people I have known to come here and lie, and they come home with more stamps than I have, and that's what the young lady was telling me one time. 'See, you went in there and you told them truth.' I said, 'Look, it's the state, I'm not trying to get in trouble in no kind of way, so that's why I explained to them the situation, what was going on.' But at the end of the day, I walked out with the three dollars.

Donna's perception that people who do not tell the truth get more benefits was pervasive among mothers in this study, and this perception was a central piece of the moral quandary mothers faced in seeking public assistance.

While some mothers did not report feeling guilty about misrepresenting information, and some felt that it was actually the right thing to do, others struggled with what they felt was a moral trap inherent in the welfare system. They either told the truth and potentially wouldn't get the help they needed to support their family (which was central to their self-understanding as mothers), or they didn't tell the truth, got the assistance, but betrayed their sense of what was right (the modeling of which was also central to their view of what a mother should do). Sade recounted that when she was nineteen and had just given birth to her first child she applied for food stamps. The caseworker informed her that she wouldn't qualify for food stamps because she owned a car that was worth too much money. Sade estimated that it couldn't have been worth more than \$1,000, as it was used and she had paid for it with \$700 in cash. But the caseworker argued that she could sell it, at which point she would have had too much money in the bank to be eligible. At the time that Sade disclosed to the caseworker about the car, she didn't realize it would make her ineligible. I asked her if she would have answered differently if she knew what she knows now. She responded:

To be honest, it really makes you want to lie... Because you know, if you tell the truth, I mean, of course it may come back to haunt you, I'm not for sure. But it makes you not want to [tell the truth] because if you're reaching out to them, you're not just reaching out to them, you know, callously like it means nothing. You're reaching out to them because it's a need. And you still have that feeling of desperation—if I don't do this I have to, I don't really have an option. I have to just tell this white lie in order to get what I need... I can omit that I own a car, you know what I'm saying? ... Yeah, it puts you in that position, like you already know what you up against... You can't fudge your income. Cause this is something that you have to show them, or your bills or something but ownership or something like that, I really think that that's true. Which's why they say, 'Oh I'ma put it in my mother's name.' you know what I'm saying? So that you qualify for whatever is out there. It's sad, but it's true.

Sade's comments emphasize the moral quandary in which mothers find themselves once they realize how the eligibility determination works and discover which pieces of information are, as Sade put it, possible to "fudge." Women on welfare have historically had to balance the demands of providing for their children (including through securing welfare) against the practical reality that successfully meeting that goal might require compromising one's morals or sense of integrity (if one does not tell the truth) (Edin 1991; Gilliom 2001), and this dynamic was present in this study. Either one could be seen as reflecting poorly on one's identity as a mother.

Performing Cooperation

For some mothers, the best way to proceed when dealing with social safety net institutions was to perform cooperation for the benefit of caseworkers, in order to convey that they were responsible clients. As noted in Chapter 3, the imperative that welfare recipients must be "responsible" was central to welfare reform, as highlighted by the name of the legislation: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. But more directly, clients also had to sign a Personal Responsibility Agreement before receiving benefits (TX HHSC 2013). To achieve the performance of cooperation, mothers adjusted their bodily comportment and tone, provided all of the requested information or documentation without question, and did their best not to upset the caseworker or to appease them if they did become upset. For example, when Sade applied for cash assistance and food stamps many years ago she recalled the caseworker asking her a question that took her aback: "When is the last time you've had a menstrual cycle, when is the last time you been intimate with someone?" This question evoked in Sade "a horrible feeling," and she was baffled as to why the caseworker asked these questions. She assumed these questions were intended to verify her pregnancy, which she felt she had

already done by providing a letter from her doctor. But instead of speaking up, Sade kept quiet. She decided to, “just grit my teeth and bear it to get what I needed to get, because I didn't want to, you know, cause any waves to um, impact my case, you know or prevent me from getting it.”

Sade explained:

Because you're in a position of... (sigh). At that time for me, you're in a kind of position of desperation. You need the help, that's why I'm there. If I didn't need the help I wouldn't be here, you know, wasting your time or mine. And I want to answer everything that you ask me because I don't want you to tell me no.

Sade's comments call to mind the findings discussed in Chapter 3 about how mothers perceived the questioning by caseworkers to be a signal that mothers were not seen as trustworthy, or that they were seeking help that they did not “truly” need. But she also described having been in what she termed a “position of desperation.” At the time, she noted, getting public assistance was “pretty much my only option, you know, so yeah... It's just a desperate need to fulfill the need that you know you have coming cause you have to eat at the very minimum.” This vulnerability limited Sade's willingness to push back against what she felt was an invasive and unnecessary question. She therefore deployed the strategy of performing cooperation because on balance, in that moment, it was more important for Sade to “grit [her] teeth and bear it” and get benefits than to try to maintain some control over her information or to push back.

Teena was also concerned that asking questions of caseworkers or pushing back could result in her losing benefits. In her view, caseworkers “can be rude,” but her strategy was to, “just deal with it, because at the moment you know you need it.” She described how she would perform politeness and obedience in response to caseworkers who she felt were being rude to her: “I just be like, you know what? ‘You right, ma'am, yes, ma'am, no, ma'am.’” When I asked what she thought would happen if she talked back to the caseworker, Teena responded:

Oh, they would...if you talk back to them, they will literally go to the next room, push your paper back and say oh ma'am...they'll tell you go back out in the waiting room, and they'll then see you at the end of the day before it close. But that's the deal.

Teena echoed Sade's resignation as she highlighted what she saw as the immutability of this dynamic, concluding, "But that's the deal." And, what she described seemed to be a form of disciplining on the part of the caseworker, should a client appear to be challenging them. Wendy, like Teena, made an effort to convey an attitude of acquiescence when faced with extensive questioning from her food stamps caseworker. She noted:

Um, I just kinda breathe and speak with a firm tone and I kinda just stare like, 'Mm-hm, that's fine.' You know I'm really, I try to be on my Ps and Qs cause you know really inside I just want to you know, 'UGH!' but I try to keep my composure because if I show that it's getting to me it's not going to do anything for me, so. I try to act like it doesn't bother me and just deal with it like that.

Wendy was somewhat unique in that she did not believe that individual caseworkers had the unilateral power to deny her benefits out of spite, but she admitted that she felt, "a little intimidated to say something to them." Instead, she worked to remain calm and to appear composed, to keep her emotions inside. The right kind of welfare client, according to what mothers like Teena and Wendy learned in interacting with welfare caseworkers, is obedient and does not talk back no matter how the caseworker behaves. Sociologist Javier Auyero (2012) describes such interactions with street-level bureaucrats as "daily crash courses on the workings of power" (7), in which the poor are socialized into a certain expectation of what the government will provide as well as what is expected of them as recipients of government assistance (Auyero 2012). As Wendy's comments reveal, she and others received that message loud and clear—they knew they were expected to be obedient, answer all the questions, and follow the rules. At the same time, they also learned to expect welfare caseworkers, as representatives of the state, to be

at best indifferent to their needs and at worst vindictive when mothers did not comport themselves as cooperative subjects.

April had mixed experiences with caseworkers in the past, conceding that, “some of them were very nice, but you know I guess if...I guess the last client if things didn't work out too well, you have to catch the wrath of what's coming after that.” In response to being subjected to that “wrath” on one occasion, April explained how she tried to appease the caseworker by saying little and following directions: “I was like oh God I'ma say as less as possible. 'What do you need?' 'Here.' You know I don't want no static.” April hoped to avoid “static” because she believed that upsetting the caseworker could jeopardize her benefit receipt, as she noted, “If they're upset [they're] like 'Oh I'm not fixing to do this.’” In April’s experience, maintaining her composure and staying quiet could be effective in mitigating this static. She said:

Sometimes if they can tell...you're sitting and you're really cooperative, you know they'll kinda calm down and then at the end, you know, sometimes people are, you know, just having that moment, and they'll say, 'You know what, I just had a bad moment you know excuse me.' I said some, not all. So, and they'll kinda like just state to you like, 'You know I did have a bad time so I do apologize for that.'

April’s language, describing how clients should be “sitting...really cooperative” is akin to the language a teacher might use in instructing children how to behave. April and other mothers who used the performing cooperation strategy responded to this paternalistic expectation by conforming to it in their performance, playing the role of the subservient client in order to get what they were seeking. It is important to note, however, that having learned that obedience and docility make for “good” clients does not preclude also resisting that very notion. As I show in a later section, mothers may perform cooperation at the same time they are providing false information to caseworkers, an example of a relatively powerless group using the tools available to them— “the weapons of the weak”—to resist the powerful state (Scott 1985: 29).

Because I was unable to observe client-caseworker interactions, I cannot speak to caseworkers' perspectives on these encounters. What mothers perceive to be rude treatment might be interpreted very differently by caseworkers, depending in part on how they view their role and identity as a welfare caseworker. Some caseworkers view their role narrowly as more of a technical taskmaster, whose primary job is to use surveillance to ensure that clients are following the rules and work towards the primary goal of getting clients employed and off of welfare (Watkins-Hayes 2009). Others take a more expansive approach, viewing themselves as social workers whose role is to address clients' comprehensive needs, including those that extend beyond discrete barriers to employment (Watkins-Hayes 2009). But what is important here is that there is a shared perspective among most mothers that caseworkers do have a great deal of power—and that they choose to either help or hinder clients seeking assistance. Mothers commented regularly that caseworkers seemed to act as though the welfare they administered was “coming out of their own pocket,” a phrase echoed by women welfare clients in sociologist Vicky Luna's (2009) study of single mothers' experiences with welfare. These comments emphasize clients' perception that caseworkers controlled the welfare purse strings. And because soliciting and assessing clients' personal information and monitoring their compliance to program conditions is a key part of caseworkers' job, some mothers felt that they should not obstruct this process or even appear to do so, lest they diminish their chances of getting help. In addition, caseworkers were seen as occupying a position of power regarding sanctions. If they perceived that a client was not telling the truth or was not in compliance with program requirements, they could choose to request additional documentation or verification. In this context, some mothers capitulated to disclosure demands and also comported themselves in a way that was thought to reflect obedience.

Beyond attempting to appear cooperative, a related aspect of the strategy of performing cooperation involved remaining vigilant about required documentation. April and other mothers described keeping well organized all of the documents they might be asked to provide. This tactic seemed to demonstrate a willingness to cooperate and also convey that mothers were being responsible. April recounted what she would say to the caseworker she described above:

April: Anything you ask me for, as a matter of fact I have everything sitting here, go through get what you need.

Cayce: So you just brought everything that you might need?

April: Yeah, just in case I have like a folder file so I have all shot records, everything's labeled, everything so whatever you ask me for, I have it. So there's no reason why we should go through anything except you know I do understand you're upset about something that may have occurred you know, with that other client or something. But it wasn't me!

Other mothers echoed the expectation that they would be blamed if anything went wrong regarding their benefits, and, like April, suggested that staying vigilant was imperative. Katrina noted:

Whatever you ask me for, I try to be prepared and have everything: birth certificate, social security cards, whatever you need you know, I pack it up. You know if you tell me I need to bring back something, I'm gonna try to bring it back that day, you know, so that you're not waiting on me. The issue if I didn't get food stamps or that money wouldn't be because I haven't done my part.

For April and Katrina, having all of their documentation organized, labeled, and available was a way to ward off taking the blame they anticipated facing if something was wrong with the paperwork. Again, performing cooperation was a way to situate oneself as a responsible client. This vigilance around documentation was relatively common, as some mothers talked about carrying their award letters, identification papers, and even their children's birth certificates with them in case they came across an opportunity for assistance and needed them for verification.

Mothers also used the strategy of adopting a posture of obedience and performing cooperation outside the welfare office, for example in interacting with subsidized housing

authorities. When I interviewed Cassandra, she had recently moved into an apartment with her Section 8 voucher after being forced to relocate from Scott Plaza. After receiving a notice that she had to vacate the premises within two weeks, Cassandra turned in her keys and fortunately found a new apartment that would accept her voucher. After nearly a month of living there, her new landlord informed her that she hadn't yet received Cassandra's housing voucher payment, which is sent directly to the landlord. Cassandra called the housing authority only to learn that the property manager at Scott Plaza had never notified them that Cassandra was no longer a tenant, and instead pocketed an entire month's rent—which Cassandra now owed to her new landlord. She showed me a folder where she had kept every rent receipt, every piece of correspondence between she and her previous landlord, and any other pertinent paperwork carefully organized. During our interview, Cassandra called the housing authority to find out what recourse she had. She had tried calling all morning but had not been able to get through. When someone finally picked up, Cassandra held the phone up so I could hear their conversation. I was immediately struck by the way Cassandra, before beginning to explain her situation, paused to ask the housing caseworker, "First of all how you doing this morning?" After having heard so many mothers complain about being treated with disrespect by caseworkers, I wondered how often mothers were asked the same question. It seemed to me to be a conscious tactic on Cassandra's part to set a good (read: cooperative) tone from the start.

Cassandra's most pressing question for the caseworker was whether or not the housing authorities would pay back her current landlord for the month's worth of rent that was erroneously paid to Scott Plaza. By the very end of the conversation, after much confusion, she learned that indeed they would. But throughout the discussion, the caseworker interrupted Cassandra, used paternalistic language, and was strikingly callous given the context. For

example, after insinuating that the housing authority would only pay the upcoming month's rent, not the previous month, Cassandra pleaded, saying, "Wow. Okay so there's absolutely nothing I can do about this?" The caseworker's response:

As far as this new unit is concerned per policy and I'm pretty sure you've been made aware of, you know, multiple times before, [if] you do decide to move into that new unit before the contract is completed [you] are fully responsible for the rent.

The caseworker made a point of noting that Cassandra must have been told this before, implying that it was her fault. When Cassandra responded that she had never been informed, and in fact was given different information by another caseworker, the caseworker said, "No ma'am that's what we're here for in customer service, you could have given us a call to verify that information." Of course, Cassandra had been calling for days. Cassandra, near tears, said, "Wow. Okay. So me and my kids gonna be out on the street basically." The caseworker replied, with no trace of empathy, "I'm not saying that just informing you that's what the policy is." As they went back and forth, Cassandra did not raise her voice, she did not personalize the situation, and she was not defensive even as the caseworker repeatedly reinforced the idea that it was Cassandra's fault that she was in this predicament. When the caseworker finally understood Cassandra's initial question, she said, "Oh no, you just didn't specifically ask that...you didn't ask if Housing would retroactively pay" (which Cassandra clearly had asked). Note Cassandra's response after being chastised for the caseworker's miscomprehension:

I'm sorry, I was just, I'm sorry, I'm a little tied up because I have a lot of different stuff going on at one time. I'm just trying, that's, that's the question that I meant to ask, I apologize for that.

Cassandra hung up the phone shortly after, but not until she had effusively thanked the caseworker. Cassandra immediately turned to me and said, "You see how rude they are...They're very rude." Observing this interaction helped me understand why Cassandra and

others swallowed their rage and made an effort to do everything possible to avoid friction, to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate and do what they were told, since the potential for antagonism and punishment seemed always to lurk right beneath the surface. And the costs of potentially losing something as consequential as one's housing voucher were enormous for mothers like Cassandra. At the same time, the emotional toll of having to enact subservience is heavy, particularly for African American women, given the history of racism and sexism directed towards them in the welfare context and more broadly (Collins 2004; Hancock 2003; Quadagno 1994). Mothers expressed to me the anger and hurt they shielded from caseworkers, as well as their sense of disbelief that "the system" always seemed to be stacked against them as if they were to be blamed and indeed punished for their poverty.

Agitating and Advocating

In contrast to adherents of the performing cooperation strategy, some mothers perceived that the only way to ensure fair treatment and get the maximum benefits or services was to stand up for themselves and push back when they felt that the process was unjust or invasive—a strategy similar to what Luna (2009) terms "fighting the system" (444). Tiana, a grandmother of eight, had years of experience with public assistance, having received food stamps and housing assistance intermittently since the mid-1990s. Tiana had received TANF briefly, but stopped because it was only \$161 a month, and she found she could make more working odd jobs and selling her blood at plasma centers. In general, she viewed applying for welfare as an invasive process involving "nosy" caseworkers that want to get "all your business." Tiana's described how interacting with caseworkers can be daunting, saying, "You can feel so intimidated about even getting help, just because [your caseworker] is just wanting to be all in your business, but I

have no problem telling them to get out of mine.” She described how she did so: “You get some people [caseworkers] who just—they just literally dig deep just to be digging deep... you have some that, ‘Well where your baby daddy at, and how you get money?’ and I say, ‘I sell ass on the side to strangers. I don't get they names.’” Tiana disclosed this false story not because she thought it would result in her getting more food stamps, but instead as a tactic to get the caseworker to stop asking questions and bring the encounter to a quicker close. She explained, “It’s just like, that's a shock. You don't want to hear that. I mean, you gonna go on through the application right there. It’s just like, ‘Let me get her out of my office, like right now, so yeah.’”

Tiana’s decision to tell a sensational story—to agitate—was one tactic she used to take back some control over the interaction. Not only did she expect the encounter to move on more quickly, but in a way she seemed to reclaim the controlling image of the hypersexual welfare queen (Collins 1990) and deploy it against the caseworker, rather than the other way around. In reference to her caseworker, Tiana said, “I do know that you still have some rules you have to abide by, and if I can't get it with you, let me talk to your supervisor.” When I asked if she did push back, Tiana replied, “Yeah, I'm a get straight to the point. I mean, I'ma go all the way. I'm not gonna get rowdy, because that's a stereotype, but this is not working.” Here, Tiana’s comments reveal the limits of how much she could resist without being reduced to another controlling image—that of the “angry Black woman” (Harris-Perry 2011: 86). Tiana was aware that this stereotype could be applied to her at any point, and she was careful not to cross that symbolic line. But she stressed the importance of clients standing firm in the face of what can often feel like intimidation, and for her, an invasion of privacy. She offered advice to other mothers seeking assistance:

Just don't be intimidated, you know what I'm saying? Don't be afraid to speak to the supervisors if you not getting your questions answered, you know? Ask questions. 'Well, what does that have to do with what I'm asking you? What does that have to do?' Because I found that some of them just be damn nosy. Don't have nothing to do with the work, just so you can sit in there and gossip with your friend after you finish.

As Tiana noted, she found over time that, in her view, some caseworkers were asking questions just to be “damn nosy.” And both aspects of her agitate and advocate approach—shocking the caseworker or asking repeatedly why they are asking certain questions and what the information will be used for—seemed designed to push back in order to preserve some measure of control over the situation as a whole. She did not expect to receive more food stamps if she asked those questions; rather, she hoped to clarify why she had to answer the questions and advocate for herself in the process. Interestingly, if she were to have received a satisfactory answer (e.g. if the caseworker explained how each item fit into the eligibility scheme), she might no longer feel as though the questions were too invasive. As I showed in Chapter 3, part of what made mothers perceive that their privacy was violated in the welfare office was that they weren't told why they had to answer the questions or how the information would be used. In other words, the privacy aspect of Tiana's issue with the application process might be mitigated if her questioning was taken seriously.

Mothers often reported using the strategy of agitating and advocating when they were either sanctioned, lost benefits, or when they felt that they weren't receiving a service or benefit that they were supposed to be receiving. For example, Jonelle, who has received food stamps for years for her four children, described what happened when she once missed a food stamps recertification appointment because she was in labor. She recalled:

I was pregnant with my second daughter. I had to go in, and I was—my appointment was set on the day I was due, and I was literally in labor, in the hospital, and I was calling the man [at the food stamps office] telling him I'm not going to make it. He didn't answer the phone, he didn't—his voicemail was full. Next day, I called him again, I said I had my daughter yesterday I couldn't make it in, he was like, 'Oh yeah we cancelled your food stamps.'

When Jonelle got out of the hospital, she called the state HHSC office in Austin and was eventually able to recertify her food stamps after strongly advocating for herself. She said, "So I try to tell everybody that, if you're smart enough to speak your mind in a proper way, they'll listen. It takes a lot of fight, but they'll listen." Again, Jonelle's use of the term "proper" highlights the constraints around what constitutes appropriate ways for welfare clients to protest unfair treatment.

Olivia also went through a protracted struggle to get her food stamps reinstated. She applied for food stamps and Medicaid in February, including submitting all of the required paperwork, and was told that it could take up to 30 days for them to process the request, which is official policy. Usually, though, mothers told me that they were able to get food stamps sooner than that. But Olivia had to wait for months. As she recalled:

It had been like three months and I still hadn't heard anything back, so I'm calling like every day, because I didn't have no food in my house...I had to—my aunt lives in the front [of the apartment complex]. I had to go in her house and, so me and my kids could eat every day.

Olivia described herself as "...the type of person, I don't like to ask for much, like it's a limit. You [her aunt] already feeding you and your three kids, then me and that's a lot to be doing. You got to, you know, survive yourself and feed your own kids and yourself, so that was a struggle right there." Given her self-understanding as an independent person, having to rely on her aunt for food was challenging for her. Olivia kept calling the food stamps office until she was able to speak to someone:

I finally get someone on the phone and she says, ‘Well, we see that you sent your application in, but the case worker before us didn't process your food stamps, she only processed your Medicaid.’ And I'm like, ‘Well why would she do that when I have two kids and myself to feed?’ So I'm furious, like I'm going off because I don't have a job. I'm unemployed. Like I need to feed my kids and myself like really my kids, not me, so they say, ‘Well, you'll have to do a application all over again, start the process all over again,’ so I was just going—I was furious. I was just going off, and I did my application again, then they finally did they job.

Olivia's frustration was palpable as she told me this story. Her anger stemmed partly from the fact that she and her family had endured unnecessary hardship while they waited for a benefit they desperately needed. She recalled, “So May, June, July, four months before I got food stamps again, and I was hurt. I was crying. I was breaking down. I was like how I'm supposed to feed my kids.” But Olivia was also furious at how hard she had worked to no avail. She said:

I complained. I complained online. I complained two, three, four times, spoke to supervisors. They told me the same thing, you had to reapply again, you have to do an application again, start over, start over...

Eventually, her benefits were restored after she reapplied. But in the process, Olivia received the message from the state loud and clear—that her family and their needs were inconsequential, and that she should have low expectations of state support.

Raven's experience with the state led her to the same interpretation. Raven was eighteen years old and pregnant with her first child when we spoke, and lived with her grandmother and two uncles, both of whom had special needs. Since she was still on her mother's food stamps and Medicaid case, Raven had mostly been an observer of the welfare application process. And for her, it was best that she stay uninvolved, because, as she noted:

Their attitudes are horrible. So for me, I let my mama handle all that. I was like, 'Cause I know that if I get on the phone, they're gonna have some words for me, and I'm not gonna stop.' So no, just call me and tell me I have an appointment or call me and tell me I have a doctor's appointment, that's fine. But I'm not going to talk to these people 'cause I see how they are. I'm like, it's like sharks. I'm not about to deal with this.

Raven's perception of social service providers as "sharks" stemmed from her experiences with the Medicaid and Medicare caseworkers who conducted home visits for Raven's uncles, who received disability benefits as well as supplemental cash assistance. Raven described a time that she came home to find an unfamiliar person there. She recalled, "I didn't know who she was, but when I came in the house and I was like, 'Who are you?' she was like, 'I'm the person that control whether his check gets cut off or not.'" Angered by that comment, Raven walked into the other room to consult with her grandmother, who urged Raven not to be rude, because as Raven recalled, "[My grandmother] was like, 'If she write what she wanna write, they'll cut it [the Medicaid] off.'" But Raven did not hold her tongue after she observed the caseworker continuing to be "real rude and snarky" to her uncle. When I asked what the caseworker was doing that was so rude, Raven explained, "It's how she said everything. And how she was acting and writing down every specific thing and the way she spoke, like, 'Oh I'm better than you' or, 'I can control whatever it is that you're doing.' I hate that attitude, because we're all people. We're equal, so. Don't act like that." In response, Raven spoke her mind: "I was like, 'You can get out of our house, cause we don't have to go through this. We don't need this. You need to take your little \$750 a month and go, like. We don't need that.' And she got out."

But Raven did not stop there. She called the caseworker's supervisor to complain, and also to make sure that her grandmother's warning did not come to pass. She explained:

But they didn't cut his check off, cause I called her boss and I was like, 'We're a normal family, it's not like we just, 'Oh we need this we need this we need this.'...But don't send somebody out here that's gonna talk to him like he's nothing. Because we all, we're something.

Raven's advocacy on behalf of her uncle resulted in a new caseworker getting assigned to his case, someone Raven described as "so polite" and "respectful, she introduced herself, she got to know everybody in the house." Raven's strategy of agitating and making demands of the

caseworker was therefore successful in making sure his benefits were intact and the service provision was improved. But Raven comments also reveal that there was much more underlying her impulse to challenge the caseworker. Raven resisted what she perceived as the caseworkers' paternalism and sense of superiority as well as the control she claimed to wield over the family's livelihood. And she linked the caseworker's "writing down every specific thing" to her perception that she was also somehow documenting Raven's family's worth. When she emphasized to the supervisor on the phone that, "We're a normal family," she resisted the implication that because they needed assistance, they were not. Raven's story illustrates the ways that mothers' strategies in dealing with social safety net institutions can serve multiple aims and also reveal their deeper critiques of what they view as an unjust system. It also demonstrates the power of surveillance and personal information in this context. The caseworker's threat—that she could cut Raven's uncle's check—could be realized depending on what she documented of the visit as she wrote down "every specific thing."

But the strategy of agitating and assertively advocating for oneself carried risks, including that the caseworker could become angry and potentially retaliate by denying one's benefits—precisely the type of perceived risks that caused some mothers to instead choose the strategy of performing cooperation. For example, Amara perceived that she was always having trouble with social service providers because of the way she responded to them when she felt that their behavior was rude. Her response was to stand up for herself, push back, and ask to see a supervisor if possible. When I asked about her experience at the food stamps office, she replied:

Oh they rude too! But they like, on different occasions like I don't know if it's because my age, I don't know if it's because my color, or you know, it's just really it's the people that works there. They attitude. Then if I ask to talk to somebody over them, cause like I have a bad attitude, I'm still learning how to talk to people too. You know, so if she being rude to me it's gonna rub off on me and I'm gonna be rude back to her. But I'll ask to talk to a manager and they'll be like, 'Oh well I am the highest person' and like they - it's just unprofessional. Everywhere's unprofessional. But I don't know if it's because of my age, like everywhere I seem to go I have a problem.

Amara acknowledged that she herself was sometimes rude, but in her view that was in reaction to the caseworkers' behavior. At twenty years old, Amara was often dealing with social service providers who were considerably older than her, and Amara believed that her age was part of the issue. She described an encounter at her son's subsidized childcare center:

The lady at the daycare for instance, the daycare that my son go to like she was telling me like, 'You need to have him ready when we come through, we can't even stay for five minutes so when she call you, you need to be walking him outside.'

Amara raised her voice as she imitated the caseworker's aggressive tone. Amara continued, "So I'm like 'Hold on ma'am, I'm not your child.' You know that's how I have to handle it, because I just show more power that I do have a voice too." For Amara, "showing power" meant advocating for herself and letting the caseworker know that Amara would not countenance the caseworker's condescension.

Bree used a similar tactic with state and non-profit social service providers, and suggested that her agitating and advocating might have limited her options for seeking help. She no longer tried to get help from the Red Cross because, as she recalled:

I don't go to Red Cross because the last time I called there the woman was so rude, I and I have a habit...I just acted and the woman didn't even want to speak to me, she cut me off. So you talking crazy to me on the phone, and I done talked crazy to the light company, I'm surprised I still got lights. And gas, and water, cause I will talk. Cause I feel like you give me a certain amount of respect, I give you a certain amount of respect. You come at me the correct way, I'm a come at you the correct way. If you step out of line with me I'm fixing' to step further outta line with you cause I'ma let you know you not fixin'ta handle me like that.

Bree articulated her motivation for “talking crazy” to the woman from the Red Cross or the utilities company: they failed to treat her with respect, and she mirrored back the same treatment.

Bree continued, describing how she felt as though caseworkers sometimes tried to talk down to her, to make her feel “stupid” as they asked her repeated questions. Bree responded:

I be like, ‘Now if you want me to ask *you* questions I can make you feel real stupid.’ And they be like, ‘Well ma’am that’s not...’ ‘Well, continue on whatever else you need to ask me because I answered, I told you everything flat out, cause I already knew what you was gonna ask me. So I told you everything and don’t come at me like I’m lame because I’m not.’ I’m like ‘I’m grown, I’m thirty six years old, I got three kids, they playing the same games you play.’

In likening the caseworker’s “games” to those that her children play, Bree discursively reversed the power dynamic—instead of the caseworker talking down to her, Bree put the caseworker in the subordinate position. It is also worth noting that although Bree protested to the caseworker that, “I told you everything flat out,” she also used the strategy of intentional concealment when she felt the informational requirements were too invasive, an example of how mothers sometimes used multiple strategies depending on context and on their immediate aims. Bree recalled a time that she was asked by a caseworker, “Do you have a boyfriend and does he come over?” She said to me sarcastically, “I’m a female, I got three kids, you think I don’t have a male companion? So I tell them ‘No.’ I be like ‘No.’ They be like, ‘Are you telling us the truth?’ ‘What the hell do *you* think, I’m a whole female, what female don’t have a male companion?’” In this example, Bree resisted the caseworker’s questions and what she perceived as their rudeness by standing up for herself and asking questions back to the caseworker at the same time she concealed information she did not want to share because it felt invasive to her privacy.

Opting Out

The preceding strategies all involve modes of interacting with social service providers, navigating the application for public assistance, and in general engaging with social safety net institutions. However, a fourth strategy centers on *non*-engagement, or selective engagement with only certain forms of assistance. Some mothers in this study—despite their high level of material need—chose to opt out when faced with what they perceived to be onerous information disclosures, unrealistic program conditions, or demeaning treatment. Often this choice was a result of having had past negative experiences when they did engage, as the following story demonstrates.

Phenicia has two adult children and a one-year-old child with special needs that require him to use a feeding tube. He was temporarily hospitalized when we spoke. Phenicia was working at a donut shop, but still qualified for food stamps, which she had received off and on since having her first two children. But Phenicia had never received TANF, though she would have been eligible, and she explained why. Many years prior, Phenicia went to the welfare office to apply, and she recalled that a caseworker asked her, “When was the last time you and the child’s father had sex?” Phenicia said, “It was a lady that asked me that question. And I just got up and walked out.” When I asked whether the caseworker gave any reason for the question, Phenicia said, “I didn't give her a chance to, I got up and walked out.” Phenicia’s non-response to this question meant that she didn’t receive benefits for which she was eligible. And she noted that although the cash assistance wasn’t much, “It would've helped me do what I had to do, you know. But after that I was just like it's not even enough money to answer that question.” In this encounter and in her refusal to seek TANF in the years since, Phenicia privileged retaining her sense of dignity and privacy over getting the cash assistance. As I show, other mothers took the

same tactic, resisting what they viewed as an unjust treatment by opting out of seeking help even when they were eligible for assistance.

Four days before I interviewed Michelle and her friend Phyllis, I volunteered at a mobile food outreach held outside a Sunnyside church, and I later learned that they had been there too that day in the hopes of getting a box of food. It was already scorching and humid by eight o'clock in the morning, a typical May day in Houston. About forty people were already milling around waiting when I arrived, and the Houston Food Bank truck was nowhere to be found. When it did arrive, Linda, who was coordinating the outreach, asked one of the two food bank employees why there were no tables, since they typically brought tables with them in the truck. I overheard the employee respond curtly, saying that she had called and texted Linda the day before to ask if they needed tables and had gotten no response. Linda retorted that she had been serving about 600 senior citizens the day before at a separate event, and also said her phone wasn't working. I was struck at the time by the employee's irritated tone, and the way her comments sounded like a rebuke of Linda, who presented herself as the person in charge. Linda sent me to ask an older man who seemed to be in charge of the church facilities if we could use some of the church's tables and chairs, to which he grudgingly agreed. As he and I carried several tables from the church's storage room out to the truck, the crowd was rapidly growing as the pockets of available shade shrank.

Once the tables were arranged and the outreach was ready to begin, all of the volunteers gathered around the truck to take instructions about how much of each type of food was to be given to each person. The food bank truck contained large pallets of yellow squash, cabbage, and other loose produce items that we were to hand out to each patron, and at this type of outreach it was common for there to be a general guideline as to how many pieces to offer initially, like one

bunch of bananas or four apples. For items that were known to be unpopular, we were sometimes instructed to tell patrons to take as much as they wanted. The opposite was true for more sought-after (and limited quantity) foods like bread and milk. At the other outreaches I had been to, Linda was the person who communicated to volunteers, most of whom she had personally invited, about the food distribution parameters. But on this day, the same employee who had been short with Linda was the one who came over to tell us what to offer to the patrons. She instructed us to give as much zucchini and cabbage as people wanted, since she suspected that many people would decline them. A few minutes later, Linda came to tell us that we should not give as many of these as people wanted; instead, she suggested that we offer only two squash per person. Then, the employee and Linda returned, and after Linda reiterated her suggestion, the employee challenged her in front of all the volunteers, asking whether she was sure about that, since there were so many in the truck. Linda held her ground as they had the same exchange about other items, repeating her guidelines and eventually overriding the employee, who did not hide her frustration.

I was taken aback by what seemed to me to be an unnecessarily antagonistic approach on the part of the food bank employee, particularly in dealing with Linda, a long-time partner with the organization. I learned in my interviews with Michelle and Phyllis that I was not the only one who was surprised and also offended by what they observed at the food outreach. In fact, both of them ended up leaving without their boxes of food after seeing Linda, as Michelle put it, “disrespected.” She continued, “And I’m gonna tell you, our community did not appreciate that, you know.” Michelle explained why she left with no food:

I didn't want none, because I wasn't going to interface with nobody like that. I mean I'm not a beggar. Yes, I need some but I'm not a beggar and I'm not going to be disrespected and I'm not gonna be treated like a dog. Or less than a human being. Because, you know, I want you to give me some fruit, because that's what they was giving out, fruit and veggies. Yes, I would love to have it, but not like that. I mean you'd already disrespected our major leader.

Michelle had planned to give some of the food to her grandchildren, who often stay with her because her daughter is seriously ill and has frequent seizures. But, Michelle stipulated: “Not at that cost.” She explained, “Cause I teach them [my grandchildren], keep your head up no matter what. You know, and don't let nobody treat you bad.” Michelle attributed this advice to her father, and told me the following story about a defining moment in her life when she was a young girl:

I guess it come back from my daddy because...he worked at a refinery and he was talking to the man back in the car, we was sitting in the back. And the man called him a nigger, said something about nigger. He said, 'Let me tell you one thing. As long as I'm Black, don't you ever disrespect me again like that.' The man said, 'Well I can have your job.' He said, 'You can take this job if you want to, but you're never gonna disrespect me like that and especially in front of my kids.' And he always told us he said, 'Don't, no matter how, what's the need, don't ever let nobody call you no nigger. Don't let them disrespect you like that. Cause if you don't have nothing else, you have your pride.' And so, I mean I grew up with remembering that he was willing to lose his job for respect.

Michelle connected that story to what she observed at the food bank, which was someone who was not African American—the employee appeared to Michelle to be “Hispanic”—treating an African American community leader with disrespect. She felt that the food bank employee “kinda ran over her [Linda]...because she was Black,” and like her father, Michelle was not willing to accept that even if it meant missing out on needed assistance.

Not only did Michelle object to the way the food bank employee had treated Linda, but she also told me that that the employee had raised her voice at patrons, telling them gruffly to get in line. She recalled, “You don't talk to people like that. I don't care what you giving out...y'all can keep your stuff because you not gonna disrespect me like that and talk to me like that.” As

Michelle articulated, regardless of how much she wanted and needed the food box, it wasn't worth sacrificing her sense of self-respect. Phyllis felt the same way, and she also distrusted the food bank employees, who were, as described in Chapter 1, also helping people sign up for food stamps. Phyllis perceived that they were pressuring people to sign up and also claiming that if patrons did not sign up they wouldn't be able to receive a food box. She explained, "The lady said something, 'Y'all just gonna have to do this or do that.' So I said, 'You swear that this is your stuff that you giving away. Like this is yours.' You know you're over here trying to get somebody to sign up for something." Phyllis believed that the employees were trying to meet a quota, and if that were the case, she would have had no problem with them soliciting people to sign up, as long as they made that clear:

Explain that. I can see somebody saying, 'Well you know what ma'am, I'm trying to meet a quota. And you know the more people sign up, that helps me.' I can respect that. But don't try to tell me I have to do something, else I'm not going to be able to receive any services just because you trying to get what *you* need.

Phyllis's comments reveal a deep sense of mistrust of the welfare state as well as an unwillingness to countenance what she feels is unfair treatment. At the time of our interview, Phyllis was suffering from liver cancer and was on a transplant list. She had recently moved into a low-income senior citizen's apartment after having to move out of the house she had rented for decades because of a rent increase, and complained about the high costs of her medications. She certainly could have used the box of produce she went to the outreach that day to get; however, she and Michelle both decided to forego those material resources, instead choosing to walk away—a demonstration that they weren't willing to give up their self-respect regardless of their level of need.

Michelle and Phyllis did not categorically object to seeking help from church or secular food pantries; in fact, they both reported having positive experiences at these venues in the past.

But this one event caused both of them to report that they would never again attend an outreach that was, as Michelle put it, "...outside in the yard like that. Cause I wouldn't want to interface with that lady." Others were more resolute in opting out of entire types of assistance, such as the mothers described in Chapter 3 who avoided seeking help from churches altogether.

Other mothers strategically opted out of certain forms of public assistance, such as TANF, while engaging with others, like food stamps or Medicaid. Tasha described why she preferred to seek only food stamps, though with no income, she would have qualified for TANF, saying:

The process and being a statistic. I wasn't raised that way... It is a...that is gut wrenching for me. Just the thought that I have to be in there [the welfare office]. Asking anybody for anything. I'm so independent. With nothing. That I would rather just not have it if I have to ask you for it.

Elisha had received public assistance for a brief period of time, but decided that the hassle and information requirements were not worth the benefits. She complained about the documentation she provided not being accepted at Texas Workforce Solutions, saying:

And even if you bring them the medical information they still be like, the [Texas Workforce Solutions] still be like, 'Well that's not gonna work for the food stamps office.'...It's horrible. I told them I'd rather do without... It's like so much stuff you gotta go through just to have the benefits.

Similarly, Catrina stopped receiving food stamps for a long time after she spent an entire day at the welfare office waiting to see a caseworker who turned out not to be there at all. She recalled:

I can recall a time when I went there and I sat there literally all day. My appointment was 8:00 in the morning and I did not leave out til after five. I mean I kept asking you know, 'Did you all forget about me, did you all forget about me?' and about 4:30 they told me that my caseworker wasn't there. And that I would have to come back. And I was very frustrated because I've taken a whole day off of work to go down to recertify and I said no. I said, I need to speak with a supervisor and I did and I was just - it was just the last time that I went to request services. No it's not the last time, but for a while, it was the last time for a while because I sat there all day and then I only qualified for ten dollars of food stamps.

Like Elisha, after this experience Catrina determined that the amount of food stamps just wasn't worth the time, hassle, and sense of disrespect she felt having been left to wait all day. She explained, "I was just so disappointed, I was just disappointed with the service, disappointed with, you know, having to sit there all day literally and you know get ten dollars.

Catrina's comments show that mothers' choices—to use a particular strategy, to seek help from a certain source or not, to disclose accurate information or to dissemble—are not fixed, nor are they made at only one point in time. Indeed, Catrina first noted that this was the last time she requested services, then corrected herself to acknowledge that she did seek food stamps again at a later point. Often, the decision to opt out, as Catrina did here, was only possible given certain conditions. In Catrina's case, she was able to take on a second job, which helped her get by without food stamps. When those conditions change, mothers' decision-making may change as well, as the balance of what is worth enduring in order to get, as in Catrina's case, ten dollars worth of food stamps, changes too. This decision-making is best viewed as a recursive process, in which new information—whether it be a tip from a neighbor about how to get more benefits or a negative experience with a non-profit organization—accumulates and continuously alters how mothers view available options.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I traced four strategies mothers use as they respond to the disclosure demands, program conditions, and surveillance they face as in engaging with safety net institutions. I demonstrated that these strategies serve mothers' interests in securing the material resources they seek as well as their interests in maintaining symbolic resources, including dignity, respect, and privacy. Importantly, I showed that at times, mothers privilege these

resources over getting benefits and services that they need. It can be more important for mothers in a given situation to, for example, agitate and advocate for themselves in order to demand fair treatment, even if they fear that such a tactic could result in delays or the loss of benefits or services. At other times, despite wanting to speak up and push back, mothers resist these urges because they are not willing to risk getting needed assistance. I showed that as mothers make these decisions—to walk away when they confront what they perceive to be invasive questions, or to “edit” their answers to avoid unwanted disclosures—they face a moral minefield. Often, mothers feel as though there are no good choices to make, which foments frustration and anger at a system that seems designed to hurt, rather than help them.

Of note, how mothers navigate these moral quandaries reflects back on them as individuals but also as mothers. They are not just solo actors, engaging with organizations to get resources for themselves. If they are denied benefits or they do not receive enough, and are therefore unable to put food on the table or keep the lights on, they risk far more than their own livelihood or comfort. They risk being viewed as bad mothers – not only in terms of reputation, but also in the eyes of the state (Hays 2003). The prospect of Child Protective Services taking away one’s children is a very real one in poor communities of color (Roberts 2002)—and the symptoms of neglect and poverty are often hard to distinguish. But at the same time, if they choose strategies such as intentional concealment, not only do many mothers feel guilty because they feel that lying is wrong from a moral standpoint, they also feel bad for modeling such behavior for their children (Edin 1991). In many ways, then, mothers find themselves between a moral rock and a hard place in seeking help not only to survive but also to keep their integrity intact.

CONCLUSION

My last fieldwork trip to Sunnyside was in September 2016, just over a month before the outcome of the U.S. presidential election would dramatically change the socio-political landscape and potentially imperil the social safety net at the center of this dissertation. When the topic of the election—and specifically the prospect of Donald Trump as president—came up in conversation, mothers in this study expressed, like many others across the country, a mix of emotions including disbelief, concern, outrage, and resignation. Jasmine, who lived in a project-based Section 8 apartment, worriedly told me she had heard Trump was planning to do away with low-income housing and Medicaid if he were to be elected. She spoke of “running to the polls” to vote early so she could do her part to avert that outcome. Kelly said she’d heard that Trump might cut the food stamps program, but she feared that it would be even worse than that, saying, “Little do everybody know, that man probably take us and have all of us locked up somewhere...”

It is too soon to tell whether Jasmine or Kelly’s prognostications will come to pass. However, in the first few months of the Trump administration, there have already been grave warning signs that the social safety net is poised to be dramatically altered in ways that will make it more difficult for mothers like those in this study to make ends meet and sustain the health and well-being of their families. For example, in the budget released in March 2016, the Trump administration proposed to eliminate the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) (Office of Management and Budget 2017), two programs that provide vital assistance for mothers in this study. The LIHEAP program, which offers low-cost home repairs, weatherization, and home cooling for those in

crisis, was critical for several mothers I interviewed whose homes were damaged by the perennial flooding and hurricane weather in Houston. Many of the non-profit organizations mothers in Sunnyside could go to for help paying utility bills and rent may now be on the chopping block, as they are funded by the CSBG. Without such assistance, more Sunnyside residents will be living like one man I met, who, because his utilities had been cut off for non-payment, cooked all his meals on a grill set up in front of his home and used a rain barrel to catch water.

For people like Jasmine who rely on subsidizing housing, the future looks equally bleak. Trump's proposed budget slashes funding for low-income housing to an extent not seen since the early 1980s. The Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Ben Carson, has stated that Fair Housing protections constitute "social engineering" and that poverty is "more of a choice than anything else" (Stolberg 2016). Also set to be cut is the Legal Services Corporation, an agency that provides funding for legal aid organizations representing the poor in cases such as wrongful eviction, domestic violence, and custody disputes (Jan and Mufson 2017). The clientele of Legal Services is roughly 70% women. In another worrisome move, the administration has proposed to cut funding for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which offers free or low-cost breakfast and lunch for low-income students. At Bastian, the largest elementary school in Sunnyside, 98% of the students are eligible for this program (Houston Independent School District 2016).

The social safety net in Texas, as the stories in this study have illustrated, is already austere. And with the accelerated shift towards further devolvement of welfare administration, states like Texas will have even more freedom to cut funding for safety net programs, impose even harsher sanctions, and implement rules that go beyond federal policy, such as the

requirement that all welfare applicants be tested for drugs (Ura 2015). In a House Agriculture Committee hearing on food stamps in March 2017, Texas Representative Jodey Arrington argued for cutting food stamps for able-bodied adults that are not working, invoking the biblical passage, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (Dewey 2017). As the safety net continues to shrink, not only will formal sources of assistance dry up, but the informal networks of the poor also will likely further constrict as well. Put simply, it is already very difficult to be poor in Texas, and it looks like it is going to get a lot worse under the Trump administration.

In addition to constricting the material resources available for the poor, the administration’s focus on deterring fraud and enhancing efficiency as well as their emphasis on “law and order” means that surveillance in the safety net and beyond is also likely to grow in scope and depth. The same budget that cut funding for Meals on Wheels added billions for law enforcement, defense, and border security. The impact of heightened law enforcement surveillance of undocumented immigrant communities, Muslims, and other minority groups in the service of “national security” is already manifesting in troubling ways, beyond what some have experienced in the post- 9/11 era (Selod 2015). For example, the Los Angeles police chief noted in March 2017 that since January, reports of sexual assault in the city’s Latino communities have dropped by 25%, with reports of domestic violence down 10% (Los Angeles Police Department 2017). He associated this change with widespread fears of deportation, including of victims and their perpetrators. Given the extensive disclosures regarding partners and household members required for welfare receipt, it would not be surprising to see a similar decrease in requests for public assistance. In addition, the Justice Department announced in April 2017 that it would curb federal efforts to investigate police abuse and promote law enforcement reform in cities including Ferguson, Baltimore, and St. Louis (U.S. Department of Justice

2017)—cities whose names have become inextricably linked to the images of the African American men who died there at the hands of police. The Justice Department has also reversed an Obama-era policy designed to decrease the use of private prisons, which confine a disproportionate number of people of color relative to public prisons, and whose conditions are known to be more violent (Petrella and Begley 2013). Further, the Department has indicated an interest in reviving mandatory minimum sentencing for low-level drug offenders, a policy that played a major role in what became mass incarceration of mostly African American and Latino men (Alexander 2010). Against the backdrop of African American history in the U.S., the specter of an emboldened police force, an unchecked criminal justice system, and a gutted safety net makes clear why mothers like Kelly might fear not only losing support but also their very freedom.

Whither Privacy

Some might argue that the bleak policy outlook I describe here would suggest that the importance of something like privacy to the mothers in this study will be eclipsed as they face ever more pressing material needs. How, they might ask, could poor people begin to think about privacy when they can't put food on the table or secure affordable housing? It is my hope that this study has not only begun to answer that question, but has also revealed why it is the wrong question to be asking. The "why privacy" question assumes a structure akin to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, in which certain desires or needs—like privacy—are superfluous to people's "real" concerns like safety, food, and shelter. The assumption is that only once these basic needs are met can a person move on to work towards higher order needs. But if being able to achieve privacy is "very important" to over 75% of Americans (Madden and Rainie 2015), why would

we expect it to not also be very important to the poor, regardless of their socioeconomic status? Yet in my reading, the dearth of attention to poor people's experiences in the literature on privacy suggests that this assumption may be deeply imbedded.

Underlying this assumption is the notion that poor people—because they are poor—are somehow fundamentally different than the rest of us. But I argue that even among mothers living in deep poverty, for whom meeting basic needs is a daily struggle, the desire for privacy and related resources like dignity and respect remain strong, despite the difficulty of achieving them. I have shown that at the very least, mothers take into account their personal privacy when they make decisions to engage with safety net institutions that pose threats to it. It matters in their decision-making process. And I have shown that sometimes they privilege privacy even when it means missing out on needed assistance.

In this study I have also shown that privacy's meaning and importance for the poor mothers I interviewed may differ from the privacy experiences of affluent groups. And my findings reveal that the conditions of poverty—including mothers' need for material assistance—may actually elevate the salience of privacy as a cultural resource for the poor. For example, when achieving privacy in the welfare office means the difference between having to disclose the name of your children's father—which could lead to his imprisonment—or not, privacy becomes much more than a preference. The cost of losing privacy here goes far beyond the immediate interaction with the caseworker, yielding long-term practical consequences for families' survival strategies. For those living in subsidized housing, not being able to achieve privacy means that mothers are vulnerable not only to neighbors and others they may want to avoid for safety reasons, but it also leaves them exposed to state actors who hold the power to evict them. In this sense, privacy—if achievable—can serve as a buffer for poor mothers against welfare and other

state institutions that have a stake in breaching their boundaries. By the same token, the denial of privacy effectively operates as a mechanism of punishment of the poor (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Wacquant 2009).

Part of the difficulty mothers face in achieving privacy in this context lies in the power dynamic central to the process of seeking help from a position of disadvantage. Mothers and welfare caseworkers, Section 8 property managers, or other providers are not on equal footing from the start: mothers need something, and it is to some extent up to the provider to give it to them or not. For their part, caseworkers need something from mothers as well—to process their application, determine eligibility, and assess compliance they need mothers' personal information, access to their homes, and knowledge about others in the household or on the case. But caseworkers and others act as representatives of the state, and are thus backed by the state's reservoir of power to get what they need from mothers—both through surveillance practices and inter-agency data sharing but also through the threat of sanctions and denial of assistance. Mothers, in contrast, protect their boundaries from a position of vulnerability. As I have shown, they are not passive participants in this dynamic, but they are limited in the extent to which they can push back because they often desperately need the help they are seeking. So they work at the margins, strategically concealing or misrepresenting information when they think it won't be detected and using other “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985: 29) to carve out pockets of privacy and also to resist what they view as an unjust system. But these efforts at resistance often put mothers at risk of punishment, and they are also unlikely to disrupt the system as a whole.

I have also shown that mothers' efforts to claim a measure of privacy dovetail with their efforts to preserve a sense of dignity, autonomy, and respect as they engage with the safety net—highlighting the relationships among these notions (Solove 2010). As such, mothers' strategies

reflect a deeper project of self-preservation in the face of oppression. In pushing for a bit of control over their personal information or refusing to ask for certain types of help when the informational costs are too high; in agitating and advocating for themselves when caseworkers fail to treat them with respect; in expressing their anger at security cameras pointed into their homes—mothers are asking and at times demanding that they be treated as fellow citizens, not as criminals. They are resisting the implication that because they are poor and because their family arrangements differ from the white middle-class norm, they have done something wrong, or are somehow less human (C. J. Cohen 1997, 2004). As I have shown, this resistance sometimes takes the form of discursively distancing themselves from other poor mothers, in effect morally elevating themselves at others' expense. But the goal for mothers remains: to stake a claim for themselves and their families of what some have termed social citizenship (Soss 2000; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

For mothers in this study, part of being a social citizen, though they would not use those terms, is being afforded privacy in areas of life where most people expect some degree of privacy—in their homes, around their personal information, and regarding intimate family relationships. Even if the “right to privacy” is not a right the poor are likely to be granted in court, given historical precedence, it is something that the mothers in this study perceive that they should be granted just like everyone else, in part because it reflects respect for the boundaries they—like everyone—set between themselves and others, and between themselves and the state. It is in this sense that privacy's fruitfulness as a sociological construct is apparent, as individuals' efforts to achieve privacy can be seen as a way to negotiate the fundamental tension between self and society. As such, the findings in this dissertation may be generative for examining how other marginalized groups, under different conditions, achieve privacy.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

This study is based on data from in-depth interviews and supplemental ethnographic observation I conducted in the Sunnyside neighborhood in Houston, Texas, between 2013 and 2016. I took an inductive approach to address the primary research question guiding the study: how do poor mothers negotiate personal privacy in the context of seeking help from the social safety net. I did not take for granted that privacy would be an issue for mothers in this context; therefore, I began with a pilot study to explore whether privacy was a salient concern, and if so in what ways. It quickly became clear that privacy indeed mattered to the mothers I interviewed, so I proceeded with the main study with the goal of figuring out how, why, and with what consequences. In what follows, I discuss how I selected the case, describe the methods I used for data collection and analysis, and provide a demographic description of my sample. Throughout, I discuss the challenges and limitations of my approach.

Case Selection

I chose Sunnyside as my field site after spending time in the neighborhood working on a separate research project. In the initial phase of that project, which centered on low-income mothers and social isolation in the context of neighborhood poverty, I focused on getting to know the neighborhood in a broad sense. I introduced myself to local social service providers, pastors, and property managers and conducted interviews with mothers visiting the WIC office located in the Sunnyside Multi-Service Center. Through these interviews I learned about the safety net institutions that these mothers utilized and about the challenges they faced raising children in Sunnyside. I also conducted an organizational census in 2013 in which I enumerated each establishment in the neighborhood and calculated the organizational density of each type.

Through this work and also my own observations, I found that churches were by far the most prevalent organization in Sunnyside. This finding highlighted faith-based social service provision as a key alternative for mothers who might not want to seek public assistance for a variety of reasons, including privacy concerns. Sunnyside therefore offered an opportunity for me to compare mothers' experiences seeking help from state versus non-profit social service providers, and probe how and why they made these decisions. Sunnyside was also an ideal neighborhood in which to study privacy because of its spatial organization and housing stock. The neighborhood is not densely populated and the primary type of housing unit is the single-family home, not apartments. These features allow for a potentially higher level of physical privacy for those with access to them, which allowed me to exploit variation in the experiences of mothers with more or less favorable conditions for privacy.

Pilot Study

In 2014, I conducted a pilot study in Sunnyside with the goal of determining whether privacy was a salient aspect of poor people's engagement with representatives of the safety net. I interviewed 12 mothers and 7 fathers, as I was not yet limiting my study to women with children. These interviews were open-ended and exploratory, and participants were recruited through flyers I posted in the neighborhood as well as through referrals from contacts I had established at child care centers as part of the other project. I took as a starting point that the various conceptualizations of privacy in the literature—as a right, as something that can be invaded, as something intrinsically tied to property—might or might not be meaningful for the people I interviewed. Therefore, I avoided introducing the term “privacy” and instead asked participants open-ended questions about their experiences seeking help from various social service providers,

the types of information different organizations required, and how they perceived these disclosures, rather than asking directly whether they felt their “privacy” was invaded in the process. I also sought to understand social service providers’ perspectives on privacy in client interactions, and interviewed 13 people that either worked or volunteered in social service provision. Interviews with providers were informal and focused on the application process, how they determined eligibility for services or benefits, and on their perspectives about the challenges facing their clients. During the pilot study I also began volunteering at faith-based social service outreach events in the neighborhood through the invitation of a key informant. These events were mostly centered on food distribution, often in partnership with the Houston Food Bank.

The pilot study yielded several findings that shaped my approach to the primary phase of data collection. First, it was clear that privacy mattered to those I interviewed, and that among those that had sought public assistance, the informational demands were often seen as onerous and invasive. Further, interviewees noted that it wasn’t necessarily the content of the information that was problematic in terms of privacy, but other factors including why they thought the questions were asked and how they were asked. In subsequent interviews I therefore focused on illuminating how and why privacy problems emerged in some settings and in some instances and not in others. Also, although some men had utilized food pantries, it became apparent that most public assistance programs were aimed at women with children, and that mothers seemed to play the primary role in engaging with safety net institutions. Therefore, in the main study I limited my sample to mothers and grandmothers, who were often involved in multigenerational caretaking.

Finally, the pilot study convinced me that conducting interviews, rather than participant observation or traditional ethnography, was the most appropriate method for the dissertation. I

made this decision based on several factors. First, I realized that even if I were able to observe interactions between caseworkers and clients, my presence there would necessarily change the conditions under which privacy was negotiated. Also, it was my primary aim to examine mothers' perceptions and feelings about privacy and what it meant in their lives, an aim well suited to in-depth interviews (Pugh 2013; Weiss 1995). However, I agree with the sentiment that every good interviewer is also an ethnographer (Berezin 2014; Lamont and Swidler 2014); therefore, I treated each interview as an opportunity for observation. In addition, the time I spent volunteering at social service outreaches was critical not only because I could directly observe this form of service provision, but because it helped me get to know the local context. My interviewees took note when I knew the names of various churches or of community leaders, or expressed familiarity with different sub-sections of the neighborhood. It helped build trust but it also deepened my understanding of what mothers' meant when they talked about their experiences with these safety net organizations.

Data Collection

In-Depth Interviews

Between 2014 and 2016, I conducted in-depth interviews with 55 mothers living in the Sunnyside area. I describe the sample in Table 1. Data analysis was concurrent with data collection, and after each fieldwork trip I transcribed and coded the completed interviews. The analysis in this dissertation is primarily based on these interviews as well as the 12 pilot study interviews with mothers (67 total), though I also draw on the interviews with providers. I conducted follow-up interviews with 17 mothers, with 4 of these mothers completing 4 or more

interviews. All initial interviews were conducted in person with one exception, which was conducted by telephone. Three follow-up interviews were conducted by phone.

Interviews were open-ended and conversational, and, as in the pilot study, I did not frame the project in terms of privacy and generally did not introduce the term privacy unless or until my respondents used that term. Instead, I asked more broadly about mothers' experiences seeking help from safety net institutions, about the questions they were asked as part of the application process, and about their interactions with caseworkers and other social service providers. I also asked about the challenges they faced raising children with limited resources and about their perspectives on the neighborhood. When the topic of privacy came up organically, I probed what respondents meant by privacy and used counter-factual questions to elicit details. For example, if a respondent noted that they found a particular question to be invasive of privacy, I might ask if they would feel differently being asked the same question by a different person, if it was asked in a different way, or probe the differences between that question and another that did not present a privacy concern. If privacy did not come up, I would note later in the interview that I was particularly interested in privacy, and then ask participants a series of questions, including whether they felt they had "enough" privacy in their lives, whether they had enough privacy at home, and then probe what privacy meant to them based on their responses. This study was guided by inductive logic, so as the study progressed and certain topics emerged in ongoing analysis, I focused more on these topics. For example, when the issue of child support enforcement and the required disclosure of fathers' identity emerged as central, I began asking mothers in subsequent interviews specifically about whether they had encountered this requirement and if so, how they felt about it.

Table 1. Description of study sample

	n (%)
Age (average)	37
N	46
Race/ethnicity	
Hispanic	3 (4%)
African-American	60 (96%)
N	63
# of children (average)	2.5
N	50
# in household (average)	3.7
N	49
Marital status	
Never married	29 (58%)
Married	5 (10%)
Separated/divorced	14 (24%)
Widowed	4 (8%)
N	52
Housing	
Rent a home/apt	37 (67%)
Stay with someone	12 (22%)
Own a home	6 (11%)
N	55
Employment	
Employed	21 (40%)
Unemployed	32 (60%)
N	53
Household income	
<\$5,000	19 (40%)
\$5,000 – \$9,999	7 (15%)
\$10,000 – \$19,999	9 (20%)
\$20,000 – \$34,999	6 (13%)
\$35,000 – \$49,999	2 (4%)
don't know	4 (8%)
N	47
Receiving public assistance	
yes	38 (75%)
no	13 (25%)

I did not collect demographic information from participants in the pilot study, and some respondents did not answer questions on the demographic sheet. The Ns here reflect the total responses to each item.

I began conducting follow-up interviews because I suspected that after having established rapport in the initial interview, I might be able to ask about certain topics more deeply in a second interview. This approach was especially useful around sensitive topics such as mothers' practice of intentionally concealing information on the welfare application. I found that some mothers volunteered information about this and other practices that violated program rules, such as selling food stamps for cash, in follow-up interviews. However, these interviews were also generative because I could track important life events over time. For example, many of the mothers I interviewed more than once either moved or got evicted between interviews, which gave me an opportunity to discuss that process. Given the frequency with which welfare recipients have to recertify their benefits, I also followed up on these interactions over time.

When I was in Houston, I volunteered and observed at social service outreach events in Sunnyside, typically those hosted by local churches. I was invited to participate by a key informant who often coordinates these outreaches. As noted above, this participant observation yielded insight into how this form of social service provision operates on the ground and it offered an opportunity for me to recruit interviewees. I also developed relationships with other volunteers and pastors, who introduced me to community leaders and gave me another angle of insight into the neighborhood. Finally, volunteering was a way for me to make even a nominal contribution to the community during my time there.

I was also trained by Houston Food Bank staff in how to assist people with the joint application for TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid. The HFB partners with HHSC in an effort to boost food stamps enrollment by offering this assistance at mobile food outreach events. Staff members set up tables and go over the application materials one-on-one with clients. This training helped me contextualize mothers' comments about the application process, such as the

fact that the same questions appear multiple times on the form. Indeed, this aspect was one of the key ways this assistance from the HFB simplified the application process, as we asked clients for relevant information only once, filling the rest out ourselves. Although I volunteered in this capacity at food outreaches outside of Sunnyside, I chose not to participate in this capacity at the events in Sunnyside because I did not want to align myself with the state in any fashion.

Recruitment

I recruited participants using a variety of methods. I posted flyers in neighborhood establishments such as the library, the Sunnyside Multi-Purpose Center, churches, at laundry mats and child care centers. I also brought a stack of flyers to the food outreach programs where I volunteered. The Collaborative for Children, a non-profit advocacy organization that partners with childcare centers in Sunnyside, advertised the study on my behalf in their affiliated centers. I also got referrals through Gulf Coast Social Services, a non-profit organization that administers several Head Start centers near Sunnyside. Finally, I asked each interviewee to recommend other mothers they thought might be interested in participating in the study. I gave participants a \$20 gift card to Walmart as a thank-you for their time, a choice I discuss further below.

The inclusion criteria for the study were intentionally left broad. When I described the study to a potential participant, I informed them that I was interested in mothers' experiences getting any sort of help while raising children in Sunnyside. I was sensitive about the use of the term "low-income" and did not use the term "poor" or "poverty" when introducing the study, as I was aware that many people that fall into these categories based on their income and resources do not identify themselves as such. I did not screen for income. However, the highest income category among my respondents was \$35,000 - 49,999, and only two respondents reported this

level of income. Both were social service providers who had previously lived in poverty and had received public assistance in the past. Table 1 reflects the fact that most of my respondents were very low income: 75% reported a household income less than \$20,000. I also did not screen for current engagement with the social safety net, because I did not want to foreclose the possibility that some people would not be engaged with the safety net for reasons that could include privacy.

In the early phases of data collection, I conducted interviews in public spaces, most often at a local McDonald's that had a play area for children in the rear of the building. I chose this McDonald's because it was centrally located and because I thought the play area would be helpful for the mothers who brought their children with them. However, in March 2015, there was a fatal shooting in the drive-through (Melton 2015), and I subsequently began conducting interviews at the neighborhood public library instead. I later decided to offer the option of going to participants' homes to conduct the interviews, despite the fact that I began the interview process with a self-imposed "rule" to limit interviews to public spaces, for safety reasons. I ended up breaking this rule for several reasons. First, recruitment was slow, and it was common for potential participants to reschedule at the last minute or fail to show up for a scheduled interview. Most mothers I interviewed did not have reliable childcare, and those that were not employed often took primary care of their children, which, in addition to other factors made it challenging for some to keep appointments. It was simply easier for mothers if I met them where they were. In addition, once I did a few interviews in mothers' homes, I realized that being there gave me an important window into their world. Not only could I observe where mothers lived, which gave a contextual richness to their words, but I also felt that volunteering to come to their homes helped establish rapport and build trust in a setting where mistrust was pervasive.

Data Analysis

With permission from my respondents, I recorded each interview and transcribed them verbatim. I began data analysis after I had conducted and transcribed ten interviews, and continued to conduct data analysis as the study progressed. Using Atlas.TI software for qualitative data management and analysis, I open-coded this first set of transcripts, with the goal of first identifying broad themes that emerged from participants' comments rather than starting with a set of a priori codes (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Each code was assigned to a data fragment or quotation that was representative of its meaning. As I began to see certain codes occur repeatedly, I developed a list of primary codes, such as "moral order." I used this code list as a starting point for subsequent waves of coding. Over time, some codes were collapsed with other related codes into an overarching code or, conversely, disaggregated into finer-grained codes. For example, "moral order" was split into "moral accounting: others," "moral accounting: oneself," and "moral accounting: the system." In an iterative process, as new codes were added, I returned to already coded transcripts and recoded them. During this process, I wrote analytic memos that pulled together relevant data fragments to synthesize emergent themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

Positionality

My positionality relative to my respondents is complicated. I am a white, highly educated man on a middle class trajectory and I do not have children. I chose as my field site a predominantly African American poor neighborhood in a city I am not from, and conducted interviews with African American mothers. I was unmistakably an outsider in Sunnyside, and most often found myself the only white person in a given setting. There is a long and often

problematic history of white urban poverty scholars building careers on the backs of the marginalized communities they study, and I was often concerned about my role in perpetuating this history. I was aware that it was my choice to come to Sunnyside, and that I could also choose to leave at any time and never come back—a choice that my respondents did not have if they had wished to leave. In terms of boundary management—a central theme of this project—I inserted myself into the community when I decided to conduct this study, and there were people who would have preferred that I was not there.

I was questioned by community members on a few occasions about whether my research would actually help the community and whether I intended to stay and “do something” or just leave once I finished my research. On one notable occasion, an elderly African American woman who volunteered at the Multi-Service Center confronted me after having seen me interview mothers there several times over the course of a year. She asked sharply why I kept coming back to the “Black community” to ask questions when there must be problems in my own community to study. Given the history of Sunnyside, residents are especially mistrustful of outsiders coming in to extract from the African American community rather than contribute to it. On these occasions and when I described my intentions to my research participants, I was honest about the limitations of my work. I told them that I was writing a book that I hoped would generate useful ideas about how social service organizations might do a better job based on what mothers shared with me about their experiences. But I was forthcoming about the fact that the book would likely be read mostly by other researchers and students—so I shared my plans to write other material in ways that would be more accessible to social service providers and policymakers.

Most of the time, though, I did not have trouble developing rapport with mothers that I interviewed. I was taken aback by how much they shared with me, and how quickly. Like

anyone else, I think it meant something to them to be able to tell their stories—to be heard. Especially given the ways my respondents described being treated when they sought assistance, it may have been a welcome departure to have someone give them space to talk as much as they wanted, and for their words and time to be valued. As I soon realized, many of the women I interviewed had experienced extreme hardship and trauma in their lives. I heard stories of childhood sexual abuse, neglect, and of the cruelty of incarceration. Some mothers discussed with me things they said they never talked about with anyone else, and more than once a respondent noted that the interview felt like therapy. It was not uncommon for mothers to break down emotionally when discussing difficult memories or struggles. But there was also a lot of laughter, and no small amount of teasing at my expense. And of course, some interviews fell flat and I sensed that the interviewee was mostly there for the gift card rather than to talk openly. But ironically, people are sometimes more comfortable talking to strangers about the most intimate topics rather than loved ones. For the most part, I didn't know any of the people my respondents talked about, and there was a good chance we would never see each other again. In this sense, me being an outsider might have given them a greater sense of freedom to disclose.

However, I was also conscious of the fact that in interviewing poor mothers about their experiences with privacy, disclosure, and surveillance, and by offering them a gift card in exchange for their participation (which primarily involved answering personal questions), I was in effect recreating the very dynamic I was trying to study. And because of my personal history, I was particularly attuned to what it feels like to be on the other side of this dynamic—to be the marginalized person who has to answer personal questions and sometimes sacrifice privacy in order to get the resources you are seeking. As a transgender man, I often found myself in this position when I sought to transition over a decade ago. Before being granted access to transition-

related resources, I had to go through an intensive gatekeeping process governed by the medico-legal institutions that determined whether or not I had “proved” that I was a deserving candidate to transition. And the way I proved that was by answering deeply personal questions posed by bureaucrats. These experiences informed my interest and personal investment in questions of privacy, required institutional disclosures, and marginalization. In listening to mothers’ stories of feeling powerless at the hands of the bureaucrats who could decide to grant them help or not, I often reflected internally on the parallels between their experiences and my own.

Yet for many reasons I did not disclose my trans status to my research participants. This decision is inflected with the same tensions I theorize in this dissertation—between privacy and disclosure; concealment and exposure; visibility and invisibility; power and marginalization. I discuss these tensions in detail elsewhere (Hughes forthcoming), particularly as they relate to my identity as a trans man; however, a brief discussion of the methodological implications of my position is warranted. Because I kept this important aspect of my identity concealed, I was limited in my ability to do the sort of information sharing work that can bridge social distance between the researcher and the researched. For example, white sociologist Jamie Fader describes her efforts at building trust with the young African American men involved in the justice system, saying:

Being a straightforward person led naturally to sharing information about myself, not just asking probing questions about them. While making sure that the topic of conversation was firmly focused on them, I was open to answering questions about my personal background and professional life, reducing the vulnerability associated with a unidirectional flow of information (Fader 2013: 8).

To be clear, conflating being a “straightforward” person and being out about one’s gender identity or sexuality is problematic and not my intention here. However, it is true that I was not able to do this work to the extent Fader was, since I was unwilling to touch on certain aspects of

my personal life and indeed was actively concealing them. However, I did take concrete steps to mitigate the power dynamic inherent in the interview process and to show my respondents an abundance of respect, not only for their time but, perhaps paradoxically, also for their privacy.

For example, I gave my respondents the gift card before the interview started, to signal that I meant it when I said they were free to stop the interview whenever they wished, and to assure them that I was “good for” the money I promised. I developed a practice of making a point of emphasizing that I was in no way affiliated with the state, was not a social worker, and would keep everything we discussed confidential. This effort was in response to key informants’ comments to me early in the study that Sunnyside residents would likely suspect I was either a cop, a bill collector, or a caseworker—someone representing the very surveillance system I wanted to study—because those were typically the only white people who spent time in Sunnyside. To mitigate this mistrust, I also chose to ask a minimal amount of demographic questions and did not ask my respondents to provide additional contact information beyond their phone number, as I did not want them to worry about the possibility of me sharing that information with someone in a position of authority (e.g., Child Protective Services). Further, when mothers indicated that they did not want to talk about a particular topic or detail—either by using a euphemism or by stating directly that they did not want to talk about it—I often did not press them. I recognized these as attempts to maintain privacy and therefore purposefully let my respondents keep these details private. For me, this was a demonstration of respect for their privacy. It was also, I hoped, a departure from the treatment they so often described undergoing at the welfare office, where a client’s non-response is viewed as suspect and it is common to be asked the same questions repeatedly until an answer is given.

In addition to the efforts I made during the interviews, I also made the choice to

circumscribe my ethnographic observation to discrete sites that were relevant to my research questions regarding privacy, surveillance and the safety net, rather than take an immersive approach where the researcher spends as much time as possible “being there” in the field (Lamont and Swidler 2014: 157). This decision was methodologically appropriate, as this study was not a classical neighborhood study, but it was also an ethical decision on my part. It was important to me, to the extent possible, that I was invited to be present in certain spaces rather than impose myself, and that I took care not to engender worry or fear among a group of people with ample reason to fear someone that looked like me.

Ethics of Representation

Uncritical research on urban poverty in marginalized communities, particularly when conducted by people that are not from these communities, can have adverse consequences for both the quality and rigor of knowledge production and for the people whose lives fall under what can be a reductive and Othering gaze (Rios 2015; Small 2015). And it is common for researchers like me to fall into the trap of overemphasizing the differences between ourselves and our research participants with whom we do not share a common socio-economic status or set of similar life experiences, or who we position as fundamentally different. This sort of bias inhibits the researcher’s ability to see research participants as full humans, encouraging instead a monolithic view of people based on attributes such as race, class, gender, or sexuality. The impulse is to assume that a research participant must think or act in a certain way because of whatever attribute is the axis of difference. At the same time, an overemphasis on self-reflexivity and one’s own subjectivity can lead qualitative researchers to produce a sort of navel-gazing auto-ethnography, in which the main character is the researcher, not the ideas under study (Cobb

and Hoang 2015). Not only do these pitfalls produce anemic knowledge about urban poverty, but they can do deeper damage by leaving unchecked what sociologist Victor Rios has characterized as a “white space...a social-psychological state of being in that our attitudes, perceptions, and cultural frames operate to conduct work that perpetuates whiteness, white privilege, and white spaces” (2015: 259). In conducting this study, I tried to avoid these pitfalls both in the field and in the analysis and writing phases.

In writing this dissertation, I faced numerous decisions about which stories I would choose to tell and how, and which details to include and which ones to leave out. I consider these ethical decisions, particularly given that I am producing a representation of a community that is often characterized narrowly in terms of its problems, including poverty and violence. I did not want to contribute to the unfortunate pattern of producing either an overly sympathetic or an exoticized picture of poor people’s lives (Small 2015). I did not want to sanitize what is often the ugliness of poverty, but I also did not want to frame my respondents only or mostly in terms of their disadvantage. Instead, I tried to do justice to the complexity of my respondents’ lives while also accurately describing what for many were devastating conditions of material deprivation and for some, violence. Therefore, I included details about these conditions when they were directly related to the concepts or ideas with which I was engaging, and were therefore critical to include. But at other times, I left out certain details, particularly those involving intense trauma, because I felt they would overshadow the theoretical point or argument I was trying to make and risk painting a sensationalized portrait of the poor. I did my best to keep the emphasis throughout on description and explanation in the service of answering my research questions with analytic rigor and also respect for the participants whose generosity in sharing their lives with me made this study possible.

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