DOI: 10.1111/lapo.12176

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

LAW & POLICY UNIVERSITY OF DENVER WILEY

Listening to snitches: Race/ethnicity, English proficiency, and access to welfare fraud enforcement systems

Spencer Headworth[1] | **Viridiana Ríos**[2]

[1]Department of Sociology, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

[2]Harvard Summer School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence
Spencer Headworth, Department of Sociology, Purdue University, 700 West State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA.
Email: sheadworth@purdue.edu

Abstract

How does the state respond to members of the public seeking to mobilize its coercive power? Focusing on welfare fraud control units in the United States, we examine how race/ethnicity and written English proficiency affect access to systems for reporting welfare fraud suspicions. Using a correspondence audit, we assess fraud control authorities' likelihood of taking up reports from Latinas and Whites with higher and lower English proficiency. We find that fraud units are less likely to take up lower-proficiency Whites' reports, but that lower proficiency's uptake-dampening effect does not hold for Latinas. To explain the mechanisms underlying our experimental results, we draw on interviews with fraud investigators. The interview evidence reveals the determinations of investigative promise underlying these uptake disparities. For White reporters, English errors cue gatekeepers' preexisting skepticism about public reporters' reliability, decreasing enthusiasm for investing resources in these reports. Reports from lower-English proficiency Latinas offer special viability appeal, however, offsetting the negative influence on uptake probability that errors demonstrate for White reporters. Our results shed new light on contemporary racial/ethnic dynamics in the US welfare system, and advance social scientific understanding of how bureaucratic gatekeepers decide what to do—if anything—with volunteered reports of misconduct.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A variety of government agencies use incriminating information supplied by members of the public (Natapoff, 2009; Reeves, 2017). This practice allows the state to enlist nonstate actors as contributors to the exercise of state power (Garland, 1996; Goddard, 2012; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007). In the prominent example of criminal law enforcement, this process is often straightforward: having identified someone possessing incriminating information, authorities offer the prospective informant an incentive (often a reduction in legal liability) in exchange for disclosure (Skolnick, 1966, pp. 124–125). It is less clear, however, what factors shape authorities' responses under the "volunteer model" (Bergemann, 2017), in which members of the public approach them to report alleged wrongdoing.

Herein, we seek to understand how bureaucratic gatekeepers decide what (if anything) to do with volunteered reports of misconduct. Specifically, we focus on what happens after members of the public contact dedicated fraud control units within social service agencies to report suspected welfare fraud.[1] These units' investigators are tasked with detecting, investigating, and substantiating clients' rule violations, making their immediate function closer to that of criminal justice authorities than to nominally helping-oriented public assistance work. Intentional Program Violations (IPVs) are administrative charges that permit agencies to suspend and disqualify clients. Some cases are also referred to prosecutors for criminal charges. Fraud unit gatekeepers' decisions about what to do with incoming fraud reports shape who will be investigated for fraud, with those investigated potentially facing a range of sanctions due to those investigations.

We examine how two categories of reporter characteristics—Latina versus White race/ethnicity and higher versus lower apparent English proficiency—shape fraud reports' dispositions. These factors are timely; recent evidence points to Latino ethnicity and language skills as consequential linked variables in threat perceptions (Flores & Schachter, 2018) and to an "immigrationalization" of opinions about welfare (Garand et al., 2017). Our research elucidates how these factors shape welfare fraud control units' responses to volunteered reports of alleged fraud.

The focal fraud units spend much of their time on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program; state-level agencies completed nearly a million SNAP client investigations in fiscal year 2016 (Food and Nutrition Service, 2017). While they also address other types of fraud—such as clients "trafficking" SNAP benefits by exchanging them for cash or goods—much of what fraud workers do reduces to boundary-work around formal eligibility categories. In investigating eligibility fraud cases, they seek to establish that eligibility-pertinent information that clients have supplied is inaccurate, incomplete, or outdated.

Like their counterparts in conventional law enforcement, administrative welfare fraud investigations run on information. With some jurisdictional variation, fraud investigators draw upon an array of evidentiary resources to substantiate charges: databases; inquiries to employers, landlords, schools, and daycares; home inspections; and interviews with neighbors and clients themselves. This article investigates influences on these investigations' origination, focusing specifically on case referrals that begin with volunteer reporters complaining of suspected fraud.[2] Fraud units and the agencies that house them encourage such reporting; agency websites provide instructions for reporting suspected fraud online or over the phone, and local offices and administration buildings display fraud-centered flyers and pamphlets recruiting clients as informants.

As street-level bureaucrats[3] (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Soss et al., 2011a, Ch. 10; Watkins-Hayes, 2009b), fraud workers have significant discretion at multiple stages of the investigative process. Assessing incoming public reports and deciding whether to act on them—and if so, how—are pivotal junctures of such discretionary decision-making. Fraud units do not have the labor necessary to fully investigate every referral they receive. Like police

officers, they pursue "an ideal of 'economy of intervention'" (Bittner, 1967, p. 713), determining which cases merit substantial time investment through "triage" or "creaming" (Walsh et al., 2018; see generally Brodkin, 2011; Halushka, 2017; Lara-Millán, 2014). Unit gatekeepers have substantial leeway in making these determinations, working from both formal written rules and informal rules of thumb.

Gatekeepers' decisions about fraud reports directly affect reported clients' access to crucial social safety net programs. The program suspensions and disqualifications that result from substantiated fraud charges temporarily or permanently bar program participation. In the SNAP context, this means losing access to a nutritional assistance program on which tens of millions of Americans rely every month (Food and Nutrition Service, 2016). Welfare fraud investigations can also result in criminal charges (see Gustafson, 2009). Gatekeepers' decisions about what to do with fraud reports, therefore, have far-reaching and serious implications, with different responses to different types of reporters shaping who is exposed to impactful sanctions (see also Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

We use two studies to assess how fraud reports' characteristics affect agency gatekeepers' actions. First, we employ a correspondence audit of fraud units' public fraud reporting systems to test gatekeepers' responses, assessing the impact of two independent variables: reporters' race/ethnicity[4] (Latina[5] vs. White) and their written English proficiency. As explained further below, we expect fraud workers to presume that Latina reporters are likely to report people similar to themselves, and that Latino ethnicity—particularly in combination with lower English proficiency (LEP)—will cue questions about immigration status, encouraging gatekeepers to take up reports from these sources (see Flores & Schachter, 2018). Our experimental results show that fraud units are less likely to take up reports from White reporters who make English errors, but that language errors' uptake-dampening effect does not hold for Latina reporters. Next, we use qualitative data from interviews with fraud workers in five diverse US states to illuminate their decision-making processes and thus explain the mechanisms underlying the observed differences in report uptake. These data reveal how perceptions of investigative promise drive investigatory decision-making, suggesting that patterns of differential uptake result from gatekeepers' prioritization of the reports that they see as most likely to lead to substantiated charges. In total, our results demonstrate the operation of a bounded and contextualized instrumental rationality: gatekeepers demonstrate attenuated interest in pursuing reports that appear to originate with less reliable reporters, unless another aspect of the report offers offsetting appeal.

2 | BACKGROUND

We follow previous research demonstrating systematic differences in access to state services and resources, particularly between racial/ethnic groups. These studies show, for instance, that putative African Americans receive fewer and less polite answers when requesting information about public services (Giulietti et al., 2019) and encounter less-responsive state legislators when requesting help with voter registration (Butler & Broockman, 2011), and that putative Latinos receive less information when seeking information about voting (White et al., 2015).[6]

Like these researchers, we are fundamentally concerned with access to the state. However, in investigating who is "taken seriously" as a complainant to state public assistance agencies, we assess influences on the disposition of individuals' appeals to state enforcement bodies, rather than requests for information or assistance. Like other street-level bureaucrats, fraud workers' assigned tasks exceed their labor resources, necessitating decisions about where to invest time and energy (Lipsky, 1980). In making these determinations, fraud workers exercise the discretion that characterizes the working lives of street-level bureaucrats (Brodkin, 1997; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009b). A noteworthy instrumental rationality applies to these discretionary determinations; fraud workers are outcome-driven, focused on

successfully establishing as many cases as they can, especially intentional fraud cases (Headworth, 2021a). Thus, a different calculus applies here than in many contexts of individual-initiated access to the state: gatekeepers are motivated to maximize specific outcomes invoking the state's coercive power, not its supportive capacities. Both individual and group-level incentive systems underlie fraud workers' motivation to prioritize cases that they believe they can successfully substantiate; fraud unit managers and individual investigators both stress maximizing IPV numbers, and the federal government incentivizes state governments' fraud control activity by allowing them to retain 35% of the federal SNAP benefit dollars that they recover via fraud enforcement action.[7]

In some ways, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) sanctions offer a case of welfare punishment that parallels these intentional fraud investigations. TANF sanctions are disciplinary and punitive interventions, levied as consequences for clients' noncompliance with program rules, including work requirements and reporting obligations (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 153). Studies have generally found that race and ethnicity influence caseworkers' discretionary decisions about applying these sanctions, with Black and Latina clients being more likely to be sanctioned than their White counterparts (Born et al., 1999; Hasenfeld et al., 2004; Kalil et al., 2002; Koralek & Pindus, 2000; Monnat, 2010; Schram et al., 2009; Soss et al., 2011b).[8]

Experimentally assessing race and ethnicity's influence on caseworkers' sanctioning decisions, Soss et al. (2011a, p. 255) find that TANF caseworkers express a greater likelihood of penalizing Black and Latina clients than White clients when responding to hypothetical vignettes. Soss et al.'s (2011a, p. 257) corresponding review of administrative data, however, reveals only bias against Black clients in real-world sanctioning behavior, not bias against Latinas. This result reflects their broader conclusions about TANF sanctioning: that "welfare officials do not inevitably sanction clients of color at higher rates. . . . Client race can matter more or less depending on how contextual factors affect the salience and contents of racial categories as frames for decision making" (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 154). Local characteristics such as rates of poverty and welfare participation increase overall sanction rates (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 158), while local political conservatism disproportionately increases sanction rates for Black and Latino clients compared to White clients (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 163). These results suggest that local-level political and demographic factors influence caseworkers' discretionary decisions regarding when to apply sanctions (or not), as well as other discretionary action with regard to clients (Kogan, 2017).

While dedicated fraud investigators also discretionarily implement client punishments, their circumstances differ notably. Fraud units present a particular form of the welfare system's "marketization" (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 176). The broader contemporary business-style approach to welfare includes enforcing sanctions to mold welfare clients into usable workers for the low-wage labor market. Fraud units go further, as dedicated components of the welfare system incentivized to maximize client investigations and punishments; this makes them a pronounced exemplification of US welfare bureaucracies' punitive and adversarial stance toward their own clients (see Headworth, 2021b). With some interjurisdictional variation, investigators are expected to complete set numbers of investigations per month or per quarter, and performance reviews include completed case output. Federal financial incentives for substantiating client fraud and recovering overpayments solidify the overriding preference to invest time in cases deemed promising and to deprioritize others.

Monitoring clients' rule compliance and applying sanctions are part of welfare caseworkers' jobs as "catch-all bureaucrats" (Watkins-Hayes, 2009b), and their performance assessment systems can systematically engender increased sanction rates (Soss et al., 2011a, Ch. 9). TANF caseworkers, see high sanction rates as damaging to their performance assessments and accordingly express hesitation about sanctioning clients (Soss et al., 2011a, p. 233). Fraud investigators also see caseworkers as sometimes reluctant to initiate sanctioning processes; discussing how cases come to them, frustrated fraud workers say that caseworkers do not refer enough clients

for fraud investigation, a tendency that they attribute to caseworkers' disinclination to deal with fraud referral paperwork (Headworth, 2021b).

For fraud workers, pursuing client punishments is not part of the job: it *is* the job. Their organizational priorities and performance assessments revolve around successfully detecting and officially substantiating clients' (intentional) rule violations; in contrast to caseworkers' reasons to hesitate in administering punishment, structural forces funnel fraud workers' discretion wholly toward maximizing successful charges. Straightforward bias or animus remain potential contributors to investigative appeal for at least some gatekeepers. Fraud units' policy mandate and structural position, however, make perceptions of reports' promise as investigative leads especially consequential (see also Epp et al., 2014).

Thus, we posit that gatekeepers' decisions about which cases to prioritize will hinge on their assessments of investigative *promise*: reports' perceived likelihood of generating successfully substantiated charges. Following Goertz (2006), we develop an ontological concept of promise— that is, our concept is "about the fundamental constitutive elements of [the] phenomenon" (Goertz, 2006, p. 5). Per Goertz (2006), our concept of promise is also realist (in that it is empirically derived) and causal (in that it is used to develop causal hypotheses and elucidate causal mechanisms). Promise has two fundamental constitutive elements. The first, *reliability*, pertains to reporters, denoting their perceived trustworthiness as case referral sources. The second, *viability*, refers to reports themselves, denoting gatekeepers' assessments of the extent to which reports contain provable allegations.

2.1 | Race, ethnicity, immigration, and welfare workers' decision-making

Previous research provides grounds for suspecting that race and ethnicity might affect welfare fraud workers' assessments of reports and decisions about reports' disposition. Racial and ethnic inequalities have long characterized US public assistance. As the social safety net expanded during the Progressive Era and the New Deal, programs segregated and excluded racial/ethnic minorities, including Black Americans and people of Latin American descent (Fox, 2012; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Quadagno, 1988, 1994; Ward, 2005). These inequitable origins produced a stratified public assistance system, with prominent differences between racial/ethnic groups' access to benefits and popular perceptions (Bobo et al., 1997; Chunn & Gavigan, 2004; Gans, 1995; Gilens, 1999; Katz, 2013; M. K. Brown, 1999; Reyna et al., 2005).

The United States has a pronounced history of anti-Black racism. This form of racism figures centrally in the evolution of US welfare programs and anti-welfare backlash (Gilens, 1999; Gustafson, 2011; Hancock, 2004; Kohler-Hausmann, 2017; Ocen, 2012; Roberts, 2012, p. 1492), and much welfare research focuses on Black/White disparities. Some recent work, however, emphasizes the linked variables of Latino ethnicity and immigration status' emerging prominence in welfare discourse. Garand et al.'s (2017) analysis of the "immigrationalization" of welfare opinions highlights this phenomenon; these authors find that immigration attitudes are more consequential for contemporary welfare attitudes than a range of variables conventionally associated with public assistance opinions, such as political ideology and attitudes toward African Americans.

Working with late-20th century survey data, Fox (2004) found that Whites' beliefs about Latinos' work ethic predicted their support for welfare programs, but that this relationship was context-dependent. In more heavily Latino states, Whites' belief that Latinos are hardworking predicted more favorable attitudes toward welfare, while in Whiter states, Whites' belief that Latinos are lazy predicted less favorable welfare attitudes. Fox (2004, p. 615) concluded that "the contact hypothesis 'works' for Latinos": larger state-level Latino populations predicted more favorable White attitudes about Latinos' work ethic. Conversely, racial/ethnic isolation appeared to beget negative stereotypes about Latinos that aligned with those historically directed at African Americans (Fox, 2004, p. 616).

Things have changed substantially in the intervening two decades. During that time, the Latino population has grown significantly, from roughly equal to African Americans (at around 12% of the population) to the country's largest racial/ethnic minority group (at around 18% of the population) (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018b; Fox, 2004, p. 596). More likely to experience poverty and food insecurity than their White counterparts, Latinos received more than 20% of all SNAP benefits in 2016 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018b).[9]

These demographic shifts have garnered attention. Politicians and others increasingly invoke Latinos as a stigmatized "target population" (Huber, 2016; Johnson, 2018; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Regarding welfare, this rhetoric focuses particularly on immigration, especially undocumented immigration (Amundson & Zajicek, 2017, pp. 395–396; J. A. Brown, 2016), evincing a broader contemporary pattern of depicting Latino immigrants as socially and economically dangerous interlopers who abuse government services (Chavez, 2013; Massey, 2007, p. 146). This type of demonization of Latino immigrants is a prominent trend in recent US politics, particularly in the context of social safety net programs (Flores & Schachter, 2018; J. A. Brown, 2016).

The changing social discourse around Latinos in general and Latino immigrants in particular bears the hallmarks of a racial threat scenario, in which a racial/ethnic minority group's presence economically, politically, and symbolically threatens the White majority (Blalock, 1967). Perceived threats to privileged status in the racial stratification system decrease Whites' support for public assistance programs (Wetts & Willer, 2018). More concretely, larger racial/ethnic minority populations tend to beget strengthened police departments (Holmes et al., 2008; Huff & Stahura, 1980; Kent & Jacobs, 2005; McCarty et al., 2012; Stucky, 2005; Zhao et al., 2012), punitive discipline in public schools (Hughes et al., 2017; Payne & Welch, 2010; Welch & Payne, 2010), and welfare sanctioning (Monnat, 2010; Soss et al., 2011a).

Evidence suggests that Latino ethnicity's potential effects on fraud unit gatekeepers' decisions may relate specifically to the close connections that many contemporary US residents draw between this ethnicity, nativity, and immigration status (Jiménez, 2008; Valentino et al., 2013, p. 155). Relatively recent public opinion research indicates that antiwelfare sentiment is linked to negative feelings about immigrants, not negative feelings about Latinos per se (Hussey & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013), yet Whites associate Latinos with immigration concerns and tend to view Latinos differently than other immigrants, especially White immigrants. For example, Whites see Latino immigrants as low-skilled and needy (Lee & Fiske, 2006) while preferring highly educated immigrants (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015), and Whites are more censorious of inappropriate or illegal behavior among Latino immigrants than among White immigrants (Hartman et al., 2014).

Beyond the general salience of Latino ethnicity and immigration status in current welfare discourse, these factors also have specific salience with respect to fraud control. While race and ethnicity are formally irrelevant to SNAP rules, immigration status is not. Federal policy changes excluded undocumented immigrants from most social safety net programs in the 1970s (Fox, 2016). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 went a step further, restricting legal immigrants' access to food stamps and other programs (Chavez, 2013; Van Hook et al., 2006). Currently, undocumented immigrants remain ineligible for SNAP. Legally documented immigrant children and people with asylee or refugee immigration statuses are typically SNAP-eligible with no waiting period, while other immigrant adults must accrue five years of legal residence before becoming eligible (Food and Nutrition Service, 2013). Thus, fraud workers' immigration-related inferences bear on their assessments of reports' viability.

Because all of our experimental reports contain the same basic SNAP allegation—an unreported income-earner living in the home—we functionally control for basic viability assessments. This, however, is where ethnicity and immigration considerations notably enter the calculus. Especially due to its current prominence in welfare discourse, Latino ethnicity may influence gatekeepers' assessments of incoming fraud reports. Apart from the possibility of

straightforward bias against racial/ethnic minorities, we expect fraud workers to presume that Latinas are likely to report other Latinos, and for Latino ethnicity to cue questions about immigration status (Flores & Schachter, 2018). Given immigration status' relevance to program eligibility, such presumptions would strengthen these reports' apparent viability as potential avenues of investigation. Thus, we hypothesize:

> **Hypothesis 1** Fraud units will be more likely to take up reports from Latinas than from Whites.[10]

2.2 | Written English proficiency as a signal to gatekeepers

Our experimental design (detailed below) entails varying two key dimensions of public fraud reports (reporters' apparent race/ethnicity and written English proficiency) while keeping other basic report characteristics constant. As such, we functionally control for socioeconomic status among report targets: we expect gatekeepers to typically presume that the targets of welfare fraud allegations are relatively poor.

Within this context, English proficiency serves as a second independent variable signaling something to gatekeepers. We expect that what English proficiency signals, however, will depend on reporters' apparent race/ethnicity. For White reporters, we expect LEP to signal carelessness or incompetence, leading gatekeepers to see LEP reporters as less reliable than their higher English proficiency (HEP) counterparts; such perceptions would reduce LEP reporters' allegations' appeal to outcome-oriented street-level bureaucrats making discretionary decisions about their disposition (see Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Language errors could also signal lower educational attainment, and perhaps lower social class. Given the general stigma against less educated and poorer people—and fraud workers' common distrust of poor people who participate in welfare programs (Headworth, 2020)—such signals could similarly make LEP reporters seem less reliable and their reports therefore less promising, discouraging bureaucratic gatekeepers from investing time and energy in them. Hence:

> **Hypothesis 2** Fraud units will be less likely to take up reports from LEP Whites than from HEP Whites.

We expect LEP to function differently when combined with Latino ethnicity. On the one hand, it is possible that gatekeepers may expect Latinas to have LEP more often than Whites, or will be less surprised when Latinas make English errors, curtailing LEP's strength as an unreliability signal. Beyond this, we expect that Latinas' English errors will cue ideas about nativity and immigration status, making them pertinent to viability assessments. Like Latin American origin, LEP increases Whites' suspicion about immigrants' legal status (Flores & Schachter, 2018). We expect fraud unit gatekeepers to demonstrate similar tendencies, and correspondingly to see reports from LEP Latinas as more likely to implicate recent or undocumented immigrants than reports from HEP Latinas. Given immigrant status' relevance to SNAP eligibility, such inferences are directly relevant to viability assessments. Because fraud workers are incentivized to maximize successful investigations, we expect them to demonstrate elevated interest in reports perceived as likely to incriminate immigrants. Thus, we expect language errors to have an opposite effect for Latinas than for Whites, increasing rather than decreasing report uptake as viability considerations offset any reliability concerns raised by LEP.

> **Hypothesis 3** Fraud units will be more likely to take up reports from LEP Latinas than from HEP Latinas.

Our expectation that increased viability perceptions will offset any decreases in perceived reliability for LEP Latinas reflects substitutability in investigative promise's two fundamental constitutive elements (see Goertz, 2006, p. 12). While a certain viability threshold likely must be met for gatekeepers to take up reports, reliability and viability can also partially substitute for each other in constituting promise. That is, strong viability assessments may encourage gatekeepers to take up reports from reporters of questionable reliability, while high perceived reporter reliability may encourage them to give the benefit of the doubt to reports with questionable viability.

2.3 | Overview of studies

We employ a mixed-method design to comprehensively examine how reports' characteristics influence gatekeepers' decisions. Study 1 is a field experiment in which we test our hypotheses by assessing gatekeepers' real-world uptake tendencies. Study 2 uses qualitative interview data to illuminate fraud investigators' perceptions of public reports and their decision-making processes in order to explain the mechanisms underlying the experimental results.

Our research design reflects our efforts to capitalize on each method's strengths and address its limitations through complementary data. Our fundamental interest in capturing what fraud unit gatekeepers actually do in their day-to-day work underlies our choice of a correspondence audit for Study 1. We are also interested, however, in *why* gatekeepers act the way they do, a question that our experiment is ill-equipped to address. Study 2's interviews fill this gap, revealing what fraud workers see as important, desirable, and worthwhile, and offering insights into the major influences on their decision-making. This allows us to draw conclusions about mechanisms based on empirics, rather than speculation or supposition.

3 | STUDY 1: TESTING GATEKEEPERS' RESPONSES

3.1 | Data and methods

We submitted a series of pretextual reports to fraud units' internet-based public reporting systems (both email hotlines and fillable online forms) to assess gatekeepers' corresponding actions. Field experiments of this sort—often called "audit studies"—have proven to be an essential social science research design (Baldassarri & Abascal, 2017). By testing real-world responses to systematically varied experimental conditions, audit studies measure actual social behavior. Research measuring hiring employers' responses to pretextual applicants and resumes is the approach's best-known iteration, evincing how factors such as race (Bertrand et al., 2005; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), sexual orientation (Tilcsik, 2011), criminal record (Pager, 2003, 2007; Pager et al., 2009), social class and gender (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), and educational credentials (Gaddis, 2015) influence labor market outcomes. Similar research designs have shown that university faculty are less responsive to people of color regarding research opportunities (Milkman et al., 2015) and that minorities see fewer vacancies in real estate markets (Turner et al., 2013). In online markets, Black sellers tend to receive fewer emails and lower bids (Doleac & Stein, 2013), and in healthcare, Black patients get different recommendations for similar cardiac problems (Schulman et al., 1999).

3.1.1 | Dependent variable: Agency uptake

Our use of pretextual fraud reports as a means of interaction makes our study a "correspondence audit," in which mail- or internet-based communications replace experimental auditors

who interact with employers or other institutions in person (see Gaddis, 2018). We aim to determine how these reports' characteristics affect fraud units' likelihood of taking them seriously and meaningfully acting on them. Such responses are not typically apparent. Fraud units do not usually inform public reporters about resulting agency action (or lack thereof).[11] This necessitates a research design element that provides a signal of agency interest in the report.

To meet this requirement, each report excluded the information that fraud units need to launch even the earliest stages of investigations: no pretextual report included any name for the fabricated reported party, or any other potentially identifying information. Thus, if agency gatekeepers wished to pursue the report further, their only option was to send a follow-up email asking for additional information. We consider the sending of a follow-up email to constitute uptake: an expression of agency interest in the report. The absence of a follow-up email, on the other hand, indicates non-uptake. With more specific information about accused parties, presumably all or nearly all reports would garner some degree of agency uptake, entailing at least a client lookup in the agency's computer system (typically, reporters who provide enough information to launch an investigation do not receive any response from agency gatekeepers, and have no access to information about their reports' disposition). The limited information we provided made "automatic" report uptake impossible; through our correspondence audit, we are able to measure our experimental variables' impact on gatekeepers' likelihood of taking the extra step necessary to give further consideration to information-deficient reports. Because all of our pretextual reports were missing the same pieces of basic information, we are confident that we have effectively controlled for any potential systematic disparities in how different types of missing information might affect gatekeepers' decisions.

We did not respond to any requests for additional information; when we received such a request, we logged and deleted it, concluding the course of that specific report. Thus, our outcome variable *answer* measures agency response as a simple 0/1 dummy variable: yes, the unit takes up the report, or no, it does not.[12]

3.1.2 | Pilot study and final sample

Fraud control units in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia were potentially eligible for inclusion in our sample, setting the maximum sample size at 51. After preliminary review, we found that 36 units were eligible for inclusion in our pilot study; the other 15 units either had no online fraud reporting option, or (more commonly) used an online form with required fields that our research design could not accommodate.

The pilot study stage comprised 16 pretextual reports sent via email or online form submission to each of the 36 units in our initial sample over a span of 8 weeks. We used this stage to assess the sensitivity of our "uptake" outcome variable and to determine the extent of variation in fraud units' (non)response tendencies. Fifteen units of the initial sample demonstrated experimental variation; the other 21 units responded to either all (11 units) or none (10 units) of the 16 pilot-stage pretextual reports. Based on this result, we limited our final sample to the 15 units demonstrating variation. We sent each final sample unit 21 total reports over approximately 4 months, yielding a total sample size of 315 reports.

3.1.3 | Independent variables

We designed our two independent variables to correspond to key dimensions of investigative promise and to accommodate experimental manipulation in a correspondence audit. First, we varied written English proficiency by modifying the text of the reports themselves. We began with "non-error" versions of report text, which lacked English errors. We then systematically

introduced errors, yielding a "non-error" version and a matched "error" version of each report. Each error version contained the same sorts of errors and was sent to different agencies under both Latina and White names. Because of our interest in the potential intersectional effects of Latina ethnicity and LEP, we chose written English errors characteristic of native Spanish speakers, originally derived from a guide to Spanish speakers' English acquisition (Coe, 1987) and refined in consultation with an external expert on this topic. The errors primarily involve article use, plurals, and word order. Although these are characteristic errors made by native Spanish speakers, nothing about them is necessarily tied to native Spanish speaking.

Our second independent variable is reporter race/ethnicity. Methodological and practical considerations around sample size, statistical power, and data collection logistics limited this study to two racial/ethnic groups. Within these parameters, we chose to focus on Latino and White race/ethnicity. Several factors underlie our decision to compare Latinas with Whites: (1) current hostility toward Latinos and their (perceived) participation in public assistance; (2) tendencies for people to associate Latinos with immigration status questions (Valentino et al., 2013, p. 155); and (3) immigration status' relevance to SNAP eligibility and attitudes about welfare (Garand et al., 2017). We also expected to find distinct effects of combining different apparent levels of written English proficiency with signals of these racial/ethnic categorizations.

We signal race/ethnicity via names. To date, many correspondence audits have assumed that study respondents reliably infer race/ethnicity from certain names, but have made limited effort to confirm these operationalizations' validity by measuring different names' strength as race/ethnicity signals (Gaddis, 2017a, p. 470). Thanks to Gaddis' (2017a, 2017b) recent survey work, our study offers notable methodological strength in this area. Gaddis asked US respondents to indicate the race or ethnicity (if any) they associated with different names, thereby testing the names' signaling strength. Gaddis (2017a) finds that numerous given names strongly signal Whiteness, with 20 out of 41 White-typed female names read as "White" by more than 90% of respondents. Adding "White" surnames generally increases given names' signaling strength (Gaddis, 2017a). Gaddis (2017b) finds Latina-typed female given names to be relatively weaker signals of race/ethnicity, with only two names out of 18 read as "Latina" by more than 90% of respondents. However, pairing "Latina" given names with "Latina" surnames increases the signal's strength dramatically: "correct" racial/ethnic identification exceeded 94% for *all* Latina given names when paired with Latina surnames (Gaddis, 2017b).

Based on these results, we use strongly racially/ethnically typed given name/surname pairs for both our ostensibly Latina and our ostensibly White reporters. We randomly paired strong-signal White and Latina given names from Gaddis' (2017a, 2017b) surveys with strong-signal White and Latina surnames to create our set of experimental reporter names. We do not provide our specific experimental names here to prevent the possibility of agencies identifying archived copies of our reports.

We did not vary the characteristics of the people upon whom our pretextual reporters informed. In theory, we would have liked to use names to signal reported parties' apparent race/ethnicity. However, our research design precluded this possibility, for two reasons.

First, we carefully planned our study to make absolutely minimal demands on agencies' time and resources. By submitting only brief reports with few details, we ensured that the only possible agency response was to send a follow-up email requesting additional information. In their realized form, the pretextual fraud reports constituted only a very small portion of a much larger workflow. In correspondence with the authors, a fraud worker from a low-population state stated that that they receive multiple public fraud reports daily, around five or 10, and a mid-sized state's representative provided data showing receipt of around 6000 annual public reports in recent years.[13] Totaling only 21 per state over 4 months and absent any information that could be used to generate even preliminary investigations or to loop in actors beyond initial gatekeepers, our simulated reports were miniscule additions to agencies' public fraud report

workflow. Supplying further information, such as names for pretextual reported parties, would have potentially permitted agencies to give our reports greater attention. As realized, the design allowed agencies to invest only the most minimal time in the pretextual reports. Because fraud units regularly receive public reports missing key facts, our pretextual reports are an insignificant and unremarkable addition to a common trend.[14]

Our commitment to avoiding potential harms to real people further precludes using fabricated names for our pretextual reported parties. Particularly given our use of common names, providing reported parties' names could inadvertently implicate actual agency clients, bringing unwarranted fraud scrutiny upon them. Nothing in the reports as realized provided grounds for scrutinizing any actual clients.

Combining the English proficiency variable with the race/ethnicity variable yields a 2 (Latina/White) × 2 (higher/LEP) factorial design (Table 1).

3.1.4 | Experimental control

Our research design requires diverse ways of communicating essentially the same thing to fraud unit gatekeepers. Because we sent each agency multiple reports, we needed multiple report versions. We randomly paired experimental names with reports and ensured that the same unit did not receive both versions of the same report or multiple reports from the same experimental name. In addition, to isolate the effects of our experimental variables, we held constant all other major characteristics potentially influencing reports' disposition.[15]

Because women predominate among adult SNAP clients (Gray & Eslami, 2014), we presented both reporters and reported parties as women. We described all reported parties as having an unspecified number of children (but more than one).[16] All reports alleged an unreported income earner's presence in the home, a common version of SNAP eligibility fraud, and depicted reporter/reported party relationships as acquaintanceships, using generic descriptors such as "coworker" and "neighbor." We also held constant the reports' other basic components, such as approximate length and language use sophistication (apart from systematically introduced errors). We do not provide the specific text of the experimental reports here, again to prevent the possibility of agencies identifying archived copies.

3.1.5 | Analysis

To evaluate our experimental results, we calculated Average Treatment Effects (ATE), specifically:

$$\phi(\mathrm{L}) = \mathrm{E}[\mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{L}) - \mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{W})]$$

$$\phi(\mathrm{P}) = \mathrm{E}[\mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{NE}) - \mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{E})]$$

$$\phi(\mathrm{L} \times \mathrm{E}) = \mathrm{E}[\mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{L} \times \mathrm{E}) - \mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{L} \times \mathrm{NE}) - \mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{W} \times \mathrm{E}) - \mathrm{Y}(\mathrm{W} \times \mathrm{NE})]$$

where L is Latina, W is White, NE is no errors, and E is errors.

TABLE 1 Experimental conditions

Latina & Higher English Proficiency (HEP)	White & Higher English Proficiency (HEP)
Latina & Lower English Proficiency (LEP)	White & Lower English Proficiency (LEP)

To estimate ATEs, we used probit models for E and the interaction between E and L. These models used state fixed effects and robust standard errors.[17] We tested for variation in the treatment effects with several specifications for group comparisons using tests of the equality of marginal effects (Long & Mustillo, 2021).

3.2 | Results

We report predicted probabilities of response. Overall, 54% of reports received responses, a high total response rate compared to most labor market audit studies. Randomization produced excellent balance; there is no statistical difference between treatment groups.

Table 2 shows our regression main effects. These results demonstrate that Latina ethnicity alone does not significantly predict report uptake; because Latina ethnicity itself is statistically insignificant, our experiment does not support H1.[18]

Table 3 displays the predicted probability of report uptake for reporters in each of the four experimental conditions. Using a probit model with state fixed effects, robust standard errors, and a control for the date the report was submitted (*DateS*),[19] we computed the probability of receiving an answer conditional on the four possible combinations of race/ethnicity and English proficiency, holding control variables at their observed means.

TABLE 2 Regression main effects

	Answer	Answer	Answer
Latina	.180		−.127
	(.163)		(.235)
LEP		−.204	−.580***
		(.179)	(.243)
Latina × LEP			.690**
			(.323)
Date sent	−.001	.000	.001
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Observations	315	315	315

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

TABLE 3 Predicted probabilities of uptake

	Predicted probability of response	Test of first difference (English proficiency)	Test of second difference (English proficiency)	Test of first difference (race/ethnicity)	Test of second difference (race/ethnicity)
Latina				HEP	
HEP	.549	.579 − .549 =	−.159 − .03 =	.549 − .584 =	−.035 − .154 =
LEP	.579	.03	−.189**	−.035	−.189**
White				LEP	
HEP	.584	.425 − .584 =		.579 − .425 =	
LEP	.425	−.159**		.154**	

*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

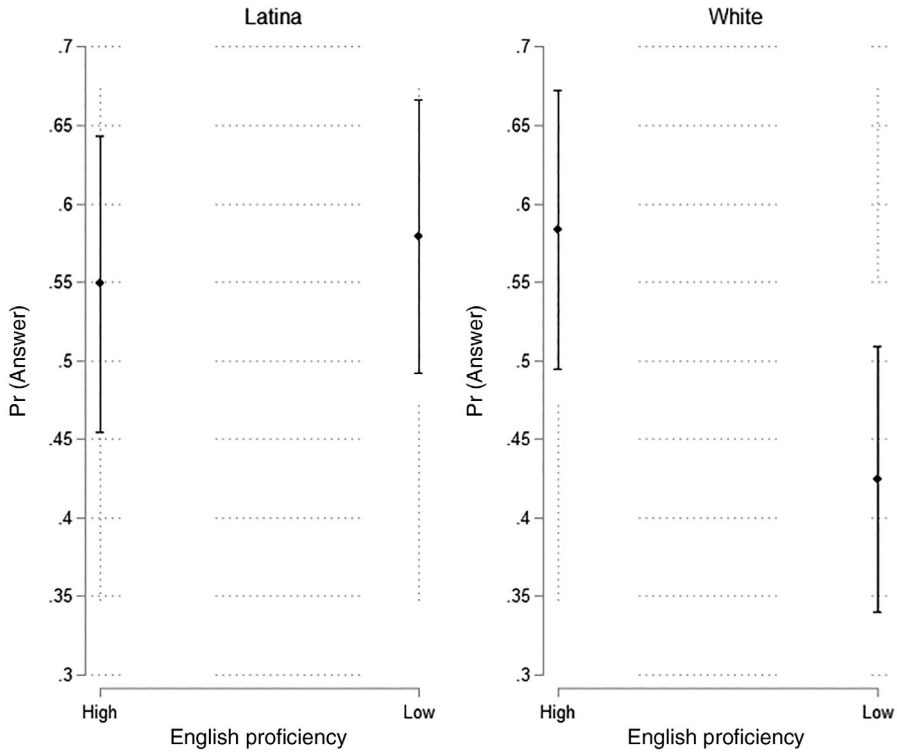

FIGURE 1 Predicted probability of uptake by race/ethnicity and English proficiency

While reporters in the other three categories all have better than 50/50 chances of receiving a response, LEP Whites have less than a 43% chance. This result supports H2, showing that LEP decreases Whites' chances of having their reports taken up.

As Figure 1 illustrates, predicted probability of response is .549 for HEP Latinas and .579 for LEP Latinas, but this difference is not statistically significant. For White reporters, on the other hand, the probability of receiving a response is significantly higher when they do not make errors (Pr = .584) than when they demonstrate LEP by making errors (Pr = .425; difference of .159, $p < .05$). Among HEP reporters, Whites are more likely to receive responses than Latinas (.549 − .584 = −.035), but this difference is also statistically insignificant. Significant racial/ethnic differences emerge among LEP reporters; here, Latinas' predicted probability of response is .154 higher than Whites' (.579 − .424 = .154, $p < .05$).

Based on the results shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, we also find partial support for H3. Although the predicted probability of response is somewhat higher for LEP Latinas than for HEP Latinas, the test of first difference by English proficiency shows that this difference is not statistically significant. Yet, the results of combining Latina ethnicity with LEP are noteworthy, showing that LEP's response-dampening effect does not hold for Latinas. The effects of LEP for Whites and for Latinas differ significantly (−.159 − .03 = −.189, $p < .05$). Thus, English proficiency's effect depends on reporters' apparent race/ethnicity. When gatekeepers are assessing Latinas' reports for investigative promise, viability considerations appear to offset any reliability concerns that language errors might induce.

4 | STUDY 2: EXPLAINING MECHANISMS

Our experiment reveals distinctive patterns in how race/ethnicity and English proficiency intersect in predicting reporters' probability of having their reports taken up. To better understand

the perceptions and habits that underlie these tendencies in gatekeepers' responses, we turn to evidence from interviews with fraud workers.

4.1 | Data and methods

Study 2 derives from in-depth, semistructured interviews that Headworth conducted with fraud workers in five US states. We anonymize the five states with identifiers denoting their regional locations: "Eastcoast," "Midatlantic," "Northeast," "Southeast," and "Southwest."[20] State politics, welfare policies, criminal justice policies, and demographics vary across these states. Here, however, we focus on patterns that are consistent across jurisdictions; the selected quotes are representative of these patterns.

The 42 interviewees include a range of those involved in fraud control efforts, including investigators, analysts, supervisors, and managers, as well as a handful of administrators with broader responsibilities; all names are pseudonyms. Some interviewees' current positions entail making the exact judgments our experiment assesses: deciding what to do with incoming public fraud reports. All of the interviewees are familiar with this component of the fraud control information economy and are experienced with similar discretionary decision-making.

Headworth recruited voluntary participants via a recruitment message shared by organizational gatekeepers in each state. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, covering a range of topics related to the substance and significance of fraud control work. The responses recounted here arise especially from questions about how fraud workers assess and process public fraud reports, as well as their perceptions of patterns in fraud perpetration.

The qualitative data serve the purposes of logical inference, not statistical inference (see Small, 2009; Yin, 2014). While actors' motives are not generally empirically accessible (Reskin, 2003), interview accounts offer unique insights into what people find important and meaningful (Pugh, 2013). Our interviews illuminate the problem situations in which fraud workers exercise discretion as gatekeepers processing public fraud reports and suggest the habits they draw upon in making these judgments (see Gross, 2009, p. 375).

We provide qualitative evidence in three areas to explain Study 1's findings. First, we show how fraud workers talk about the necessity of "creaming" referrals: identifying those they perceive as promising, and concentrating their efforts on those cases. Second, we discuss their perceptions of reporter (un)reliability. This section covers fraud workers' belief that public reporters are often unreliable, and their specific sense that "messy" reports that "make no sense" do not merit significant time investments. These sentiments suggest that the lower uptake rates for LEP Whites predicted in H2 and observed in the experiment are due to language errors cueing skepticism about reporter reliability. Third, we provide evidence concerning how ethnicity and Latinos' language skills influence fraud workers' perceptions of reports' viability. This section includes fraud workers' comments on homophily and fraud's concentration in ethnic enclaves, which support our expectation that gatekeepers will commonly presume that reports from Latinas are likely to implicate other Latinos. This section also includes fraud workers' statements about connections between ethnicity, language skills, and immigration status, supporting our contention that, for Latinas, LEP serves as a viability signal, offsetting the uptake-dampening effect it demonstrates for Whites.

4.2 | Discretion and "creaming" referrals

Fraud units have to choose how to invest their resources. As Eastcoast manager Vincent explains, this includes deciding which incoming case referrals to pursue:

> We get a lot of referrals . . . [thousands of] referrals a month that you have to vet through to see which ones [to pursue]. So yeah, we get a lot from the [local offices], we get a lot from the general public, from the fraud hotline, people can send us tips anonymously. . . . Our job is to try to automate the best we can, to try the vet the best we can . . . but you never want them to slip through, because the one that slips through could be **that one**. . . . We have a . . . dozen fraud referral and screener [staff], so we're constantly generating, constantly setting [up cases].

Vincent illustrates how, facing a constant influx of fraud reports, fraud units continually seek balance, avoiding investing time and energy in unpromising reports while also trying to ensure that no promising reports go unaddressed. Similarly, Southeast manager Jack emphasizes that potential investigations outstrip their work capacity, and indicates some of the factors that contribute to prioritization decisions:

> We're kinda like the police. The police can't work every case that they get. I've had officers tell me here that they work the best cases, they work the ones that they think they can get something out of. And we're basically the same thing. If we think we can do it, we'll give it a shot. But you get some referrals that, not necessarily from the [local] offices, but some referrals may say, "We think so-and-so is selling their food stamps." Well, you know, that's hard to prove. First, we basically have to get them to admit that they're doing it. But, we'll give it a shot, but we're not gonna waste a lot of time on something like that.

Per Jack's account, fraud units endeavor to avoid committing resources to unpromising referrals, thus reserving capacity for those in which they see more promise. Distinguishing between more- and less-promising fraud referrals represents discretionary "triage" (Walsh et al., 2018) in fraud investigations. The marketization of welfare punishment in dedicated fraud units funnels this discretion in a particular direction. Jack explains how incentives drive his unit's activities:

> We keep 35% for [IPVs], and 20% for [unintentional] cases. And if there's an agency error that caused a loss, we don't keep anything [chuckles]. We don't get anything for that. [*Stage whisper, looking over the top of his glasses:*] 'Cause we'd be making money, you know.

Jack's comments illustrate the push to maximize IPVs and other client overpayments. Organizational priorities and individual performance assessments motivate fraud workers to focus on promising leads in client fraud cases, rather than other types of waste or error, and to avoid sinking time into dead-end cases. Reporter reliability and report viability are the two key dimensions constituting fraud workers' perceptions of promise in these cases.

4.3 | Reporter reliability

Fraud workers are more inclined to invest their time in reports from people they see as reliable. In general, they view public reports somewhat skeptically, in part because they perceive public fraud reporters as mostly personally motivated, and sometimes dishonest (see Headworth, 2019). They also say that some public fraud reporters report things carelessly, are poorly informed about the situation they are reporting, or misunderstand program rules, making them unreliable sources. Southeast supervisor Rosemary says, "A lot of stuff we do get on the hotline we can't even do anything with." Eastcoast investigator Tiffany agrees:

> Most of my good referrals do come from either caseworkers or [database matches]. Hotline calls can kind of be, unpredictable, because . . . you have usually angry people calling into the [fraud] unit. So, sometimes you get all kinds of strange information, and some of it's good, some of it's bad. So, I would say the hotline is probably the most unreliable information.

As Tiffany suggests, one of the express reasons for fraud workers' dubiousness regarding public reports are their perceptions of informants' ulterior motives: they believe that voluntary fraud reporters are usually driven by interpersonal animus, and that such motivations beget less-reliable information (see Headworth, 2019). Despite these reservations, public fraud reports remain resources in the fraud control information economy, and fraud workers are receptive to those they see as promising. Describing the value she sees even in interpersonally motivated reports, Southwest supervisor Carly says, "That little old lady is mad, because they're always partying at the house. That's typically how it comes to us. But, I'll take it, that's cool. However we find it." Fraud control is outcome-driven; ultimately, valuable reports are reports that lead to successful investigations.

The language errors we introduced in some reports correspond to fraud workers' hesitations about what Midatlantic manager Brian calls "messy tips." Fraud workers say that carelessness or incompetence can characterize less-promising referrals, indicating that LEP's uptake-dampening effect results from cueing skepticism about reporters' reliability. Southeast supervisor Antoine expresses reservations about spending time on complaints that come from less-reliable categories of public reporters. Antoine says these reports sometimes "have some information that really makes no sense" or "really [have] no substance to them," suggesting that the reporters are misinformed, or simply do not grasp the situations about which they are complaining. Antoine contrasts these public reports with others that are "real legitimate," and says it irritates him when less-promising reports turn into investigations:

> I say, "Did anybody read this, or actually look at this?" It's not that I don't have enough to do. . . . [My manager] and I talk about this a lot, 'cause sometimes he'll send 'em to me, and I'll say, "Did you read this?" and we'll start looking at it and say, "This don't make no sense. Okay, fine. We'll take care of it."

Here, Antoine demonstrates his interest in maximizing his unit's efficiency by concentrating its efforts on promising cases that appear to originate with relatively reliable reporters. Advancing this objective means expeditiously concluding cases that appear to be headed nowhere, and ideally forgoing unpromising investigations altogether.

4.4 | Report viability

Fraud workers also discount reports that they see as less viable, prioritizing allegations that they predict they can successfully substantiate. Some public reports contain allegations that do not appear to constitute rule violations, such as complaints that clients have expensive pieces of personal property, which is irrelevant to eligibility calculations. Others contain allegations that are comparatively difficult to authoritatively document; under-the-table work, for instance, is harder for investigators to prove than formal labor market participation.

Fraud workers' statements also give reason to suspect that race and ethnicity may bear on viability assessments. Although fraud workers do not explicitly assert disproportionate interest in pursuing allegations against Latino clients, they do depict this group-level characteristic as enforcement-pertinent. First, while race and ethnicity are formally irrelevant to program eligibility, immigration status is not; thus, questions about immigration status may suggest

comparatively greater report viability. While fraud workers, like other people (Valentino et al., 2013, p. 155), connect immigration status and Latino ethnicity, the other enforcement-relevant aspect of group-level characteristics that fraud workers note is less racially/ethnically specific; fraud workers describe fraud behavior as often concentrated in racial/ethnic enclaves and express interest in counteracting fraud in such "problem areas."

4.4.1 | Homophily presumptions and addressing "problem areas"

Fraud workers depict homophily in public fraud reporting as common; that is, they say that reporters tend to come from social locations similar to their reports' targets' (Headworth, 2019; see also Bergemann, 2017; McPherson et al., 2001). Fraud workers' strong consensus on this point suggests that gatekeepers draw inferences about reports' targets based on reporters' characteristics.

Investigators also highlight fraud's concentration in particular "problem areas" and note the steps that they take to attend specifically to such situations. Eastcoast administrator George exemplifies this perspective, describing both demographic and geographic patterns in fraud behavior:

> Different areas have different populations . . . Russians . . . Nigerians. . . . If you go around [certain] offices, there's a large Hispanic population, so it depends on where you are. . . . You can go down the street probably 10 minutes from here and buy a Social Security card, you know. . . . [We are dealing with] illegals that we didn't know about their driver's licenses. Guess what? I hate to say it. They're probably gonna be on freaking aid too, so I gotta go out and find them before I get a call about them.

George foregrounds a connection between racial/ethnic immigrant enclaves and fraud behavior, and specifically flags fraud issues among undocumented immigrants. His comments suggest that, for him, while Latinos are one of the groups with whom he associates enforcement-relevant characteristics, they are not the only one. Other fraud workers, too, describe concentrations of fraud behavior among multiple groups, and not necessarily immigrants or racial/ethnic minorities; indeed, multiple fraud workers specifically mentioned issues among groups of White women.

These comments represent fraud workers' perceptions of homophily's role in welfare clients' lives generally, and fraud specifically. They typically depict fraud as a behavior modeled and learned in social settings. Furthermore, they say that public reports of fraud suspicions usually come from people personally associated with reports' targets, such as neighbors, friends, or family. Southwest investigator Sue summarizes the most frequent sources of reports: "neighbors, and it's relatives, exes." Fraud workers believe that such socially proximate individuals often have personal motivations for reporting (Headworth, 2019; see also Bergemann, 2017). Particularly considered in conjunction with their beliefs about fraud behavior's social and geographic concentrations, fraud workers' consensus on this topic begets the notion that fraud unit gatekeepers expect public reporters to report people similar to themselves.

4.4.2 | Ethnicity, language skills, and immigration status presumptions

Latinos are decidedly the ethnic group that US Whites most closely associate with immigration, and Valentino et al.'s (2013, p. 155) survey evidence shows that "attitudes about Latinos in particular, not general ethnocentrism, are associated with policy opinions about immigration."

Experiments demonstrate that White respondents cued with Latino associations express less favorable attitudes about immigration than those cued with European associations; this effect is particularly pronounced when combined with stereotype-confirming signals about Latino immigrants being low-skilled (Brader et al., 2008).

Our qualitative data support the notion that fraud workers associate language use, and specifically native Spanish speaking, with immigrants believed to be engaged in fraud. Eastcoast Manager Caroline, for instance, recounts how her Spanish language skills aid her in detecting immigrants' transgressions:

> When it comes to [our unit], we do find there is a lot of immigrants that say that they don't understand. . . . There are a lot of immigrants that come here get the benefits and say that they don't know what's goin' on, but I think they know what's goin' on. Because how would you know that you need benefits? Who told you that, you know, that you could get benefits? . . . [That strategy works] a lot of the time.
>
> I speak Spanish fluently. You can't tell, obviously [because I'm White]. I have been in situations where clients come here and we sat with them and they have spoken Spanish in front of me about a situation. And I'm like, "I can't believe they are saying this!" And I am catching them on stuff that I'm like, "Well, she just told me in English that she is not working, but she's telling him, 'We have to get out of here in an hour,' because she has to start work." [. . .]
>
> I let them talk, and so we'll have a conversation, and then at the end, then I speak to them in Spanish: "Well, okay, let me just reiterate what you said and what I heard you say to each other". . . .Their jaws drop, and they're like, "No, that's not what I meant." [And I say,] "No, I just heard what you meant because I'm fluent."

Here, Caroline describes the relationship she perceives between speaking Spanish and certain patterns of rule violation and indicates that her Spanish fluency helps her catch immigrants breaking rules. Southwest investigator Sue also speaks Spanish, and similarly notes that skill's role in her job. In doing so, she suggests a connection between Latino ethnicity and undocumented status and links that status with lowered barriers to perpetrating fraud:

> I do a lot of Spanish cases. So, with the Hispanic population, it's more of the unreported income. Because it's easier for them because they don't have a Social [Security number]. It's easier for them to work and get paid cash and not report it.[21]

In interviews, welfare fraud workers assert that race and ethnicity themselves are irrelevant to both the phenomenon of welfare fraud and their jobs in fraud control (although they do commonly invoke racialized ideas about the "culture of poverty" and "generational dependence"). Nondiscrimination rules and official bureaucratic colorblindness (see Einstein & Glick, 2017) engender assertions of racial/ethnic neutrality, particularly in response to an inquiring outsider.

Immigration status, though, is rule-relevant, and fraud workers are sensitive to noncitizens receiving benefits as a form of fraud. Southwest investigator Ashley describes how she sees this manifesting: "Stolen Social Security numbers is a big thing, you know. Or them using their kids' Social Security numbers because their kids were born here but they weren't." Southeast investigator Leslie agrees, in a statement that suggests prejudice against Mexican Americans and evinces many fraud workers' disdain for components of the welfare system that they view as overly permissive and vulnerable to exploitation: "We have one interpreter, and she'll be

interpreter for like 20 or 30 of the Mexicans that come in, and they don't speak any English, so she's there getting [assistance] for everybody."

4.5 | Mechanisms of disparate uptake

Fraud workers' depictions of their working worlds indicate the operation of a contextualized and bounded form of instrumental rationality in their assessments of public fraud reports. Gross's (2009) pragmatist theory of social mechanisms usefully applies here. This model focuses on how social action derives from actor-problem-habit-response chains. Thus, instrumental rationality is not a strictly rational choice: "actors are enmeshed in webs of meaning that indicate the significance of the ends they are trying to pursue, constrain the choices they make by setting limits on the thinkability of means, and sustain the social relationships in which instrumentality must be embedded" (Gross, 2009, p. 367). Fraud workers' interview accounts reveal the context surrounding their instrumental action: the circumstances of problems' perception/interpretation; the significance ascribed to their ends (successful fraud cases); and the patterns of thought that constitute their habits. In total, they help us understand how the "habit of rationality . . . develops and is situationally deployed" (Gross, 2009, p. 367) in this setting of social action.

Fraud workers draw on their experience and judgment in their day-to-day discretion, including determining which reports merit follow-up. Such circumstances provide space for stereotypes and biases to influence thinking and action; indeed, responsibility to assess and act quickly in response to complex situations with limited information engenders reliance on cognitive shortcuts (Epp et al., 2014; Lara-Millán, 2014; Lara-Millán & Van Cleve, 2017; Schram et al., 2009).

Fraud workers' interview accounts suggest mechanisms of disparate uptake derived from perceptions of investigative promise (although it would be surprising if their express interview accounts described acting out of racial/ethnic animus). For instance, Eastcoast manager Stephen says that while he may be aware of people's race/ethnicity, he does not see those characteristics as a factor in his job. He does note, however, both immigration status and racial/ethnic enclaves as potential enforcement-relevant issues.

> This is a great country, and a lot of people that are outside of this country want to come here. Does it affect my actual job? Not really, because, when I'm looking at data, and of course I'm looking at a retailer or a client or whatever, I'm not looking at a person's ethnicity as a result of that. But typically you can see patterns and trends based on geography, which people tend to gravitate toward a particular area. So, from that perspective, you can kind of make some inferences.

Because race and ethnicity are themselves formally rule-irrelevant, there are no direct incentives for gatekeepers to make judgments on their basis. There is certainly room for straightforward animus in shaping fraud control activity, as findings from other welfare client punishment contexts suggest (Fording et al., 2011; Pipinis, 2017; Soss et al., 2011a). However, differential uptake patterns do not require such motivation; they could result from instrumentally oriented discretionary action within this institutional context, as gatekeepers make incentivized judgments (based on their socialization) regarding what counts as a more or less promising type of referral (see also Epp et al., 2014).

Overall, Study 2's interviews show that fraud workers endeavor to concentrate their time and energy on referrals that they see as promising. Fraud workers hesitate to invest resources in complaints that appear to originate with less reliable reporters. On the other hand, they express significant interest in counteracting fraud in perceived "problem areas," and they draw viability-pertinent connections between ethnicity, English proficiency, and immigration status.

The patterns in the interviewee responses support our conclusion that, for Latina reporters, language errors offer viability signals that offset the reliability concerns they induce for White reporters.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | The bounds of instrumental rationality in welfare investigation decision-making

Soss et al. (2011a, p. 230) observe that "[o]rganizational routines, tools, norms, incentives, information systems, and categories of understanding function as mechanisms of social control that shape the use of discretion in particular ways." Fraud workers' incentives all push toward prioritizing cases believed to be conducive to successful charge substantiation. Our results suggest how "the habit of rationality . . . develops and is situationally deployed" (Gross, 2009, p. 367) in this setting. Fraud workers' accounts illuminate the context of welfare fraud's (formal) apprehension and interpretation as a problem, perceptions of successful fraud investigations' significance, and the patterns of thought that ground fraud workers' habits when processing informational inputs and choosing consequent courses of action. These accounts reveal the reasoning behind deprioritizing reports from (White) LEP reporters: language errors confirm preexisting wariness of reporters' reliability, reducing these reports' perceived promise as investigative leads. We do not find a significant effect of Latina ethnicity itself on report uptake. LEP's failure to evince its otherwise uptake-dampening effect for Latina reporters, however, indicates an interaction between ethnicity and English proficiency. Fraud workers' interview responses reveal likely drivers: although race and ethnicity themselves are policy-irrelevant, the linked characteristics of citizenship and immigration status are policy-relevant.

Formally race/ethnicity-neutral policies can nevertheless functionally target particular groups (see, e.g., Hartman et al., 2014), and gatekeepers' contextualized beliefs about group-level fraud likelihoods and different types of leads' investigatory promise can drive disparate uptake without specific discriminatory intent.[22] Because undocumented immigrants and many other recent immigrants are categorically ineligible for SNAP, elevated suspicion about Latinas' citizenship and immigration status may counteract any damage to perceived reporter reliability caused by LEP, erasing the uptake-dampening effect observed for Whites.

Our results are consistent with a contextualized and bounded instrumental rationality on gatekeepers' part. Overall, the experimental evidence reflects fraud workers' greater interest in cases perceived to be promising. The evidence supporting H2 suggests that, for White reporters, LEP cues fraud workers' general skepticism regarding public reporters' carefulness and competence. Their attenuated interest in these reports indicates fraud workers' prioritization of reports they perceive to originate from more reliable sources.

Latino ethnicity itself does not appear to be a strong enough viability signal to statistically significantly affect gatekeepers' prioritization decisions, as H1 proposed. Adding English proficiency as a consideration, however, substantially changes things. Although the difference between LEP and HEP Latinas' predicted probability of response was not statistically significant, our experimental findings tilt toward the suggestion that fraud units are more likely to take up LEP Latinas' reports than HEP Latinas' reports. This result—which may have proved statistically significant with a larger sample—contrasts starkly with LEP's pronounced uptake-dampening effect for White reporters. Latino ethnicity's salience in this context appears dependent on its connection to other cues—in this case, that cue is LEP, a primary determinant of "social illegality" (Flores & Schachter, 2018). This result corresponds to recent research suggesting that anti-immigration sentiment is more salient to welfare attitudes than are feelings about Latinos in general (Hussey & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013). When combined with Latino

ethnicity, LEP loses the power to reduce uptake that it demonstrates for White reporters. This result supports H3 and evinces the interaction of apparent ethnicity and apparent English proficiency in claims-making upon enforcement systems.

Our experiment shows that the exact same sorts of written English errors have different effects depending on the perceived ethnicity of the person who makes them. In contrast to White reporters, for Latina reporters LEP might cue questions about nativity and immigration status. When combined with officials' statements about fraud's prevalence in certain communities and immigration status' relevance to program eligibility and rule violation patterns, the experimental results suggest that decision makers interpret signals of ethnicity and language proficiency together when deciding whether to follow up on claims of fraud.

This interaction echoes Fording et al.'s (2011, p. 1638) finding that race/ethnicity and length of program participation interact significantly in predicting TANF clients' likelihood of being sanctioned. Both interactions indicate that race and ethnicity's meaning to street-level bureaucrats varies depending on accompanying factors. Differences in errors' effect for White and Latina reporters demonstrate that language errors cue different responses depending on the people from whom they appear to originate: the same variable that predicts access for Whites—English proficiency—loses its predictive value for Latinas.

These findings add to the emerging understanding of race and ethnicity in the US welfare state beyond the conventional Black/White dichotomy.[23] Our racial/ethnic focus reflects developments in racial threat phenomena in the United States and related research highlighting Latino ethnicity and immigration status' current political salience. While Black/White inequality remains central to individual-state relationships in general and social control and welfare contexts specifically, recent trends suggest that Latino ethnicity and immigration considerations hold newly magnified importance. We respond accordingly, attending to pivotal contemporary dynamics in the "social construction of target populations" (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

6 | CONCLUSION

Previous research reveals anti-Latino discrimination when people seek information or services from state agencies (Einstein & Glick, 2017; Ernst et al., 2013; White et al., 2015). We find a related phenomenon among representatives of the welfare system's client investigation apparatus. The general public judges Latino immigrants more harshly than White immigrants for behaviors that violate laws or norms (Hartman et al., 2014); our results show that welfare fraud authorities also view Latino-connected rule breaking differently.

More broadly, this investigation illuminates how welfare rule enforcement authorities evaluate different categories of public reporters and, through them, different types of potential fraud suspects. Anti-Black racialization and racism are enduring features of US social safety net programs (Gilens, 1999; M. K. Brown, 1999; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Soss et al., 2011a). Recent trends point toward Latino immigrants' growing centrality in discourse about welfare abuse and dependence (Amundson & Zajicek, 2017, 395–396; Chavez, 2013; J. A. Brown, 2016). Perceived racial status threats predict resistance to social safety net programs (Wetts & Willer, 2018), as do anti-immigrant sentiments (Garand et al., 2017; Hussey & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013). Indeed, findings that immigration attitudes are more salient to opinions about welfare than the anti-Black attitudes long linked to anti-welfare sentiments suggest an "immigrationalization" of welfare attitudes (Garand et al., 2017). Within welfare bureaucracies, differences in how fraud unit gatekeepers process English proficiency for Latina and White reporters indicate that the patterns of thought fraud workers reveal in interviews translate into measurable differences in real-world behavioral patterns. Our results suggest that fraud workers' perspectives on group-level characteristics and suspicions about Latinos' immigration

status may influence their discretionary action as they seek to maximize fraud control outcomes.

Undocumented, documented, and documentation boundary-straddling immigrants alike experience stigmatization, criminalization, and legal vulnerability in US society (Abrego, 2014; Dreby, 2015; HoSang, 2010, Ch. 6; Gonzales, 2016; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Restrictive legal rules—or absent legal protections—affect immigrants both materially and symbolically (Golash-Boza, 2016; Menjívar, 2006), and fear, mistrust, and feelings of marginalization may discourage Latino immigrants from making claims upon legal institutions (Abrego, 2011). The English proficiency–ethnicity interaction our study documents raises important questions about citizenship and perceptions of belongingness as factors bearing upon relationships between state agencies and the public (see also Ernst et al., 2013; White et al., 2015).

Regardless of gatekeepers' underlying motivations, the observed uptake differences have important substantive implications for program clients. Following TANF's replacement of AFDC, cash welfare's contribution to poor Americans' subsistence formulae has largely evaporated (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). The role of SNAP benefits has increased correspondingly, and SNAP's average monthly participation of around 46 million is over 10 times that of TANF (Food and Nutrition Service, 2016; Office of Family Assistance, 2015). Suspending and disqualifying clients via fraud investigations, therefore, threatens tens of millions of Americans' food security. Fraud allegations can also lead to monetary penalties, criminal charges, and even incarceration (see Gustafson, 2009). Both administrative and criminal punishments entail serious consequences for poor families.

Our findings suggest that not all clients are equally exposed to such punishments. And public fraud report uptake as assessed here is one of the numerous discretionary stages in the fraud enforcement process. Fraud workers have significant discretion regarding which cases to pursue, how much time and energy to invest in them, and what types of charges, if any, to pursue (Unintentional Program Violations, IPVs, or referrals for criminal prosecution). This study reveals only one link in the chain of discretionary action that leads to substantiated fraud charges; in the aggregate, between-group differences at various stages of this process have significant implications for systematic disparities in fraud control outcomes.

This study also builds on research identifying related phenomena in other countries. For example, literature from Mexico has documented strong ethnic biases in politicians' engagement with their constituencies (Trejo & Altamirano, 2016), voters' responses to electoral appeals (Aguilar, 2011; Campos Vázquez & Rivas Herrera, 2019), and banks' reactions to potential clients (Martínez Gutiérrez, 2019). Other researchers have observed ethnic biases with respect to local institutions in Brazil (Leivas & dos Santos, 2018), social welfare programs in Colombia (Slough, 2020), and the global allocation of internet access across racial groups (Weidmann et al., 2016). Evidence of bureaucratic discrimination has also been shown in developed countries like Germany (Hemker & Rink, 2017), Sweden (Schütze & Johansson, 2019), and the United Kingdom (Ford, 2016). Our results add to the growing body of literature indicating biases in the bureaucracies of diverse nations around the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Spencer Headworth thanks Shawn Bauldry, Trent Mize, Bob Nelson, Linda Renzulli, and Robin Stryker for productive feedback on earlier drafts, Michael Gaddis for data on names as race/ethnicity signals and other suggestions, and Callie Zaborenko for outstanding research assistance. Viridiana Ríos thanks Justin Grimmer for feedback, Mylene Cano and Omar Espejel for outstanding research assistance, and Jay McCann, Rosalee Clawson, and Aaron Hoffman for mentorship.

ENDNOTES

[1] Some criminal justice agencies also have units dedicated to policing welfare fraud. See Gustafson (2009).

[2] Other typical sources of case referrals include public assistance agency workers and referrals from other state agencies, including police departments.

[3] Lipsky (1980, xi) defines street-level bureaucracies as "the agencies whose workers interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions." Lipsky notes welfare departments as leading examples of such bureaucracies. The fraud workers whom this study focuses on are functionaries of these bureaucracies. Their assigned tasks and day-to-day activities satisfy all of the elements of Lipsky's formulation; they work on questions related to benefit dispensation and are responsible for enforcement actions that result in program-specific sanctions and other legal penalties, and they exercise considerable discretion in the course of their duties.

[4] Throughout, we use the term "race/ethnicity" when referring to group-based categorizations including both racial groups and ethnic groups; this figures prominently into our analyses, which juxtaposes an ethnic group (Latinos) with a racial group (Whites). We use "race" and "racial" when referring specifically to race-based categorizations, and "ethnicity" and "ethnic" when referring specifically to ethnicity-based categorizations.

[5] Throughout, we use "Latina" when referring to our experiment's pretextual fraud reporters, whom we consistently depicted as women, and "Latino" when referring to people of Latin American descent generally.

[6] Some other work questions discrimination's ubiquity. While the literature documents widespread evidence of discrimination, the difficulties of publishing negative results may have contributed to contravening evidence's comparative rarity in peer-reviewed outlets (Arceneaux & Butler, 2016). Both Black and White politicians' comparative responsiveness to same-race constituents appear to temper between-group disparities (McClendon, 2016). Einstein and Glick (2017) also find that public housing officials respond at equal rates to email requests from Black and White people, a result they attribute to public housing's racial demographics, a well-established bureaucratic profession, and anti-discrimination rules. Yet, they also find that Latinos are somewhat less likely to receive responses, and that the responses they do receive are less friendly.

[7] The federal government also allows state governments to retain 20% of recovered overpayments not substantiated as resulting from intentional client fraud.

[8] See also Keiser et al. (2004), who find that people of color are sanctioned more than Whites within local areas, but that non-Whites' disproportionate residence in areas with lower sanction rates leads to overall lower sanction rates.

[9] African Americans, whose poverty and food insecurity rates are even higher, accounted for approximately 30% of SNAP benefits in 2016 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018a).

[10] For parsimony and clarity, we only report here our most theoretically central hypotheses. A more extensive list of hypotheses evaluated is available in the version of the study we registered at Evidence in Governance and Politics prior to accessing our outcome data. (Title: "Unequal Enforcement: How Perceived Ethnicity and Written English Proficiency Affect Welfare Agencies' Responses." ID: 20180430AC.)

[11] Some fraud workers bemoan this fact, suggesting that providing reporters with information regarding report follow-up would encourage more reporting.

[12] We also recorded several characteristics of email responses received, including how quickly responses arrived, responses' length, and whether respondents provided personal contact information. Analyses of these supplementary outcomes did not reveal a consistent pattern of results.

[13] Unfortunately, no systematic data are available on the total numbers of public reports fraud units receive or those reports' characteristics.

[14] Please see Study 2 below for fraud workers' statements about reports commonly lacking the kind of information needed to launch an investigation.

[15] The gatekeepers' personal specifics are unknown; although it is likely that identity characteristics such as race/ethnicity affect their work (Watkins-Hayes, 2009a, 2009b), we cannot assess these factors' potential influence on our results.

[16] The association of children with a case implies the potential for larger overpayments, and fraud units generally evince more interest in cases with greater implicated dollar amounts. See Headworth (2021b).

[17] The state fixed effects address any potential state-level confounders. In auxiliary analyses, we also explored state-level predictors, including Berry et al.'s (2010) measure of government ideology; Democrat versus Republican gubernatorial control; the percentage of Republican seats in state legislatures; states' percentage Latino in 2017 and change in that percentage between 2010 and 2017; states' percentage foreign-born in 2017 and change in that percentage between 2010 and 2017; states' estimated percentage undocumented in 2017 and change in that percentage between 2010 and 2017; and a state-level measure of Latino residential segregation. These auxiliary analyses generally did not yield significant results, perhaps owing to a lack of statistical power.

[18] Reporter reliability considerations may factor into this result. That is, if gatekeepers see Latina reporters as inherently less reliable, this effect could offset increased viability assessments for Latinas' reports.

[19] This control is important, because agencies have more time to answer reports submitted earlier.

[20] Study 1 and Study 2's samples partially overlap; interviews were conducted in some but not all of the states in the final quantitative sample.

[21] Working "under the table" is itself a cue for prejudice; popular opinion more strongly condemns this behavior among Latino immigrants than among White immigrants (Hartman et al., 2014).

[22] Immigrants' legal vulnerability could similarly influence gatekeepers, who might assume that LEP Latinas must have especially "good reasons" to come forward and initiate interaction with a state agency; such presumptions would also encourage closer attention to these reports.

[23] See also Fox (2012) for a penetrating historical analysis of the "three worlds of relief" for Black, Latino, and White Americans.

REFERENCES

Abrego, Leisy J. 2011. "Legal Consciousness of Undocumented Latinos: Fear and Stigma as Barriers to Claims-Making for First- and 1.5-Generation Immigrants." *Law & Society Review* 45(2): 337–70.

Abrego, Leisy J. 2014. "Latino Immigrants' Diverse Experiences of 'Illegality'." In *Constructing Immigrant "Illegality": Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, edited by Cecilia Menjívar and Daniel Kanstroom, 139–60. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Aguilar, Rosario. 2011. *The Tones of Democratic Challenges: Skin Color and Race in Mexico*. Mexico City, Mexico: CIDE.

Amundson, Kalynn, and Anna Zajicek. 2017. "A Case Study of State-Level Policymakers' Discursive Co-constructions of Welfare Drug Testing Policy and Gender, Race, and Class." *Sociological Inquiry* 88(3): 383–409.

Arceneaux, Kevin, and Daniel M. Butler. 2016. "How Not to Increase Participation in Local Government: The Advantages of Experiments When Testing Policy Interventions." *Public Administration Review* 76(1): 131–9.

Baldassarri, Delia, and Maria Abascal. 2017. "Field Experiments across the Social Sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 43: 41–73.

Bergemann, Patrick. 2017. "Denunciation and Social Control." *American Sociological Review* 82(2): 384–406.

Berry, William D., Richard C. Fording, Evan J. Ringquist, Russell L. Hanson, and Carl Klarner. 2010. "Measuring Citizen and Government Ideology in the American States: A Re-appraisal." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 10: 117–35. (Measures updated June 2018). October 1, 2018. https://rcfording.wordpress.com/state-ideology-data/

Bertrand, Marianne, Dolly Chugh, and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2005. "Implicit Discrimination." *American Economic Review* 95(2): 94–8.

Bertrand, Marianne, and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2004. "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination." *American Economic Review* 94(4): 991–1013.

Bittner, Egon. 1967. "The Police on Skid-Row: A Study of Peace Keeping." *American Sociological Review* 32(5): 699–715.

Blalock, Hubert M. 1967. *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

Bobo, Lawrence, James R. Kluegel, and Ryan A. Smith. 1997. "Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler Anti-Black Ideology." In *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, edited by Steven A. Tuch and Jack K. Martin, 15–42. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Born, Catherine E., Pamela J. Caudill, and Melinda L. Cordero. 1999. *Life after Welfare: A Look at Sanctioned Families*. Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work, Welfare and Child Support Research and Training Group.

Brader, Ted, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay. 2008. "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(4): 959–78.

Brodkin, Evelyn Z. 1997. "Inside the Welfare Contract: Discretion and Accountability in State Welfare Administration." *Social Service Review* 71(1): 1–33.

Brodkin, Evelyn Z. 2011. "Policy Work: Street-Level Organizations under New Managerialism." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21 (Suppl. 2): i253–i77.

Brown, Jessica Autumn. 2016. "The New 'Southern Strategy': Immigration, Race, and 'Welfare Dependency' in Contemporary US Republican Political Discourse." *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* 8(2): 22–41.

Brown, Michael K. 1999. *Race, Money, and the American Welfare State*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Butler, Daniel M., and David E. Broockman. 2011. "Do Politicians Racially Discriminate against Constituents? A Field Experiment on State Legislators." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3): 463–77.

Campos Vázquez, Raymundo M. and Carolina Rivas, Herrera. 2019. El Tono de Piel de los Representantes de Elección Popular en México. El Colegio de México. Documento de trabajo No. 2.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2018a. "SNAP Helps Millions of African Americans." Washington, DC.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2018b. "SNAP Helps Millions of Latinos." Washington, DC.

Chavez, Leo R. 2013. *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Chunn, Dorothy E., and Shelley A. M. Gavigan. 2004. "Welfare Law, Welfare Fraud, and the Moral Regulation of the 'Never Deserving' Poor." *Social & Legal Studies* 13(2): 219–43.
Coe, Norman. 1987. "Speakers of Spanish and Catalan." In *Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems*, edited by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith, 72–89. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
Doleac, Jennifer L., and Luke C. D. Stein. 2013. "The Visible Hand: Race and Online Market Outcomes." *The Economic Journal* 123(572): F469–F92.
Dreby, Joanna. 2015. *Everyday Illegal: When Policies Undermine Immigrant Families*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
Edin, Kathryn J., and H. Luke Shaefer. 2015. *$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Einstein, Katherine Levin, and David M. Glick. 2017. "Does Race Affect Access to Government Services? An Experiment Exploring Street-Level Bureaucrats and Access to Public Housing." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(1): 100–16.
Epp, Charles R., Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel. 2014. *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Ernst, Rose, Linda Nguyen, and Kamilah C. Taylor. 2013. "Citizen Control: Race at the Welfare Office." *Social Science Quarterly* 94(5): 1283–307.
Flores, René D., and Ariela Schachter. 2018. "Who Are the 'Illegals'? The Social Construction of Illegality in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 83(5): 839–68.
Food and Nutrition Service. 2013. *SNAP Policy on Non-citizen Eligibility*. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture. https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/snap-policy-non-citizen-eligibility.
Food and Nutrition Service. 2016. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs, 1969–2015*. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture.
Food and Nutrition Service. 2017. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program State Activity Report, Fiscal Year 2016*. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture.
Ford, Robert. 2016. "Who Should We Help? An Experimental Test of Discrimination in the British Welfare State." *Political Studies* 64(3): 630–50.
Fording, Richard C., Joe Soss, and Sanford F. Schram. 2011. "Race and the Local Politics of Punishment in the New World of Welfare." *American Journal of Sociology* 116(5): 1610–57.
Fox, Cybelle. 2004. "The Changing Color of Welfare? How Whites' Attitudes toward Latinos Influence Support for Welfare." *American Journal of Sociology* 110(3): 580–625.
Fox, Cybelle. 2012. *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Fox, Cybelle. 2016. "Unauthorized Welfare: The Origins of Immigrant Status Restrictions in American Social Policy." *The Journal of American History* 102(4): 1051–74.
Gaddis, S. Michael. 2015. "Discrimination in the Credential Society: An Audit Study of Race and College Selectivity in the Labor Market." *Social Forces* 93(4): 1451–79.
Gaddis, S. Michael. 2017a. "How Black are Lakisha and Jamal? Racial Perceptions from Names Used in Correspondence Audit Studies." *Sociological Science* 4: 469–89.
Gaddis, S. Michael. 2017b. "Racial/Ethnic Perceptions from Hispanic Names: Selecting Names to Test for Discrimination." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 3: 1–11.
Gaddis, S. Michael. 2018. *Audit Studies: Behind the Scenes with Theory, Method, and Nuance*. New York: Springer.
Gans, Herbert J. 1995. *The War against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy*. New York: Basic Books.
Garand, James C., Ping Xu, and Belinda C. Davis. 2017. "Immigration Attitudes and Support for the Welfare State in the American Mass Public." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(1): 146–62.
Garland, David. 1996. "The Limits of the Sovereign State: Strategies of Crime Control in Contemporary Society." *British Journal of Criminology* 36(4): 445–71.
Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Giulietti, Corrado, Mirco Tonin, and Michael Vlassopoulos. 2019. "Racial Discrimination in Local Public Services: A Field Experiment in the United States." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 17(1): 165–204.
Goddard, Tim. 2012. "Post-welfarist Risk Managers? Risk, Crime Prevention and the Responsibilization of Community-Based Organizations." *Theoretical Criminology* 16(3): 347–63.
Goertz, Gary. 2006. *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Golash-Boza, Tanya. 2016. "Feeling Like a Citizen, Living as a Denizen: Deportees' Sense of Belonging." *American Behavioral Scientist* 60(13): 1575–89.
Gonzales, Roberto G. 2016. *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
Gray, Kelsey Farson, and Esa Eslami. 2014. *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2012*. Washington, DC: USDA FNS Office of Policy Support.
Gross, Neil. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review* 74(3): 358–79.

Gustafson, Kaaryn S. 2009. "The Criminalization of Poverty." *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 99(3): 643–716.
Gustafson, Kaaryn S. 2011. *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty*. New York: New York University Press.
Hainmueller, Jens, and Daniel J. Hopkins. 2015. "The Hidden American Immigration Consensus: A Conjoint Analysis of Attitudes toward Immigrants." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 529–48.
Halushka, John. 2017. "Managing Rehabilitation: Negotiating Performance Accountability at the Frontlines of Reentry Service Provision." *Punishment & Society* 19(4): 482–502.
Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2004. *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York: New York University Press.
Hartman, Todd K., Benjamin J. Newman, and C. Scott Bell. 2014. "Decoding Prejudice toward Hispanics: Group Cues and Public Reactions to Threatening Immigrant Behavior." *Political Behavior* 36: 143–63.
Hasenfeld, Yeheskel, Toorjo Ghose, and Kandyce Larson. 2004. "The Logic of Sanctioning Welfare Recipients: An Empirical Assessment." *Social Service Review* 78(2): 304–19.
Headworth, Spencer. 2019. "Getting to Know You: Welfare Fraud Investigation and the Appropriation of Social Ties." *American Sociological Review* 84(1): 171–96.
Headworth, Spencer. 2020. "The Power of Second-Order Legal Consciousness: Authorities' Perceptions of 'Street Policy' and Welfare Fraud Enforcement." *Law & Society Review* 54(2): 320–53.
Headworth, Spencer. 2021a. "Broke People, Broken Rules: Explaining Welfare Fraud Investigators' Attributions." *Punishment & Society* 23(1): 24–46.
Headworth, Spencer. 2021b. *Policing Welfare: Punitive Adversarialism in Public Assistance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Hemker, Johannes, and Anselm Rink. 2017. "Multiple Dimensions of Bureaucratic Discrimination: Evidence from German Welfare Offices." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(4): 786–803.
Holmes, Malcolm D., Brad W. Smith, Adrienne B. Freng, and Ed A. Muñoz. 2008. "Minority Threat, Crime Control, and Police Resource Allocation in the Southwestern United States." *Crime & Delinquency* 54(1): 128–52.
HoSang, Daniel Martinez. 2010. *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Huber, Lindsay Pérez. 2016. "'Make America Great Again!': Donald Trump, Racist Nativism and the Virulent Adherence to White Supremacy amid US Demographic Change." *Charleston Law Review* 10: 215–48.
Huff, C. Ronald, and John M. Stahura. 1980. "Police Employment and Suburban Crime." *Criminology* 17(4): 461–70.
Hughes, Cresean, Patricia Y. Warren, Eric A. Stewart, Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, and Daniel P. Mears. 2017. "Racial Threat, Intergroup Contact, and School Punishment." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 54(5): 583–616.
Hussey, Laura S., and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. 2013. "The Changing Role of Race in Social Welfare Attitude Formation: Partisan Divides over Undocumented Immigrants and Social Welfare Policy." *Political Research Quarterly* 66(3): 572–84.
Jiménez, Tomás R. 2008. "Mexican Immigrant Replenishment and the Continuing Significance of Ethnicity and Race." *American Journal of Sociology* 113(6): 1527–67.
Johnson, Richard. 2018. "Trump, the Democrats, and the Politics of Immigration." *Political Insight* 9(3): 15–9.
Kalil, Ariel, Kristin S. Seefeldt, and Hui-Chen Wang. 2002. "Sanctions and Material Hardship under TANF." *Social Service Review* 76(4): 643–63.
Katz, Michael B. 2013. *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Keiser, Lael R., Peter R. Mueser, and Seung-Whan Choi. 2004. "Race, Bureaucratic Discretion, and the Implementation of Welfare Reform." *American Journal of Political Science* 48(2): 314–27.
Kent, Stephanie L., and David Jacobs. 2005. "Minority Threat and Police Strength from 1980 to 2000: A Fixed-Effects Analysis of Nonlinear and Interactive Effects in Large US Cities." *Criminology* 43(3): 731–60.
Kogan, Vladimir. 2017. "Administrative Centralization and Bureaucratic Responsiveness: Evidence from the Food Stamp Program." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 27(4): 629–46.
Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. 2017. *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Koralek, Robin, and Nancy Pindus. 2000. *South Carolina Family Independence Program Process Evaluation*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
Lara-Millán, Armando. 2014. "Public Emergency Room Overcrowding in the Era of Mass Imprisonment." *American Sociological Review* 79(5): 866–87.
Lara-Millán, Armando, and Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve. 2017. "Interorganizational Utility of Welfare Stigma in the Criminal Justice System." *Criminology* 55(1): 59–84.
Lee, Tiane L., and Susan T. Fiske. 2006. "Not an Outgroup, Not Yet an Ingroup: Immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30(6): 751–68.

Leivas, Pedro Henrique Soares, and Anderson Moreira Aristides dos Santos. 2018. "Horizontal Inequality and Ethnic Diversity in Brazil: Patterns, Trends, and Their Impacts on Institutions." *Oxford Development Studies* 46(3): 348–62.

Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Long, J. Scott, and Sarah A. Mustillo. 2021. "Using Predictions and Marginal Effects to Compare Groups in Regression Models for Binary Outcomes." *Sociological Methods and Research*. 50(3): 1284–1320.

Martínez Gutiérrez, Ana Laura. 2019. *¿Quién Tiene Acceso al Crédito en México? Un Experimento sobre Discriminación por Tono de Piel*. Mexico City, Mexico: CONAPRED.

Massey, Douglas S. 2007. *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Maynard-Moody, Steven, and Michael Musheno. 2003. *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

McCarty, William P., Ling Ren, and Jihong Zhao. 2012. "Determinants of Police Strength in Large US Cities During the 1990s: A Fixed-Effects Panel Analysis." *Crime & Delinquency* 58(3): 397–424.

McClendon, Gwyneth H. 2016. "Race and Responsiveness: An Experiment with South African Politicians." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 3(1): 60–74.

McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook. 2001. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(1): 415–44.

Menjívar, Cecilia. 2006. "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 111(4): 999–1037.

Menjívar, Cecilia, and Leisy J. Abrego. 2012. "Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(5): 1380–421.

Milkman, Katherine L., Modupe Akinola, and Dolly Chugh. 2015. "What Happens Before? A Field Experiment Exploring How Pay and Representation Differentially Shape Bias on the Pathway into Organizations." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100(6): 1678–712.

Monnat, Shannon M. 2010. "The Color of Welfare Sanctioning: Exploring the Individual and Contextual Roles of Race on TANF Case Closures and Benefit Reductions." *Sociological Quarterly* 51(4): 678–707.

Natapoff, Alexandra. 2009. *Snitching: Criminal Informants and the Erosion of American Justice*. New York: New York University Press.

Neubeck, Kenneth J., and Noel A. Cazenave. 2001. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge.

Ocen, Priscilla. 2012. "The New Racially Restrictive Covenant: Race, Welfare, and the Policing of Black Women in Subsidized Housing." *UCLA Law Review* 59: 1540–82.

Office of Family Assistance. 2015. *TANF Caseload Data 2014*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families.

Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology* 108: 937–75.

Pager, Devah. 2007. *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pager, Devah, Bruce Western, and Bart Bonikowski. 2009. "Discrimination in a Low-Wage Labor Market: A Field Experiment." *American Sociological Review* 74: 777–99.

Payne, Allison Anne, and Kelly Welch. 2010. "Modeling the Effects of Racial Threat on Punitive and Restorative School Discipline Practices." *Criminology* 48(4): 1019–62.

Pipinis, Dimitris. 2017. "Punitive White Welfare Bureaucracies: Examining the Link between White Presence within Welfare Bureaucracies and Sanction Exits in the United States." *Social Service Review* 91(1): 71–105.

Pugh, Allison J. 2013. "What Good Are Interviews for Thinking about Culture? Demystifying Interpretive Analysis." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1(1): 42–68.

Quadagno, Jill S. 1988. *The Transformation of Old Age Security: Class and Politics in the American Welfare State*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Quadagno, Jill S. 1994. *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Reeves, Joshua. 2017. *Citizen Spies: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society*. New York: New York University Press.

Reskin, Barbara F. 2003. "Including Mechanisms in Our Models of Ascriptive Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 68(1): 1–21.

Reyna, Christine, P. J. Henry, William Korfmacher, and Amanda Tucker. 2005. "Examining the Principles in Principled Conservatism: The Role of Responsibility Stereotypes as Cues for Deservingness in Racial Policy Decisions." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90(1): 109–28.

Rivera, Lauren A., and András Tilcsik. 2016. "Class Advantage, Commitment Penalty: The Gendered Effect of Social Class Signals in an Elite Labor Market." *American Sociological Review* 81(6): 1097–131.

Roberts, Dorothy E. 2012. "Prison, Foster Care, and the Systematic Punishment of Black Mothers." *UCLA Law Review* 59: 1474–500.

Schneider, Anne, and Helen Ingram. 1993. "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy." *American Political Science Review* 87(2): 334–47.

Schram, Sanford F., Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Linda Houser. 2009. "Deciding to Discipline: Race, Choice, and Punishment at the Frontlines of Welfare Reform." *American Sociological Review* 74(3): 398–422.

Schulman, Kevin A., Jesse A. Berlin, William Harless, Jon F. Kerner, Shyrl Sistrunk, Bernard J. Gersh, Ross Dubé, et al. 1999. "The Effect of Race and Sex on Physicians' Recommendations for Cardiac Catheterization." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 340(8): 618–26.

Schütze, Carolin, and Håkan Johansson. 2019. "The Importance of Discretion for Welfare Services to Minorities: Examining Workload and Anti-immigration Attitudes." *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 79(4): 1–18.

Scoular, Jane, and Maggie O'Neill. 2007. "Regulating Prostitution: Social Inclusion, Responsibilization, and the Politics of Prostitution Reform." *British Journal of Criminology* 47: 764–78.

Skolnick, Jerome H. 1966. *Justice without Trial: Law Enforcement in Democratic Society*. New York: Wiley & Sons.

Slough, Tara. 2020. "Bureaucrats Driving Inequality in Access: Experimental Evidence from Colombia." Unpublished paper.

Small, Mario. 2009. "'How Many Cases Do I Need?': On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research." *Ethnography* 10(1): 5–38.

Soss, Joe, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F. Schram. 2011a. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Soss, Joe, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F. Schram. 2011b. "The Organization of Discipline: From Performance Management to Perversity and Punishment." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21 (Suppl. 2): i203–i32.

Stucky, Thomas D. 2005. "Local Politics and Police Strength." *Justice Quarterly* 22(2): 139–69.

Tilcsik, András. 2011. "Pride and Prejudice: Employment Discrimination against Openly Gay Men in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(2): 586–626.

Trejo, Guillermo, and Melina Altamirano. 2016. "The Mexican Color Hierarchy: How Race and Skin Tone Still Define Life Chances 200Years after Independence." In *The Double Bind: The Politics of Racial & Class Inequality in the Americas*, edited by J. Hooker and A. B. Tillery, Jr., 3–16. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.

Turner, Margery Austin, Rob Santos, Diane K. Levy, Doug Wissoker, Claudia Aranda, and Rob Pitingolo. 2013. *Housing Discrimination against Racial and Ethnic Minorities*. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.

Valentino, Nicholas A., Ted Brader, and Ashley E. Jardina. 2013. "Immigration Opposition among US Whites: General Ethnocentrism or Media Priming of Attitudes About Latinos?" *Political Psychology* 34(2): 149–66.

Van Hook, Jennifer, Susan K. Brown, and Frank D. Bean. 2006. "For Love or Money? Welfare Reform and Immigrant Naturalization." *Social Forces* 85(2): 643–66.

Walsh, David, Coral J. Dando, and Thomas C. Ormerod. 2018. "Triage Decision-Making by Welfare Fraud Investigators." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 7(1): 82–91.

Ward, Deborah E. 2005. *The White Welfare State: The Racialization of US Welfare Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Watkins-Hayes, Celeste. 2009a. "Race-Ing the Bootstrap Climb: Black and Latino Bureaucrats in Post-reform Welfare Offices." *Social Problems* 56(2): 285–310.

Watkins-Hayes, Celeste. 2009b. *The New Welfare Bureaucrats: Entanglements of Race, Class, and Policy Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Weidmann, Nils B., Suso Benitez-Baleato, Philipp Hunziker, Eduard Glatz, and Xenofontas Dimitropoulos. 2016. "Digital Discrimination: Political Bias in Internet Service Provision across Ethnic Groups." *Science* 353(6304): 1151–5.

Welch, Kelly, and Allison Anne Payne. 2010. "Racial Threat and Punitive School Discipline." *Social Problems* 57(1): 25–48.

Wetts, Rachel, and Robb Willer. 2018. "Privilege on the Precipice: Perceived Racial Status Threats Lead White Americans to Oppose Welfare Programs." *Social Forces* 92(2): 793–822.

White, Ariel R., Noah L. Nathan, and Julie K. Faller. 2015. "What Do I Need to Vote? Bureaucratic Discretion and Discrimination by Local Election Officials." *American Political Science Review* 109(1): 129–42.

Yin, Robert K. 2014. *Case Study Research*, 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Zhao, Jihong, Ling Ren, and Nicholos P. Lovrich. 2012. "Political Culture Versus Socioeconomic Approaches to Predicting Police Strength in US Police Agencies: Results of a Longitudinal Study, 1993–2003." *Crime & Delinquency* 58(2): 167–95.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Spencer Headworth is an assistant professor of Sociology at Purdue University and an affiliated scholar of the American Bar Foundation. He received his PhD in sociology from Northwestern University.

Viridiana Ríos is an instructor of US-Mexico Politics at Harvard Summer School and a columnist at *El Pais*. She received her PhD in government from Harvard University.

How to cite this article: Headworth, Spencer, Viridiana Ríos. 2021. "Listening to snitches: Race/ethnicity, English proficiency, and access to welfare fraud enforcement systems." *Law & Policy* 43(4): 319–347. https://doi.org/10.1111/lapo.12176