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Introduction

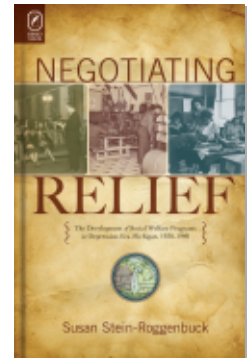
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INTRODUCTION

MICHIGAN GOVERNOR JOHN ENGLER eliminated the state's General Assistance program, which provided relief to unemployed individuals, in October 1991. Other states followed his course, and the number of states providing General Assistance benefits dropped from twenty-three to thirteen.¹ Engler's efforts to reduce welfare costs were mirrored at the national level, culminating in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. The presumption behind many of these reforms was that welfare recipients could work but refused to do so. Michael Katz argues that the 1996 law "signaled the victory of three great forces—the war on dependence, the devolution of public authority, and the application of market models to public policy."² The 1996 reforms emphasized the link between work and citizenship, and the 1996 law redefined work to exclude any training program that took more than one year; recipients could no longer pursue post-secondary education and have it

1. Ruth Connif, "Welfare, Ground Zero: Michigan Tries to End It All," *The Nation* (May 27, 1996): 16; Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 86–88; John A. Begala and Carol Bethel, "A Transformation within the Welfare State," in *The Council of State Governments* 65.1 (1992): 26; Lyke Thompson, "The Death of General Assistance in Michigan," in *The Politics of Welfare Reform*, eds. Donald F. Norris and Lyke Thompson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 79–80.

2. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship*, 1. Katz argues that welfare "reform" has redefined citizenship and strengthened the link between employment and benefits.

considered a “work-related activity.”³ Work was only work if it paid wages. The goal of early-twentieth-century maternalists—to provide mothers’ pensions to enable mothers to care for their children at home—fully disappeared. Child care qualified as “work” only if one was watching someone else’s children.⁴ The emphasis of these reforms was on one’s responsibility to provide for oneself and one’s family.

A key goal of the reforms of the 1990s was to return control over welfare to the states. Proponents of such reforms, like Engler, questioned the role of the federal government in welfare provision. The shift to federalism dates to the 1930s, when the federal government first entered the arena of public welfare. According to Katz, “Instead of the constitutional allocation of government functions by level, federalism became a system in which major functions were shared among local, state, and national governments.” Welfare became a partnership between the different levels of government, and financial responsibility and administrative control shifted, in part, from the county and township levels to the state and federal governments. Engler and other governors sought to reverse that in the early 1990s, arguing that it was not the federal government’s role to end poverty. Engler was extremely critical of the programs of the Great Society in the 1960s, and believed they should be dismantled and authority returned to the states: “These programs,” he claimed, “have worked untold mischief on the American republic.”⁵ Engler led the charge to return the power to develop programs to the states; he welcomed federal funds, but argued that states could more effectively administer those funds, resulting in more cost-effective programs that would encourage independence.

My goal is to provide a historical foundation to this narrative by studying the debates of the 1930s, which led to the federal and state partnership that Engler and other welfare-reform advocates sought to dismantle. I do this by analyzing the experiences in Michigan from 1930 to 1940, the period in which the administration of relief policies shifted, at least in part, from local communities to the state and federal governments. The New Deal was, in fact, a compilation of many “little New Deals” at the state and local levels; implementation of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933 and the Social Security Act of 1935 varied tremendously across the nation.⁶ Edwin Amenta

3. Jyl J. Josephson, “Gender and Social Policy,” in *Gender and American Politics: Women, Men, and the Political Process*, eds. Sue Tolleson-Rinehart and Jyl J. Josephson (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 149–50.

4. Gwendolyn Mink, “The Lady and the Tramp (II): Feminist Welfare Politics, Poor Single Mothers, and the Challenge of Welfare Justice,” *Feminist Studies* 24 (Spring 1998): 59–61; see also Mink, *Welfare’s End* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 22, 108–9.

5. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship*, 79, 84.

6. Edwin Amenta, *Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American*

argues that the limited and uneven change brought by the New Deal resulted from this variance in the states' implementation of those programs. States with limited public welfare before the Great Depression saw the greatest change, as the New Deal programs fostered the creation of a public welfare system. States with a strong network of private welfare agencies saw at least a partial shift to public welfare programs under the Social Security Act. Other states, such as Michigan, whose needy residents relied on public welfare, saw a mix of change and continuity. Despite the new laws, Michigan's welfare system reestablished local control, within the legal limits of the Social Security Act, in 1939. The question of which level of government—local, state, or federal—would create and implement public welfare policy was a major issue in Michigan's debates.

Defense of local control, and thus of democracy, is central to understanding the development of welfare programs in Michigan. Early efforts to respond to the economic crisis of the Great Depression were framed by what I term fiscal localism: the attempt to minimize local expenditures and provide tax relief, even at the expense of welfare services. A fear of creating dependence and a reliance on the private sector for solutions to the economic downturn were central to this idea. A significant antitax sentiment fueled fiscal localism, which overlapped and at times merged with a belief in home rule. Local officials did not seek an end to public relief programs and believed such programs were necessary for the truly needy and deserving; they also welcomed state and federal funds. They did argue, however, that they could best administer the programs, with minimal state or federal oversight. Home rule advocates shared a hostility to professional social work, arguing that business professionals were the most competent welfare administrators. Home rule advocates believed local control was the best means to limit taxation and to achieve fiscal efficiency. Both home rule and fiscal localism appear throughout the decade.

The emergency-relief period did not end in Michigan until 1940, when the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act was applied. Although Michigan qualified for funds under the Social Security Act's Aid to Dependent Children, Aid to Blind, and Old Age Assistance programs beginning in 1936, administration of those programs continued under the emergency-relief administrative structure (local welfare-relief commissions and the State Emergency Relief Administration) until 1940.⁷ The emergency-relief structure remained in

Social Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). See particularly chapter 5, "Some Little New Deals Are Littler than Others." For a similar argument regarding court reform in the Progressive Era, see Michael Willrich, *City of Courts: Socializing Justice in Progressive Era Chicago* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

7. SERA administered relief efforts at the state level, using local welfare-relief commissions (also referred to as county emergency-relief administrations). Both terms were used in the

place in Michigan, and in other states, well beyond the demise of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in December of 1935. Those years saw the overlap and intertwining of numerous welfare programs, including traditional poor relief, county infirmary care, mothers' and old-age pensions, direct relief, work relief, and the categorical aid programs. The 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act attempted to consolidate the state's welfare system while conforming to the requirements of the Social Security Act to permit the state to continue to receive federal funding.

The decade witnessed significant debate and conflict over the state's social welfare policy. Debates operated at numerous levels in Michigan's diverse demographics: rural and urban, industrial and agricultural, native-born white and immigrant or nonwhite. Through these counties we see the negotiations of relief at all levels. In my research, I analyze four counties: Marquette, Saginaw, Van Buren, and Wayne. Collectively they illuminate Michigan's combined rural and urban and agricultural and industrial economy, as well as its population demographics. It is at this level that we see the actual *implementation* of the New Deal programs, rather than just what the federal government envisioned when the laws were written.

Numerous state and local studies of the New Deal have appeared in recent years, adding to our understanding of the operation of these programs at the local and state levels. The New Deal encompassed a range of programs and issues, and scholars vary in their emphasis by necessity; an all-inclusive study of the New Deal is impossible in a single monograph. Many state studies assess the New Deal programs, and the relationships between federal and state governments, as well as the effects of the programs on different groups: farmers, workers, minorities, etc. The studies are often organized around the specific programs, including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Works Progress Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and the Social Security Act. Some emphasize labor or farm issues.⁸

Studies such as those by Jo Ann Argersinger and Douglass Smith examine the impact of the programs on urban politics: Argersinger in Baltimore, and Smith in four southern cities. Cecelia Bucki examines the role of the Socialist Party, and third-party politics in general, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in the fifteen years leading to the Depression and the New Deal years. Other studies,

1930s, but I tend to rely on the former (WRC).

8. For example, see George T. Blakey, *Hard Times and New Deal in Kentucky, 1929–1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986); Jack Irby Hayes Jr., *South Carolina and the New Deal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); and Ronald L. Heinemann, *Depression and New Deal in Virginia: The Enduring Dominion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983).

such as Karen Ferguson's *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*, look at the issue of race and black activism during the New Deal.⁹

A key goal in this study is to examine these years through the lens of relief and welfare, and thus other issues, including farm and labor programs, are given minimal attention.¹⁰ I consider programs, particularly work relief, as they intersected with welfare programs and were conceived as an alternative to "the dole." The title, *Negotiating Relief*, refers to the multiple negotiations that took place between various groups during the debates about how best to provide for the state's needy residents. Local officials, state officials, local welfare-relief commissions, relief workers, professional social workers, and the recipients of relief—all took part in these negotiations and helped to shape the outcome of relief administration. These multiple perspectives reveal the often-competing narratives of relief that emerged during the 1930s in Michigan. Frequently local government representatives, particularly those from rural areas of the state, were at odds with those who sought progressive change in welfare administration. Time and again recipients had different ideas about relief and, although in positions of minimal power, used the system to gain support for their families.

Competing professional visions in welfare administration took center stage in the 1930s in Michigan. The debate centered on what expertise and training were required to administer relief. In its most basic form, the debate pitted home rule advocates who favored a return to pre–New Deal local control of relief (although they welcomed the state and federal monies of the New Deal) against those who advocated a centralized welfare system staffed by professional social workers. The first group saw welfare as a business; therefore, business expertise, and not social work experience, was central to the administration of welfare. Two groups of professionals were behind these debates: local officials and their professional organizations, including the Michigan State Association of Supervisors and the State Association of the Superintendents of the Poor, and professional social workers educated in college social

9. See Jo Ann R. Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Douglas L. Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Cecilia Bucki, *Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal, 1915–1936* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); and Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

10. Jerry Bruce Thomas analyzes the evolution of welfare programs as a part of his study of West Virginia, but most scholars spend minimal time on that issue. See *An Appalachian New Deal: West Virginia and the Great Depression* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), particularly chapters 6 and 7. Susan Traverso analyzes the roles of religion, ethnicity, and gender in welfare developments in Boston from 1910 and 1940. See *Welfare Politics in Boston, 1910–1940* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

work programs. Social workers believed that social work training, including casework methods and family counseling, was critical. The reaction against the passage of the 1937 law reorganizing welfare, which implemented in large measure the recommendations of the 1936 Welfare and Relief Study Commission, illustrates these polar views. The subsequent 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act was a blend of more-traditional practices and more-modern ideas about social welfare.

The story of welfare reorganization is intertwined with the development of the profession of social work. Social workers entered public welfare in an unprecedented way with the onset of the emergency-relief programs of 1933, and were critical negotiators of relief, both with local officials and individual recipients. The profession faced its own internal conflicts during the 1930s, including debates about the role of the “new” relief worker, who did not fit the professional model constructed so carefully by professional organizations in the previous decades. The professional social work system was hard-pressed to meet the training and educational demands of its untrained emergency workers. The status of social work as a profession was contested, and like others employed in the “semiprofessions” or female-dominated fields, social workers were underpaid, but the administrative costs of the emergency-relief system, in particular the salaries paid to caseworkers, were at the heart of criticisms by opponents of professional social work. Competing visions of professionalization, or how to define or use it, existed within the ranks of relief workers. Some wanted no part of the “profession,” opting instead to use unionization to address issues such as working conditions, low pay, and high caseloads, and some allied with relief recipients to secure more adequate benefits.

Michigan’s debates about welfare and relief speak to larger issues operating throughout the nation during this difficult and turbulent period. Fears about the centralization of government and the decline of the local community, and the values associated with notions of community, were at the center of several New Deal-era movements, and also have a larger history in the American past. The reaction against social work, and centralized, state-supervised relief administration, was rooted in these larger national issues, although it manifested itself in the relief debates in this state. Criticisms of local government actually predate the Depression, and political scientists and policy makers questioned the quality and efficiency of county and township governments. The Depression’s severity, and the inability of local governments to respond fully to that crisis, further called into question local government structure. But belief in the sanctity of local control ran deep, as William Brock argues:

Whatever professional critics might say, local government was, in popular estimation, the seed bed of American democracy. If the depression brought

it to the verge of ruin, more would be at stake than the functions of county commissioners, boards of supervisors, township trustees, and overseers of the poor; however pressing the case for centralization, many Americans would consider that the erosion of local responsibility had inflicted fatal injury upon self-government.¹¹

Alan Brinkley's study of Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin, the popular "radio priest" based in a parish in Royal Oak, Michigan, presents an example of this belief in local control and autonomy. Brinkley argues that the importance of these two men and their movements extended far beyond their limited constituencies: "They were manifestations of one of the most powerful impulses of the Great Depression, and of many decades of American life before it: the urge to defend the autonomy of the individual and the independence of the community against encroachments from the modern industrial state."¹² This study of Michigan's relief debates further validates the resonance of those feelings. The hopes and fears tapped by Long and Coughlin, and described by Brock, were remarkably similar to those evidenced in these debates, and in part explain why opponents of professional welfare administration were ultimately successful. Fueled by anti-intellectualism, antiradicalism, antitax sentiment, partisan politics, and growing opposition to the New Deal programs by 1935, opponents of welfare reform advocated a return to local administration of relief, to ensure that relief administration did not become too far removed from the electoral reach of Michigan voters. The rhetoric they employed struck a familiar chord among Michigan voters in the 1938 referendum on welfare reform.

One of my central arguments is analyzing the continuities in social welfare history, as well as the key changes resulting from the New Deal. The hardship of the Great Depression in the 1930s prompted some of the boldest initiatives in social welfare in American history. Two centuries of American poor law, with responsibility for social welfare firmly rooted in local communities, changed as a result, but at times in limited ways. Although a major period that witnessed significant changes and sparked heated debates, the New Deal continued many practices found in pre-Depression relief. The New Deal did introduce the professional social worker to public welfare on a much greater scale than earlier, shifted the source of funding from primarily local to a financial partnership between local, state, and federal governments, and of course changed the magnitude and scope of welfare. In fact numerous continuities

11. William R. Brock, *Welfare, Democracy, and the New Deal* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45, 50–52.

12. Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), xi.

existed between pre–New Deal relief and the establishment of the Social Security Act’s Aid to Dependent Children and Old Age Assistance programs, as well as general-relief programs under the 1939 state law.

One area of continuity was the distinction between earned benefits and public assistance. As Barbara Nelson and other scholars have argued, the New Deal entrenched the “two track” welfare system, separating those who were entitled to help from those who needed benefits. Connected to this was the notion that some recipients deserved assistance, such as widowed mothers of a certain ethnicity or culture, while others did not. The issues of gender and race played important roles. Women and nonwhites often were among those who did not work in paid employment areas included in the early workers’ compensation or the Social Security Act’s insurance program; instead, they often fell under the area of dependent mothers.¹³ A key change from mothers’ pensions was the administrative placement of the program; no longer a part of the Probate Court, ADC was situated squarely in public assistance. This was a significant shift, and a contested one, in some counties, while in others it simply codified the administrative practices of mothers’ pensions.

Welfare reorganization created what I term a “third track” of welfare, or the general-relief programs which were outside the federal arena, the same aid (General Assistance) eliminated in 1991. Home rule advocates had successfully regained control of these services in the 1939 law. These programs, often forgotten in the analysis of federal welfare under the Social Security Act, served those people not eligible for aid under Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance, or Aid to the Blind: often the disabled or those unable to work but too young for OAA. The state government began to contribute funds to general relief after the 1939 reorganization, a key change from pre–New Deal years. Control over this third track of welfare was a contentious part of the debates over welfare reorganization in the 1930s, as local officials fought to prevent the centralization of all relief. For many counties, that translated into a wholesale return to poor-relief practices and traditions. Local officials, particularly township supervisors, continued to wield extraordinary influence in the administration of relief. General relief became the “third track” of welfare provision, and perhaps the most stigmatized of all the welfare programs. The

13. Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95–96, 105–6. Kessler-Harris argues that the social insurance program under the Social Security Act excluded 55 percent of all black workers, 80 percent of all women workers, and 87 percent of all black women workers. See also Barbara Nelson, “The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen’s Compensation and Mothers’ Aid,” in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

state replaced these county programs in 1976 with General Assistance, with the state fully funding the program, completing the centralization of relief started in the 1930s.¹⁴ The arguments for the welfare reforms of the 1990s hearken to those put forth in the 1930s by groups and individuals opposed to the federalism created by the New Deal. Michigan's General Assistance program, which provided both cash aid and health care for unemployed residents, evolved from the changes of the 1930s.¹⁵

Another area of continuity, intertwined with the issue of gender, was the role of the family in welfare administration. Central to that administration is the ideology of family responsibility, closely linked to the family wage. Social welfare law in Michigan, and in most other states as well, contained stipulations that family members had a legal responsibility to support other family members, if able to do so. For young children, fathers were the logical first step as the expected family breadwinner. If the father could not provide, that duty extended to other family members. The responsible-relative clause dates to Michigan's earliest poor laws in the nineteenth century, and it remained in force in Public Act 146 of 1925, which consolidated Michigan's relief system. Township supervisors or county superintendents of the poor enforced support of relatives in the county's probate court. Children who had been deserted or abandoned by parents before they reached the age of sixteen were exempt from the responsibility, but they had to prove that they were in fact deserted.¹⁶ The 1935 Social Security Act did not require that states enforce any family responsibility in administration of the categorical aid programs, but a large number of states, including Michigan, nevertheless retained those provisions in their laws.¹⁷ The responsible-relative clause persisted in emergency-relief

14. Josephson, "Gender and Social Policy," 141; *Report of the Michigan Department of Social Services for 1976* (Lansing: 1976), 12; Public Act 237 of 1975, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan*, 607–11.

15. Opponents of the program argued that recipients were employable, able-bodied adults who refused to work. Katz points out that more than 40 percent of GA recipients in Michigan were over the age of forty and 61 percent were never employed; the majority of the latter category were "many newly widowed or divorced women." Only 38 percent found work within two years, and only 26 percent earned an income comparable to their benefits under GA. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship*, 87–88. The program served many of the state's seasonal workers, employed in construction, tourism, and agriculture, as well as some auto workers. Thompson, "The Death of General Assistance," 81–82.

16. Edith Abbott, *Public Assistance: American Principles and Policies, Vol. I* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 277–80; Isabel Campbell Bruce and Edith Eickhoff, *The Michigan Poor Law: Its Development and Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 31.

17. A Works Progress Administration study found that just nine states, and the District of Columbia, had no provisions for relatives' support. Another nine states included grandparents, grandchildren, and siblings among the responsible relatives, and nine others excluded only siblings. The *Social Security Bulletin* reported in 1939 that twenty-seven of the fifty-one Old

administration practices, and also in the 1937 and 1939 welfare-reorganization laws in Michigan.¹⁸

All relief programs, whether direct relief or work programs, framed aid through the lens of the family. Whether it was the earnings of a father or brother with a Works Progress Administration assignment, or of a young man sent to a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, such aid was for the family's needs, and was budgeted accordingly. Program administration often ignored individual needs and dissension within the family in their focus on the family as a unit. The WPA, CCC, and other work-relief assignments operated with the expectation that wages would support the family and household. The enforcement of the responsible-relative clause was a key source of conflict among social workers, relief recipients, and their families before, during, and after the New Deal. Often when families balked at helping other members, particularly elderly parents on OAA or mothers receiving ADC, the recipient paid the price in terms of delayed or lost benefits. Although the intention of the law was to use the state as a means of support as a last resort, the outcome at times was to punish those who needed the aid the most, and who often had the least power to persuade family members to contribute. Gender played a critical role in this debate, both in what social workers expected of recipients and in the positions individuals held in the negotiation of relief in households and families.

Recipients were very much a part of the relief story, and provided their own narrative of the experience of receiving relief during the 1930s. Case records from the emergency-relief programs and the early years of the categorical-aid programs permit the inclusion of their voices, although filtered through the lens of the caseworker. Four counties serve as case studies based in part on the availability of case-file materials from those localities; all four counties' case records from the New Deal programs have survived to some extent.¹⁹

Age Assistance programs required relatives' support, and another fourteen states had such requirements in their general poor laws. Robert C. Lowe, *State Public Welfare Legislation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 63–67; “Public Assistance,” *Social Security Yearbook: Annual Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin* 3 (1939): 161.

18. See Public Act 146 of 1925, Chapter 1, Sections 1–21; Public Act 258 of 1937, Sections 30–31; Public Act 280 of 1939, Sections 76–77, *Public and Local Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan*; “Local Public Welfare,” n.d., WRSC Records, RG 35 Box 5, Folder 10, 96; Bruce and Eickhoff, 3, 10, 26, and 31. Under a 1953 law, grandparents were relieved of the burden of caring for grandchildren when the grandchildren reached the age of sixteen, but the responsibility of other relatives to support family members did not undergo significant change until 1970. See Public Act 148 of 1953 and Public Act 88 of 1970, chapter 1.

19. All case files of the Department of Human Services have restricted access in the archives. Researchers must obtain permission from the department to see the files, and they cannot record any proper names of recipients. Thus my records include only case numbers and

(See maps I.1 and I.2.) Van Buren County's Emergency Relief Administration case-file collection includes 102 case files dating from 1930 to 1940, and is the most complete source base I have located.²⁰ I also analyzed the OAA and ADC case files from Saginaw County, in the thumb area of Michigan, on the east side of the state; Marquette County, on the shores of Lake Superior, in the Upper Peninsula; and Wayne County, which includes Detroit, the state's largest city. I focused on cases initiated before the close of 1940, when the emergency-relief period ends. These case files include original application forms, verification investigations conducted by social workers, detailed case histories chronicling case visits, and correspondence.²¹ Particularly valuable are letters or other correspondence written by recipients voicing their views on the relief programs serving them. These records make it possible not only to study the basic questions of who sought relief and why, but also to reconstruct the interactive relationships between the various individuals and agencies involved in the administration and receipt of welfare aid. In addition, the records enabled me to assess how both groups viewed welfare policy and their individual case, and how relief recipients influenced the program's administration.²²

the personal characteristics of the recipient. All recipients' names are fictitious, although I have endeavored to retain ethnic characteristics in the selection of a name. All case numbers, and footnote references to archival locations and microfilm reel numbers, are accurate; anyone who obtains permission from the department can identify specific cases using the case number.

20. The full collection includes 133 records through 1945, but as with the ADC and OAA files, I examined only those initiated before or during 1940. Samples of other counties' ERA records survive for Kent and Bay counties but contain only a handful of case files. While useful for anecdotal purposes, they are too limited for any statistical analysis or for the county's administrative practices. Most counties' emergency-relief records were apparently lost, although many of the categorical-aid records include ERA information. A large number of OAA and ADC recipients in the late 1930s also received direct relief under FERA.

21. Saginaw's collection is the most complete, including 409 ADC cases and 218 OAA cases. I analyzed the complete run of surviving ADC files and a sampling (every tenth case) of OAA records. A sampling of Wayne County's collection (every fiftieth case) yielded a base of 319 ADC and 285 OAA cases. Marquette's collection is much smaller, with just 16 ADC cases and 39 OAA cases. Only about a quarter of Michigan counties are represented in the collections with a significant number of case files; most collections contain only a 2 percent sample, thus limiting the counties available for study.

22. The ERA case files and the categorical-aid records represent different relief populations. ERA records reflect a variety of case types, from unemployment to ill health to dependent mothers. They include anyone who applied for relief during the emergency-relief period. In contrast, the ADC and OAA programs served unemployable individuals, or those people who either could not work, physically, or should not work, according to policy makers, because of parental responsibilities. Many of the categorical-aid recipients also received emergency relief and were simply transferred to the ADC and OAA programs in 1936. Although they were categorized as ADC or OAA, the local welfare-relief commission continued to administer those programs until the 1939 law was implemented. Thus they continued under the New Deal emergency-relief umbrella until the end of the decade.

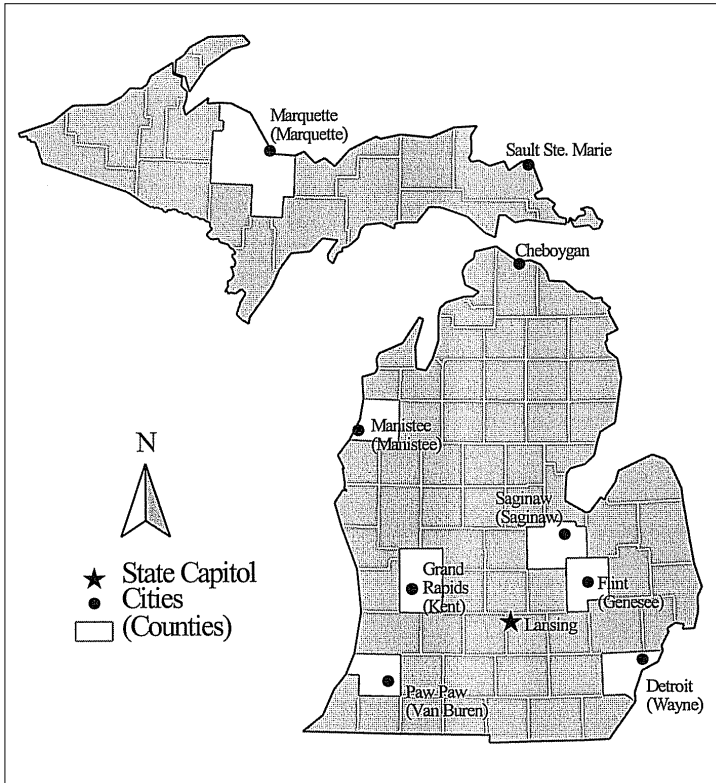


Map I.1 Michigan counties

Although New Deal programs were opposed and criticized from the start, they were important to Michigan residents, providing relief and employment when there were few other outlets. The state of Michigan suffered high unemployment and relief rates during the Depression years, and its economic problems dated to the 1920s. Much of the state was already in a recession by the crash of 1929, and the problems only worsened in the 1930s. By 1933 between 13 and 16 percent of all Michigan residents depended on some kind of relief, and those numbers approached 20 to 30 percent in the northern parts of the state, especially the Upper Peninsula.²³

Michigan was a diverse state in terms of demographics and economics in the 1930s, and thus its residents experienced the Depression in different

23. William Haber and Paul L. Stanchfield, *Unemployment, Relief, and Economic Security: A Survey of Michigan's Relief and Unemployment Problem* (Lansing: State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, 1936), 19, 39.



Map I.2 Key locations in the development of social welfare, 1930–40

ways, depending upon one's region, race, nativity, citizenship, sex, age, and occupation. Although Michigan contained a relatively small minority population (just 4 percent in 1930, the vast majority of which was African-American), its foreign-born population was 19.8 percent in 1920 and 17.4 percent in 1930. Its economy varied from the industrial centers of Detroit and Flint to the agricultural centers in southwestern Michigan, mid-Michigan, and the thumb area on the east side of the state between Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron. The Upper Peninsula and the northern Lower Peninsula centered on lumbering and lake commerce, and mining also was a critical industry in the Upper Peninsula. The counties selected for this case study reflect this diversity in population demographics and economics, both of which are intertwined with the need for and delivery of relief and social welfare services in the 1930s. Representing that diversity, in conjunction with securing the case-file source base, were critical factors in selecting the counties for

study. Historians know much more about social welfare, relief, and the New Deal programs in large urban centers than they do about smaller towns and rural areas. My study seeks to illuminate both the rural and urban nature of relief.

Van Buren County, largely white and native born, represents the rural, agricultural experience in Michigan, while Marquette County illustrates the mining and lumbering (and some agriculture) economy of the Upper Peninsula. Saginaw County, with its racial and ethnic diversity, represents the “simultaneous growth of industry and agriculture” characteristic of Michigan and other Midwestern states.²⁴ Its economy centered on sugar beets and other agriculture, but industry also played an increasing role, particularly with the rise of the automotive and steel industries, and later the defense plants of the 1940s.²⁵ These job opportunities attracted African-Americans and Mexicans, offering an opportunity to assess the role of race and citizenship in the welfare process. Race was and is a critical issue in welfare policy, but citizenship also played an important role. Noncitizens of all nationalities experienced discrimination in welfare programs as well as in employment opportunities, and both Saginaw and Wayne counties offer the basis for this analysis. Mexican populations in Saginaw and Wayne counties also faced repatriation efforts in the 1930s, a strategy used at the state and local level to remove noncitizens who might take jobs, or relief benefits, from citizens and residents.

Wayne County was the center of Michigan’s automotive industry (and later the defense industry). It had the highest population of any county, and its racial demographics were very similar to Saginaw County (see table I.1). Those two counties contained the majority of the state’s African-American and Mexican populations. Wayne County had more than half of all Mexicans who lived in the state, but the Mexican population in Saginaw made up a greater percentage of the county’s overall population.²⁶ Wayne County (and Detroit) experienced a unique relief situation. Detroit professionalized its social welfare department in the 1920s, and thus does not represent the larger experiences in the state. Detroit’s size also permitted it to create a Department of Social Welfare separate from Wayne County under the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act.

Van Buren County, largely rural, with only one city (South Haven) in the 1930s, had a population of 32,637 in 1930. At that time, the county’s popula-

24. Daniel Nelson, *Farm and Factory: Workers in the Midwest, 1880–1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), vii.

25. Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 20–22.

26. Wayne County’s 1930 census listed 7,104 Mexicans—more than half of the state’s 13,336 Mexicans. Saginaw had the next greatest number (2,270), which represented nearly 2 percent of the county’s population. See *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 1152.

TABLE I.1
FOREIGN-BORN AND MINORITY POPULATIONS IN 1930

County	1930 Census Population	% Foreign-Born	% African-American	% Mexican
Marquette	44,076	22.8	0.4	0.0
Saginaw	120,717	9.1	3.9	1.9
Van Buren	32,637	10.3	1.4	0.0
Wayne	1,888,946	25.3	7.0	0.37
State of Michigan	4,842,325	7.4	3.5	0.3

Source: *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. I, Population*, 1115, 1152.

tion was 88 percent native-born white, 10.5 percent foreign-born white and 1.4 percent African-American (see table I.1).²⁷ More than half of its employed residents labored in the farming industry, either on their own farms or as laborers. Other key areas of employment included retail, construction, and domestic work (for women).²⁸

Van Buren County residents made their living through the century from fruit production, including berries (blueberries, strawberries, and cherries), apples, pears, and peaches. Grape vineyards not only yielded fruit but also fed the wine and juice industries. Juice companies had organized in the early years of the twentieth century, with companies in Lawton and Paw Paw. Welch Grape Juice Company, for instance, started business in Van Buren during World War I, manufacturing grape jelly for the armed forces. With the demise of Prohibition, in 1933, came the growth of the wine-making industry, and by 1937 the county boasted five wineries.²⁹ Some residents also labored in the paper mills of Watervliet, in nearby Berrien County, as well as in Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids.

Marquette County, like much of the Upper Peninsula, had a significant foreign-born population. It was slightly larger than Van Buren, with a population in 1930 of 44,076. Nearly one-quarter of its residents were non-native-born whites; the foreign-born population was 22.8 percent. However, as was true for much of Michigan, Marquette had few nonwhite residents, with just 0.4 percent of its population listed as African-American.³⁰ Immigrants from Scandinavian countries—especially Finland, Norway, and Sweden—and also from

27. *Fifteenth Census*, 1140.

28. *Fifteenth Census*, 1164.

29. Douglas L. Semark, ed., *A History of Van Buren County, Michigan* (Hartford, MI: Van Buren County Historical Society, 1983), 1, 3–5.

30. *Fifteenth Census*, table 13, 1138, 1140.

Ireland, Scotland, England, and Canada, helped to settle Marquette. Some came under contract with mining companies, while others migrated for land in addition to the promise of employment.³¹

Like much of the Lake Superior shore of the Upper Peninsula, Marquette centered its economic base on extractive industries such as mining and lumbering, dating to the mid-nineteenth century. For the Marquette area, iron ore was the major material, as compared to copper in the Keewenaw Peninsula. Iron ore was first found in the region in 1844, and by 1845 the first mine—Jackson Mine—opened, and became the site of the city of Negaunee in Marquette County.³² Other mining ventures soon followed, including the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company. The county's location on the shores of Lake Superior made it a natural choice as an urban center for the Upper Peninsula and the mining industry, and completion of the shipping locks in 1855 at Sault Ste. Marie—connecting Lake Superior with the lower Great Lakes—only facilitated the industry's growth. Until the late nineteenth century, all of Michigan's iron-ore industry was concentrated in the Marquette range.³³

Of the companies founded during the peak of Marquette's mining industry, the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, the largest, continued to operate into the mid-twentieth century, and gained ownership of several smaller mines throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mining continued to be a key employer in the area by 1930.³⁴ In addition to its role as a shipping center, Marquette also developed other industries, including chemical production (nitroglycerin), sawmills, brownstone quarries, flour mills, and a brickyard, in addition to agriculture. Its key industries—mining, forestry, and railroads—were all on the decline by the Depression, however, and the short growing season made agriculture less than ideal in the Upper Peninsula.³⁵ But its more diverse industrial base saved it from disappearing, as some mining towns did.

Saginaw County represents the state's mix of industry and agriculture. Originally founded as a major lumber town, Saginaw, both the city and the

31. Warren Vander Hill, "So Many Different People," in *A Most Superior Land*, ed. Susan Newhof Pyle (Lansing: TwoPeninsula Press, 1983), 19–23.

32. John S. Burt, "Boys, look around and see what you can find," *Michigan History* 78.6 (November/December 1994): 11, 14.

33. "A Bond of Interest," in *Harlow's Wooden Man: Quarterly Journal of the Marquette County Historical Society* XIII, no. 5 (Fall 1978): 6–10; Kathleen Marie Blew, "The Impact of Family Settlement Patterns on the Politics of Lake Superior Communities, 1890–1920" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1982), 87–88.

34. "A Bond of Interest," 16; Blew, "The Impact of Family Settlement Patterns," 87–88.

35. *Fifteenth Census*, 1162; *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 345–46.

larger county, developed an industrial base that helped it to weather the worst of the Depression years. Saginaw County had a population of 120,717; of its residents, 9.1 percent were foreign-born, 3.9 percent were African-American, and 1.9 percent were Mexican (see table I.1). Immigrants from Germany, Poland, and Canada (French), some of whom were recruited to work in the lumber industry, helped to settle the area by the 1870s, although native-born workers continued to dominate the lumber workforce. Sugar beet farming and processing emerged by the early twentieth century as a major part of Saginaw's economy, bringing the area's first Mexicans to Saginaw as migrant laborers.³⁶

Lumbering provided the economic foundation for Saginaw, and the first sawmills were built on the shores of the Saginaw River in the 1830s. Saginaw's location—just downstream from the convergence of four major tributaries of the Saginaw River—made it a logical site for storing logs and constructing sawmills.³⁷ The lumber industry prospered in the nineteenth century, and thus so did the city of Saginaw and the surrounding area. By the 1880s and 1890s, however, lumbering of the pine forests was on the decline, and only half of the sawmills remained in operation at the close of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, manufacturing began to replace lumbering as the dominant industry. Manufacturing companies, both metal and automotive, developed rapidly, including what would become the largest employers in the area: Jackson-Church and Wilcox (later to be General Motors and Saginaw Steering Gear) and Valley Grey Iron (Chevrolet Grey Iron Foundry). The auto-parts manufacturers would be major employers by World War I. By the 1920s more than ten thousand people worked in the Saginaw Steering Gear Division.³⁸

Negotiating Relief is organized chronologically in the first half and topically in the latter. Chapter 1 describes pre-Depression relief in Michigan, focusing on Marquette, Saginaw, Van Buren, and Wayne counties and their social welfare systems. Michigan's welfare system was locally administered and publicly funded, even before the New Deal. Chapter 2 chronicles the efforts of both public and private agencies to meet the rising demand for unemployment relief in the early years of the Great Depression, before the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Ultimately, all counties would face major financial crises as a result of the relief problem, but resistance to federal aid remained strong until 1932, and never entirely disappeared.

36. Germans and Canadians were the major proportion (81 percent) of Saginaw's immigrant population by 1890. Jeremy W. Kilar, *Michigan's Lumbertowns: Lumbermen and Laborers in Saginaw, Bay City, and Muskegon, 1870-1905* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 174, 177, 194; Jeremy W. Kilar and Sandy L. Schwan, *Saginaw's Changeable Past: An Illustrated History* (St. Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, 1994), 66, 98, 118-19.

37. Kilar, *Michigan's Lumbertowns*, 20-22.

38. *Ibid.*, 293; Kilar and Schwan, *Saginaw's Changeable Past*, 114-15.

Chapter 3 assesses the implementation of the Federal Emergency Relief Act in 1933. The FERA years foreshadowed the deep anticentralization views regarding relief administration that would only magnify in the next five years. Local officials sought to defend home rule. Many counties resented the intrusion of the federal and state governments into what they saw as their business; they welcomed the financial help, but did not want the rules that accompanied that aid. Chapter 4 chronicles the work-relief programs of the New Deal, particularly the Civil Works Administration, Works Progress Administration, National Youth Administration, and Civilian Conservation Corps. These programs were important in bringing millions of dollars in wages to the state, and often served as a vehicle for family support until private employment became available.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to two groups critical to relief negotiations in this period: social workers (and the profession at large) and the recipients of relief. Chapter 5 analyzes the competing professional visions for relief administration, with a focus on the effects of the Great Depression and New Deal years on social workers and the profession of social work. High demand for caseworkers created an influx of untrained relief workers who did not meet the professional-education standards, creating tension and division within the profession. The conflict culminated in the spread of social worker unions to address the labor grievances of relief workers. This chapter also examines the influence of professional social work on public welfare agencies.

Chapter 6 analyzes the relief negotiations between caseworkers and recipients, who saw federal and state officials as new allies in the administration of welfare. The recipients' narrative often contrasted sharply with that described by the caseworker. At the center of these negotiations were expectations of family responsibility, and the framing of relief around the unit of the family. Recipients were not passive participants, but agents in the administration of relief in the 1930s.

Chapter 7 turns to the statewide negotiation of relief in the welfare-reform debate after FERA's end in 1935. The ideologies of home rule and fiscal localism are central. Michigan's welfare law needed major revision to enable the state to receive federal grants under the Social Security Act. The conflicts outlined in chapter 3 only intensified as local officials sought to defend their authority against what they saw as encroachment by the federal and state governments. Debates took place during meetings and hearings of the Welfare and Relief Study Commission, appointed in 1936 to assess the state's welfare system. Local officials, and their representative associations, successfully mobilized to defeat the 1937 laws that resulted from the commission's recommendations, in a victory for home rule.

Debates about relief in Michigan in the 1930s centered on notions of expertise and power, as well as on home rule and fiscal localism. Differences between key groups, particularly local officials and advocates of professional social work, focused on beliefs about what expertise was needed for relief administration. In detailing these debates, and the competing narratives they generate, I do not aim to privilege one over the other, but seek to give voice to the complexity of those debates and to illuminate the experiences of those involved. Although associations representing specific groups often took a firm stand on welfare issues, the individuals within those groups represented a spectrum of beliefs. Some local officials advocated professional social work and centralization of relief, while some advocates of social work practices did not believe those methods were needed in public welfare. The complexities, revealed in part by the lack of a unified voice and a diversity of motives, resulted ultimately in a welfare system that represented both change and continuity.³⁹ The mixed nature of the 1939 Welfare Reorganization Act left few people on any side fully satisfied, and welfare administration continued to be debated in the years that followed.

39. Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 13–15. Schoen's introduction provides a helpful discussion of the diversity of motivations behind reproductive policy and the agency of women affected by that policy.