

Investigating the Possible Existence of Human Services Deserts

Shoshana Shapiro, PhD

Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute for Research on Poverty, U-W Madison
Wisconsin Initiative for Science Literacy

Human services are local goods and services that are directly given to Americans who are experiencing times of poverty or being short on cash. Some examples of human services are food banks and pantries, homelessness shelters, emergency rent assistance, and transportation assistance for low-income individuals. Human services are typically given out by nonprofit agencies to residents of the same county where the agency is located. While Americans experiencing poverty sometimes receive other types of cash assistance, like food stamps, direct cash assistance is limited in America and many Americans are not eligible for it. Because of this, human services agencies are often the main place Americans experiencing poverty can get assistance for basic needs like food, shelter, and transportation. This research is intended to inform policy around provision of nonprofit human services so that policymakers can make sure all Americans have access to these crucial services.

I am a postdoctoral National Poverty Fellow (NPF) with the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The NPF program is a federal government-university partnership administered by IRP seeking to build the capacity of postdoctoral researchers conducting high-quality policy-relevant research on poverty and inequality in the United States. In that role, I am in residence on the Data Science and Technology Team in the Office of Community Services in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one of the largest federal nonprofit human services program offices. I

graduated in August from the Joint Program in Public Policy and Sociology at the University of Michigan, where I focused on poverty research through affiliations with the Poverty Solutions research group and the Institute for Social Research Population Studies Center. I am originally from Upstate New York, and, prior to attending graduate school, I worked on rural human services policy in the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

I am delighted to contribute to the program "Sharing UW-Madison Postdoctoral Scholarly Research with Non-Science Audiences," sponsored by the Wisconsin Initiative for Science Literacy (WISL). This program, made possible by the dedication of the WISL staff, specifically Cayce Osborne, Elizabeth Reynolds and Professor Bassam Shakhashiri, is instrumental in fostering connections between scientific exploration and a wider audience. My postdoctoral fellowship is in the Institute for Research on Poverty at U-W Madison, and this project has also been supported by a grant from the Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy Research. My journey as a postdoctoral fellow is not just about research, it's an effort to engage in effective scientific communication to support policy solutions to positively impact the world.

In this project, I research the question of whether some places in America are human services deserts, where residents can't get any human services at all – in other words, no food banks, homelessness shelters, or rent assistance are available to those in need. Previous research suggests that it is likely that there may be some human services deserts. Other researchers found that there are counties without a single social worker, who would typically staff a human services organization (Belanger 2013; 2018; Larson et al. 2016). Those studies, however, did not confirm that there really are human services deserts. Some of those counties

without a social worker may have services provided by a human services agency in another county. However, others may really be deserts, where no human services at all are available to residents of the county. This would be a major problem because residents would have no access or little access to crucial human services, including food banks and pantries, homelessness shelters, emergency cash assistance, transportation assistance, and other important human services programs.

In this research project, I interview professionals working in counties in two states, Georgia and Kansas, to understand whether certain counties are human services deserts. Kansas and Georgia were selected as sites because they both have an unusually high number of possible human services desert counties, and they represent different regions of the country. This project is different from the previous research on this topic because I talk to people from a specific county to confirm what services are available within that county. I selected the counties to call using data on national human services availability from the National Center for Charitable Statistics, which pointed me to places that may be human services deserts based on the data, and I am using the interviews to confirm whether they indeed are. While the national data can give indicators of places that have a high likelihood of being human services deserts, the interviews are important to confirm the information in the data based on the services provided in the county. Working with me are a team of six research assistants who have helped to call the counties and interview the people working there. One of those research assistants, Aayu Jain, is a second author on writing the paper that will give the results of this research project.

We started the interviews with professionals working in these possible human services desert counties in 2020, and we anticipate finishing the interviews by the end of 2025. Because of the pandemic and the cost and distance of interviewing folks living in forty counties in two states, we used Zoom to conduct the interviews with the professionals working in the counties. In all, we have done 33 interviews with 49 counties, which was over 95 percent of the counties we were hoping to speak with. Because in small counties, providers often serve more than one county, some of the interviews covered several counties. We spoke with professionals who worked in county government, state government, agricultural extensions, and local hospitals and health clinics. If there was a human services provider in the region, we also spoke to them. We asked the professionals about what human services are available in their counties, going through a list of human services and asking about each one. For example, we asked them if there were food banks and pantries available in the county. We asked if there were homelessness shelters or affordable rental housing available in the county. We also asked if there were services that were not physically in the county but available to residents of the county. These questions let us understand, across all of the counties, which counties had access to human services for residents. We also asked some open-ended questions to understand more about what it was like to live in those counties. For example, we asked the professionals what they thought were the strengths and weaknesses of the human services system in their county and how they thought the system impacted those seeking services. Some of the most frequently mentioned themes of the responses to these questions are highlighted below.

These answers have given some interesting new information about whether the counties are human services deserts. They support the idea that the majority of the counties

are, in fact, human services deserts. The professionals said that their county had few services in 70 percent of all interviews. This was brought up in about 50 percent of the Kansas interviews and about 75 percent of the Georgia interviews, suggesting that, although human services deserts may pose a challenge in both states, there may be more human services deserts in Georgia as compared to Kansas. Transportation challenges to access services was also a very often discussed theme, with over 90 percent of our interviewees in both Georgia and Kansas bringing up the topic of transportation challenges. For example, one professional we interviewed told us that, “55 miles is... the closest city with more services, even then, not all services can be provided in those cities so people will have to travel across the state for more specialized services.” This illustrates transportation as a practical barrier in accessing services, as not all Americans who are experiencing a spell of poverty will have the time or access to transportation to travel 55 miles to access things like food banks or housing services.

This research is important because, as I mentioned earlier, it matters crucially for poor families if they have access to assistance for food, housing, transportation, and other critical goods and services. Access to those critical goods and services can help families get through periods where they have little money, such as a job loss or a family member’s illness. For both children and adults, it is important for overall well-being to have good food, stable housing, reliable transportation, and the other basic goods and services they may need. That foundation helps with health, mental health, and it can even help people become stably employed. Every American needs access to basic human services if they experience a spell of poverty. This project seeks to find the places where Americans do not have access to those services. Government officials and politicians will be able to use this research to direct more services

there. For example, government human services programs can use this analysis to identify regions that might be underserved by their grant programs and consider ways to connect those regions to major flagship human services organizations such as Community Action Agencies and United Ways. Another possible policy to address the issue of human services deserts would be a program to incubate new human services in human services desert counties, modeled on successful programs for incubating new services in health care delivery.

The next step on this research project is to finish conducting the interviews and analyze the data we got from the questions about which services are provided in each county. For example, we will make a list of counties that don't have food assistance services, don't have housing assistance services, or don't have transportation assistance services. This will give more detailed information about which counties technically qualify as full human services deserts. At the end of the project, we hope to give a final answer about whether human services deserts really exist, and how many there might be based on our investigations in Georgia and Kansas.

Works Cited

- Belanger, Kathleen. 2013. "Human Services Deserts." *The Rural Monitor*, May 6, 2013. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/rural-monitor/human-services-deserts/>.
- . 2018. "Child Maltreatment in Insular & Isolated Communities." In *Child Maltreatment in Insular and Isolated Communities*. Child Welfare League of America. <https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/isolated-e1542037752407.jpg>.
- Larson, Eric, Davis Patterson, Lisa Garberson, and Holly Andrilla. 2016. "Supply and Distribution of the Behavioral Health Workforce in Rural America." Data Brief 160. Seattle: WWAMI Rural Health Center. <https://depts.washington.edu/fammed/rhrc/publications/supply-and-distribution-of-the-behavioral-health-workforce-in-rural-america/>.