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The High Cost of Doing Good: Earnings in Social Assistance Jobs in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Workers in care occupations and industries in the United States earn less than counterparts with similar personal characteristics in other jobs. We document considerable gradation within care services, showing that workers employed in social assistance earn less than workers in other care industries such as education and healthcare. We posit that social assistance providers are particularly vulnerable to pay penalties because their clients suffer from low bargaining power, weak political voice, and cultural stigmatization. Institutional context matters—social assistance has witnessed a shift from public to private provision since the 1980s; unlike other care industries, private sector workers in social assistance (most of whom work in non-profits) earn less than their counterparts in the public sector. We suggest that public subcontracting to private firms is a cost-cutting strategy that has put downward pressure on the wages of social assistance providers.

Key words: earnings; social assistance; care services; industry wage premia; nonprofits.

Recent research shows that employees in care occupations and industries in the United States earn less than counterparts with similar personal characteristics in many other jobs (Budig, Hodges, and England 2019; England, Budig, and Folbre 2002; Folbre, Gautham, and Smith 2023). Pay penalties appear to be linked to differences in worker bargaining power, such as vulnerability to employer discrimination, but also to prominent features of care work itself, such as intrinsic motivation, positive spillover or public-good effects, and team production. The intrinsic caring motives of care workers reduce their willingness to press for higher wages, even as they provide services that create benefits beyond their direct recipients ("spillover effects"), making it difficult for employers to capture the full extent of their value-added (England 2005). Care provision is also hard to standardize, with its effectiveness depending on the motivation and cooperation of those served, making it difficult to measure (and accordingly reward) individual value-added (Folbre et al. 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, with many care workers facing increased workloads, lack of personal

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protective equipment, and heightened risk of infection, further contributing to staffing shortages and burnout (Duffy, Armenia, and Price-Glynn 2023).

Empirical research reveals significant differences in earnings across care jobs that invite further exploration. This paper explores the relative earnings of workers employed by public and private providers of social assistance in the United States, a subcategory of a group often designated "human service workers."[1] Social assistance, along with healthcare and education, comprise the industry groups typically designated as "care services." Many social assistance employees address problems such as domestic violence, alcoholism, and drug abuse on behalf of clients who are generally excluded from the category of the "deserving poor." They fit the description of what Budig, Hodges, and England (2019) and Duffy et al. (2023) refer to as "nurturant care workers." Low staffing levels, high turnover, and poor working conditions in social assistance contribute to the larger problem of inadequacies in care provision across all states in the United States (Valle-Gutierrez et al. 2024)

Funding for social assistance is limited because most clients are economically disempowered and culturally stigmatized and have little political voice. Limited funding is likely to exert downward pressure on the wages of service providers. While we cannot directly test this causal argument, our analysis of data from the American Community Survey (ACS) shows that social assistance workers earn less than their counterparts with similar personal characteristics—even compared to those employed in other care industries such as education and healthcare. Predictably, penalties within social assistance based on race and ethnicity and gender are also significant. More surprising is an institutional penalty based on type of employer: social assistance workers employed by both non-profit and for-profit firms earn significantly less than those employed in the public sector.

This institutional penalty leads us to explore historical trends, finding that the share of public sector workers in social assistance provision has fallen over the last four decades alongside the falling relative earnings of social assistance workers as a group. Lipsky and Smith (1989) first hypothesized that the rise of public subcontracting to private providers was facilitating cost-cutting measures by reducing public accountability, introducing competitive bidding, and discouraging unionization. Our cross-sectional findings and historical trends based on the ACS lend credence to their argument.

We begin with a brief outline of our theoretical perspective and a summary of previous research on employment in social assistance. Next, we describe our data, sample selection, empirical methods, and results. A descriptive picture of basic trends and cross-sectional comparisons sets the stage for multivariate regressions that control for employee and industry characteristics. We then focus on pay differences within social assistance by type of employer and changing patterns of pay penalties over time.

CARE PENALTIES AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

This section first provides an overview of how feminist economists and care scholars have challenged traditional economic models used to explain low wages in paid care work. We discuss how commitments to the well-being of others tend to reduce worker bargaining power, especially when they generate diffuse, long-term benefits which are not readily assigned a dollar value, and whose value cannot be easily captured by their providers. While this is a problem for the care sector as a whole, it is especially relevant for care involving social assistance, which serves a particularly disadvantaged population, and contributes to the social climate as a whole. We then discuss how social assistance, dominated by a nonprofit sector that is heavily reliant on public funding, is undermined by cost-cutting and declining public support. Declines in unionization and public subcontracting exacerbate downward pressures on wages. Our framework, therefore, points to a pay penalty specific to social assistance, on top of the care penalty.

Empirical research documents significant pay penalties in occupations that involve provision of direct care services in the United States, such as childcare, elder care, teaching, and many healthcare jobs (Budig, Hodges, and England 2019; Duffy et al. 2023). Evidence also suggests that employment

[1] Note that the nomenclature of industry and occupation categories in the United States differs from that in the U.K. and many other countries.

in care service industries (health, education, and social welfare) is associated with significantly lower pay for similarly educated workers in business services, where success is more easily denominated in dollars. This industry pay penalty affects workers across the occupational spectrum, including professionals and managers (Folbre et al. 2023).

Standard economic theory holds that wages are largely determined by worker productivity. Within standard theory, the notion of compensating differentials says that workers are willing to take a lower wage for jobs doing something they like or find meaningful, and require a higher wage to do something they find onerous or distasteful. Thus, standard theory also predicts a wage penalty for those who have a preference for "doing good" (Frank 2004). While we agree this may explain part of the penalty, human capital and compensating differentials as explanations of wage determination are incomplete, especially when applied to care services. While many care workers derive satisfaction from their commitments, the "wages of virtue" are lowered for many other reasons (England et al. 2002). One reason is that it is impossible to accurately measure individual value-added in customized services in which social context and the personal characteristics of clients profoundly affect outcomes, and where the development or maintenance of human capabilities has both intrinsic value and significant spillover or public-goods effects.

Such dynamics are particularly relevant to the subset of care services that comprises social assistance. Employees in social assistance contribute not only to measurable outcomes for individual clients but also to the quality of the social climate in their communities. Pro-social motivation is especially key to the quality of social assistance but is an insufficient explanation for low pay. Economists often assume that fulfillment of moral values delivers a kind of psychic income that fully compensates for low wages (the "compensating differential" mentioned above). This assumption is misplaced. Virtue is not always its own reward, and commitments to the welfare of others can be eroded by lack of public support and respect. Both significant staff shortages and high turnover rates in social assistance reveal evidence of burnout related not only to low earnings, but also to lack of adequate resources to provide effective care. Pressures for minimizing measurable costs can lead to significant reductions in unmeasurable dimensions of care quality (Folbre 2012, 2018).

Both individual and collective bargaining power shape earnings in ways that lead to significant variations across occupations, industries, and firms. The long history of disparities based on gender, race/ethnicity, and immigration status continues to influence patterns of earnings today. But there are other factors that deserve consideration. Wages in direct and indirect (subsidized or subcontracted) public employment are also influenced by fiscal dynamics. Derogatory attitudes toward those needing assistance undermine support for funding social services, creating pressure to cut labor costs. Poor quality social assistance resulting from low wages and high workloads can intensify economic stress, leading to increased mortality, morbidity, crime, and general deterioration of the social climate (Case and Deaton 2020; Stuckler and Basu 2013 Wilkinson and Pickett 2011).

Many non-profit human service organizations in the United States have expressed concern about staffing shortages and high turnover in the field, exacerbated by the effects of the 2020–21 Covid pandemic and resulting economic shocks (National Conference of Nonprofits 2021). Low reimbursement rates in public contracts for non-profit services reduce efficacy (Provider's Council et al. 2017). For instance, in one Massachusetts survey of service providers relying on state and local funds, over 90 percent reported that funding levels did not cover the full cost of services provided (Provider's Council et al. 2017). Concerns regarding insufficient compensation, as well as contracting problems, are emphasized in a recent report by the Non-Profit Association of Washington (2022). Limited access to benefits such as adequate health insurance and retirement is also problematic, though difficult to study due to limited data.

Almost a century ago, social assistance workers were strongly represented by unions (Leighninger 2001). However, unionization has declined and fiscal pressures contributing to new management practices have reduced workers' participation in management (Cunningham, Baines, and Shields 2017). In 2019, only 11 percent of workers in social assistance belonged to or were covered by a labor union, compared to 24 percent in 1984.[2] This decline reflects falling union coverage rates among

[2] Author calculations from CPS Outgoing Rotation Group samples restricted to full-time, wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64.

privately employed social assistance workers as well as a shift away from the more highly-unionized public sector toward subcontracted for-profit or non-profit providers.[3]

The New Public Management (NPM) strategy that emerged in the 1980s aimed to make public administration more "business-like." A comprehensive review of research on social care providers shows that it largely succeeded in this respect, prioritizing cost reduction over service quality (Bach-Mortensen and Barlow 2021). It is much easier to monitor costs than to monitor quality, since no government agency systematically collects data on unmet needs. While explicit budget cuts arouse public attention, competitive bidding for social contracts by non-profit and for-profit firms not only gives the appearance of efficiency, but also directs blame for poor performance away from public administration.

Increased reliance on public subcontracting of social assistance to non-profit organizations since the 1980s has been widely documented (Non-Profit Association of Washington 2022; Smith and Lipsky 1995). Quantitative analyses of earnings in the states of Massachusetts and Washington and the City of New York indicate that employees of non-profit organizations in human services and social assistance earn far less than their counterparts in public employment (Non-Profit Association of Washington 2022; Parrott and Moe 2022; Provider's Council et al. 2017; Wage Equity Study Team 2023). In recent years, for-profit provision has also increased, though less attention has been devoted to implications for relative earnings than to concerns about working conditions and service quality (Zelnick and Abramovitz 2020).

Staffing shortages reported in many states mean that many community needs go unmet, with toxic effects such as increased mortality, drug addiction, mental illness, and crime (NAS 2019; Wyman and SeaChange Capital Partners 2018). Contracting problems with state agencies exacerbate the problem, with demoralizing consequences for administrators as well as field staff (Boris et al. 2010). An analysis of the effects of the Great Recession in 2008–2009 on human services came to conclusions that remain relevant today:

> Since over half of human service organizations rely on government as their dominant funding source, a more basic question suggested by the findings is whether it is sound public policy to expect human service providers to provide the nation's social safety net and shoulder the recession's damaging effects without additional resources. The public is largely unaware of the reduction in government funding to nonprofits, basically shielding these government policies from public accountability (Boris et al. 2010:23).

This background leads us to hypothesize that workers providing social assistance in the United States as a whole are vulnerable to several overlapping pay penalties related to their individual and collective bargaining power:

- A care penalty related to provision of care services whose value is difficult to measure and capture;
- A political power penalty (specific to social assistance as a subsector within care services) related to the weak political and cultural voice of people in need of public assistance;
- An institutional penalty related to the structure of public sub-contracting, which reduces public accountability for service adequacy.

Therefore, even after controlling for a range of individual and job characteristics, we expect to see a care penalty, as well as an additional penalty that is specific to social assistance. Within social assistance, we expect that non-profit and for-profit employees earn less than their public sector counterparts. We acknowledge that pay penalties within social assistance are likely shaped by a gender penalty (related to historical and current discrimination, including social pressure to specialize in care work and the devaluation of caring skills), as well as a racial/ethnic penalty (related to constricted opportunities for education and employment, as well as direct discrimination). However, while we control

[3] Between 1984 and 2019, coverage rates fell from 6 percent to 5 percent in private social assistance employment, but *rose* from 60 percent to 66 percent in public social assistance. At around the same time, the share of public sector employment in social assistance fell from almost 60 percent to a little over 20 percent.

for race, gender, ethnicity, and citizenship, among other worker characteristics, we do not attempt to test the hypothesis that penalties to social assistance are shaped by the over-representation of women and workers belonging to racial/ethnic minority groups in social assistance.

Statistical analysis of data on individual characteristics, individual earnings, and firm-level job information provides an avenue for testing our hypotheses. However, existing survey data have significant limitations, including lack of information on some aspects of compensation (such as benefits), working conditions, and poor measurement of many other factors, including occupation and employment history. The complexity of possible interactions among different dimensions of bargaining power, combined with the importance of controlling for individual differences in education and working hours, makes estimation challenging.

Nonetheless, to foreshadow, we will show that median annual earnings are lower in social assistance than in other care services and other non-care jobs at every level of education. The relative earnings penalty is largest for highly-educated employees, because they have more lucrative opportunities elsewhere. Inequalities in pay by gender, race, and ethnicity are, in general, compounded by pay penalties specific to social assistance industries and occupations. While our empirical analysis cannot fully parse specific effects, it challenges conventional economic theory, revealing patterns consistent with the effects of many different forms of bargaining power on earnings.

DATA AND METHODS

Here, we describe the data set we utilize, clarify our operational definition of jobs in social assistance, and provide an overview of salient descriptive patterns.

Dataset and Sample

We analyze the American Community Survey (ACS), the largest annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, using data downloaded from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) (Ruggles et al. 2023). To create our ACS sample, we pool the 2015–2019 ACS data (including some additional data from earlier waves of the ACS and U.S. decadal census samples back to 1980 when appropriate) restricted to those persons between the ages of 18 and 64 who were employed in the previous week and excluding the self-employed. For most of the analysis, we restrict our attention to individuals working full-time, year-round (35 or more hours per week for 50 weeks or more during the year).[4] While data for 2020 and later are available, we select 2019 as our endpoint due to concerns that COVID may have affected data collection and earnings patterns. ACS individual weights have been used throughout the analysis.

Dependent Variable

Earnings (unless otherwise specified) refer to annual earnings, defined as wages, salary, commissions, bonuses, or tips from all jobs in the last 12 months. Respondents are instructed to report the amount before deductions for taxes, bonds, dues, or other items. We use the CPI-U multiplier available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to convert earnings to constant 2019 dollars. We prefer to use annual earnings as the ACS does not have a precise measure of hourly pay (weeks worked are reported in intervals, impeding the calculation of hourly pay based on annual earnings, weekly hours, and weeks worked annually).

Defining Social Assistance

We define social assistance using the industry codes under the "Social Assistance" subsector of the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). We therefore include "Individual and family services" (NAICS code 8370), "Community food and housing and emergency services" (NAICS code 8380), and "Vocational rehabilitation services" (NAICS code 8390). Within this subsector, childcare services (NAICS code 8470) stick out as services provided to middle-class as well as low-income clients. Therefore, we exclude employees in childcare services from our definition of

[4] We justify our restrictions to full-time and full-year (FTFY) workers) below.

social assistance workers. Some previous research on human service workers has also excluded childcare (Parrott and Moe 2022). We deliberately choose to define social assistance as industries providing social assistance, rather than as a set of occupations, as we are interested in considering the distinct characteristics of services (i.e., industry) that are motivated by a concern for people who are disadvantaged.

Defining Other Care and Non-Care Industries

Based on our previous research on employment in care services (Folbre et al. 2023), we define a second group of workers in other care industries ("Other care" in shorthand) whom we compare against those providing social assistance, enabling us to tease out pay penalties specific to social assistance separate from general care penalties. "Other care" workers include those in Educational Services (including early childhood education in child day care services) and Healthcare industries (see online Appendix A for the specific occupations and codes). Social assistance and "other care" therefore together comprise the umbrella category of what are typically termed "care services" or "care industries." The remaining industries constitute non-care industries, which are also used as a comparator. Non-care industries are a broad residual category including many heterogeneous services (retail, finance and insurance, information, public administration, among others) and non-services (agriculture, mining, and manufacturing).

Characteristics of Workers Providing Social Assistance

These workers represent about 1.3 percent of the paid labor force in 2015–2019, and around 75 percent are women (see Table 1). This is similar to the share of women in other care industries, but much lower than in non-care industries (where it is only 40 percent). Compared to both other care and non-care industries, however, social assistance includes a higher share of workers who are Black or African American, with 21 percent of workers in social assistance being African American (compared to 14 percent and 11 percent in other care and non-care respectively). Workers in social assistance are also more likely than other care services to lack U.S. citizenship. They are a fairly well-educated group, with 42 percent holding a bachelor's degree or higher and 16 percent holding a master's degree or higher. Educational attainment is similar to (though slightly lower than) that in other care services, distinguishing social assistance and other care services from non-care industries. However, despite better educational qualifications, workers in other care services have only slightly higher median real pay than workers in non-care services ($39,901 compared to $38,648), while workers in social assistance earn considerably less ($30,005).

Social assistance workers are less likely to work full-time than other care or non-care workers (73 percent, 78 percent and 83 percent, respectively; see Table 1). Similarly, a smaller proportion work full-time, year-round. The higher incidence of part-time, part-year employment in social assistance poses a problem for our analysis as we use annual earnings rather than hourly pay as our dependent variable. Fewer hours spent in the paid labor force will reduce annual earnings; therefore, we restrict our sample to full-time full-year workers to avoid misleading comparisons due to differences in hours and weeks worked. In regression analyses, we control for usual hours worked to account for variability in hours worked among full-time employees. This said, even among part-time workers, workers in social assistance have lower earnings than other care services and non-care industries.

Heterogeneity within Social Assistance

We are particularly interested in differences across sector—private for-profit, private non-profit, and public—within social assistance. Social assistance is different from both other care and non-care in terms of its heavy reliance on non-profit employees: the non-profit sector employs just under 45 percent of social assistance employees; the public sector about 25 percent; and the for-profit sector just over 30 percent (Table 1). Non-profit employment shares for other care and non-care industries are just 21 percent and 4 percent, respectively. Other care services are more likely to be delivered by employees in the for-profit sector (45 percent) or in the public sector (33 percent).

Among full-time, full-year social assistance employees, mean annual earnings (and earnings at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles) are the highest among public sector employees, followed by non-profit and then for-profit workers (Table 2). Note that non-profit employees in social assistance are the most

Table 1. Worker Characteristics by Industry, 2015–2019

	Social assistance	Other care	Non-care
All employed (unweighted N)	226,176	4,237,014	13,352,501
Percent of all employed	1.3	22.9	75.8
Percent that are:			
Women	74.8	75.3	39.9
White	65.0	74.3	74.8
Black/African American	21.2	14.1	11.1
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.1	0.7	0.7
East Asian	1.7	1.9	2.0
Other Asian	3.0	3.8	3.6
All other	7.9	5.2	7.9
Not a U.S. citizen	5.9	5.2	10.1
Hispanic	15.6	11.4	17.5
Type of employment			
Private, For-profit	30.6	45.3	84.5
Private, Non-profit	44.4	21.3	4.1
Public	25.0	33.4	11.4
Highest education			
Less than high school	8.5	3.5	10.5
High school	21.2	15.8	28.9
Some college	20.3	20.3	24.9
Associate's degree	8.0	11.9	8.3
Bachelor's degree	26.2	24.9	19.7
Master's degree	14.3	16.7	5.8
Professional degree/PhD	1.5	7.0	1.9
Percent full-time	72.8	77.6	83.1
Percent full-time, full-year (FTFY)	64.8	65.0	73.0
Median earnings (2019$)			
All	30,005	39,901	38,648
Part-time	10,752	13,541	10,784
Full-time	37,261	46,371	45,293
Full-time, full-year	38,882	48,008	48,008

Source: 2015–2019 ACS: All currently employed wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64. Full-time defined as 35+ usual hours of paid work per week. Full year defined as 50+ weeks worked in the previous year. All dollar values converted to 2019 dollars.

highly educated group: 56 percent have at least a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to only 52 percent and 35 percent among public and for-profit employees, respectively; non-profit employees in social assistance are also more likely to have a master's degree or higher. Demographic composition also does not explain lower pay for non-profit employees: compared to those employed both by for-profits and the public sector, more non-profit employees are white, U.S. citizens, and non-Hispanic. These educational and demographic patterns would lead us to expect non-profit employees in social assistance to earn more than their public sector counterparts, not less.

Most social assistance employees (every 4 out of 5) work in individual and family services (defined as the provision of nonresidential social assistance to children and youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Examples include adoption agencies, youth centers, foster care placement services, adult day care centers, or companion services for disabled persons, the elderly, and persons diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities).[5] The remaining are split between community food and

[5] See the 2022 NAICS manual supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/naics/).

Table 2. Employment Characteristics within FTFY Social Assistance, by Sector, 2015–2019

	All	For-profit	Non-profit	Public
Annual Earnings (in 2019$)				
Mean	44,871	39,756	46,080	48,039
p10	19,411	16,176	21,371	21,568
p50	38,822	32,545	39,419	43,363
p90	75,007	67,749	76,159	77,645
Percent that are:				
Women	75.0	75.1	72.8	78.5
Highest education				
Less than high school	5.1	8.7	3.3	4.5
High school	17.8	25.4	14.5	15.5
Some college	19.2	22.1	17.7	19.0
Associate's degree	8.6	8.6	8.0	9.5
Bachelor's degree	30.5	22.4	33.6	33.5
Master's degree	17.0	11.4	20.8	16.4
Professional degree/PhD	1.8	1.3	2.2	1.6
Race, citizenship, and ethnicity				
Black/African American	22.6	25.7	19.7	23.7
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.9	0.7	1.9
East Asian	1.6	1.7	1.3	2
Other Asian	3.1	3.9	2.4	3.5
All other	8.5	9.8	7.5	8.6
Not a U.S. citizen	5.4	9.3	3.6	3.7
Hispanic	17.5	20.2	13.8	20.6
In detailed industry				
Individual and family services	83.0	85.9	76.9	90.1
Community food and housing, and emergency services	7.6	4.8	12.6	2.3
Vocational rehabilitation services	9.4	9.3	10.5	7.6
In occupation				
Social and Community Service Managers	9.4	5.8	14.2	5.2
Social Workers	26.2	16.1	24.6	39.0
Community and Social Service Specialists	2.2	1.7	2.5	2.3
Observations (unweighted count)	143,849	35,609	66,480	41,760

Source: 2015–2019 ACS: All currently employed FTFY wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64 in social assistance.

housing, and emergency services (which include food banks, meal delivery programs, soup kitchens, temporary residential shelters, transitional housing, or short-term emergency shelters) and vocational rehabilitation services (such as job counseling or job training for unemployed persons or persons with disabilities). Workers in the non-profit sector are more concentrated in community food and housing, and emergency services and to vocational rehabilitation services than their for-profit or public sector counterparts. The ACS codes, unfortunately, do not allow us to disaggregate establishments beyond these three broad codes.

Among social assistance occupations, the largest occupational group within social assistance is social workers, followed by social and community service managers and community and social service specialists. The latter two occupations are overrepresented within non-profits, while social workers are more concentrated in the public sector.

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

Social Assistance Pay Penalties

An overview of trends in mean inflation-adjusted earnings from 1980–2019 shows that earnings are lower now for both women and men in social assistance industries than in other industries (see Figure 1).[6] In 1980, mean earnings for women employed in social assistance were similar (slightly higher) to those of women in other industries, at around $40,000 (in 2019 dollars). However, while earnings for the latter group have increased steadily to around $56,000, earnings for women in social assistance have risen much less. In 2019, they earned $10,000 less than their counterparts in other industries. Mean earnings for men in other industries have increased as well, though less dramatically than for women. Men in social assistance earned much less than in other industries in 1980, and their median real pay has *declined*, from $55,000 in 1980 to $50,000 in 2019. For both women and men, therefore, pay gaps between social assistance and other industries have increased.

These broad national trends invite two further refinements: first, given our interest in situating social assistance pay penalties in the context of broader penalties to work in care services, we split "other industries" into "other care services" (that is, education and healthcare) and "non-care industries." Second, education level and earnings are closely linked, with earnings increasing as education increases. Thus, it is important to control for educational attainment when comparing earnings across industries. We hypothesize that workers providing social assistance earn less than workers with similar levels of education in other care industries (a social assistance penalty related to the weak political power and voice of their constituency), and also less than workers with similar education in non-care industries (a "care penalty").

Median annual earnings in social assistance are indeed lower than in other care services and lower still compared to non-care industries, across educational categories (see Figure 2). For example, FTFY workers in social assistance with a bachelor's degree (but none higher) earn about $42,000

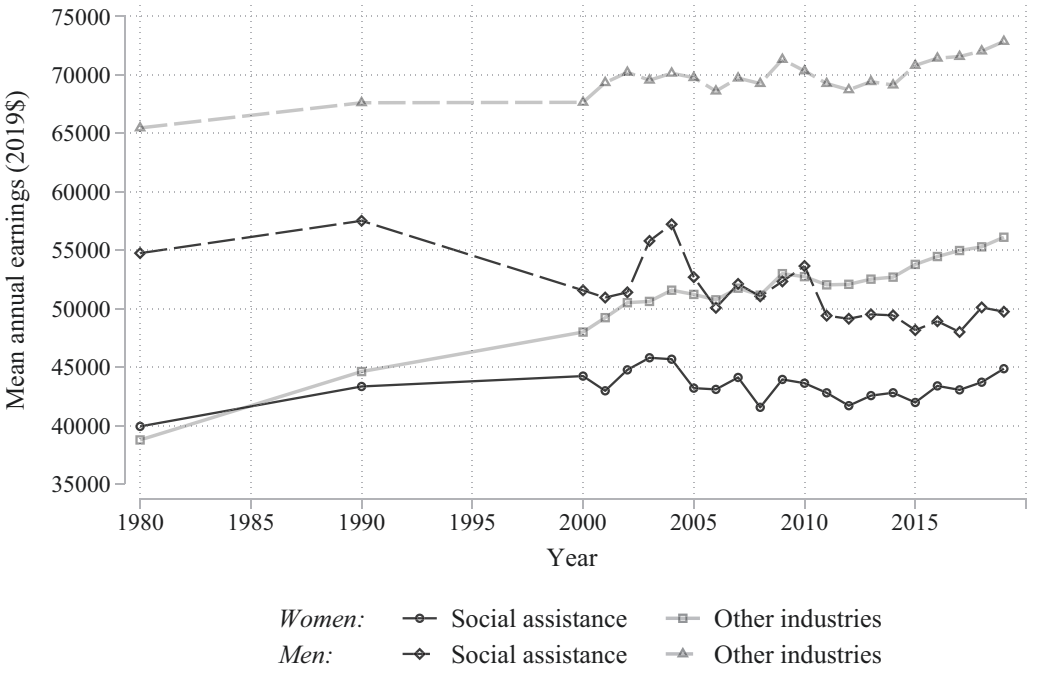

Figure 1. Mean Annual Earnings (in 2019$) by Industry and Gender

Source: 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census samples and 2000–2019 American Community Survey. All currently employed, full-time full-year wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64.

[6] Here, we supplement ACS 2000–2019 data with decadal U.S. Census 5 percent samples for 1980 and 1990.

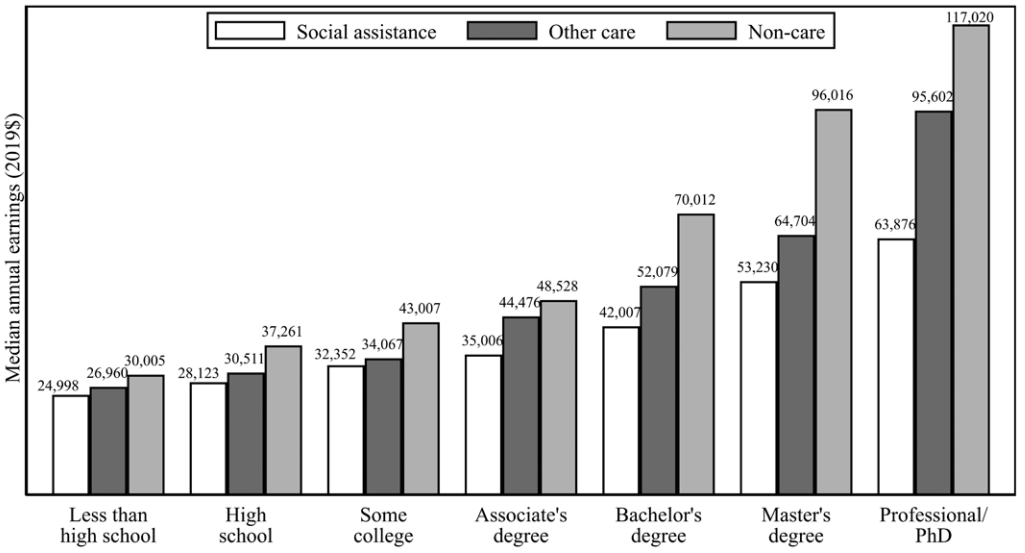

Figure 2. Median Annual Earnings (in 2019$) by Industry and Education
Source: 2015–2019 American Community Survey: All currently employed, full-time full-year wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64.

a year, compared to $52,000 for similarly educated workers in other care services, and $70,000 for similarly educated workers in other industries. A care penalty for workers with a bachelor's degree exists, but there is also a specific penalty for social assistance workers (a $10,000 gap between social assistance workers and workers in other care industries). Similar patterns are evident for other levels of educational attainment. The size of these wage gaps is larger at higher levels of education.

Lower earnings in social assistance hold across time periods, broad occupation groups, census race and ethnicity categories, and citizenship status (see Appendix Table B.1 online for figures disaggregated by gender). Consistent with other research, women have lower earnings than men across all industries, compounding the pay penalty for women in social assistance who have the lowest earnings across these groups. Note also that women earn less than men of the same racial/ethnic background in almost all categories, and that differences between women in earnings by race and ethnicity are less marked than those between men.

Trends in Sectoral Composition

The share of public sector employment in social assistance has declined steadily since 1980 from 58 percent to 23 percent in 2019 (see Figure 3), the same period that we observe stagnating or declining real pay within social assistance. The decline in public employment has been accompanied by a nearly symmetric rise in the for-profit share: from 10 percent in 1990 to 32 percent in 2019 (the 1980 Census did not distinguish between for-profit and non-profit workers). The share of non-profit employment has remained largely unchanged at around 45 percent, with a small increase in the early 2000s, followed by a decline (the absolute number of non-profit social assistance employees has increased, given that the share of social assistance in total employment has doubled in the last 40 years).

The decline in the share of public employment has been somewhat smaller for other care workers: going from 47 percent in 1980 to 32 percent in 2019 (Appendix Figure B.1). The share of non-profit employment in other care has declined since 1990 (from 26 percent to 23 percent), while the share of for-profit employees has increased from 37 percent to 45 percent. In contrast, sectoral shares for non-care workers have not changed substantially, but public and private non-profit employment were small to begin with: the public share fell from 16 percent to 13 percent between 1980 and 2019, while the non-profit share rose from 3 percent to 4 percent between 1990 and 2019.

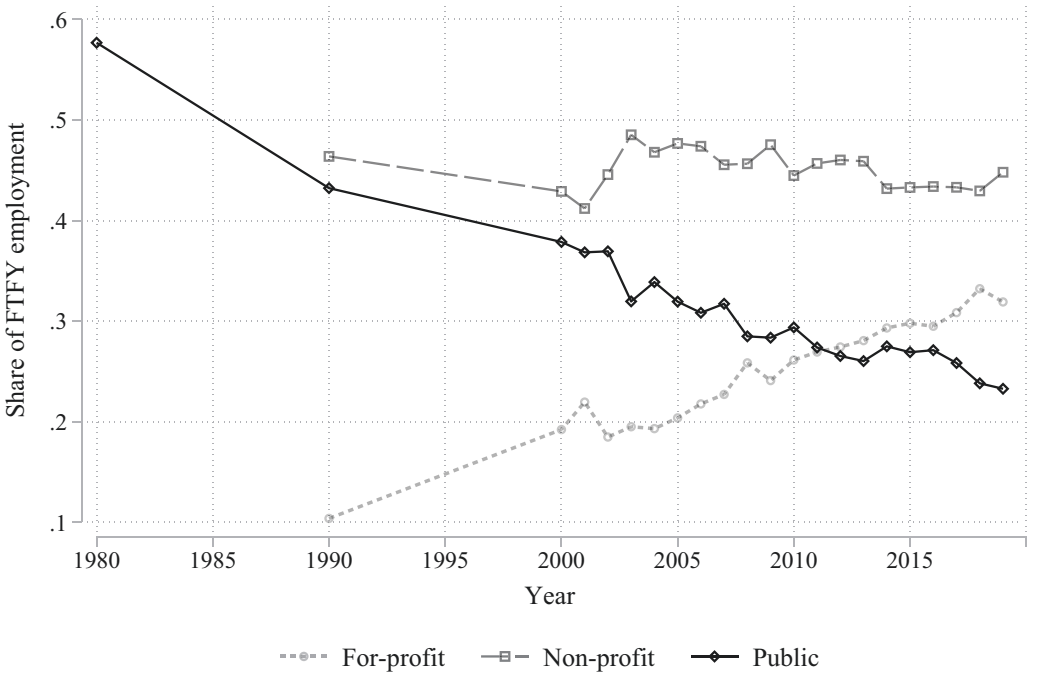

Figure 3. Sectoral shares among FTFY social assistance workers
Source: 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census samples and 2000–2019 American Community Survey. Includes all currently employed, full-time full-year wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64, in social assistance. The 1980 Census did not disaggregate private sector workers into for- and non-profit. We use harmonized 1990 industry codes provided by IPUMS, defining social assistance as "Job training and vocational rehabilitation services" and "Social services, n.e.c."

Pay Heterogeneity within Social Assistance

As discussed earlier, social assistance employees are more likely to work for non-profit employers than employees in other care services or in non-care services. In particular, workers in other care services are more likely to belong to the public sector than workers in social assistance. We are interested in whether reliance on private institutions is a cost-cutting strategy that is likely to go along with lower pay for social assistance workers. Within social assistance, we generally see earnings in for-profit establishments lower than those in non-profit establishments, which are in turn lower than those in public establishments, across educational levels. For workers with a bachelor's or master's degree, earnings in for-profit and non-profit establishments differ little, while workers in the public sector with such degrees earn far more (see Appendix Figure B.2).

Disaggregating by industry reveals similar patterns: in both individual and family services and vocational rehabilitation, public sector workers earn the most, followed by non-profit and then for-profit workers. Non-profit workers earn slightly more than public sector workers within community food and housing services, the smallest subcategory within social assistance. Interestingly, the earnings gap between public sector and non-profit workers is large within social assistance occupations requiring high educational qualifications such as social and community service managers and social workers. Social workers in the public sector, for example, earn almost $9,000 more than social workers in for-profits, and $10,000 more than social workers in non-profits.

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF PAY PENALTIES

While the descriptive results above clearly suggest that employees in social assistance services (particularly those outside the public sector) earn less than their counterparts in other industries, a multivariate statistical analysis affords a closer comparison which controls for individual-level differences based on age, gender, marital status, race, ethnicity, broad occupation, usual hours worked, and region,

as well as education. Since previous statistical analysis shows that employees in care industries pay a penalty relative to employees with similar observable characteristics, we look more closely at differences between social assistance employees, employees in other care services, and employees in other industries, estimating the pay penalty when observable individual characteristics are taken into account.

Our Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions control for institutional sector (for-profit, non-profit, public); education (7 categories: less than high school, high school, some college, bachelor's degree, associate's degree, master's degree, and professional degree/PhD); gender; whether married (interacted with gender); whether has an own child in the household (interacted with gender); race (6 categories: white, African American, American Indian, East Asian, Other Asian, and all other); Hispanic ethnicity; citizenship; 11 occupation categories; usual hours worked per week (5 categories: 35–40 40, 41–45, 46–50, 50+); and dummies for age in years, survey year, and the state in which the worker's workplace is located. Sample means for all variables, by industry, are listed in Appendix Table B.2.

In model (1), we regress log annual earnings on a dummy variable indicating employment in care services, with the full set of controls listed above. In model (2), we split care services into social assistance and other care services, allowing us to observe whether penalties to social assistance are different (higher) than in other care services. As we are especially interested in how pay penalties vary across sectors *within* social assistance, model (3) interacts industry with sector, with private for-profit workers in non-care industries as the reference group. In models (4)–(6), we also test the sensitivity of our results to the inclusion of a control for care work occupations, a subset of professional and service occupations associated with a wage penalty (for a list of these occupations, see Appendix A).

The multivariate analysis strongly confirms the existence of pay penalties to care workers in general, and to social assistance workers in particular. Net of controls, workers in all care services (that is, social assistance and other care services combined) earn 11 percent (12 log points) less than workers in non-care industries (see specification 1 in Table 3). However, when we disaggregate all care services into social assistance and other care, we see that workers in social assistance earn 23 percent (26 log points) less than workers in non-care industries (specification 2). Other care workers earn 11 percent (12 log points) less than workers in non-care industries. We therefore see a penalty that is specific to social assistance, on top of a general care penalty. In terms of sector, non-profit employees as a whole earn 6 log points (6 percent) less than for-profit employees, while public sector employees overall earn 2 percent less than for-profit employees.

In specification (3), relative to for-profit workers in non-care industries group, non-profit employees in non-care pay a 16 percent penalty, while public employees enjoy a 6 percent premium. All social assistance workers earn less than for-profit non-care, but the penalty is largest for non-profit workers (at 28 percent) than for for-profit or public social assistance workers (with penalties at 23 percent and 19 percent respectively). While our descriptive analysis suggests that both non-profit and for-profit workers within social assistance are similarly disadvantaged in terms of pay compared to their public sector counterparts, our regression analysis clearly points to the biggest penalties accruing to non-profit employees within social assistance. The apparent discrepancy is resolved once we consider how the educational characteristics and demographic composition of non-profit employment within social assistance (noted in Table 2) would favor higher pay within this sector compared to other social assistance: holding these other factors constant therefore reveals a greater penalty attributable to non-profit employment alone.

In contrast, within other care industries, pay penalties are the lowest in the for-profit sector, and only slightly higher among non-profit workers, with public sector workers having the largest pay penalties. Care penalties accruing to public sector or non-profit workers therefore appear to be mediated by the type of care being provided: for healthcare and education, it is public sector workers who face the greatest penalties, unlike social assistance, where pay penalties are the largest within the non-profit sector.

Controlling for employment in a care occupation reduces the pay penalty attributable to care industries (to 8 percent, specification 4). However, the pay disadvantage to social assistance workers remains more than twice as large as that for other care workers (19 percent compared to 7 percent in

Table 3. OLS Regressions of Log Annual Earnings on Social Assistance Employment

	W/o care occupation control			With care occupation control		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Reference: Non-care						
All care services	-0.12***			-0.08***		
	(0.00)			(0.00)		
Social assistance		-0.26***			-0.21***	
		(0.00)			(0.00)	
Other care		-0.12***			-0.07***	
		(0.00)			(0.00)	
Reference: For-profit						
Non-profit	-0.06***	-0.06***		-0.06***	-0.05***	
	(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.00)	(0.00)	
Public	-0.02***	-0.02***		-0.02***	-0.02***	
	(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.00)	(0.00)	
Industry-sector interactions (reference: For-profit in non-care)						
Non-care # Non-profit			-0.17***			-0.16***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Non-care # Public			0.06***			0.06***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Social assistance # For-profit			-0.26***			-0.20***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Social assistance # Non-profit			-0.33***			-0.29***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Social assistance # Public			-0.21***			-0.16***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Other care # For-profit			-0.08***			-0.03***

Table 3. Continued

	W/o care occupation control			With care occupation control		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Other care # Non-profit			-0.09***			-0.05***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Other care # Public			-0.24***			-0.19***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
Care work occupations				-0.12***	-0.11***	-0.11***
				(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
General occupation (reference: Managers)						
Business and financial occupations	-0.07***	-0.07***	-0.08***	-0.07***	-0.07***	-0.08***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Professionals	-0.12***	-0.12***	-0.12***	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Service	-0.48***	-0.48***	-0.50***	-0.47***	-0.47***	-0.48***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Sales	-0.29***	-0.29***	-0.28***	-0.28***	-0.28***	-0.28***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Office & admin	-0.35***	-0.35***	-0.36***	-0.35***	-0.36***	-0.36***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Farming	-0.60***	-0.60***	-0.60***	-0.59***	-0.59***	-0.60***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Construction	-0.27***	-0.27***	-0.27***	-0.26***	-0.26***	-0.26***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Maintenance	-0.27***	-0.27***	-0.27***	-0.26***	-0.26***	-0.26***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Production	-0.37***	-0.37***	-0.36***	-0.36***	-0.36***	-0.36***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)

Table 3. Continued

	W/o care occupation control			With care occupation control		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Transport	-0.43***	-0.43***	-0.43***	-0.42***	-0.42***	-0.42***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Usual hours/week (reference: 35-39)						
40	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
41–45	0.31***	0.31***	0.31***	0.30***	0.30***	0.31***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
46–50	0.40***	0.40***	0.40***	0.39***	0.39***	0.40***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
51+	0.46***	0.46***	0.47***	0.46***	0.46***	0.46***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education (reference: Less than high school)						
High school	0.15***	0.14***	0.14***	0.14***	0.14***	0.14***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Some college	0.24***	0.24***	0.24***	0.24***	0.24***	0.24***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Associate's degree	0.31***	0.31***	0.30***	0.31***	0.31***	0.30***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Bachelor's degree	0.52***	0.52***	0.51***	0.52***	0.52***	0.51***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Master's degree	0.65***	0.65***	0.66***	0.66***	0.66***	0.66***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Professional degree/PhD	0.91***	0.91***	0.90***	0.91***	0.91***	0.90***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Women	-0.12***	-0.12***	-0.12***	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.12***

Table 3. Continued

	W/o care occupation control			With care occupation control		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Married	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Married x Women	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.09***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.09***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Parent	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Parent x Women	-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.05***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Race (reference: White)						
Black	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.11***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
American Indian	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
East Asian	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.03***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Other Asian	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.02***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Other	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***	-0.04***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Non-citizen	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Hispanic	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.10***	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.10***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Observations	4501954	4501954	4501954	4501954	4501954	4501954

Source: Same as Table 1, restricted to full-time, full-year workers. *Note*: State, age, and year dummy controls are not shown. Standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

specification 5). And similar to specification 3, in specification 6, non-profit social assistance workers have the greatest pay penalty compared to for-profit non-care workers, followed by for-profit workers, while public sector workers do the best within social assistance.

Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Our multivariate analysis shows that women employed in social assistance are disadvantaged both by an overall gender gap in earnings, and by their employment in a low-paying industry. Figure 4 drives this point home. All else equal, women in social assistance are predicted to earn about $6,000 less than men in social assistance, but also $8,000 less than other *women* employed in non-care industries. When compared to men in non-care industries, the gap is, as expected, the largest, at $21,000. Women in other care services also experience a larger drop in earnings compared to women in non-care services, but this disadvantage is not as large as for women in social assistance.

Similarly, Hispanic workers in social assistance earn $5,000 less than non-Hispanic workers in the same industry, but $14,000 less than other Hispanic workers in non-care industries. White workers (whose earnings are higher than other racial groups across industries) are about 10 percentage

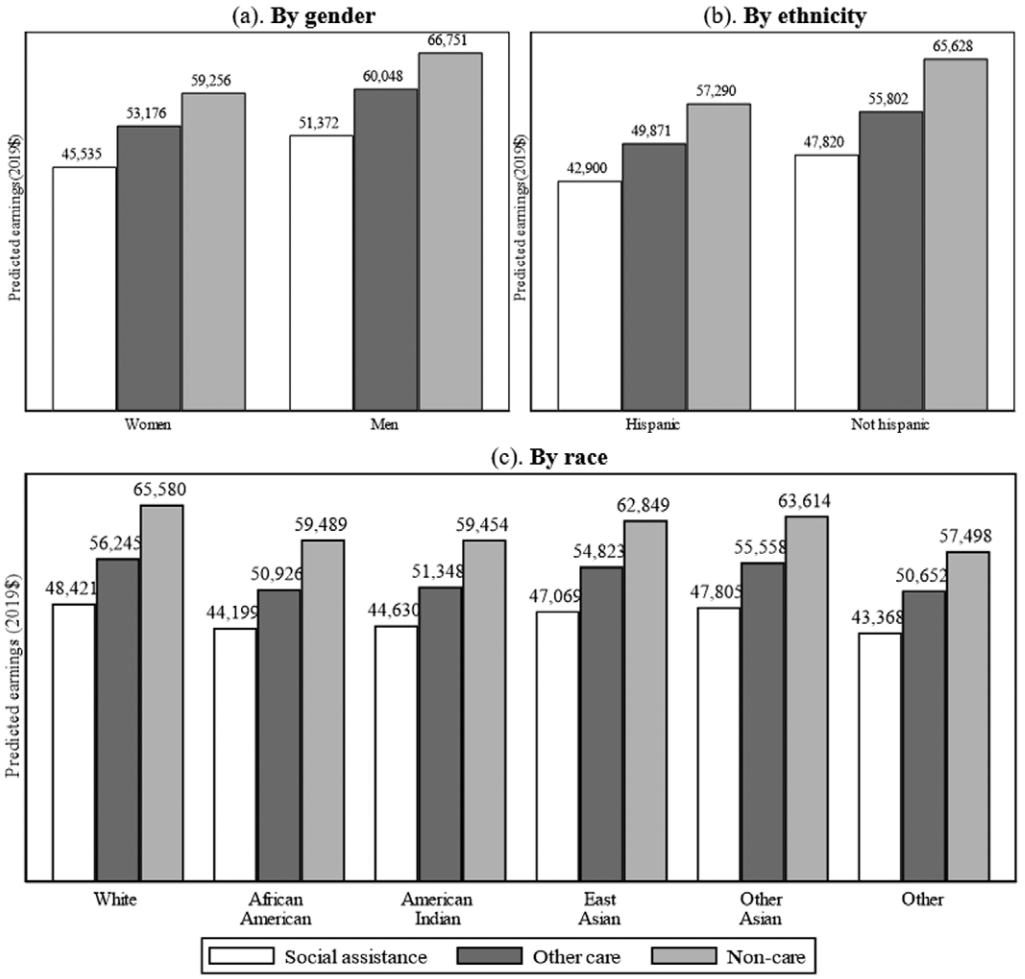

Figure 4. Average predicted earnings (in 2019$) across industry groups

Source: 2005–2019 American Community Survey: All currently employed, full-time full-year wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64. Log earnings predicted from the regression in Table 3 (specification 1), at the following values for covariates: private sector, professional occupations, bachelor's degree education, age 40, single, childless, and in year 2019. Predicted log earnings converted to levels by taking the exponent.

points less likely to work in social assistance than in non-care industries or other care industries (see Appendix Table B.2). On the other hand, African American workers are 11 percentage points more likely to work in social assistance than in non-care industries. These workers experience a $4,000 reduction in earnings compared to white workers in social assistance, and a $15,000 reduction compared to other African American workers in non-care industries.

Historical Trends

Figure 5 plots the pay penalties for social assistance and other care (relative to non-care industries) using the decadal census sample for 1990 and the ACS for each year beginning in 2000. It does this by applying specification 5 in Table 3 (i.e., an OLS regression of log annual income on industry categories, care occupation dummy, sector, and the full set of other controls) to each year. We plot the absolute value of the OLS coefficient on social assistance and other care industries. Note that we do not use the 1980 census as it does not permit us to introduce a key control: for-profit or non-profit status. Social assistance does experience an increasing penalty, from 14 log points in 1990 to 20 log points in 2019. Over the same period, the pay penalty to other care services also increases, but only by 4 log points (from 4 to 8 log points).

DISCUSSION

Our cross-sectional and historical analysis of employment in social assistance based on data from the American Community Survey supports the general hypothesis that industry—an indicator of the type of service being provided and the characteristics of its clientele—has distinct implications for earnings. The earnings penalty associated with working in an industry whose social benefits are hard to privately capture is compounded when these social benefits are delivered to a disempowered

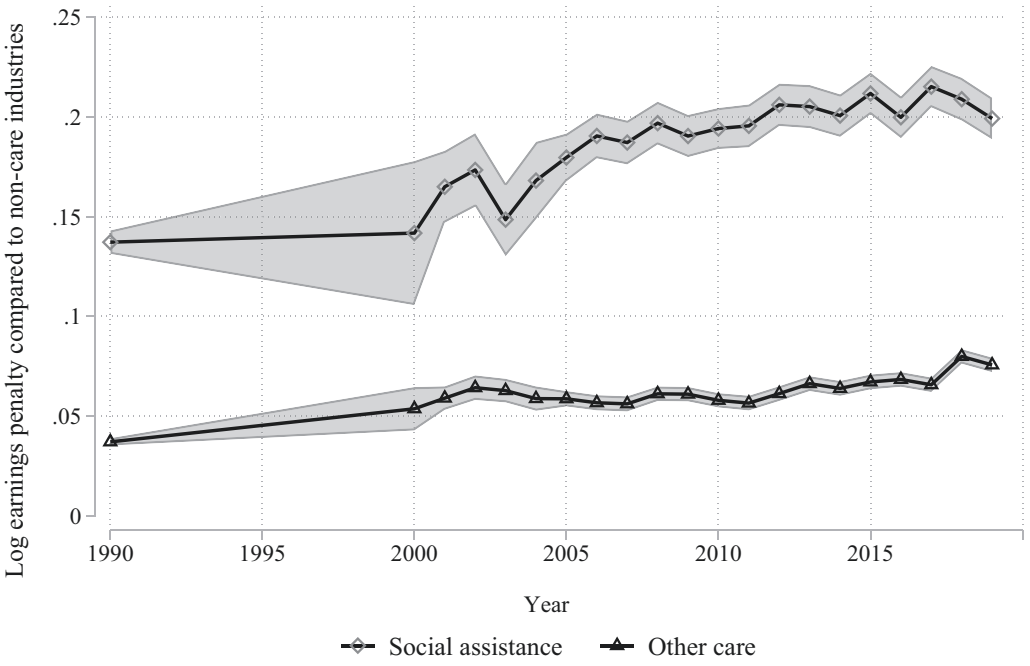

Figure 5. Pay penalties to social assistance and other care services, 1990-2019

Source: 1990 U.S. Census samples and 2000–2019 American Community Survey. Includes all currently employed, full-time full-year wage and salary workers between the ages of 18 and 64, in social assistance. We use harmonized 1990 industry codes provided by IPUMS, defining social assistance as "Job training and vocational rehabilitation services" and "Social services, n.e.c." Pay penalties for social assistance and other care are calculated—separately for each year—by taking absolute values of coefficients on social assistance and other care, with non-care industries as the reference, in the OLS regression of log annual income on the industry categories, care occupation dummy, sector, and the full set of other controls included in specification 5 of Table 3. Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals.

population, especially when institutional arrangements such as subcontracting and outsourcing weaken the bargaining power of workers committed to social welfare and increase institutional incentives to cut wages with little regard for service quality. The median full-time, full-year worker providing social assistance, for instance, earned about $38,900 (in $2019) annually, almost $10,000 (or 20 percent) less than employees in other care services and in non-care industries.

Industry effects are compounded by other dimensions of bargaining power that increase the earnings penalties imposed on the women and Black/African American and Hispanic employees clustered in social assistance jobs. These penalties extend to college-educated workers with more opportunities for high-wage employment: those with a bachelor's degree (but none higher) earn 19 percent less in social assistance than comparable employees in other care services, and 40 percent less than comparable employees in non-care industries. Greater awareness of these differentials could encourage professionals and managers to join ranks with less credentialed workers to insist on greater public commitments to high-quality social assistance delivery.

No causal interpretation is warranted here. The ACS estimates control only for very broad worker characteristics (such as educational degree), potentially leaving out many unobserved characteristics that could influence wages and be correlated with their employer's industry. Future research could examine the effect of transitions between social assistance jobs and other jobs on individual earnings, though fixed effects estimates are subject to selection bias.

Is the increasing pay penalty attributable to employment in social assistance related to declining public provision? While we cannot provide a decisive answer here, evidence certainly points in this direction. For instance, a simple linear fit indicates that a one percent increase in the share of public employment in social assistance across the states is associated with a 0.25 percentage point decrease in the median pay gap between social assistance and non-social assistance workers (see Appendix Figure B.3). Notably, this negative relationship is not merely driven by the higher earnings of public sector social assistance workers—the gap between *private* social assistance workers and their counterparts in other industries is also smaller in states with a public sector share in social assistance employment.

This suggests that the declining public provision of social assistance reduces overall pay for social assistance workers both because it shifts employment to relatively lower-paying employers, and because it worsens the fallback position of workers in existing private social assistance jobs. Qualitative research on the evolution of state and metropolitan policies could potentially help explain the national trend toward subcontracting social assistance services to for-profit firms, which was geographically quite uneven—and remains uneven today. The growing field of fiscal sociology focuses primarily on the formation of tax policy (Mumford 2019). However, the links between state and local budget practices, institutional arrangements, wages and benefits, worker turnover, and service quality clearly require further scrutiny. In the meantime, however, it seems important to call attention to the increasingly high cost of doing good.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material is available online at *Social Problems* (https://academic.oup.com/socpro).

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