It Takes ID to Get ID: The New Identity Politics in Services

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Application procedures for each major form of government identification require at least one other major form of identification to authenticate the applicant’s identity. Although this policy loop has implications for a number of vulnerable populations, it creates particularly intractable problems for people leaving incarceration with serious mental illness. These individuals depend upon timely access to public assistance programs for treatment of complex sets of physical and behavioral health needs, but identification requirements are found to delay access to benefits during a critical time in individuals’ reentry to the community after a period of incarceration.

Nearly every American knows that he or she needs a passport to travel abroad, and hardly any would be surprised if asked to produce a driver’s license when applying for a job or cashing a check. Since September 11, 2001, most people recognize that they need photo identification to travel on commercial airlines. Even so, few are aware of the extent to which identification requirements are creeping into every day life. This lack of awareness leaves many people surprised to discover that access to services as diverse as registering a child for school, checking into a hospital, or applying for public assistance can be contingent on one’s ability to produce the correct form of identification.

Identification requirements may seem like nothing more then a nuisance to most middle-class Americans, who only have to reach into their wallets to get their driver’s licenses or to dig out the birth certificates stashed away at home. Research suggests however, that many people have problems satisfying identification requirements. This is particularly the case among individuals living in poverty, those with psychiatric disabilities or substance abuse problems, prisoners and other institutionalized populations, victims of natural disasters, the elderly, children,

As a result of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (U.S. Public Law 109-171 [2006]), Medicaid’s identification requirements have changed. These changes and the associated effects offer timely insight into the problems that identification requirements can create. This policy adjustment was intended to block illegal immigrants’ access to Medicaid. The program’s identification requirements changed from a self-declaration of identity under threat of perjury to a prescriptive process in which states have to gather written documentation of identity and citizenship at the point of application or recertification (USGAO 2007). The USGAO (2007) recently surveyed the 50 states to determine whether Medicaid enrollment declined after the implementation of this new identification requirement, finding declines in 22 of the 44 of the responding states. A majority of these states attributed the declines to delays or losses of Medicaid coverage among individuals who appeared to be eligible citizens. The findings of the USGAO’s (2007) survey support concerns that identification requirements heighten the disparities in health outcomes for vulnerable populations (Families USA 2006; Kansas Health Policy 2007).

There is a growing awareness that identification requirements create substantial problems for certain client populations (Families USA 2006; Kansas Health Policy Authority 2007; USGAO 2007), but research has yet to examine how such requirements create service barriers in daily practice or why some have difficulty satisfying the requirements. Such issues are especially important for people with serious mental illness who are involved in the criminal justice system. These individuals experience high levels of poverty (Draine et al. 2002; Petersilia 2003), homelessness (Metraux and Culhane 2006), and drug and alcohol misuse (Abram and Teplin 1991; Ditton 1999; Petersilia 2003). Such experiences can leave them dependent on multiple social service delivery systems at the point of release, and they are especially vulnerable to exclusion from services with identification requirements. Further, returning offenders have a substantially elevated risk of death, particularly during the first 2 weeks after release (Binswanger et al. 2007). It is important to identify policies that forestall their access to the economic, material, and treatment services they need to survive the transition into the community.

There are several promising service strategies for people who have mental illness and are reentering the community after a period of incarceration. These include post-booking jail diversion (Broner et al. 2004) and reentry programs (Draine and Herman 2007). Both are designed explicitly to facilitate the community transition of individuals
admitted to jails, prisons, and mental health courts (Cosden et al. 2005), a specialized court-based intervention that assumes responsibility for supervising the community transition of incarcerated participants. These approaches focus on facilitating the offender’s access to treatment after release. Each service depends on public assistance programs to provide economic and material resources during the transition of each offender into the community. Timely access to public assistance programs is especially critical in reentry because these resources pay for community-based medical and behavioral health treatments (Conly 2005; Morrissey et al. 2007) as well as for resources to meet basic material needs. Offenders with serious mental illness are thus forced to rely on entitlement programs that were not designed to meet the general needs of people with serious mental illness (Rochefort 1989) or the specific needs of returning offenders.

One of the problems associated with this reliance is that the application process for state and federally administered benefit programs can take from a few weeks to 6 months depending on the program. Returning offenders with mental illness require immediate access to the economic and material supports that the programs provide (Conly 2005). The time lags associated with program applications exemplify the utilization disincentives embedded in the operations of such programs (Lipsky 1980, 1984; Katz 1996; Freudenberg et al. 2005).

Social historians document the use of disincentives in the administration of public welfare benefits, tracing such efforts back to the beginning of America’s public assistance system (Katz 1996; Axinn and Stern 2004). Michael Lipsky (1984) explains the use of these disincentives in noting that public agencies, faced with high demand and limited resources, ration access by developing mechanisms that limit services to eligible citizens. He notes that many of these disincentives arise in bureaucratic contexts that are hidden from public view.

Scholars also note that the disincentives can take many forms, including imposition of additional costs and inconveniences on individual applicants or program participants, establishment of procedural hurdles that increase eligible applicants’ difficulty in obtaining benefits, and adjustment of an agency’s orientation from a helping model to one of claims processing, wherein applicants are made to bear the responsibility for proving their eligibility (Lipsky 1980; Brodkin and Lipsky 1983; Lipsky 1984). Some argue that disincentive strategies are advantageous to public agencies because the strategies are embedded into the ongoing operations and thus are not likely to raise broad opposition; they are largely invisible to outside entities and are dispersed among individual applicants rather than targeted at specific, identifiable groups of applicants (Lipsky 1984).

From the public agencies’ perspective, procedural hurdles, verification requirements, and other utilization disincentives may seem like
necessary organizational activities with which “honest people should be happy to comply” (Lipsky 1984, 8). In order to understand the additional burdens that procedural hurdles, such as identification requirements, impose on applicants for public assistance, these practices have to be evaluated from a “bottom-up” (Schram 1995, 40; Lindhorst and Padgett 2005, 406) perspective that examines their effect from the position of the people trying to negotiate them. Then, in order to identify their full effect on the lives of service applicants, these practices must be further situated within the larger service delivery system. This enables an examination of their potential interactions with the policies of other agencies.

It is therefore especially important to conduct a bottom-up analysis of the dynamics that hinder and facilitate access to public assistance benefits among this client population. Research shows that timely access to these benefits plays a crucial role in the community transition of offenders with mental illness (Morrissey et al. 2007). It is essential to identify policies and practices that forestall these clients’ access to the programs that play such a critical role in the reentry process.

Methods

A 17-month ethnographic study of a reentry program for offenders with serious mental illness leaving jail offers an opportunity to study the issue of identification and its relation to access to benefits. This study took place between February 2005 and June 2006. One of the central aims of the study is to inductively examine the range of help-seeking activities of this population. Another goal is to identify dynamics that hinder or facilitate their access to public services. Multisited ethnographic research techniques are used because they allow for the study of activities that took place in such diverse locations as the program site, public assistance offices, and identification-granting agencies (Marcus 1998). Data are drawn from over 500 hours of observations of the staff and client activities in the reentry program; in-depth interviews with 10 staff and 14 clients of the reentry program; results of the program’s internal evaluation of its first 2 years of operation; and an array of documents, including federal, state, local, and organizational policies, that structure the help-seeking activities of clients, the client applications, and the eligibility criteria associated with services that clients attempted to access. All study procedures were approved by the university and municipal institutional review boards in the city where the research took place.

Data collection and analysis were interactive processes that continued until saturation was reached. In this study, saturation occurred when it seemed no longer possible to identify new help-seeking activities, new variations in these activities, or additional discrepant cases. In the initial stages of participant observation, open sampling techniques (Strauss
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and Corbin 1998) were used to observe the full range of help-seeking activities that the program’s clients engaged in after release from jail. Relational and discriminate sample techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998) were used in subsequent stages of fieldwork to observe the variations in help-seeking activities, the relationships among these activities, and the dynamics that hindered or facilitated the activities in daily practice.

Open sampling occurred during the first 6 months of fieldwork. During this stage, observations focused on the full range of activities that occurred within the reentry program. This focus is intended to identify all of the different types of help-seeking activities that clients engaged in after release as well as dynamics that hindered and facilitated them. In order to identify variations and relationships among the different help-seeking processes, subsequent observations purposefully selected situations in which clients experienced varying degrees of difficulty in engaging in the help-seeking activities identified during the first stage. During this stage, situations in which individuals had help-seeking experiences outside of the developing norms were pursued and studied in order to develop a richer understanding of the variations within and relationships among activities.

Semistructured interviews were used in the final phases of fieldwork to develop a detailed understanding of individual help-seeking experiences. Maximum-variation sampling techniques (Padgett 1998) were used to select clients for interviews. The criteria used for sampling were variations in the level of difficulty associated with obtaining services after release. A semistructured interview format was used to develop a deeper understanding of each client’s help-seeking experiences and his or her perspectives on the dynamics that complicated attempts to seek help after release.

In the initial stages of analysis, open-coding techniques were used (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) to develop a list of codes that represent the activities, experiences, and processes associated with the help-seeking activities under study. In the later stages of analysis, selective coding techniques and constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998) were used in an iterative coding process to identify the core patterns in the clients’ help-seeking activities and the types of problems that complicated these activities in daily practice.

Several additional analytic techniques were used to strengthen the rigor of the analysis. Data were triangulated by source and method. Field notes, interview notes, document summary forms, analytic memos, and interim case reports were used to develop a clear audit trail. Member-checking techniques were employed by eliciting the feedback of research participants on the developing analysis. Negative case analysis techniques were used to seek out discrepant cases that challenged the researchers’ emerging understanding of the processes under study (Padgett 1998).
Research Context

This study took place within a newly developed reentry program for offenders who have serious mental illness and are reentering the community after incarceration. The program is located in a large city in the northeastern United States. Funded through the city’s public mental health system, the program was developed and operated by one of the public mental health system’s nonprofit service providers. The city operates one of the nation’s largest jail systems. The system houses individuals awaiting trial and transfer, as well as those serving county-level sentences for misdemeanor and low-level felony offenses that result in sentences with a minimum duration of less than 1 year and a maximum duration of less than 2 years.

A team of researchers from a local university worked with the reentry program during its first 2 years of operations. This program is located in a mental health agency that has been in operation for a number of years. The team conducted several research projects, including the study reported here. The team member who conducted the fieldwork associated with this study participated in the program’s first year and a half of operations, acting as a participating daily observer during this period (Spradley 1980).

The reentry program employed 11 full-time staff, who provided services during and after clients’ incarceration. Program offerings include prerelease planning services, intensive case management services, and economic and material supports provided through the program’s transitional center. The prerelease planning services were provided by three peer-service providers and a supervisor who identified potential clients in jail. These four provided peer-support, psychoeducational, and planning services. A staff of five case managers and a supervisor provided intensive case management services for 90 days after the client’s release (Corrigan et al. 2008).

The program’s transition center operates out of the reentry program’s main offices. This center provides reentering clients with access to a flexible pool of economic and material resources. The economic resources include such items as subway tokens, money for medication, and gift cards to local stores and restaurants. To provide material resources, the program maintains a clothing bank; maintains a shower with towels, soap, and shampoo; and keeps a kitchen stocked with snack foods and beverages. On the day of their release, the program gives clients a gift basket that contains such items as toothbrushes, toothpaste, bras, underwear, socks, towels, and other essentials.

An internal evaluation indicates that the program provided services to 100 individuals during the first 2 years of operations. Sixty of these clients were released from jail during the study period. Offenders are eligible for the reentry program if they reside in the city; are reentering
Table 1

SOCIAL AND CLINICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF
THE REENTRY PROGRAM’S CLIENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Percentages of Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race or ethnicity:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 6–8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 9–12</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (average years)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary mental health diagnosis:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenia</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bipolar</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major depression</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizoaffective</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline personality disorder</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosis disorder not otherwise specified</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other diagnosis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE.—N = 100.

Returning offenders who have mental illness are often eligible for several public assistance programs, including General Assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. In the state where the study site is located, all such programs are administered by the state’s public assistance department, which also oversees the application process and thereby controls access to services. Identification requirements are a central feature of the application process, and these requirements emerged early in the study as a source of problems for clients. As part of data collection, the researcher accompanied clients on their trips to the public assistance office and other agencies that play some role in client access to iden-
The researcher also interviewed program staff and clients. In addition, organizational and institutional documents were collected to elucidate the institutional context by outlining the regulations that structure the identification requirements clients sought to negotiate. Investigations sought to determine: (1) why the identification requirements associated with state-administered public assistance applications play such an important role in the returning offenders’ help-seeking activities, (2) why some clients have difficulty acquiring the necessary forms of identification, and (3) what types of problems these requirements create for clients in daily practice.

The Public Assistance Application Process

Data from the program’s internal evaluation reveal that each of the 60 clients who were released during this study period (February 2005 to June 2006) began his or her postincarceration help-seeking activities by applying through a state public assistance office for General Assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. If this application process was successful, clients received $205 per month from General Assistance and approximately $160 per month in food stamps. The application for state-administered assistance can last from 2 weeks to 3 months. In the state where this study took place, public assistance applications began with an 18-page form, which was reviewed over a minimum of two face-to-face interviews with workers at the public assistance office. During these interviews, workers require clients to produce documentation to help in the eligibility determination process. Despite great variation in the type and number of documents that public assistance workers require in individual cases, photo identification is required of all applicants. For a discussion of specific documents and requirements, see below.

The interviewed reentry staff report that, even under the best of circumstances, clients wait an average of 11 days for the second face-to-face interview at the public assistance office. They also note that the completion of the second interview offers no guarantee that the worker will approve the application for benefits. Observations and interviews reveal that this delay in the start of benefits leaves clients struggling to find ways to survive during the first few weeks after release. Most have no money, no place to live, and no family to help support them after release.

Although the reentry program works with each client for months to prepare him or her for release, no amount of planning can overcome the delay between application and granting of the benefits needed to pay for food, clothing, and shelter in the community. This delay forces the reentry program’s staff and clients to cobble together resources that tide clients over until their benefits are activated. Because most clients
refuse to turn to the city’s shelter system upon release, staff try to obtain placements for them in local recovery houses, which are unregulated, communal-living arrangements for people with substance abuse problems. The houses accept clients on the promise that the house will defer collection of rent until a client is approved for General Assistance. Even when this works, clients often have to scramble for food, and they solicit staff help in this. Until access to food stamps begins and the client starts contributing half of his or her food stamps to the house each month, clients are not allowed to partake in the one daily meal that these houses typically provide. In many situations, clients’ scramble for food leaves them with no choice but to rely on loans of food from people in the recovery houses, on frequent visits to the reentry program’s kitchen, and on the reentry program’s supply of gift cards to local convenience stores and fast food restaurants.

Why Identification Requirements Are a Problem for People Leaving Jail

Observations and interviews suggest that the lengthy public assistance application process is further delayed by identification requirements and that such delays increase the length of time many clients go without benefits after release from jail. During the observations of the benefit application process, public assistance workers explained their demands for identification by saying that state regulations require them to verify an applicant’s identity as part of the application process. Reentry program staff report that this requirement creates problems because most of their clients have no identification at the time of release. The reentry program’s internal evaluation did not measure the number of clients who had problems meeting the public assistance identification requirements, but, over the course of observation, case managers estimated that between 66 and 100 percent of their clients experience problems with those requirements.

The literature suggests that lack of identification is a typical problem for returning offenders because identification is often lost during arrest and incarceration (National H.I.R.E. Network 2003). During observations and interviews, clients report that they lost identification at several different points in the process. Some report losing it during the arrest. Others say that their housing and belongings were lost during the incarceration. Still others report losing identification when they were processed into the jail. This lack of identification erected multiple service barriers for clients returning from incarceration.
Identification Requirements as a Catch-22

The following statement is taken from an interview with a staff person who talked about the no-win situation faced by clients who lack identification (ID) when they apply for public assistance benefits:

Um, well with the ID, [the public assistance office] have to understand that [the client is] coming out of the prison system. They don’t have an ID . . . and this creates just a lot of running around trying to get an ID. Like for the Social Security card they need some type of ID for that. So it’s kind of a lot a trying to figure out how to do that and running around. Like I can see if it was a person who didn’t have a case manager and they had to do it on their own. If it was me, I would be like, forget it. I’m not going to deal with that. ’Cause its frustrating and very time consuming and annoying, especially if [public assistance] are not treating the clients like people.

The problems created by identification requirements are described more directly by another staff person, who said: “I mean, it takes ID to get ID. If the consumer doesn’t have a Social Security card, or library card, or birth certificate, they can’t get anything else. Having an access card [the benefit card that the public assistance office issues] will allow you to get some of those things, but you can’t have an access card if you don’t have ID. It is a never-ending circle.”

One of the program’s clients further described this never-ending circle:

Well, when I tried to get [a birth certificate], they gave me pretty much the runaround, you know. And they had me tryin’ to get ID when that is what I needed my birth certificate for. I need my birth certificate to get ID, you know what I mean. . . . Then you needed ID to get the birth certificate. Right, I mean, it was complicated, and like, the way them people at them birth certificate office and them ID offices, they like have a nasty attitude. They don’t like, don’t treat you right. I mean its like, “Go away, I am busy.”

Public Assistance’s Identification Requirements

Table 2 outlines the identification requirements associated with applications for benefits administered through the state public assistance offices. The table’s first column lists the identification requirements that are associated with all state-administered public assistance program applications. The requirements are the same regardless of the specific programs to which a person is applying. The public assistance office does accept third-party verification, in which an associate of the applicant signs a document provided by the public assistance office to formally affirm the applicant’s identity. On first glance, this appears to be an option for those who lack identification, but the reentry staff report
Table 2

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE IDENTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Documentation</th>
<th>State-Administered Public Assistance Programs*</th>
<th>Medicaid†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proof of identity</td>
<td>Social Security card; state driver’s license; work ID; school ID; Selective Service card; voter ID card; or third-party verification</td>
<td>Valid U.S. passport; state ID with photo; school ID; military ID; record of receipt of SSI or SSDI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof of citizenship</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Valid U.S. passport; certified birth certificate; public birth record; hospital record; physician statement created more then 5 years before the application for medical assistance; affidavit made by two people (one nonrelative) who can prove their own identity and can explain why there is no record of birth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—SSI = Supplemental Security Income; SSDI = Social Security Disability Insurance; ID = identification.
* Information drawn from state code.
† Information drawn from state-administered regulations.

that public assistance workers only accept this method of verification in certain situations. An interviewed staff member explains: “Obviously, they [the clients] need some kind of identification. But if the consumer is really well-known to the system and has some kind of long history, and they [the clients] have their release papers [from jail], and they have me there vouching for them, then they [the public assistance workers] are not sticklers about the ID.”

This description illustrates the important role that worker discretion plays in the public assistance office’s identification requirement. The staff person mobilizes the worker’s discretion to broker an informal arrangement in which some staff at one of the public assistance offices in the city allow the reentry staff member to provide third-party verification of clients’ identity. Although this arrangement represents an important breakthrough for the reentry program, its utility is limited in the long run because the arrangement is vulnerable to staff turnover and does not extend to any of the other public assistance offices in the city. The arrangement ended when a new public assistance worker assumed responsibility for processing new applications and was unwilling to accept third-party verification from the reentry staff.

The second column of table 2 outlines the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act’s new identification requirements for Medicaid. These measures
tighten requirements in two ways. First, Medicaid’s requirements obligate applicants to provide two types of identification (i.e., proof of citizenship and proof of identity). Second, these requirements make no exception for people who lack identification. Not long after this policy was implemented, the New York Times published an article in which Robert Pear (2007) reports that some saw declines in Medicaid enrollment as a direct result of this policy. Allegedly, many of the people struggling to meet the new requirements are the very citizens whom the program is designed to serve (Pear 2007).

In the Tax Relief and Health Care Act of 2006 (U.S. Public Law 109-432), policy makers responded to the reported declines in Medicaid enrollment by exempting from the new identification requirements children in foster care and people who are actively enrolled in specific federal welfare benefit programs. Although these exceptions may help some, they do little to alleviate the burden that the requirements impose on first-time applicants, returning offenders, and other institutionalized individuals who have to reapply for their social welfare benefits upon release. Data from this study cannot address whether the 2006 act’s identification requirements further complicate individual applications to public assistance because the requirements took effect after fieldwork was completed. The experiences of program clients and staff suggest, however, that these strict identification requirements are likely to add additional burdens and delays in the application process for vulnerable populations.

Why It Is So Hard for Some Clients to Get ID

Observations of staff and clients’ attempts to obtain government identification suggest that the state’s identification requirements force some clients to invest considerable time and energy in searching for ways to obtain the acceptable forms of identification. These searches typically involve multiple trips to the agencies that issue Social Security cards, birth certificates, and state driver’s licenses. In each of these agencies, clients encounter a new application with its own set of identification requirements that the client must meet before he or she can obtain identification.

Table 3 lists the types of documentation required to obtain identity documents. A client must present a driver’s license, a state ID card, a Social Security card, a birth certificate, or a valid U.S. passport. For the purposes of this analysis, the state ID and U.S. passport are considered primary sources of identification because they can be used in their own right to satisfy requests for identification. The Social Security card and birth certificate are considered secondary forms of identification because an applicant may be required to produce these documents in order to obtain one of the primary forms of identification.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Document</th>
<th>Required Documentation</th>
<th>Accepted Forms of Documentation</th>
<th>Cost ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New state driver’s license</td>
<td>For applicant 18 years or older: proof of identity and two proofs of residency and Social Security card</td>
<td>Identity (one of the following): birth certificate with raised seal; certificate of U.S. citizenship; certificate of U.S. naturalization; valid U.S. passport. Residency (two of the following): W2 form; current weapons permit; current utility bill (excludes those for cell phones and pagers); tax records; lease agreement; mortgage documents. Additional documents needed to prove name change: marriage certificate; divorce decree; court order for name change.</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New state ID card</td>
<td>Same as those for new state driver’s license</td>
<td>Same as those for new state driver’s license</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacement of state driver’s license or state ID card</td>
<td>None listed; mailed to address on ID or is picked up in person</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Social Security card</td>
<td>Proof of age, identity, and citizenship</td>
<td>Identity (one of the following): state driver’s license; state ID card; valid U.S. passport. If applicant does not have any of these documents and cannot get a replacement for the documents listed above within 10 days, the agency may allow applicant to use one of the following documents: employee ID, school ID, health insurance card (not including Medicare card), adoption decree, or military ID card. Documents not accepted are birth certificate, Social Security card, and Social Security records. Citizenship (one of the following): certified copy of birth certificate; valid U.S. passport.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacement Social Security card</td>
<td>Proof of identity; proof of citizenship (if born outside United States)</td>
<td>Same as those for new Social Security card</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth certificate (certified copy)</td>
<td>Proof of identity</td>
<td>Valid government-issued photo ID with applicant’s current address</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Document</td>
<td>Required Documentation</td>
<td>Accepted Forms of Documentation</td>
<td>Cost ($)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New U.S. passport</td>
<td>Proof of citizenship and proof of identity and Social Security number</td>
<td>Citizenship (one of the following): previous undamaged passport; certified birth certificate. If applicant has neither of these documents, he or she must submit a letter from the applicant’s state of birth documenting that no birth certificate can be found and as many of the following documents as possible: baptismal record, hospital birth certificate, census record, family Bible record, early school records, and doctor’s record of postnatal care</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity (one of the following): previous undamaged U.S. passport; certificate of U.S. naturalization; state driver’s license; government-issued ID (city, state, local); military ID (military and dependents). If applicant lacks these documents, he or she must produce signature documents (e.g., a combination of such documents as Social Security card, credit card, bank card, and library card) or a person who can vouch for applicant who has known applicant for 2 years, is a U.S. citizen or naturalized resident, and has a valid ID</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal of U.S. passport</td>
<td>Same as those for new U.S. passport</td>
<td>Same as those for new U.S. passport</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—ID = identification; NA = not applicable. In some cases, there are additional identification requirements for applicants born outside of the United States and for applicants under the age of 18. Information in this table comes from the agencies’ Web sites.

The first column of table 3 lists the types of documentation that adults are required to provide when applying for each of the listed identity documents. The second column lists the forms of documentation accepted to satisfy the identification requirements associated with each identity document. A close examination of the forms of documentation listed in the second column reveals that each has its own identification requirements, which include at least one of the other forms of identi-
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Table 4

THE NEVER-ENDING CIRCLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Identity Document</th>
<th>Identity Requirements</th>
<th>Citizenships Requirements</th>
<th>Exceptions for Those Who Have No Identification?</th>
<th>Cost ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State driver's license</td>
<td>Social Security card and certified birth certificate or valid U.S. passport</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State ID card</td>
<td>Same as those for state driver's license</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security card</td>
<td>State driver's license or valid U.S. passport</td>
<td>Certified birth certificate or valid U.S. passport</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth certificate</td>
<td>Valid government ID with current address</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. passport: New</td>
<td>Driver's license</td>
<td>Certified birth certificate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal</td>
<td>Previous passport or state driver’s license</td>
<td>Previous passport or certified birth certificate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—ID = identification; NA = not applicable.

fication listed in the table. This policy loop is illustrated in table 4, which shows that an applicant for a state ID card must produce a Social Security card and either a valid U.S. passport or a certified birth certificate. Yet, in order to get a Social Security card or certified birth certificate quickly, the applicant needs a current state ID or valid U.S. passport and the associated fee (in the case of a birth certificate). Obtaining a U.S. passport may initially seem to be a way to resolve the catch-22 situation confronting applicants who lack identification because its application includes written policies that address situations in which people lack all of the required forms of identification. But, the months spent waiting for the issuance of a passport and the $97 fee associated with its application make this form of identification an impractical and unattainable option for most returning offenders with serious mental illness.

The Role of Worker Discretion

Table 4 illustrates how clients who lack identification get caught up in a circle of requests for identification, but the table does not communicate the time and frustration associated with clients’ attempts to meet these requirements. In most cases observed for this study, the worker
processing the application, be it an application for public assistance or government identification, used individual discretion to determine what identification he or she would accept as proof of identity in any given situation. Applications by clients who lack identification are held up until the applicant is able to find some type of identification that satisfies the expectations of the worker processing the application. The presence of this discretion in the decision-making process adds variability to the application process. Because the vast majority of the clients have trouble satisfying the public assistance office’s identification requirements, negative case analysis techniques (Padgett 1998) were used during the relational and discriminate sampling phases to try to identify situations in which client’s have minimal or no difficulties with these requirements. These efforts identify only three instances in which clients were able to respond to the public assistance worker’s initial request with an acceptable form of identification other than the third-party verification mechanism described above. In two of the three instances, the identification was obtained from relatives who kept the documents safe during the clients’ incarceration. In the third instance, the public assistance worker and her supervisor used their discretion to confirm the client’s identity by comparing the client’s signature on the application with a signature on a previous application.

Over time, the reentry program’s staff made several attempts to find system-level resolutions for the identification problems faced by their clients. They discussed the issues and possible solutions with correctional and mental health administrators at a meeting of a forensic task force examining issues confronting people who have mental illness and are involved in the criminal justice system. Reentry staff report that members of the task force recognized the problems associated with identification issues but that they reached no consensus on a solution.

After unsuccessful attempts to reach system-level solutions, the reentry staff developed ground-level tactics that they say sometimes help to ease the identification problems facing clients. For example, the staff learned that clients could sometimes prove identity at the state vital statistics office and public library by presenting two pieces of official mail addressed to the client. The birth certificate issued by the vital statistics office is a required document for some other forms of ID, and public assistance workers occasionally accepted library cards as proof of identity. Therefore, staff routinely send the client two separate letters on agency letterhead upon the client’s release. Although the strategy helps in some situations, it fails in many others because individual workers use discretion in determining whether to accept these forms of identification.

Some staff also try to satisfy identification requirements by providing clients with a program-issued picture card that staff call a consumer ID. The card bears the client’s name, picture, Social Security number, and
It Takes ID to Get ID

the word “consumer.” Staff and clients report, however, that most public assistance workers refuse to accept the card because it is issued without the thorough background check that is associated with work- and school-issued identification cards.

Staff and clients also report great frustration in their unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with individual workers for an expedited review. All of these agencies process applications on a first-come, first-served basis, and there is no guarantee that the same worker will handle an application from beginning to end. That problem creates situations like one in which a client who lacked identification convinced an individual worker at the vital statistics office to accept the prescription label on a pill bottle as proof of identity for use in his application for a birth certificate. Because the pill bottle was at home, he had to retrieve it and travel back to the vital statistics office. After completing the trip and standing in a long line for a second time that day, the client found himself talking to a new worker who refused to accept the pill bottle as proof of identity, and the client was forced to start the application process all over again.

Frustrations Associated with Identification Requirements

As the prior example suggests, staff and clients’ efforts take them from agency to agency in search of some type of identification that the client can use to get public assistance. Clients have many different reactions to frustrations in their search for identification. The frustrations are best expressed by a client who yelled, “This takes a quart [of alcohol]!” after he spent 6 hours driving back and forth between a Social Security office and the vital statistics office. The client attempted to obtain the birth certificate and Social Security card needed to get a new state ID card, but he had never applied for a state ID card before and lost all of his belongings in a house fire during incarceration. At the Social Security office, he and a staff member requested a Social Security card only to be told after waiting for half an hour that the client could not initiate his request until he proved his identity by providing an original copy of the document he received at release. The document listed the dates of his incarceration.

After leaving the Social Security office, he and the staff member drove 20 minutes to the vital statistics office, where they stood in line for 45 minutes after the office’s guard assured them that two letters addressed to the client would be sufficient proof of identity. When they reached the window, however, the vital statistic worker told them that these letters are not sufficient proof of identity and that, as proof of identity, the client needed a Social Security office printout showing that he had initiated a request for a Social Security card. This directive sent the staff member and client back to the reentry program’s office, where the staff
person searched for the original release document that the jail gave the client. After this, the client and staff member drove 15 minutes back to the Social Security office, where they waited another 45 minutes. While the client had expressed frustrations at the time spent waiting in the various offices that day, he did not become visibly angry until he got to the front of the Social Security line for the second time that day. He was then told by a new worker that this particular office could not process his request for a Social Security card because it was not his “home office.”

This case may seem like an extreme example, but the reality is that it was far too typical of the experiences of reentry program staff and clients. In most situations, the reentry staff reported that they were able to find some form of usable identification within a few days to a week. But, as the example above illustrates, these searches for identification forced staff and clients to spend an inordinate amount of time traveling from agency to agency. These time-consuming searches came at the expense of the staff and client attempts to access the treatment services that are considered to be such critical component of the client’s reentry process.

Discussion

Identification is a ubiquitous part of modern day life, and identification requirements have a long history of being used to prevent fraud. Recent attempts to tighten these requirements, such as those included in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, bring discussion of identification back to the forefront of public discourse (Pear 2007; USGAO 2007). In order to gain a full understanding of the problems that these requirements create, one must examine them within the context of the larger policy framework in which identification requirements are part of antiterrorism legislation and regulations.

The Real ID Act of 2005 (U.S. Public Law 109-13 [2006]) offers a recent example of related antiterrorism efforts. This law attempts to prevent individuals from fraudulently obtaining state-issued identification and increases the number of documents required to prove identity when applying for state-issued identification. Although the effects of this policy are currently under review, the act’s strict identification requirements and the absence of exceptions for people who lack identity documents are likely to further exacerbate the problems that vulnerable populations already face when trying to obtain identification.

The analysis presented here illustrates how various policies’ identification requirements interact in ways that have unanticipated consequences for an especially vulnerable population’s access to life-sustaining resources. These interactions take place when people cross such regulatory boundaries as those between Social Security and vital statistics offices. The interactions are therefore difficult to detect because they occur outside of the purview of any one institutional setting.
The results of this analysis suggest that, at a minimum, identification requirements should specify formal written measures that offer consistent, viable solutions for people who have lost their identification. Many of the states in the USGAO’s (2007) survey note the absence of written policies to address situations in which people lack identification. The states indicate that this absence is one of the major drawbacks of Medicaid’s new identification policy. Although worker discretion is generally considered to be a solution to individual circumstances that challenge the limits of existing regulation, it is not the best alternative for situations in which multiple workers make decisions on a single case. Worker discretion is also a problematic solution for situations in which workers are pressured to avoid “errors of liberality” but not “errors of stringency” (Brodkin and Lipsky 1983, 3) because such situations encourage workers to use broad discretion in guarding against fraud rather than in helping individual applicants to obtain the services for which they are eligible (Brodkin and Lipsky 1983; Lipsky 1984).

When developing written policies that address situations in which individuals have none of the major forms of government-issued identification, policy makers must identify alternative solutions. These solutions might assist people who have lost their identification as well as those who were issued any of the major forms of identification. The written exceptions in the U.S. passport’s identification measures offer a good example of a policy that can address both situations. The policy allows an applicant to prove identity by presenting testimony from a citizen who has known him or her for at least 2 years. However, the time frame requirement in Medicaid’s policy, which allows a person to prove citizenship using a document created by a doctor more than 5 years before the application, does nothing to help people who have recently lost all forms of identification.

There is a growing consensus that government-issued identification plays an important role in the reentry process (Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001; National H.I.R.E. Network 2003). Some correctional facilities have responded to this recognition by developing programs to help returning prisoners obtain identification. The correctional facility in this study reportedly responded to these identification problems by helping inmates send away for identity documents while they are incarcerated. However, the policy loop described in this article leaves this service strategy vulnerable to failure because the birth certificate is the only document that can be requested by mail and people are still required to attach copies of their identification as part of the application process. Jails and prisons may hold another possible solution to the identification problems facing returning offenders. Such institutions could issue identification to the inmate at the point of release. Observations of meetings that reentry staff had with jail officials revealed that, when jail officials were asked to consider this option, they expressed concerns, stating that
they cannot verify an inmate’s identity because people often use false names and Social Security numbers when they are booked into jail. Although there are no empirical estimates of the prevalence of these practices among jail detainees, use of aliases and lack of identification among the incarcerated are important issues to consider in designing solutions. Despite these problems, logic dictates that there is no better opportunity to verify a person’s actual identity than when they are being processed through the criminal justice system. This system has a vested interest in correctly identifying the people it incarcerates and access to the most sophisticated means of determining identity (i.e., integrated databases and fingerprinting). Thus, from public health and public safety perspectives, it makes sense that this technology be used to accurately identify those who are incarcerated and subsequently released back in to the community. Technology also offers a sensible way to use identification processes to help offenders returning to the community.

Even if correctional systems agree to provide identification for returning prisoners, this is just the first step in addressing the policy loop that confronts returning offenders who lack identification. If it is to address the problem, such identification must also be formally accepted by the various agencies and organizations that impose identification requirements. Such a policy shift would require revision of many existing regulations because none of the policies examined in this study lists prison-issued ID as an acceptable proof of identity. Thus, the success of such a policy change would hinge in large part on agreement across multiple, unconnected service delivery systems that typically have little interaction with each other. Specifically, it would require that these systems agree to develop and implement identification policies that address the special needs of offenders returning to the community.

Conclusion

Individual identification requirements, such as the ones used by public assistance offices, may seem reasonable when considered singly. This analysis shows that a confluence of identification policies increases the time and resources required to obtain identification while also tightening the identification requirements associated with a number of important public resources. The data presented in this article suggest that these policies interact in ways that create problems, which have more to do with a person’s life circumstances than citizenship status. Although the legislative effects associated with these more stringent identification policies may or may not make society safer, they might also inadvertently undermine the health, welfare, and security of some of society’s most vulnerable members on a daily basis.

The problems associated with public assistance identification requirements raise questions about the appropriateness of embedding such
requirements in social services. They also point to the need to balance the benefits associated with fraud protection measures against the benefits of facilitating timely access to services that play a critical role in maintaining an individual’s health and welfare. These problems illustrate the need to examine whether identification requirements are generally effective in preventing fraud.

This study also demonstrates the important role that identification plays in the reentry process for offenders with mental illness, as well as in the service barriers that these requirements create for people who lack identification. For returning offenders with serious mental illness, these requirements have the potential to exacerbate the risk of death in the first few weeks after release, blocking access of mentally ill people to economic resources needed to pay for care and treatment in the community. Thus, it is important for policy makers to weigh the potential benefits associated with identification requirements against the individual, organizational, and societal costs that these requirements create in terms of increased administration and lost opportunities to provide life saving resources.

References
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Notes
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1 In order to protect the identity of all the staff and clients who participated in this research, this text withholds the names of all participants, as well as of the city, university, program site, and agency where study occurred.