

# T02W01 / Street-level bureaucracy in weak institutions

**Topic :** T02 / Comparative Public Policy

**Chair :** Rik Peeters (CIDE)

**Second Chair :** GABRIELA LOTTA (Getulio Vargas Foundation)

**Third Chair :** Fernando Nieto Morales (El Colegio de México)

## CALL FOR PAPERS

The vast majority of what we know about street-level bureaucracy and frontline work comes from studies in advanced democracies. But what happens in different social, political, and administrative contexts? Implicit assumptions about professionalism, state capacity, and social trust shape the way we have come to understand frontline work and citizen-state interactions. In this workshop, we invite scholars to address the challenges of frontline work under conditions of low trust, social inequality, and limited state capacity. The objective of the workshop is to generate new insights about the way systemic conditions shape the nature of frontline work, develop a clearer focus on the coping mechanisms frontline workers and citizens develop in contested contexts, and open up research in low-trust contexts to the mainstream academic debate.

For the 3rd edition of this panel, we hope to bring together scholars from especially Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, South-East Asia, and Latin America with a shared interest in frontline work in contexts of low trust, social inequality, and limited state capacity. We invite papers that analyze different types of frontline settings (social programs, enforcement, desk work, and so on) and use different methods (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed). One of the ambitions of the workshop is to develop collaborative publications, such as a book project or a journal special issue.

Questions that should guide the papers:

- What happens to street-level bureaucracy in countries with weak institutions and low trust? How do these characteristics affect discretion and accountability?
- How do characteristics of low trust countries, such as corruption, clientelism, and patronage, affect frontline work?
- How do frontline workers cope with working in contexts of high inequalities, scarcity of resources, and weak institutions?
- To what extent do frontline workers compensate for institutional deficiencies or, on the contrary, abuse discretionary spaces?
- How is the interaction between frontline workers and citizens affected by these characteristics?

Main Topics:

- Frontline work in weak institutions
- Administrative burdens
- Social inequality and service delivery
- Low trust and citizen-state interactions
- Professionalism and accountability
- Street-level corruption, patronage, and clientelism

## ABSTRACT

The vast majority of what we know about street-level bureaucracy and frontline work comes from studies in advanced democracies. But what happens in different social, political, and administrative contexts? Implicit assumptions about professionalism, state capacity, and social trust shape the way we have come to understand frontline work and citizen-state interactions. In this workshop, we invite scholars to address the challenges of frontline work under conditions of low trust, social inequality, and limited state capacity. The objective of the workshop is to generate new insights about the way systemic conditions shape the nature of frontline work, develop a clearer focus on the coping mechanisms frontline workers and citizens develop in contested contexts, and open up research in low-trust contexts to the mainstream academic debate.

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## Session 2 Second session (presentations online)

Tuesday, June 28th 14:00 to 17:00 (C426)

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SCALE TO MEASURE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS FOR REQUIRING GOVERNMENT AID IN BRAZIL**

Maiara Marinho (Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Brazil)

In their interaction with the state, citizens often find themselves burdened with eligibility forms, endless requirements, and senseless rules that lead to unpleasant experiences with bureaucracy. These burdens represent barriers to those who need to access public benefits, especially the poor, who are seen as undeserving and have little social and human capital. In making the case that technology can help poor people get government aid, some scholars advocate for streamlined mobile apps and websites to ease access. But technology is not neutral. Literature on computer-human interaction (CHI) upholds that computing systems can place high levels of burdens on their users, establish nontransparent eligibility rules, represent a threat to individuals' privacy, require time, financial, cognitive, and emotional costs from the user. Due to these paradoxical claims, in this paper, we sought to develop a new scale to measure the administrative burdens for citizens who digitally interact with the State when they apply for welfare benefits. Our purpose of conducting the present research was to develop a new validated scale to measure a more contextualized idea of digital administrative burdens and to measure the burdens associated with psychological costs of interacting with digital government. To this endeavor, we adopted a non-probabilistic sample of 413 respondents through Facebook groups that were dedicated to discussing the Brazilian Emergency Aid, also known as auxílio emergencial. Results from exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis provided evidence of reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the burdens' scale. Also, we observed partial invariance of our model, but some limitations on the findings call for future deeper research.

### **Frontline workers under stress in Mexico: managing the COVID-19 pandemic under a weak health-care system**

Carlos Moreno-Jaimes (ITESO)

This paper analyzes the role of healthcare frontline workers in managing the COVID-19 crisis in Mexico, a country where at least half of its population lacks access to the benefits of social security services. Although at the outset of the pandemic, both the federal and 32 state-level governments created different policy frameworks to guide health-care providers on how to face a dramatic increase in demand, frontline healthcare staff had to deal with the situation using their own discretion and being exposed to different dangers. Based on face-to-face interviews with healthcare frontline workers in Jalisco, one of Mexico's most populated states, the paper illustrates how street-level bureaucrats performed their roles in a context of resource shortages, including their interaction with patients and their families, their vulnerability to contagion, the episodes of discrimination they faced and the lack of support from their supervisors. The case provides a specific illustration of the nature of frontline work in a setting of institutional weakness, such as Mexico's health-care sector, a system characterized by its high levels of organizational fragmentation, low levels of public funding and high heterogeneity in the quality of services. The case is also relevant from a theoretical perspective, as it allows analyzing the performance of street-level bureaucracies in a context of weak institutionalization, thereby contributing to better understand how discretionary decision-making affects bureaucratic accountability and the quality of service provision.

I will do my best to present on-site.

## **(Virtual) Procedural Justice and Role of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Prompting Citizens to Act as Vigilantes: The Case of the Israeli Police**

Ofek Edri-Peer (University of Haifa)

Nissim Cohen (University of Haifa)

What role do the perceptions of clients about the procedural justice that street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) use when implementing policy play in prompting citizens to engage in vigilante actions? We examine the unintended effects of SLBs' implementation of policy on citizens' vigilantism. Specifically, we explore how the characteristics of new public management (NPM) and SLBs' routines affect citizens' perceptions about law enforcement.

Vigilantism is an illegal activity, carried out by a private citizen in response to criminal activity committed by another private citizen, against that same perpetrator. Research suggests that the factors that lead to vigilantism are correlated with the outcome that the crime victims receive from law enforcement. We argue that, to characterize the relationship between the public and the authorities, we must focus on the process that citizens experience throughout their interaction with street-level law enforcement agencies and workers – not merely on its outcomes.

SLBs are a diverse group whose formal task is to improve the welfare of society and help their citizen-clients. They are public employees who interact directly with citizens. Through their discretion in implementing policy, they can have a strong effect on the actual outcomes citizens experience.

Procedural justice is an element of street-level work. It refers to the degree of fairness in the process of allocating public goods. Processes that lack procedural justice imply that decisions are made based on personal opinions, which signals to people that they will not receive fair treatment. Such perceptions affect citizens' view of legitimacy, trust in and satisfaction with public agencies.

Procedural justice is particularly salient in the daily interactions between citizens and SLBs, but there is limited research in public management linking the two. Research from related disciplines addresses these issues, maintaining that SLBs' procedural justice has a direct impact on citizens' perceptions and behavior. These studies reinforce the need to understand SLBs' impact on citizens, especially those involved in enforcing compliance. Regardless of the written policy, how SLBs use procedural justice when implementing policy might affect citizens' behavior. Thus, the role of SLBs is important not only because of their influence on policy outcomes, but also because how they implement policy may prompt citizens to engage in vigilante activities.

To investigate this issue, we use a qualitative methodology, which includes in-depth interviews with Israeli police officers and civilian crime victims, some of whom acted as vigilantes. So far, we have interviewed 28 crime victims and 22 police officers and are in the process of collecting more data. We will analyze our information using Atlas.ti and based on Charmaz's grounded theory. We will use inductive coding and categorizing for each segment of the interview, without prior assumptions about the interviewees' perceptions.

Previous research has focused mainly on SLBs' discretion and coping mechanisms. We hope to contribute to the literature on public management and implementation in the context of NPM by expanding existing knowledge about the relationship between SLBs' discretion and work routines and the perceptions and behaviors of citizens. By examining the allocation of public goods in the context of policing as a process, we hope to take our analysis one step further and to understand the implications of citizens' interactions with public service providers. We hope to discover what happens after citizens' encounters with SLBs end and how the latter's behavior and role perceptions during these encounters affect people's behavior and possibly lead to illegal activity. We also hope to contribute to the literature on policing by discovering the missing link between police officers' procedural justice and vigilantism. Methodologically, this study will contribute by examining the phenomenon from both perspectives – the clients' and the SLBs', and investigating not only the clients' perceptions and behaviors, but also why police officers act the way they do. Empirically, we will test our claims in Israel, a developed democratic country, as evidence from such countries is lacking in the vigilante literature. Lastly, our results might have practical implications for developing public policy that meets the needs of citizens and thus reduces the need for vigilantism.

## **How Do Street-Level Bureaucrats Actively Represent Clients Indirectly? The Case of LGBTQ+ Teachers in Israel**

Maayan Davidovitz (Tel Aviv University)

The literature dealing with representative bureaucracy emphasizes the significant role that street-level bureaucrats may play when they actively and directly represent clients with whom they share social characteristics, for example, by prioritizing them over others to benefit them. I go one step further and examine whether street-level bureaucrats actively represent clients indirectly by using their discretion to shape non-minority attitudes toward minorities. I explore this phenomenon empirically through in-depth interviews with 36 Israeli LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) teachers. The study contributes to the implementation literature by revealing why and how LGBTQ+ street-level bureaucrats actively represent LGBTQ+ clients indirectly by influencing the attitudes of non-LGBTQ+ clients towards them.

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## Session 3 Third session (presentations online)

Wednesday, June 29th 09:00 to 12:00 (C426)

### **The implementation of labor policies for domestic workers: the role of front-line bureaucrats and the perception of workers as beneficiaries**

Patricia Guzmán (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas )

The objective of this research is to understand aspects that affect the implementation of labor policies regarding paid domestic work. The work will focus on the role of front-line bureaucrats as policymakers and implementers and the effects of their interactions with their beneficiaries, having as a general research question: How do bureaucratic interactions affect the labor protection of domestic workers?

Three bodies of literature are used. First, the literature related to institutional weakness or low-trust bureaucracies in developing countries. Second, the literature on implementation and, specifically, on the role of front-line bureaucrats as implementers and formulators of public policies, including aspects related to coping mechanisms and client selection. Third, the experiences of the beneficiaries as the other side of the interactions.

In Mexico, institutional weakness - less formalization, political interference, low trust, and low expectations - are reflected in the actions of front-line bureaucrats, in their margin of discretion, and in how they perceive their activities (Dasandi and Esteve 2017; Lameck and Hulst 2020; Peeters and Campos 2021). In the proposed study case, there is evidence of opacity, overlapping functions, and high discretion, as well as stress, over-demand, work overload, and job insecurity. This institutional weakness could generate, at one extreme, spaces to obtain personal benefits and for the emergence of a predatory bureaucracy (Bartholdson and Porro 2019, Blundo 2006; Karadaghi and Willott 2015), at the other extreme, mechanisms that allow compensating this weakness, given by motivation or professional rules, where front-line workers can improvise, determine the meaning of policies-be policymakers-and get closer to communities to better understand their needs and shape their service to them (Amengual and Dargent 2020, Lotta & Marques 2020). Through this research, my purpose is to know what happens when regulatory changes, which promise greater equality in the workplace, are translated into concrete actions, taking as a center the role of frontline workers as implementers and policymakers and the effects of their interactions with its beneficiaries, within a context of institutional weakness.

The methodology used in this research is qualitative, with the use of structured and semi-structured interviews as the main tools, the answers will be coded based on criteria that allow the identification of institutional factors, discretion and coping mechanisms, and deservingness. The study is carried out in the 2021-2022 period in the states that concentrate the highest percentage of paid domestic work in Mexico, from a perspective compared to other countries with similar levels of development and labor informality, but with differences in the adoption of the Convention 189 and modifications to its labor laws. The subjects of this research are the front-line workers in charge of labor advice and conciliation-and in some cases inspection- and the workers.

### **(Virtual) Teachers in Mountains: Dealing with Resource Crunch and Institutional Deficiencies in the Primary Education Sector in India**

Anand Kumar Ravichandran (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

Subodh Wagle (Indian Institute of Technology Bombay)

India has made significant strides in improving access and retention in school education through various schemes and ambitious flagship programs. Despite these gains in access and retention, the learning outcomes especially in the case of students from the government primary schools located in remote rural

areas are abjectly low and do not show any significant improvements over the last several years. A large part of the blame for poor learning outcomes among children is often attributed to poor performance of the government primary teachers, who are the front-line workers in the primary education sector.

The research presented in this paper was aimed at understanding the factors that shape the performance of primary teachers working in rural government schools. The theoretical lens of the Street-level Bureaucracy Theory, proposed by Michael Lipsky, was used in this research. The primary school teachers from government schools, being the front-line workers in the education system, fit well with the criteria of the street-level bureaucrats.

The research, involving an immersive field study covered teachers from the government primary schools located in the remote, mountainous villages from the Theni district in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The selected schools were located in the villages marked by extreme lack of development and poor infrastructure. These schools suffered from acute paucity of resources and grossly inadequate human resources, while students attending these schools came from families distressed by chronic economic deprivation and social marginalization for generations. The support received by teachers from their higher authorities was minimal, though occasional monitoring exercises based on administrative criteria and unsympathetic expectations generated disenchantment. The most disconcerting problem faced by the teacher leading to adverse implications for their performance and for delivery of the policy was the excessive burden of non-educational tasks carried by these teachers.

Thus, the primary school teachers from the chosen government schools worked in the conditions marked by weak institutions, high levels of inequality, and scarcity of resources. The research found more than fifty different coping strategies adopted by these teachers to deal with these stressful working conditions, which were varied in their strategic and substantive contents. One of the major findings of the research was that these teachers, while dealing with the institutional deficiencies and scarcity of resources, made use of discretion available to them in diverse ways. While, on a few occasions, some teachers seemed to be involved in abuse of their discretion at the cost of students, on many occasions, they did take up the role of citizens' agents by going an extra mile in discharging their duties. Moreover, on many occasions, teachers were forced to adopt coping strategies that led to certain negative implications for students or for both students and teachers, but did not benefit the teachers in any way.

Various data collection methods were employed in the research, including non-participant observations, unstructured interviews, and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using the combination of a custom-made protocol evolved from the analytical framework of SLB theory and the Thematic Analysis technique.

[Online]

### **(Virtual) Comparing street-level practices in Germany and Israel – how systemic conditions shape the nature of SLB work**

Tanja Klenk (Helmut-Schmidt University Hamburg)

Nissim Cohen (University of Haifa)

Maayan Davidovitz (Tel Aviv University)

How does the marketization of providing social services impact the practices of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) towards their clients? To explore this question, we compare the home care markets in Germany and Israel, two countries, that represent welfare states of different degrees of maturity. Our article makes an analytical and an empirical contribution to the literature. Analytically, we strengthen the comparative dimension of SLB research and discuss the implicit assumptions about professionalism, state capacity, and social trust that shape the way we have come to understand frontline work and citizen-state interactions.

Empirically, we show that in both cases SLBs adopt new practices as a result of marketization. However, the new practices SLBs adopt differ widely in the two countries which we explain with the fact that SLBs need to compensate for different institutional deficiencies. Our results are based on 53 interviews with social workers in home care agencies offering ambulatory care services. We discuss the implications of our study and suggest several future fruitful research directions.

### **(Virtual) Frontline Covid Warriors in India: Dealing with Resource Scarcity, Weak Institutions, and Social Inequality**

Arpit Arora (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

Subodh Wagle (Indian Institute of Technology Bombay)

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated states and societies worldwide, including in India. The pandemic has put the country's already struggling healthcare system under immense stress, leading to a highly vulnerable situation. With the pandemic surging in recurring waves, Covid Warriors—i.e., people dealing with the pandemic at the frontlines—play a critical role in containing the spread of the disease. Michael Lipsky calls these frontline workers Street Level Bureaucrats (SLBs). In his seminal work, Lipsky highlights certain defining features of the work of SLBs, such as judging complex situations, making on-the-spot decisions, and instantaneously implementing these decisions. Additionally, the theory also identifies key factors influencing the actual, on-ground performance of SLBs in terms of coping strategies they adopt. The fast-evolving pandemic situation, coupled with limited state capacity, and lack of established best practices or well-tested standard operating procedures, has left the 'SLB-Covid Warriors' relying heavily on the discretion available to them.

This paper focuses on the activities carried out in the Home Isolation unit of the Covid Control Room established by the city and district administration of Indore—a Covid hotspot city in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The study employs diverse methods for qualitative data collection: semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and informal interactions. For analysis, the study uses the technique of data matrices combined with thematic analysis.

The paper provides insights into the working conditions of Covid-SLBs characterized by scarcity of resources, weak institutions, and high inequalities. The paper focuses on how SLBs cope with such working conditions and the extent to and manner in which the SLBs compensate for institutional deficiencies using their discretion or abuse the discretion. The paper identifies that the lack of human resources, equipment, and infrastructures such as testing kits, medical equipment, hospital beds, and ambulances are the main characteristics of resource scarcity. In the case of weak institutions, the paper highlights the issues of lack of support from supervisors, weak structure of norms governing the SLBs, and non-compliance with norms by the SLBs. The paper highlights the effects of these factors on the SLBs and their coping strategies devised to complete their tasks. Furthermore, the paper discusses the diverse use of discretion by SLBs in different situations marked by the inequalities in the SLB-client relationship. SLBs often use their discretion positively to assist the families from humble backgrounds or in situations in which the SLBs believe that the client is suffering, even by flouting the norms and acting as citizen's agents. Another central theme that the paper underscores is the prevalence of the VIP (Very Important Persons) culture and its critical implications. SLBs have to provide special treatment to VIPs, at the expense of other clients, such as immediate completion of 'isolation and discharge' formalities, immediate provision of medical infrastructure, and daily monitoring of the VIPs. Such special treatment provided to the SLBs, in return for the patronage in the future results in unwarranted use of scarce resources, affecting other clients who critically need these resources and services.

**Mode of Presentation: On-Site**