Description: “Welfare stigma” or stereotypes about poor people’s abuse of public aid are used in two core criminal justice arenas: felony adjudication in a court system and space allocation in a jail. Through a comparative ethnographic study, this research reveals that welfare stigma has interorganizational utility: It streamlines convictions in courts, which pulls defendants through adjudication, and conversely, it expands early release from jails, which pulls inmates out of the custody population. In the context of diminishing social safety nets, these findings have implications for understanding how discretion is exercised in an American criminal justice system increasingly tasked with the distribution of social services to the urban poor.

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