e-Government legislation: Implementation issues for programs for low-income people

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a research agenda to explore the intersection of e-government implementation and the key federal programs – Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, a.k.a. food stamps), (SSI), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF, a.k.a. welfare) – that provide assistance to low-income citizens in the United States. To lay the groundwork for on-going research, this paper focuses on the implementing statutes that require different levels of automation for delivering these programs to the public. It discusses the programs in terms of their breadth, impacts to recipients, and the effects of automation as implemented for each. It identifies some of the consequences of automation, such as potentially faster service delivery, different approaches to information access, and issues of privacy. It then suggests some points to consider for policymakers and for future research to more deeply understand this unique and little-studied aspect of e-government implementation. By understanding the impacts of implementing statutes on the poor, policymakers can develop a deliberately inclusive strategy that leverages technology to support access to assistance in measurable models that can be implemented at the federal, state, and county levels. This can further democratize the government-to-citizen relationship and support greater accountability to taxpayers.

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1. e-Government and low-income people

Citizens engaging the government through information and communications technologies (ICTs) (a.k.a. e-government) is cast as a cost-effective, democratizing medium for service delivery by brokering government information and services digitally (Dawes, 2002; Mossberger, 2009). It promises greater accountability and transparency by supporting a digital infrastructure in which the government and the public partner in information creation and problem-solving (Orszag, 2009). The U.S. government has committed to this strategy to engage the public through electronic information sharing, collaborative problem identification and solution development, and streamlined service delivery. To deliver on this commitment, access is necessary.

As of 2012, many low-income people (people who live at or around the federal poverty level (FPL)) are plugged in either through in-home broadband, access through libraries, cell phones, smartphones, or other mobile devices (HHS, 2012). They access traditional websites, use mobile apps, and engage via multiple social media platforms. This suggests that low-income people can access more government information and services on-line through multiple platforms if services are so delivered. Leveraging on-line access removes a number of identified barriers such as longer timelines to completion, limited office hours (by accessing information on a 24/7 or after-work basis), and transportation and childcare costs (Shipler, 2005).

Operationally, leveraging e-government by low-income people is influenced by such factors as culture, economic conditions, political influences, class, information relevance and access, and trust in the government, its constituents, and advocates (Sipior & Ward, 2005). Understanding the consequences of statutes for low-income assistance programs can help assess impacts to the poor and mitigate unintended consequences that may have been introduced. This understanding will be particularly critical in the near future because several of the lower-income demographic populations (Table 1) are estimated to double or quadruple by 2050 (see Section 5). Agency use of technology to increase administrative efficiency will be important to ensuring the greater caseloads are met. Because policy is foundational to federal programs, the statutory framework that supports electronic service delivery will play an increasingly important role in assuring that agency investment in funding and commitment to implementing an appropriate technology framework aligns with its mission.

This paper discusses how e-government mandates have provided a framework and guidance to deliver federal assistance to low-income people. To provide context, it begins with a discussion of e-government statutes as the overarching policy strategy. It continues with a discussion of what poverty is and what it means in America; this is an intersection little discussed in e-government research and implementation but is critical to better understand how the factors influence each other. It continues with a discussion of connectedness and low-income people because communications technology is the intersection between policy and user, but the stereotype of low-income people remaining on the distaff side of the digital divide exists still.

The paper continues with a description of the primary federal assistance programs: Medicaid, SNAP, SSI, and TANF, paying particular attention to impacts of the statutes that influence program automation. It

Table 1
Poverty rates by demographics.

Characteristic	Percentage at Poverty Level in 2010
Age	Age 65 and over: 9%
	Under 18: 21.6%
Race	African-Americans: 27.1%
	Native Americans: 28.4%
	Latinos or Hispanics: 24.8%
	White: 12.5%
Education	Less than high school graduate: 26.7%
	High school diploma/GED: 13.5%
	Some college: 9.8%
	Bachelor's degree or higher: 4.2%
Country of origin	Foreign-born Americans: 18.8%
	Native-born Americans: 14.8%
Gender	Women: 16.5%
	Men: 14.1%
Disability	With disabilities: 21.8%
	Without disabilities: 14.5%
Location	Urban: 16.3%
	Rural: 12.3%

also identifies some of the impacts of some non-program-specific statutes that when implemented, affect low-income people in ways that may impede applying for and receiving benefits. The paper then discusses some of the aspects of policy that support or detract from a streamlined service delivery model. It concludes with some suggestions for future research that can help inform policymakers in this new sphere.

1.1. e-Government

The overarching mandates are the e-Government Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-347), which provides legislative impetus and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 USC §794d), which obligates technical barrier-free access to digital government information. Further, President Obama's Executive Order 13571 and the memorandum *Building a 21st Century Digital Government* obligate federal agencies to make government information more widely available via the panoply of technology platforms (Obama, 2011, 2012). However, lack of consensus across agency implementers in what should be accessible; inconsistent use of formats, metadata, and storage conventions; and identifying and targeting the end user complicates making government information available to help solve real, defined problems, transforming the government-to-citizen (G2C) partnership (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; LaFleur, 2011; Linders & Wilson, 2011; OASIS, 2010).

ICTs correlate positively to access and engagement, especially at the local levels (Al-Adawi, Yousafzai, & Pallister, 2005). However, poverty is often a by-product of membership in disadvantaged groups that are more affected by non-technical barriers (e.g., lack of engagement, information relevance, and language (Attewell, 2001; Braun & Anderson, 2006; Lo Bianco, 2003)). Thus, technology can be another gatekeeper. Low-income people are more digitally engaged than ever (Rainie, 2010). But e-government includes costs of procuring skills and access; without these, people lose opportunities to fully engage with the government, a goal of e-government. The impacts of these barriers are under-examined.

1.2. About poverty

Poverty, the "pronounced deprivation in well-being" (World Bank, n.d.), is a barrier from adequate food, shelter, education, health care, safety, and civil rights that inhibits full functioning in society. Typically, the poor are marginalized as economically deficient, unable to contribute to society, lacking information capital (Britz, 2004), disengaged from the government except to seek services, or poor by choice (Shipler, 2005; Sipior & Ward, 2005). These presumptions are largely discounted (Bertot et al., 2011; Eyrich-Garg, 2011). However, exclusion

from the public forum exists, despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-352), the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (EEO), and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-336). Unlike immutable characteristics associated with a class (e.g., race, gender, and age), being poor involves cycles of poverty; this "invisibility" complicates understanding the most effective ways to deliver services electronically.

Being poor can include suspension of privacy and civil rights and may be a form of presumed criminalization (Gilman, 2008; Kornbluh, 2007). For example, homeless shelters that receive federal funding through the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (P.L. 100-77) upload personal information about clients to receive funding; clients must disclose personal information to gain admittance (EPIC, n.d.). Under the USA Patriot Act (P.L. 107-56) and Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA) (P.L. 95-511), videos and personal information may be requested by law enforcement agencies without judicial review. Information breaches can leave clients vulnerable to domestic violence (EPIC, 2003).

Traditionally, applying for assistance involves extensive data collection via an unwieldy and sometimes humiliating process; determinations may be based on arbitrary judgments for "worthiness" (Gilliom, 2001). Delay in receiving assistance can only increase an applicant's distress. Well-designed and deployed technology solutions (e.g., on-line application and case management applications, and debit cards in lieu of paper checks or direct deposit to checking accounts) could mitigate the application and determination processes, and opens an additional communications and access venue.

1.3. The American poor

The FPL is the threshold that determines who receives assistance. For example, people under 65 are allowed $11,170 per year; a family of four is allowed $23,050.[1] Table 1 includes the 2010 poverty rates (overall 14.3% poverty rate) (Census, 2010). Some demographics are more affected than others; this suggests that statute-mandated efforts should be directed to the populations that show the highest rates of poverty.

Targeting assistance requires deep understanding of demographics, labor, and market trends (Hoynes, Page, & Stevens, 2006). Legislation that reflects this, and recognizes that the impacts of technology and underlying assumptions about the poor, is critical so that solutions are targeted and impacts measured so assistance programs meet their missions.

1.4. Connectedness

Poverty does not correlate to technology unfamiliarity (Table 2) (Hampton et al, 2011; NTIA, 2010; Smith, 2011a; Zickhur & Smith, 2012). About 29% of low-income people access websites through public library computers about 1–3 times per month, often to seek assistance and information (Bertot et al., 2011). About 83% of low-income American ages 18–29 have a cell phone; 36% of those use a smartphone (Smith, 2011b). Some homeless communities share information via mobile communications (Eyrich-Garg, 2011). However, people without resources (especially information) receive diminished access or exclusion (e.g., few internet service provider choices, dial-up performance in minority and low-income areas) (Britz, 2004; Li et al, 2011, p.3).

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[1] The living wage varies by location. For example, assuming a 40 hour work week, the living wage for an adult in Hawaii is $12.51/h; $30.61 for two adults and three children. This compares to Mississippi wherein the living wage for an adult is $8.45; $21.15 for two adults and three children (MIT, n.d.). Factoring the FPL threshold (which does not consider location), and assuming a 52 week year for a single adult, the hourly rate is $5.37/h.