


# Is It Human Service Cartels or the Power Elite That Promote Societal Control and Repression? A Reaction to David Stoesz's Human Services Cartels Article

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## Abstract

This article is a reaction paper to the article in this journal issue entitled *Human Service Cartels: The Soft Repression of the Mediocracy* by David Stoesz. As such, it addresses two significant questions about the Stoesz article. One question is as follows: Are we really talking about a cartel? The other question is as follows: Isn't it *the power elite* that promotes societal control and repression?

## Keywords

human services, social services, meritocracy, social policy, mental health

I read Dr. David Stoesz's article in this journal with both interest and surprise. My interest was prompted by the rather catchy use of the word cartel in the title and the extensive range of sources used and concepts addressed. I was surprised such an accomplished authority of social welfare policy as Dr. Stoesz could create the *Human Services Cartel* based on so many significant limitations in definitions, reasoning, and existing research. My focus in this reaction paper is, with respect, to address my concerns with Stoesz's article with the hope my comments will lead to a more insightful perspective on the issues at hand. My comments are organized into two significant questions, which follow in the remainder of this article.

## Question 1: Are We Really Talking About a Cartel?

I expect there is no cartel, except in Stoesz's mind. The term is catchy, but he offers no definition of a cartel to which the human services sector conforms. Multiple sources indicate a cartel's central features involve some combination of formal agreement, cooperation, and coordination to regulate or control something, often competition or prices, with drug cartels the most often-cited example (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2021; Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). Stoesz offers no such evidence among human service professionals.

Furthermore, he identifies the human services cartel narrowly as "licensed occupations in the human services—marriage and family counseling, children's services, school counseling, social work, probation, and parole, among others—has evolved as cartels whose primary objective is

amplifying their membership's influence, income, and benefits" (p. 2). He then asserts, without supporting data, that the cartel's position is "assured" (p. 12) by requiring college degrees for positions, having civil service, and health and pension benefits secured by favorable tax provisions.

Stoesz excludes from this questionable cartel the large portion of the human services industry workers which he ironically cites later, such as Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats (p. 6), who provide most of the direct services such as Medicaid application and payment processing; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits and, before that, Aid to Families with Dependent Children; Supplemental Security Income; Social Security Disability Income; Social Security; unemployment insurance benefits; and home health, hospital, and nursing home aide and personal care assistance, among others. For decades, these eligibility and other determinations were done in person by relatively low-wage workers, though now in many jurisdictions, depending on technology availability, part of the process may be automated and conducted either online using a computer or using a kiosk of some sort at the benefits office (Holcomb et al., 2003; Wishner et al., 2018).

This worker population also receives wages, though many receive closer to minimum wage; sometimes coverage by health benefits; often civil service protection; public pensions (Social Security); tax benefits (such as earned income tax

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credits), though not as robust as the elite's tax benefits; and social benefits. Lipsky (1980) and others (Buch, 2018; Soss et al., 2011) have identified the ironic situation of many of these workers. Such workers simultaneously implement social benefit programs, which seem oppressive to many benefit recipients (the "dirty work" Stoesz refers to on page 12), while many of them often receive such benefits and are oppressed being among the working poor (Rank, 1994, 2005; Shipler, 2008).

The real issue seems to be that most people employed in human services, whether deemed professional or not, are simultaneously benefiting in some way from their employment and implementing policies that further social and economic inequality and dominance by the rich and powerful. Many employed in these public-sector jobs are minorities (Rumberger, 1983). Despite such employment in Stoesz's alleged cartel, many have low social mobility and are disproportionately represented in data on low income, lower education levels (Rodrigue & Reeves, 2015), and the uninsured (Tolbert et al., 2020). Stoesz dilutes this point by focusing on the professionals, the meritocracy, as an oppressing cartel, instead of on the true oppressors, the power elite.

Regardless of whether we characterize the human services industry as a cartel and regardless of its composition, does it really have significant power in influencing policies on the distribution of individual rights and economic and social benefits? The answer is no. A review of the sectors that control campaign contributions, lobbying, and dark money does not indicate any of the trade or professional associations representing Stoesz's cartel professionals (social workers, marriage and family counselors, school counselors, child welfare workers, or probation and parole officers) as being significant power players, either before or after the *Citizens United* case (Center for Responsive Politics, 2021). Does Stoesz really believe the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, the American Association for Marriage and Family Counselors, and other human service organizations possess the type of war chests that significantly influence national and state executive and legislative efforts on tax codes, social benefit programs, and civil rights?

## Question 2: Isn't it the power elite that Promotes Societal Control and Repression?

As noted above, Stoesz diverts attention from the true source of power and oppression, the power elite, by focusing on his conspiratorial human services cartel.

C. Wright Mills coined the term *the power elite* in his famous book of the same title in 1956. Mills asserted that corporate and public policy in the United States was controlled by an interwoven set of interests of the military, corporate, and political elements, leaving the ordinary citizen relatively powerless and subject to manipulation and the consequences of the triumvirate's decisions (Mills, 1956).

There has been much writing about the term and concept, but it still serves well, in its expanded form, to describe the

nature and extent of concentrated power. Famed lawyer, educator, and diplomat Adolf Berle and historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., among others, attacked Mills' viewpoint as an inaccurate characterization of a pluralistic American society (Summers, 2006). Others agreed with Mills but sought to refine and nuance his perspective. Domhoff (1967) elaborated Mills' concept with his own four networks theory of power, expanding on the configurations of both separate and interconnecting networks of power beyond Mills' triumvirate. Domhoff's work has been critiqued and refined as well (Domhoff et al., 2018). Nevertheless, Domhoff (2021) has remained focused on the underlying belief that power represented "the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others" (p. 2). Domhoff (2021) further asserted, building on Mills, that "rule by a wealthy few is possible despite free speech, regular elections, and organized opposition" (p. 2).

Progressive economists such as Reich (2013, 2015), Piketty (2014, 2020), and Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman (Saez & Zucman, 2020; Zucman, 2016) have presented the same picture as Mills and Domhoff, focusing on the control of a relatively small number of individuals and corporations, both in the United States and worldwide, over a disproportionate share of income and wealth.

More recently, Mizruchi (2013) has used social network analysis to argue that the American corporate elite has become more fragmented than in the mid-20th century, though reaping an even larger share of economic benefits.

Where is this emphasis in Stoesz's article? It is not there. It is secondary at best. He cites Reich and Piketty on the maldistribution of income and wealth and talks about the 21st century, which he asserts is "a vicious circle of economic inequality, social division, and political instability" (p. 12).

However, instead of focusing his article on the 21st-century power elite, he turns to how the human services cartel "rewards professionals as card-carrying members of the meritocracy, approximating the 'one percent' and corporate CEOs (p. 12). While acknowledging these professionals are not remunerated as well as the "egregiously wealthy" (p. 12), Stoesz asserts, without substantiating evidence, that "they benefit in regular pay with benefits, especially compared to blue-collar workers and marginal workers who depend on social benefits" (p. 12). Stoesz continues, invoking this without supporting data, that

the meritocracy has not only reaped the rewards of a global economy but controls the levers of national politics as well. The non college degreed comprise almost two-thirds of the population, their work in manual labor, the service sector, and clerical work controlled by their better educated peers. (p. 12)

This broad characterization of the meritocracy, well beyond the human services cartel as an alleged component, seems totally off point. Instead, Stoesz should look at actual data to support his assertion of the largesse of the human services cartel (pp. 2, 12). The data destroy Stoesz's cartel mystique. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Semega et al., 2020), the median individual income for all American workers was

\$43,206, which includes both wage and other nonsalary income. According to government data, most of Stoesz's human services cartel members' annual median salary ranges from slightly below to slightly above the 2019 national median gross individual annual income.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median 2019 individual income for a licensed mental health counselor was \$42,480; for a substance abuse counselor, it was \$49,950; for a marriage and family counselor, it was \$54,590; and school and career counselors received \$61,000 (All Psychology Schools, 2021). Parole and probation officers' 2019 median annual income ranged between \$53,020 and \$58,040, depending on the type of employer (Criminal Justice Degree Schools, 2021), and child and family social workers' 2019 median annual income was \$47,390 (U.S. News and World Report, 2021). Is this the wealthy human services cartel Stoesz is describing on page 2 of his article?

This is where Stoesz's blaming the *Human Services Cartel* becomes even more perplexing. The evidence is that national policies and politics are largely controlled by the very elite that Mills and Domhoff describe and that Stoesz acknowledges in the article (pp. 10–12) and in his other work (Stoesz, 2016, 2020; Stoesz & Karger, 1992). As noted earlier, this is even more perplexing because there is no coordinated, collaborative power group among human service professionals or workers that would constitute a cartel. Instead of focusing on the power elite, that top 1%–10% who control wealth and power, Stoesz shifts blame to the human service professionals as aiding and abetting the elite by controlling the noncollege-degreed service workers. Did Stoesz ever consider that both the professionals and the noncollege-degreed services workers in the human service sector are equally complicit in implementing the policies of the elite and trading off employment and social benefits for doing the elite's "dirty work" (p. 12)? He does not.

## Conclusion

As a result of using an unsubstantiated cartel construct and ignoring the power of the elite, Stoesz misses an opportunity to squarely focus the blame for social and economic inequality on those truly in power. Instead, he effectively blames both human service professionals and direct service workers who, while implementing the elite's policies, also are victims of the maldistribution of social and economic rights. I do not believe that Stoesz intended to devalue the responsibility of the elite for the current, and historic situation, but his obsession with the cartel construct and human service professionals' alleged singular self-serving motives de facto allows the true cartel escape without its requisite share of responsibility. In the end, the obsession with the human services cartel also leaves us with no recommended social policy game plan, not even the well-conceived social policy Stoesz (2016) himself and others (Desmond, 2016; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Kristof & WuDunn, 2020) have espoused elsewhere.


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