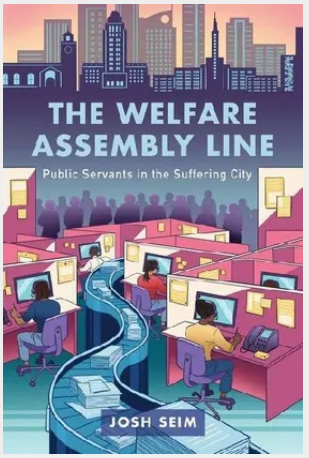
Seim

The Welfare Assembly Line

Public Servants in the Suffering City



Despite claims that we live in a "post-welfare society," welfare offices remain vital not only for those who depend on them for benefits but also for those who depend on them for a paycheck. This book, a theory-driven case study of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, examines how welfare work has transformed to allow a department of just 14,000 to serve more than a third of the county. Josh Seim argues that frontline workers at this agency—who are mostly Black and Brown women—have become increasingly proletarianized. Their work is defined less by their discretion and more by a lack of control over the productive process. This is enabled by a "welfare assembly line," where a high division of labor and heavy use of machinery resemble production regimes in factories and fast-food restaurants. With implications beyond the welfare office, The Welfare Assembly Line is a crucial addition to the broader national conversation about work, social policy, and poverty governance.

"*The Welfare Assembly Line* draws our attention to the labor that makes both the state and low-wage workers, under ever-increasing pressures towards efficiency and ever-stingier budgets. A joy to read. Josh Seim is masterful at conveying ethnographic detail and bringing the reader along on his journey through the welfare offices in which he was embedded."--Robin Bartram, author of *Stacked Decks: Building Inspectors and the Reproduction of Urban Inequality* "An eye-opening look at what's really happening inside welfare offices. Seim shows us the 'assembly line' of welfare provision and reveals the tensions inherent in this transformation. In a time of increasingly automated work and a safety net stretched ever thinner, his analysis is urgent and illuminating."--Kelley Fong, author of *Investigating Families: Motherhood in the Shadow of Child Protective Services* "The question of how governments can help people who need help is intimately tied to the question of who is doing the helping and under what conditions. *The Welfare Assembly Line* addresses these questions, showing how frontline welfare workers increasingly find themselves operating in 'policy factories' characterized by standardization and automation. Seim's analysis is eminently readable, providing an accessible and nuanced insider account of how workers operate within this new welfare machinery. Anyone wishing to understand the safety net in America today should read this book."--Donald Moynihan, Professor, Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan

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