

The identification and assessment of job seekers and social assistance clients facing multiple barriers to employment

Ludo Struyven & Liesbeth Van Parys, HIVA (Research Institute for Work and Society), Leuven University (Belgium)

In the region of Flanders (Belgium), as in many other countries, the government wants to activate a growing number of harder-to-place job seekers, whether on unemployment benefits or social assistance benefits. Many of these clients are facing multiple barriers to work. Public employment services (PES) as well as social assistance services become ‘activated’ in their turn, albeit (in contrast to some other countries) as two separate actors. By doing so, they discover an increasingly overlapping segment in their populations of welfare recipients who face multiple barriers.

The central question in this paper is threefold: which barriers can be identified, how these barriers are assessed, and finally how the remaining group of hard-to-place welfare recipients can be defined.

These questions are answered by using administrative data on the qualitative intake of welfare recipients and their trajectory to employment. These data contain rich information on the so-called ‘soft characteristics’, e.g. motivation, self-reliance, health, networks and child care. All clients on the rolls of PES and social assistance service in the city of Antwerp (January 2009) are analyzed. The information on barriers is based upon the clients’ diagnosis made by their consultants. This will be followed by delineating the policy approaches and instruments to help them finding an appropriate job or social activity in the local community. The analyses reveals that, although consultants are using a partly similar categorization of barriers to activation and employment, the assessment of clients is primarily lead by the institutional setting of an employment, c.q. welfare service.