

***Social assistance schemes in the Scandinavian countries: Changing target groups - different reactions***

**Stream 8.2: Social Assistance**

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Several institutional features unify Denmark, Sweden and Norway, and the existence of a distinct 'Nordic welfare model' is widely acknowledged. The three countries have, during recent years, adopted very different policies towards settled immigrants and a central question is, whether these differences are also reflected in the way more traditional welfare state policy areas 'cope' with the increased number of citizens with an immigrant background. Social assistance schemes are an interesting case to explore because in all three countries the number of social assistance receivers with an immigrant background is extensive.

This paper analyses how the social assistance schemes in the three countries have reacted very differently to the increasing number of receivers with an immigrant background. In particular Denmark stands out. Hence, since 2002 Denmark has repeatedly reduced the social assistance level where the target group for these reductions either directly or indirectly have been people with an immigrant background. The most recent and controversial reform is the so-called 300-hour rule from 2006 (now a 450-hour rule) which states that recipients of welfare benefits who are married lose the right to welfare payments if they work less than 300 hours during a two year period. The rule applies to everybody regardless of citizenship or ethnicity, but in practice it is primarily targeted at immigrants and the majority of those affected are immigrant women.

Taking the (in many ways) common normative foundation behind the three countries into account, this difference is remarkable and emphasizes the importance of taking the so-called 'immigrant-dimension' into account when analysing recent changes in the institutional configuration of social assistance schemes.

This paper starts out by analyzing recent changes in the Danish social assistance scheme by focusing on the 'immigrant-dimension' and changes in the benefit level and compares the findings to Sweden and Norway. Against this background the paper discusses, in a theoretical perspective, why Denmark stands out.