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Social assistance for people with disabilities.

A comparative study of five European countries

Looking at specific types of benefits or benefit receivers can give useful insights to evaluate the capability of different welfare state arrangements to secure a minimal standard of living for their citizens. In this vein, this paper focuses on minimum income protection for the particularly vulnerable group of people with disabilities. Five European countries that have installed programs in this area are compared: Belgium, France, Ireland, The Netherlands and Spain.

Minimum income protection for people with disabilities can differ in several ways from general social assistance. Generally, benefit levels are more generous and means-tests are less strict than for the able-bodied. Yet a number of different institutional pathways can be found in the countries studied. Belgium and France, for instance, already introduced such programs in the 1960s and 1970s while in The Netherlands a comparable benefit was not established before 1998. The systems also vary in their association to other domains of social protection, financing principles, access conditions and additional support available to benefit receivers.

The countries are compared qualitatively with regard to these institutional factors as well as quantitatively in terms of beneficiary numbers, expenditure and generosity.

Concerning both the proportion of dependents within society and the share of total social spending, preliminary findings indicate that this specific sphere of social protection is of greatest importance in Ireland and of least in Spain, where means-tested disability benefits play only a minor role in the welfare state.

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