

Individual and Structural Determinants of Social Assistance Trajectories in Switzerland

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Academics, social work professionals, and politicians recently started to devote growing attention to the so-called new social risks resulting from a more flexible labor market and changes in the family structure. Unstable employment and income, and family disruption may increase the risk of being in need of social assistance, sometimes for a long period. The presentation discusses some findings of a longitudinal study designed to 1) identify typical trajectories of social assistance and 2) assess individual and structural determinants of these trajectories. Data came from six consecutive waves of the Swiss social assistance statistics (2005-2010). This comprehensive survey collects detailed data about recipients, their social and economic situation, as well as the duration and type of benefits received. The applied research techniques include sequence analysis and multiple linear regression analysis. Results show five typical social assistance trajectories: * Entrance* Exit* Re-entrance* Long-term assistance* Sporadic assistance. The most frequent trajectories are entrance and long-term assistance, whereas re-entrance is rare. The identified trajectories mainly depend on individual characteristics, such as education, family status and employment. Well established protective factors associated with poverty, like higher education, seem to play an attenuated role with regard to the risk of being in need of social assistance. Structural determinants also play a role, such as social assistance systems and benefits which, in Switzerland, are regulated by cantonal laws and hence show some marked differences. Although social assistance is an important welfare issue, it has so far attracted limited academic attention, both in Switzerland, and beyond. The present study provides insights into typical social assistance trajectories and helps identify the most vulnerable subjects, but also critical life events which may lead to the need of social assistance. It thus may offer important clues to social politics and social work to develop better targeted prevention and intervention strategies.