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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Buhr, P., Leibfried, S., Ludwig, M., & Voges, W. (1989). *Passages through welfare: the Bremen approach to the analysis of claimants' careers in "publicly administered poverty"*. (Arbeitspapier / Sfb 186, 3). Bremen: Universität Bremen, SFB 186 Statuspassagen und Risikolagen im Lebensverlauf. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-57095>

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# Passages through Welfare

## The Bremen Approach to the Analysis of Claimants' Careers in "Publicly Administered Poverty"

by

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Discussion Paper No. 3

\* University of Bremen—Special Collaborative Programme No. 186 of the German Research Council, project "Welfare Careers" (D 3). The project is directed by Prof. Dr. Stephan Leibfried. Members of the research group are: Dipl. Soz. Petra Buhr; Dipl. Soz. päd. Monika Ludwig; Lutz Leisering, Ph.D.; Dr. Michael Zwick. We are especially grateful to Lutz Leisering for translating and editing this paper.

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## Preface

The projects of the social policy section of the Special Collaborative Programme on "Status Passages and Risks in Life Course" deal with the boundaries between gainful employment and social security systems. They focus on precarious transitions in the individual life-course at the interface of state and market.

This paper sets out the theoretical framework and presents some results of a pilot study and of a descriptive analysis of the random sample of case records of welfare claimants on which the project "welfare careers" draws. This project is concerned with the most basic system of income maintenance in Western welfare states: social welfare (social assistance, Sozialhilfe) which in the German Federal Republic is available to everybody without means. Social welfare is particularly suited to elucidate the role of the welfare state as a major force in shaping the individual life-course. In social welfare the grasp of institutions on individuals is more pronounced than it is in other systems of public provisions. Moreover, the recent dramatic increase in the number of recipients of social welfare (they have more than tripled since 1970) in conjunction with a no less dramatic qualitative transformation of the clientele suggests that the functions of social welfare, of its role in the individual life-course, have changed.

In contrast to Britain and the USA, there is no strong tradition of empirical poverty studies in the Federal Republic of Germany. New beginnings have emerged on a broader scale only in the 1980s. The project "welfare careers" is a pioneer in this area: it has unique access to all administrative case records of the social assistance authorities in a North German city (the Bremen 10% Social Assistance Sample, continuously drawn from 1983 onwards, currently comprising some 9,000 cases) and it is comprehensive by relying on longitudinal data collection and data analysis. Quantitative event history analysis is combined with a qualitative survey and case studies of welfare records. Unlike conventional studies of ways into poverty, the project focusses on paths through and out of social assistance. Instead of the usual static, cross-sectional typologies of clients of social assistance with types like the unemployed or the elderly, a new dynamic longitudinal typology has been developed to identify diverse trajectories of interactions between welfare bureaucracies and individuals ("careers"). Labor markets and family systems are depicted as context variables of welfare careers, and the role of cultural patterns and orientations of action such as autonomy vs. dependency is discussed.

Prof. Dr. W. R. Heinz  
Chair  
Special Collaborative Programme No. 186

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## 1 Introduction

The Bremen approach to the analysis of welfare careers conceives of the payment of "social assistance" or "welfare" benefits (*Sozialhilfe = supplementary benefit, public assistance*) as an event in the life-course of a recipient which is part of a welfare "career".<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis is on "publicly administered poverty", i.e. on the type of poverty explicitly addressed by the welfare state. In this way not all poor people are covered even if we choose to define poverty by the poverty line given through the benefit level of public assistance. However, this narrow focus is not problematic since other empirical studies (Hartmann 1981, 1985) have shown that take-up of social assistance benefits is higher in the north, especially in northern cities of the Federal Republic of Germany, due to a city-country and north-south incline in take-up. The "publicly administered poverty" in the city of Bremen, which is the subject matter of our study, thus could give a fairly good picture of the reality of poverty as measured by the administrative poverty standard. At the current stage, the research focusses on the question of paths through and out of social assistance, to be answered by an analysis of a sample of social assistance clients.

In the first part of this article we try to show that previous German poverty studies were unable to uncover *processes of impoverishment* because they have used a *discrete-time* approach mostly with cross-sectional data. The Bremen approach tries to overcome this deficiency by observing welfare careers by means of a *continuous-time* research design.

This approach is presented in the second part. We describe the sample<sup>2</sup>, the potential of the analysis of public records produced in social bureaucracies and the process of sampling at the current stage of the analysis. In particular, we show how the data gathered from administrative files can be used to analyze the careers of recipients over time. We then present a typology of possible career types which has already emerged from a pilot study. We close by discussing the possibilities of extending the research design.

Special attention is given to the labor market and to the family as structural parameters of welfare careers. Interrupted careers of gainful employment

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<sup>1</sup>In this study "welfare" means "maintenance-benefits" (Hilfe zum Lebensunterhalt, abbreviated: HLU), which is the major source of the growing number of claimants of social assistance benefits. The German welfare system relies on a universal (noncategorical) right to basic financial support ("maintenance-benefits"), which is stipulated by national law in a rather uniform way but is administered locally. By contrast, the U.S. system is categorically fragmented, with a special bias against the "working poor" or the "able bodied". Uniformity is only present in few programs (such as SSI, Food Stamps). Seen with the U.S.-eyes the German welfare system looks like a cashed-out poverty line administered locally (immediately paid out of the local funds—but within the framework of a *national general* revenue sharing system). In England we have the rare case of a fully national system, introduced in 1948 after centuries of a more or less local administration of poor relief. Unlike the German case, the working poor serviced by separate systems.

<sup>2</sup>cf. also the Appendix for a more detailed description

and corresponding payments of income support for maintenance are crucial, because normal employment (continuous employment as a full-time worker) constitutes the normative framework on which the institutionalization of the West German welfare systems rests. The assumption of a “normal family” with two parents, a male breadwinner as main earner and stable marital relations is the other—if less clearly defined—normative pillar of the German welfare state (writ large and small).

## 2 Discrete-Time and Continuous-Time Analyses of Welfare Careers

The collection of data is part of a process of selection, i.e. of a filtered perception of social reality. Particular research interests and available resources not only influence the *observation window* with regard to time but they also predetermine the possibilities of identifying and tracing the paths through social assistance. By *observation windows* we mean those artificially created segments or episodes of a claimant’s career that are taken into account by the researcher (see figures 1–3).

Processes of change have received only marginal attention in West German empirical analyses of *poverty*.<sup>3</sup> Most studies rely on cross-sectional data about the state of dependence on social assistance, or welfare, at a specific point in time, i.e. they use a narrow observation window. Panel studies also reflect changes insufficiently, because they underestimate the *dynamics* of social changes between the points of observation, especially when recipients of working age are concerned. Governmental statistics on the development of German social assistance (“Sozialhilfe”) have a cross-sectional perspective, too, and are bound to ignore short-term oscillations and repeated changes of states at the micro-level. For example, the proportion of welfare recipients in the population—or even in particular subgroups defined by the administrative statistics—can remain constant in statistical time-series without revealing that figures for different years refer to different households or individuals who receive assistance. In short, cross-sectional data paint a static picture of the poor and the recipients of assistance at any given point in time.

Cross-sectional analysis (without retrospective data) cannot distinguish between four different types of welfare recipients and their careers (which will be presented in detail below) (see example in figure 1): All four types would indiscriminately be seen as unemployed, receiving low unemployment benefits and being dependent on social assistance. Results derived from cross-section data usually draw a picture of various, static categories of welfare recipients. This perspective has a rather precarious implication: Those who once became dependent on social assistance will remain so for most of the rest

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. the studies by Hanesch 1988; Strang 1970, 1985; Lompe 1987; Deininger 1974, 1983 (special surveys conducted by the Federal Bureau of Statistics).

of their lives. Attempts by recipients—often visible only in a series of small steps—to overcome their status, can only insufficiently be accounted for in a cross-sectional analysis.

In the three subsequent figures the following abbreviations are used:

- UIB1 = Unemployment Insurance Benefit (first tier)—higher wage replacement rate, not means-tested.
- UIB2 = Unemployment Insurance Benefit (second tier)—lower wage replacement rate, means-tested.

By contrast investigations in the U.S.A. in particular have shown that large parts of the poor are rather mobile.<sup>4</sup>

Many people are neither permanently poor nor permanently dependent on public assistance; rather they try actively to escape welfare receipt and poverty. Poverty studies must be designed such that they can trace this mobility.

To trace poverty and impoverishment in time, many U.S. studies have used data that reflect the situation of *the same* recipients of assistance at at least two points in time. Such panel surveys are better suited to the study of changes in the social assistance career between two (or more) observation windows. But such a research design (figure 2) would still miss some crucial changes. In the case of type 1, the transitory or “bridging” recipient, for example, a process of impoverishment between the first and the second observation window cannot be identified. Type 2 is the case of a *periodical* recipient of welfare who is at risk of losing his social status in the long run. In our example the person has managed to escape welfare dependence in the third observation window after a process of impoverishment in the first observation window. In the case of the *escaper* (type 3), the processes that promoted sustained welfare dependence as well as the changes that led to the eventual unexpected escape may elude panel studies. The interpretation of type 4, those who eventually lose their social status, is equally problematic. One could not even find out that the recipient tried to escape dependence by recourse to public employment schemes.

We may conclude that discrete-time data fail to reflect crucial episodes of the poverty process and that short welfare spells are underrepresented and long spells overrepresented. Therefore, continuous-time collection of data with a larger observation window is the only way to grasp and distinguish *all* possible paths through social assistance (figure 3).

There are several ways to collect continuous-time data on welfare payments:<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Cf. e.g. the overviews and studies by Bane/Ellwood 1983, 1985; Ellwood 1986, 1987; Duncan et al. 1984; Hoffman 1987; Buhr/Ludwig 1989b give an extensive overview on these analytical surveys and studies.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. generally the overviews by Andreß 1985; Diekmann 1987; Preißendörfer 1987.

Fig. 1: Static Perspective - Discrete-Time Research Design with Cross-Sectional Data

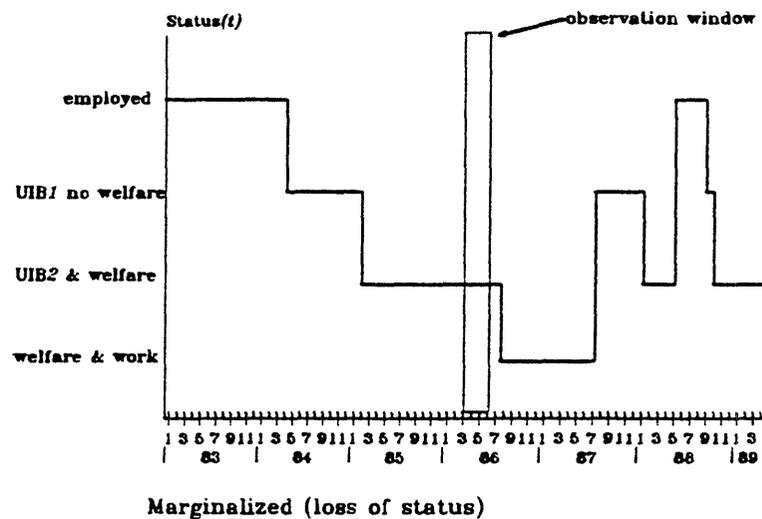
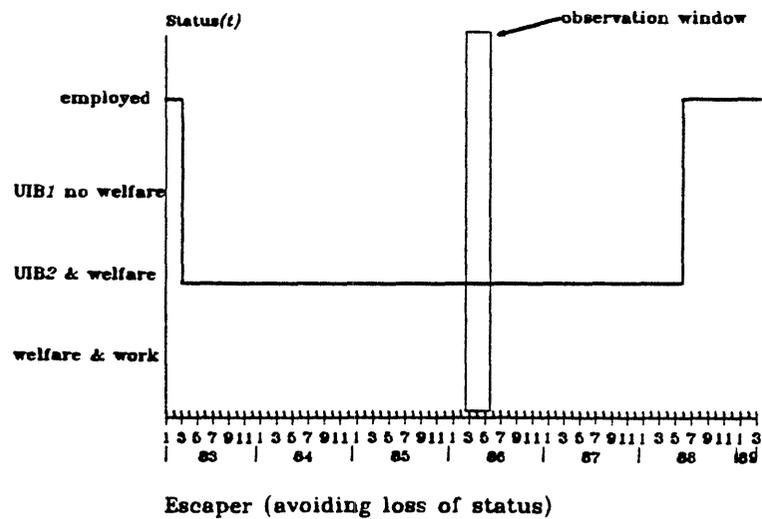
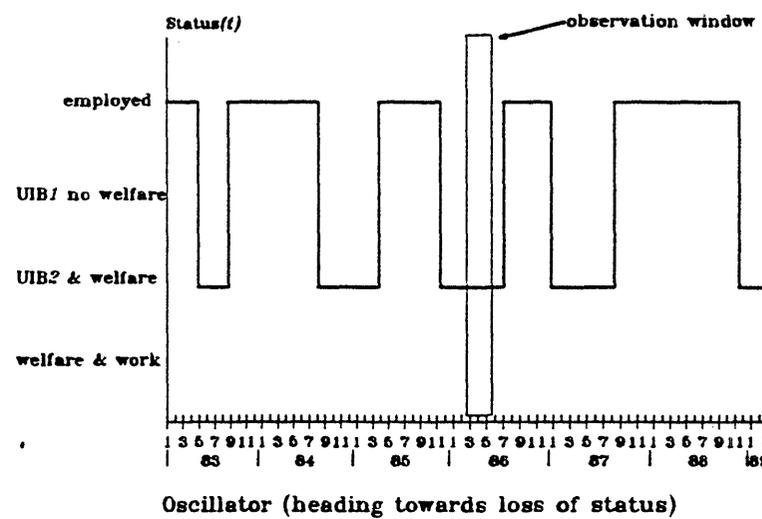
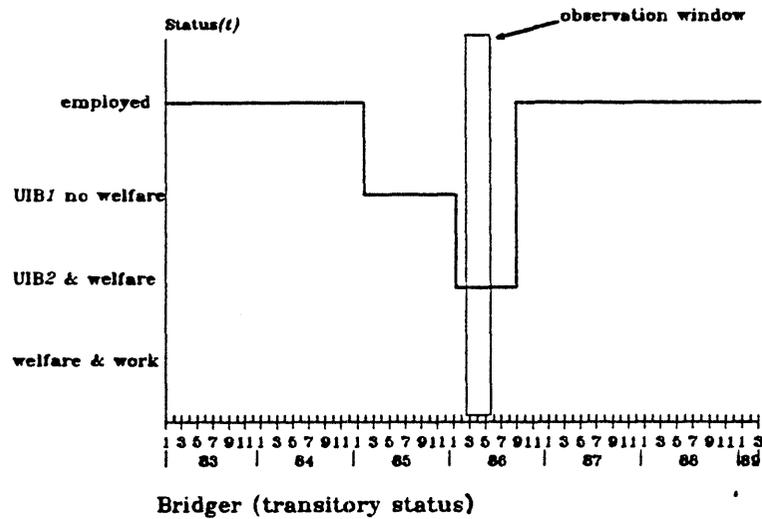
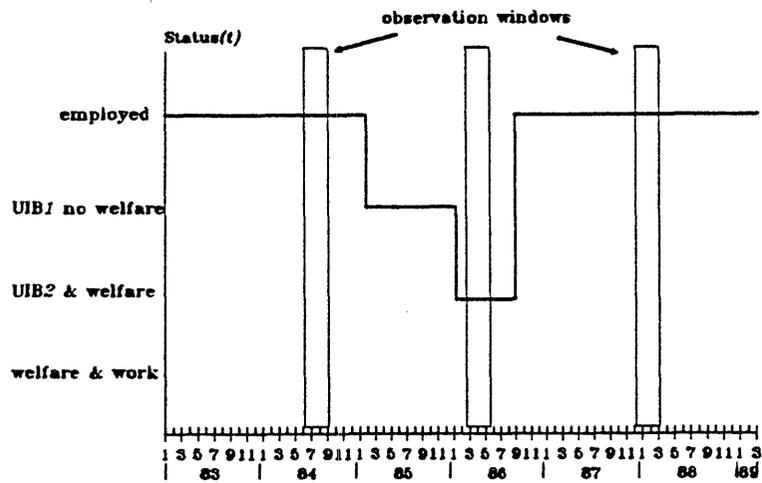
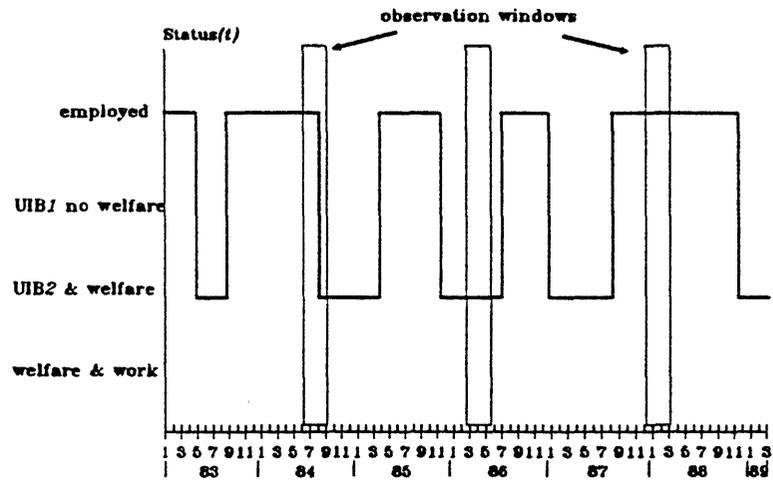


Figure 1: Static Perspective—Discrete-Time Research Design with Cross-Sectional Data

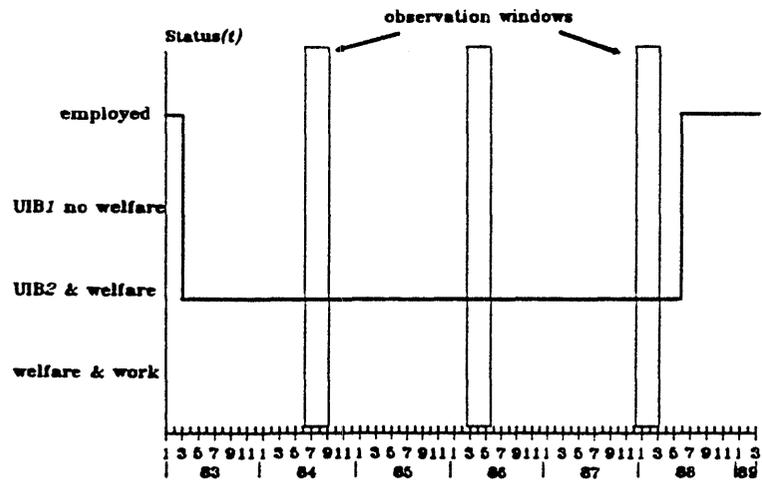
Fig. 2: Dynamic Perspective - Discrete-Time Research Design with Panel Data



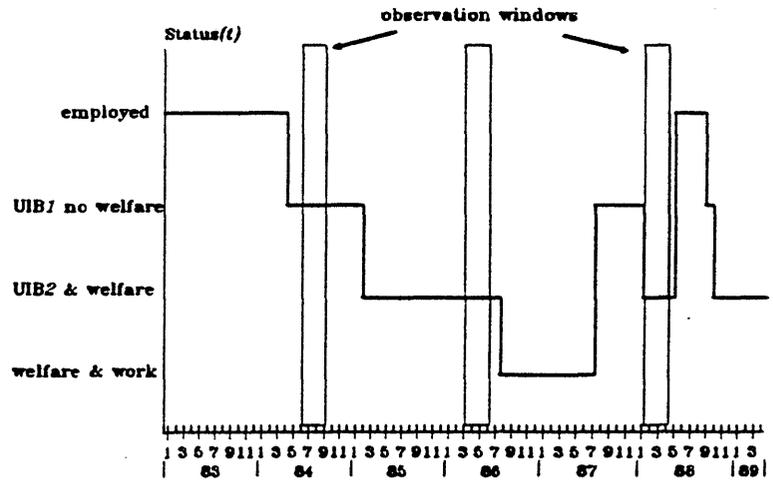
Bridger (transitory status)



Oscillator (heading towards loss of status)



Escaper (avoiding loss of status)



Marginalized (loss of status)

Figure 2: Dynamic Perspective—Discrete-Time Research Design with Panel Data



1. The course of events is traced back to a certain point in time by *retrospective* interviews at the time of data-collection. In this way the events that have taken place during that period of time are taken into account. A well-known example of this kind of approach is the project of the Max-Planck-Institute of Education in Berlin on "The Life Course and Welfare Development" (cf. Mayer/Brückner 1989). In this type of research, though, inaccuracies of memory cannot be avoided.
2. The Bremen approach to the analysis of welfare careers, by contrast, relies on the administrative files of a 10% sample of all recipients of social assistance in Bremen. In this way all events and changes that occur from the time of the first payment of benefits can be observed, as it were, *prospectively*. Such a process-oriented collection of data (analysis of files) faces the problem that not all data are available as event histories in the files (cf. e.g. Hübinger/Priester et al. 1987).

### 3 "Welfare Careers"—The Bremen Project as a Model for Continuous-Time Poverty Research

#### 3.1 Welfare Case Records as Units of Investigation

At the current stage the research project aims at collecting data on the life situation, the social risks and the status passages of recipients of assistance. A 10% sample of recipients is sufficient to apply multivariate techniques of statistical analysis and to investigate specific subgroups.

The population from which the sample is drawn includes all recipients of assistance in the city of Bremen who last received benefits in 1983 or any later year. In this way the sample includes all first-time clients from 1983 but also those who started earlier but remained dependent on assistance in or after 1983. This implies that both current recipients as well as former recipients are included.

The random sample was completed in September 1987. It was and is continuously extended with respect to a sample of new applications after that date. A detailed description of the sample is appended.

#### 3.2 Problems of the Analysis of Administrative Case Records

Reliance on files as a data source has its problems. The interpretation of such data always has to take into account the conditions under which these data have been produced (cf. e.g. Gubrium/Buckholdt 1979; Bick et al. 1984). These conditions are a given for the researcher but are compensated for by some advantages. Only such process data make it possible to grasp changes in the situation of recipients continuously and prospectively in time.

In particular, events at an early point in time can be traced safely without problems of failing memory or later manipulation of data. Reliance on files is particularly suited for "studies which aim at analyzing 'claimant careers' for a longer period of time" (Brusten 1984:252). Brusten (1984:245) emphasizes as a further advantage that also the administrative framing and processing of the problems of the clients can be grasped at its source and may be introduced into the analysis of their life situations.

We do not share the reservation of American researchers towards the analysis of administrative files (cf. e.g. Hoffman 1987:2).<sup>6</sup> These writers assume that the duration of dependence on assistance is underestimated by the analysis of files because short interruptions that are purely due to administrative reasons (moving, failure to show up at the assistance authority) are frequent. These mistakes can be almost ruled out by an adequate research design which reflects minutely the causes of the beginning and the end of phases of dependence and allows for multiple welfare spells in the lives of recipients.

### 3.3 The Suitability of Administrative Process Data for Continuous-Time Analyses

First of all the records of the social authorities have to be suitable for the process-oriented analysis of the life situations of recipients. A pilot study (cf. Hübinger/Priester et al. 1987) of the current project "Welfare Careers" has examined the quality of data and the density of information found in the files. On the basis of these results and the insights gained from the ongoing collection of data—up to now 400 files have already been evaluated—we may draw several conclusions with regard to the documentation of events in the files:

The files give a fairly detailed picture of sociodemographic characteristics, the structure of the households as well as social security, immediate causes of claiming assistance, income, assistance (benefit level, duration), special benefits. The data on these aspects are best suited for continuous-time analyses—both relating to individuals and households—because as a rule all changes are reflected in the files and can be constructed in chronological order. In this way chains of events without gaps can be reconstructed. Other aspects of the life situations of recipients, such as housing and the employment career, are also reflected in the files but not to the same degree as income data. In particular this applies to employment careers before and after payment of assistance. These events can not be fully reconstructed while changes of employment during dependence on assistance are well documented in most cases. Rent contracts which sometimes give information on the quality of housing can

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<sup>6</sup>These reservations are partly informed by the amount of data collection necessary to work with such data. It would surely be easier to work with the computer tapes of the administration, if they existed. In any case such tapes would usually not be time-continuous (for example over ten years) or detailed enough.

only be found in some files. However, time, frequency, and place of moving during welfare receipt can easily be traced in most cases, as changes of rent immediately enter the calculation of benefits.

The least information is available with regard to education, which rarely if ever figures in the files, also with respect to the state of health and the degree of social integration of recipients in clubs and associations.

### 3.4 Some Conceptualizations of Possible Career Types

Poverty research focusses on the conditions of impoverishment and the (often) corresponding welfare (claimants') careers. Which careers in employment and education, which patterns of family life are typical for becoming dependent on welfare? And, most of all: What conditions create chances to escape permanent dependence on assistance, or, by contrast, lead to a long-term possibly encapsulating administration of social problems by the authorities? In which cases are we dealing with a transitory, less limiting episode in the life course and in which with a permanent state which creates a new status for the individuals concerned? How many people out of a given cohort of welfare claimants are able to *leave* it? Do the social authorities mostly administer short-term careers of dependence or rather long-term careers?

In this perspective, rather than conceiving of a passive status of being subjected to social risks, we highlight the active strategies of people to cope with a social risk once it has arisen. Thus, attention is drawn to the active potential of the administration and the clients, which often tends to be neglected in an emphasis on macro processes. An exception here are the studies informed by a social movement or an anthropological perspective. A most prominent example of the first in the U.S. are Piven's and Cloward's studies; an example of the latter is Carol Stack's work.

The welfare system can act in two ways: it can, as one extreme, bridge short-term gaps in the normal biography, while largely preserving the autonomy and the continuity of the life of the individual concerned. In these cases welfare supports status passages which are assumed to be normal parts of adult life in the face of transitory disruptions in the labor market or in family relations. On the other hand, welfare can pave the way to an eventual loss of social status and loss of autonomy. In this case it creates a new normal biography as a recipient of assistance.

The complex "make work scheme" (*Hilfe zur Arbeit*) established by the Social Assistance Act of 1962 (§§19, 20 *Bundessozialhilfegesetz*, BSHG) aims to bridge between these two extremes of a continuum. This is today a rather residual scheme. The major job creation program is the one run by Unemployment Insurance (*ABM*). In the Weimar period (1918-1933) the emphasis used to be exactly the other way around, with "singing for your supper" programs dominating social policy (cf. Ludwig 1989). In the 1980s many

**Table 1: Information Provided by the Administrative Records of the Authorities and Their Suitability For the Reconstruction of Welfare Careers in Time**

| Suitability for continuous-time analyses | Fully Documented   | Mostly Documented  | Rarely Documented   |
|--|--|--|---|
| Good                                     | structure of household and need-community <i>normal family</i> ; social security; interruptions of payment of social assistance; need-oriented calculation of benefits; payments of maintenance and special benefits; immediate causes of eligibility to assistance; income considered for means testing; times of unemployment in case of recipients of unemployment benefits | housing situation, spatial mobility; employment since opening of file; legal status in social insurance; times of unemployment in case of none-recipients of unemployment benefits |   |
| Limited                                  |  | housing situation, quality of housing; structure of household in case of people living in shared accommodation gainful employment of applicant before opening of file              | education and training  |
| None                                     |  | property   | state of health; social integration, memberships; employment after dropping out of social assistance; debts |

“make work” programs in welfare policy were enriched by optional job components. The recipients of these programs normally received one year contracts. These programs provided additional bridges to the labor market, but especially to unemployment insurance, since such working recipients were insured and could later receive—nationally financed—unemployment benefits<sup>7</sup> instead of—locally financed—welfare benefits. The “Hilfe zur Arbeit” is designed to support a graded reconstitution of the individual fitness for work and the ensuing reintegration into the labor market (“rehabilitation”). Considered as a whole, these measures are structured hierarchically such as to effect upward mobility towards normality.

Assuming that the two types of reciprocity sketched above—biographical, transitory passages vs. new normal biography—constitute the extremes of a continuum, we may identify five different types of moving through welfare on the basis of the pilot study which was based on 50 cases.<sup>8</sup> Each of these types has a different relation to employment in the labor market and to Hilfe zur Arbeit:

- Type 1: The *Bridgers* = transitory recipients of welfare benefits with only temporary loss of social status;
- Type 2: The *Marginalized* = recipients of welfare subjected to long-term processes of loss of status;
- Type 3: The *Oscillators* = people slipping, or rather swinging, into and out of assistance, for whom loss of status is imminent, but not (yet) permanent; and finally
- Type 4: The *Escapers* = long-term recipients who eventually and unexpectedly manage to escape welfare dependence.

A further group, which lacks a direct relation to the labor market, could be categorized as the “Externalized”. It includes the autonomous, non-transitory recipients, as, e.g., pensioners or the aged.

How can we characterize these career types using the results of the pilot study?<sup>9</sup>

**The Marginalized (loss of status):** The vast majority of the clients of work schemes belongs to this group. In the pilot study we found most of these cases to be males. Most of them are untrained, subject to repeated unemployment with or without entitlement to unemployment benefits. Two welfare

<sup>7</sup>The second tier benefits of Unemployment Insurance are organized as permanent means-tested welfare benefits. The delivery standard is pegged at a 53% wage replacement rate. Since this unemployment benefit (especially in case of a family) may turn out to be below the social assistance needs standard, supplementary maintenance benefits may be applied for at the welfare office.

<sup>8</sup>These types of recipients of assistance were originally devised by Johann Behrens (see in detail Hübinger/Priester et al. 1987).

<sup>9</sup>cf. for a more detailed description of the first three types see Priester 1989.

recipients lack entitlements to old-age pensions despite inability to work. Some are casual workers and are dependent on welfare due to low (second tier) unemployment benefits or to low pay. Most of them have already become a "case" for the social authorities: At the time the case was opened support measures taken by the authorities are reflected in initiatives and remarks in the files. Later the picture shifts to a routine handling of clients. Factors like age, insufficient qualification, strong health deficiencies, multiple or long-term unemployment give these people little chance of achieving a normal status of gainful employment in the labor market.

**The Bridgers (transitory status):** A small group of clients of work schemes fall into the category of bridgers. The large majority of this group consists of people who receive welfare only until they receive the unemployment benefits they have applied for. But it consists also of persons who are still in education or are unemployed after leaving school or university. Most of the cases in the sample of the pilot study had completed a vocational or educational training or made up for previous lack of training while receiving assistance. After a fairly short period of time (19 months on average) gainful employment could be taken up again: apprenticeship, public work schemes, regular gainful employment. Youth of clients is an important factor; by contrast, sex, e.g., discrimination of women, seems to matter little. Those persons in this group who receive Hilfe zur Arbeit enter a normal contractual arrangement at the obtaining wage rate (though limited in time) according to §19 section 1 or 2, clause 1 of the Social Assistance Act of 1962.

**The Oscillators (heading towards loss of status):** There are few clients of Hilfe zur Arbeit among those threatened by loss of social status. We must note that there is no clear cut distinction between this group and those who have actually lost their status. These clients move back and forth between labor market, labor exchange and welfare authorities. The age of these persons ranges from 25 to 45 years. The large sub-group of people in recurring unemployment receive transitory aid in most cases; imprisonment and low pay are further causes. Single mothers are an even larger sub-group. In this case the separation from their husbands can be interpreted as an increase of autonomy despite dependence on welfare. They lack employment or have part-time work. The duration of welfare payments varies widely and is interrupted several times. When people in this group get Hilfe zur Arbeit, they start with premium work (they receive no wages; they keep their welfare benefits and get an additional small expense allowance), which is in some cases followed-up by a regular one year work contract according to §19 of the Social Assistance Act. Thus, there is an attempt at a gradual movement towards an ordinary, "normal" labor status.

Those persons repeatedly falling into and out of poverty tend to be disregarded in administrative statistics, especially if their welfare spells are short.

“There is, for example, a file of a recipient of social assistance with a recurrent unemployment history which has been kept by the authorities for 43 months, while the actual duration of payment of benefits is only 16 months. Non-payment periods are due to repeated employment. A different person who is in education has been receiving benefits for 43 months since the opening of the file. Although these two cases differ with regard to the actual number of months in benefit receipt, they are not and may not be distinguished in conventional studies.” (Hübinger/Priester et al. 1987:117). In this way the administrative statistics miss a multitude of movements into or out of assistance—they report statics, where considerable micro-dynamics prevail.

**The Escapers (avoiding loss of status):** These few cases, who—in our pilot study—rather appear as declassed, although they have managed to escape welfare dependence, lack homogeneous characteristics:

- Two women, aged 27 and 36, single mothers, were able to gain a professional qualification during their long dependence on social assistance, leading to secure employment in the labor market.
- A 41 year old man, repeatedly unemployed without entitlements to unemployment benefits and without education, managed to get a permanent job, supported by the welfare authority, after 93 months of receipt.
- A 24 year old woman, also repeatedly unemployed and lacking qualification, escaped welfare dependence after 40 months by marriage.

The second case most clearly represents the type of the escaper. This recipient has become independent of assistance despite a bad prognosis to which her age gave rise.

**The Externalized (status unaffected):** We are dealing here with autonomous non-transitory recipients of assistance. Since old-age pensioners are no longer engaged in gainful employment, they are obviously not a target group of work schemes within social assistance. Neither are they relevant to a study which focusses on processes of escaping dependence on welfare. Old-age pensioners could be seen as structurally poor. They are the largest subgroup of this type of recipients. In these cases, welfare payments, by supplementing low pensions, actually enhance autonomy. In the sample of the pilot study these were mostly women who have low survivors or low disability pensions. However, in this type recipients of social assistance would have to be included who, for various reasons, are engaged in long-term employment not covered by social insurance. Due to a universal right to “social assistance” in Germany also all resident employed are entitled to welfare benefits, depending on wage and

especially on family size. As a rule in this type of career long term dependence on assistance is likely.<sup>10</sup>

Table 2 summarizes the problem groups of the welfare system as discussed above, relying on the duration of payment of welfare and other criteria. This typology is necessarily provisional and will be tested and refined in the course of the further collection and analysis of data.

The typology of welfare clients raises more general conceptual and theoretical issues that will be subject to further clarification in the course of the study. A key issue is to develop the analysis of claimants' careers within the framework of a theory of social dynamics, and of status passages and of significant events in the life course on particular. Welfare careers are closely related to "employment careers" in the labor market and to "marital careers" in the familial system. Events in the employment or in the family career of a person can initiate paths into social assistance, shape passages through social assistance, but also facilitate exits from assistance.

In general discussions on poverty, welfare reciprocity is usually linked to problems of unemployment. However, special studies have shown (e.g. Ellwood 1986, Klein 1987) that the common emphasis on the labor market needs qualification. In the U.S. welfare system, in particular, with its pronounced orientation towards female poverty and single mothers, family events like marriage and divorce are a major determinant of passages into and out of public welfare. We can model the societal framework of welfare careers by four dimensions: labor market, family—or, more generally, household-, social networks—such as friendships and neighborhoods -, and social security—as distinct from social assistance.

The relevance of familial factors in addition to employment factors had been noted earlier in cross-sectional studies, with family size being the most conspicuous familial determinant of individual welfare. Only a longitudinal analysis of micro data, however, can trace the concrete processes by which familial events trigger off paths into or out of welfare dependency. Moreover, the overrepresentation of long-term recipients in cross-sectional data distorts the causal weight of family factors operating in the short term.

Familial factors operate in a fairly complex way. First of all, they not only add to but interact with employment factors. Recent dynamic analyses both in the U.S.A. and the Federal Republic of Germany (Rainwater/Rein/Schwartz 1986; Klein 1987) have highlighted the impact of familial earners other than the male breadwinner on family incomes and social deprivation. The wages of working wives and working children are an important component of what Rainwater et al. call the "income package" of families. In addition, the distribution of market incomes within the family influences the welfare position of its members. For example, working children do not always fully surrender their wage to the family income pool.

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<sup>10</sup>This category would also include those youths who are in need of public assistance to top up low and irregular income from work in the alternative sector.

Table 2: Classification of the Sociocultural Status of Five Possible Types of Welfare Careers

| Type of Career                                 | Social Status   | Autonomy                        |
|--|---|---------------------------------|
| "Marginalized" (loss of status)                | definitive disruption of normal biography                   | loss of autonomy                |
| "Bridgers" (transitory status)                 | temporary disruption of normal biography                    | no substantial loss of autonomy |
| "Oscillators" (heading towards loss of status) | normal biography at risk                                    | imminent loss of autonomy       |
| "Escapers" (avoiding loss of status)           | normal biography regained                                   | autonomy regained               |
| "Externalized" (status unaffected)             | social assistance as prop of a new kind of normal biography | Autonomy                        |

Secondly, there is a considerable diversity of familial factors. Conceptualizations of the crucial aspects range from the received notion of the family cycle and the more recent concept of discrete familial "events"<sup>11</sup>—such as marriage, divorce, and birth of a child—to more continuous factors such as the quality of social relationships within the family and orientations of action relevant to the ways of procuring a living. In tracing the impact of these factors we have to allow for the fact that the behavior of the poor differs from those of higher income groups in many (though not all) respects. Some behavioral variables, e.g. fertility, are related to income in a non-linear way, e.g., in the form of an U-shaped graph.

Thirdly, existing studies lead us to hypothesize that the relative causal weight of family variables changes in the course of extended dependency on public assistance, namely that the causal weight increases with the duration of dependency, while the causal weight of labor market variables decreases. This may entail a self-perpetuation of poverty within or even across generations, as implied in the notion of culture of poverty, but it can also facilitate the eventual escape from welfare dependency in case of joint familial endeavors to regain autonomy. In longitudinal perspective the relation between family and poverty is two-sided, with causal effects in both directions. To the extent that poverty impairs vital functions of family life, the family acts as a mediating variable in a process of self-reinforcing poverty. In this perspective, two sets of endogenous variables that can induce self-perpetuating "poverty careers" have to be distinguished: familial and social variables on the one hand and administrative variables—bureaucratic welfarization—on the other hand.

The role of the family in welfare careers leads to the general question of

<sup>11</sup> For an illuminating summary analysis of concepts and approaches see Marbach (1987).

dependency and autonomy in public welfare. Recourse to welfare by a divorced woman can be seen as a chance to achieve relative autonomy—freedom from marital dependence—and as a passage towards a new kind of autonomy in a second marriage. Social “dependence” can have a multitude of meanings and is not restricted to dependence on welfare. Furthermore, dependence on welfare has subjective and objective facets. One indicator to be used to measure objective dependence/autonomy is the amount of benefits claimed or, to be more precise, the proportion of total income paid out of welfare funds. This refers to the “poverty gap” between pre-welfare income and the administrative poverty line.

Subjective autonomy can be investigated in interviews by means of subjective indicators. The conventional view, as expounded, e.g., in the British context by R. Titmuss and T.H. Marshall (cf. Marshall 1981), that dependency is the hallmark of discretionary and means-tested benefits (without denying a positive role of such benefits in the welfare state), needs qualification in dynamic perspective. Dependency and autonomy depend on the use claimants make of social assistance in the course of their lives. They may actively resort to assistance as a strategic prop of a biographical transition to a new, fully autonomous status, or, they may view it as a long-term, relatively stable guarantee of basic security. In this sense, the above characterization of the “Externalized”, such as old-age pensioners, as relatively autonomous is to be taken as a hypothesis only, to be tested in the empirical analysis.

#### 4 Perspectives For Further Analyses of Welfare Careers

The project on “Welfare Careers” in the Special Collaborative Programme “Status Passages and Social Risks” at Bremen University is currently involved in evaluating administrative files kept by the welfare authorities of a north German city by means of a standardized extraction of data. At present of the entire sample only the new applications of 1983, that is the application cohort of 1983, is studied. The standardized “questionnaire”, which we developed to collect data from the files, not only covers the conventional data referred to in cross-sectional approaches, such as sex, date of birth, nationality, which are well-documented in the files. The “questionnaire” also covers the following dimensions which are consistently reconstructed as longitudinal data, i.e. as event histories: The structure of the household, the housing situation, marital status, employment status, profession and current or recent job, the causes of dependence on welfare as well as the causes of escaping; welfare spells, i.e. the periods of time during which benefits are paid, the level of benefits, the relevant social authorities involved, the incomes considered in means testing and the type of these incomes as well as the level and type of special public

benefits. In short, the study aims to develop types of careers rather than structural types.

The data which are being gathered in this way are relevant in three respects:

1. They enable us to depict temporal patterns of dependence on welfare: How long do welfare recipients who appear as "cases" in the files of the social authorities actually depend on financial support, i.e. how often and for how long are welfare payments discontinued? For example, which individual characteristics are related to frequent and long interruptions of welfare payments? How are these temporal patterns related to the degree of dependence on welfare? For example, are long-term recipients normally fully dependent on welfare, or can they draw on other (insufficient) sources of income?

In this way we can analyze the patterns of time and dependence, i.e. welfare careers, in relation to the individual biographies in family, employment and housing. E.g., we could find out whether long and intensive dependence tends to destabilize the housing situation, particularly due to frequent moving, especially due to concentration in urban ghettos in the process, or also the family situation.

2. Furthermore we have developed a classification of causes (cf. Buhr/Ludwig 1989a) which goes far beyond the information contained in administrative files and is particularly suited to give a differentiated picture of the crucial events that lead to dependence on social assistance. We should emphasize that long-term dependence is not normally caused by one event only which continues for good but is often supplemented or even superseded by other "causal" events.
3. Finally we aim to identify events that make clients independent of assistance. This includes cases of temporary independence, for example the ending of one (out of several) spells of welfare payments. We always have to keep in mind that clients may make several—unsuccessful—attempts at escaping dependence. On the one hand, by breaking down rates of recidivism by the events which caused dependence or independence, we can identify risk structures and risk factors in a more differentiated way. But we can also reconstruct the paths that have led out of social assistance, possibly after many previous failures.

To gain insights into aspects that are less well documented in the administrative files we will resort to interviews in a future stage of research. The poor quality of data especially with regard to education and employment careers before application for social assistance, however, could in many cases be made up by way of additional analyses of public records if the administrative data on welfare receipt could be linked to the data of the federal labour exchange in an

anonymized way. Familiarity with the files of the labour exchange alone could considerably deepen our insights. We have not yet reached this stage, but we assume that bureaucratic thresholds are enormous, especially that these data of 1983 or earlier years have been destroyed anyway. The requirements of data protection, too, make the linking of data a difficult task to tackle.

Furthermore the process-produced data found in welfare files would have to be linked to microcensus data if paths into welfare and related macrosocietal implications were to receive closer attention. This could be the direction of future stages of investigation.

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## 5 Appendix: Description of the Bremen Random Sample of Welfare Claimants' Files <sup>1 2</sup>

The random sample was drawn in September 1987 and has been continuously extended by sampling new applications after that date. It was taken with a random number design from the central welfare registry which comprises all recipients in the city of Bremen. On December 31, 1988 the total random sample amounted to 8,406 files (1983–1988). The data refer to people actually receiving welfare. They include several kinds of other income transfers (cf. table 3) which are of no direct concern for the study of poverty, thus these other transfers are excluded from further descriptive analysis.

Table 3: Composition of the Total Sample

| Kinds of Files   | Frequency | Percent | cumulative Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|--------------------|
| <i>Landespflegegeld</i> (public support for care of the elderly) | 54        | .6      | .6                 |
| <i>Lastenausgleich</i> (post WW II recompensation scheme)        | 27        | .3      | 1.0                |
| <i>TBC</i> (tuberculosis payments)                               | 46        | .5      | 1.5                |
| <i>Unterhalt</i> (child support payments)                        | 122       | 1.5     | 3.0                |
| <i>HLU/HBL</i> (social assistance)                               | 8,157     | 97.0    | 100.0              |
| Total  | 8,406     | 100.0   |                    |

We consider only files of recipients of *Hilfe zum Lebensunterhalt* (HLU, "maintenance benefits") and *Hilfe in besonderen Lebenslagen* (HBL, "benefits for special needs") while leaving aside various special income transfer schemes such as *Landespflegegeld* (public support for care of the elderly through the Länder), *Lastenausgleich* (post WW II recompensation scheme), TBC (tuberculosis payments), and *Unterhaltsvorschuß* (child support payments). Note that the share of HBL recipients in the total number is below the national average. This is mainly due to the *Landespflegegeld* which is a state law improving—and supplementing—the HBL benefits in that area.

Our random sample starts in 1983. The sample includes two kinds of data: (1) new applications from 1983 to 1988; (2) data of all other persons who received welfare payments in 1983 but whose administrative files were opened any time before 1983. Our data are representative for each cohort of new applicants (1983, 1984, ...). The data are also representative if used for a cross-sectional analysis of all recipients in 1983 and, if adjusted, for later

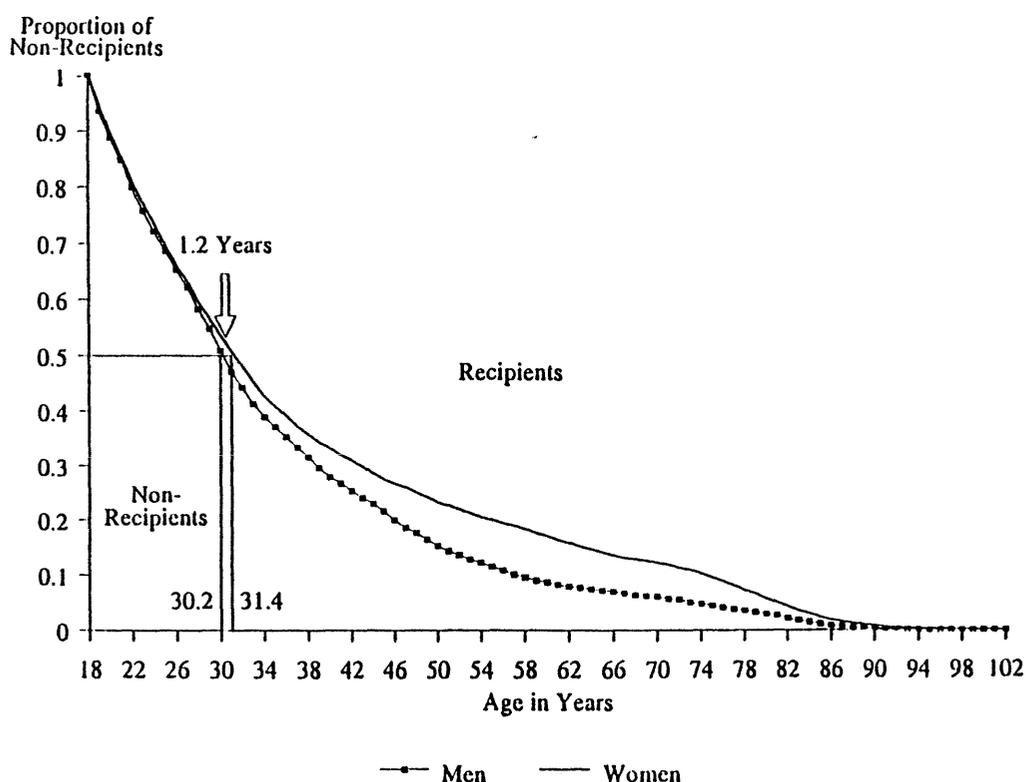
<sup>12</sup>This paper has been prepared by Wolfgang Voges.

years. In the following descriptive analysis of a few selected characteristics of the recipients of social assistance only data of the new applicant cohorts are considered. The net sample amounts to 5,015 and consists of 738 new welfare records in 1983 (14.7% of the net sample), 763 in 1984 (15.2%), 834 in 1985 (16.6%), 781 in 1986 (15.6%), 868 in 1987 (17.3%), and 1,031 in 1988 (20.6%).

There is a difference between the person in whose name a file is kept and the people who receive welfare payments. If recipients are married or divorced, for example, the welfare record is filed under the name of the husband irrespective of whether only his wife or his wife also receives welfare. In our sample there are 54.5% female and only 45.5% male welfare records. If the case file concerns a married couple, it is usually kept in the name of the head of the household, which often is the husband. This would cause a biased estimation of male and female welfare recipients, which we have corrected in many ways. In the case of married persons who both receive welfare, for example, we avoided the bias by counting one person on each side of the gender divide. Since the theoretical approach of the project "welfare careers" applies to the individual's risk of welfare dependency and to the individual's passages through the welfare system, the sum total of recipients of welfare payments is of interest and not the number of files. The following descriptions are thus based on all recipients of social assistance.

For a dynamic analysis of welfare careers it is useful to highlight the duration before the first receipt of social assistance by studying the survival function based on the "life-table" estimation. The survivor curves in the figures

Figure 4: Starting a Welfare Career by Gender



above and below give an impression of the proportion of persons who first applied for social assistance at a given point in time  $t$  (time in our sample is expressed as individual age in years). The graphs present the distribution of the length of spells without social assistance in the total sample or in particular groups of welfare recipients and provide information on the percentile points. The life-table estimation produces for all recipients the figure of a survivor function which decreases as age increases: The medium age for non-take-up of welfare benefits—measured as median—is 30.7 years.

The incline of the slope in figure 4 shows that recipients of welfare benefits are mostly young: 60.1% of the female recipients ( $n=2,935$ ) and 63.7% of the male recipients ( $n=2,469$ ) were between 18 and 35 years old when they received their first welfare payments. The medium age of starting a welfare career is 31.4 for women and 30.2 years for men, both measured as median. This means that half of the women or men in our sample were in welfare receipt for the first time before this age. The gender difference of 1.2 years demonstrates that women stay away from social assistance for a longer time, or, to put it in another way, that men start their welfare careers earlier in life.

Furthermore the survivor curve points to one central element of gender difference: about 20% of all female recipients received welfare for the first time after the age of 50, while only about 10% of the men started their welfare career after that age. Since independent files are opened by the welfare office only for people older than 18 years and since recipients who do not satisfy this age-limit are part of their parents' files, figure 4 only relates to recipients who are older than 18.

A descriptive comparison of particular groups of recipients by marital status shows interesting differences in the age of first receipt of welfare payments.

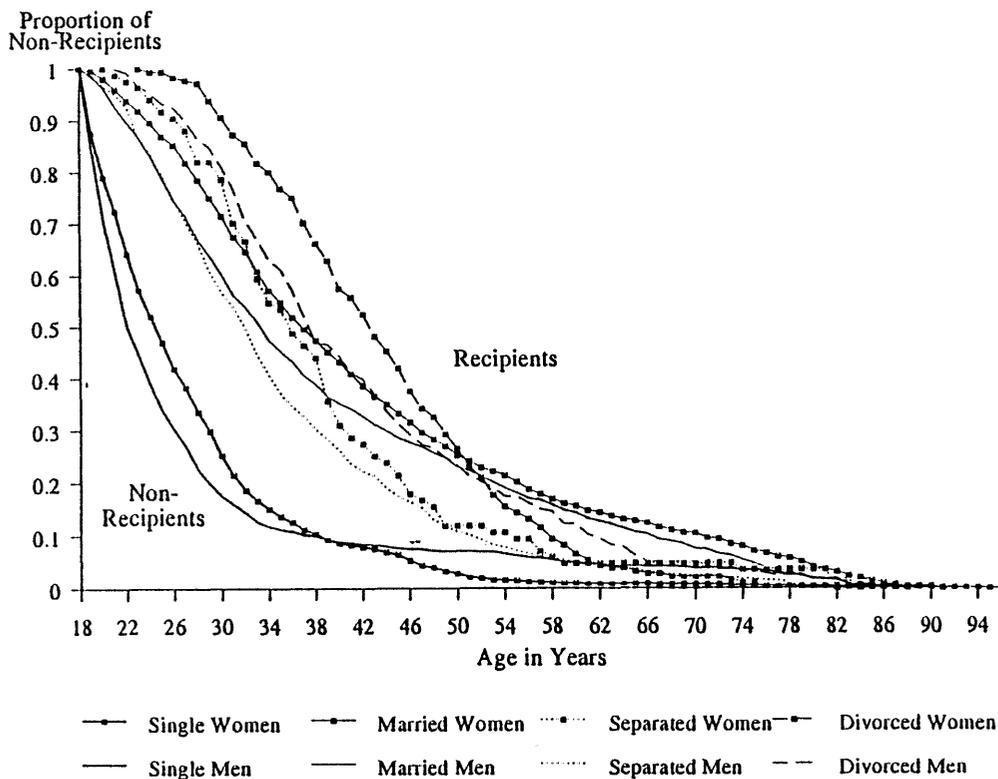
Table 3: Medium Age of First Welfare Receipt by Marital Status

| Marital Status           | Women          | Men             |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Single                   | 22.0<br>( 762) | 24.4<br>(1,166) |
| Married living together  | 33.2<br>( 869) | 36.9<br>( 905)  |
| Married living separated | 31.9<br>( 685) | 35.9<br>( 84)   |
| Divorced                 | 37.7<br>( 253) | 42.5<br>( 181)  |
| Widowed                  | 77.5<br>( 312) | 77.3<br>( 53)   |

Median survival time in years; number of cases in parentheses

Divorced women were in welfare receipt about five years earlier, married women—living together with or separated from their husbands—about four years earlier than men with the same marital status. Unmarried women first received social assistance at the medium age of 22, while single men entered the welfare system 2.4 years later. Differences between widowed women and men can be neglected. Figure 5 shows the survival curves of recipients by marital status, with the exception of widowhood. The results hint at the shelter function of marriage against poverty.

Figure 5: Starting a Welfare Career by Marital Status



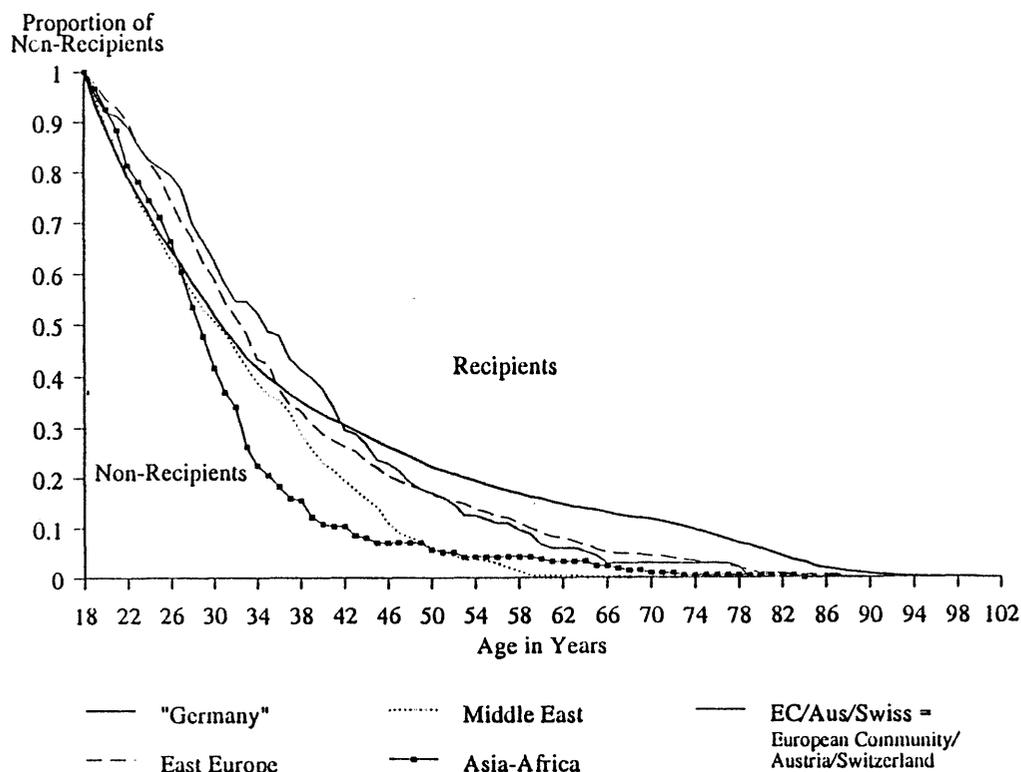
Compared with the general population over 18 years of age in the city of Bremen married or divorced persons with social assistance are underrepresented in our sample.<sup>13</sup> Married persons, living as a couple or in separation, make up 52.8% of the Bremen population (in 1987) but 48.2% in our sample. In the population 11.6% of all persons are divorced, while only 8.3% with this marital status are in the sample. Single recipients in our sample are overrep-

<sup>13</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the representativity of the sample, which uses the Bremen Welfare Department's Internal Statistics of case records (*Bearbeitungsstatistik*), the Micro-census of the State for the city of Bremen and the German Socioeconomic Panel, cf. Voges 1989.

resented. 28.5% of the Bremen citizens are unmarried as compared to 36.5% in our sample. In the sample as well as in the population 7.0% of all persons are widowed.

The low age of first receipt of welfare benefits might be an effect of a great number of younger asylants or other foreign recipients. Therefore figure 6 focusses on the country of origin of welfare claimants as defined by place of birth. "Germany" includes recipients born in "greater" Germany ("Deutsches Reich") before WW II, and those born post-WW II in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Germans started their welfare career at the medium age of 30.6 while foreigners took up welfare first with 32.5 years. Between German (n=3,835) and foreign recipients (n=1,171) there is only a difference of 1.5 years in the medium age of first receipt of social assistance. Foreigners start their welfare careers in the FRG at an higher age because receipt of welfare benefits could be used as a reason for 'deportation'.

Figure 6: Starting a Welfare Career by Country of Origin



Further analysis of the non-German recipients shows great differences among them. Recipients from the European Community, Austria and Switzerland (n=136) and people from East Europe (n=439) first received welfare benefits

at a relatively "high" age of 34.3 or 32.6 years respectively. Recipients from the Middle East (n=382) had their first welfare receipt at the medium age of 30.2 years. Only people from Asian or African countries of origin (n=214), who normally seek political asylum in the FRG, start their welfare career at a lower age, with 28.6 years. All in all the data do not suggest that the age of first receipt of social assistance is mainly determined by a "youth bias" of foreign recipients.

But one should not interpret these few data in such a way that younger persons, women or members of "old" cohorts necessarily have a higher risk of turning into clients of the welfare state. This is so, because our sample includes only persons who are already welfare recipients. We do not have any information about "censored" cases, that is persons who are poor but did not receive social benefits unless they passed the point of observation. This is also so because our data could not take into account the different proportions of recipients and non-recipients in the general population of the city of Bremen. Thus at the moment we can only estimate the risk of starting a claimant career relative to a specific age for welfare recipients.