Persistent Poverty in Rotterdam

A longitudinal study on poverty and Social Assistance in the city of Rotterdam, The Netherlands

1999-2006

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Introduction

1.1 The temporality of poverty

Poverty is something one sees in ghettoes; it is the typical trait of an underclass. Poverty is being passed on from one generation to the next. The poor are alienated from society, they suffer from multiple forms of social exclusion and deprivation. Children that grow up in poverty see their chances of a good life disappear as years go by. They often fall into a life of crime and drugs, they become teenage mothers, or even worse, prostitutes, drug dealers and delinquents. The poor are a social stratum of their own. A homogeneous group at the bottom of society.

In poverty research "[t]his is well illustrated by the search for a poverty threshold, a incongruity in behaviour which can be employed to distinguish who are poor from those who are not [...]. In its least sophisticated form, this approach is entirely atemporal. It takes no account of the duration of poverty or of people's prior experiences" (Ashworth & Walker, 1991, 25; in Buhr, 1995, 13). Being poor is a state which it is hard to come out of.

'The temporariness of poverty was, for a long time, not on the poverty research agenda. Even such a simple distinction between short term and long term poverty was not made' (Buhr, 1995, 13, translated from German). Why is that most of us see in our minds cultures of poverty and an underclass excluded from the rest of society when we think of poverty? Let us look at a fairly recent example of the way poverty is spoken about in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, which will be the setting of this particular study on poverty.

First, a short introduction on Rotterdam. Rotterdam is a typical working class big city with many of the typical 'big city' problems: it has a large immigrant population, the city is poor compared to other big Dutch cities, its economy traditionally relied on its harbor and heavy industries, crime rates are relatively high and integration of minorities is causing tensions in the city limits (Brinkman Commission, 1998). Like other major Post-Industrial cities, Rotterdam experienced difficulties with the transition from an industrial to a service sector based economy (Engbersen, Snel & Weltevrede, 2005, p. 11-13; Burgers & Musterd, 2002). Former mayor Ivo

Opstelten once proclaimed Rotterdam is 'topping the wrong lists' (as cited in Tops, 2007, p. 50). Rotterdam seems to do far worse than other cities.

Priority is given to fighting poverty and the socio-economic upgrading of the city's population. Rotterdam's poverty policy primarily focuses on the long term poor. The pillars of their policy are 'repaying debts, appealing to the own responsibility of the poor, reactivating people towards work as soon as possible (coerced if necessary), breaking the culture of poverty and preventing social alienation' (College van B&W, 2006). Again we see this image of a socially homogeneous group of people, 'hanging' somewhere at the bottom of society, targeted by all sorts of reactivation programs. There is a fear of children growing in poor families, because they are being passed on the norms and values of a culture of poverty.

Back to the temporariness of poverty then. Is poverty really such a persistent phenomenon? Some scholars argue that poverty is not the persistent phenomenon most politicians and scientists claim it to be. They point out that poverty is far more dynamic that hitherto presumed. These scholars conclude that the number of people in persistent poverty is often exaggerated, that people 'slip into and out of poverty' and that a lot of people, not just those from bad families or neighborhoods, are at risk of becoming poor at some point of time in their lives (Bane & Ellwood, 1986; Leisering and Leibfried, 1999). Poverty, they conclude, is primarily a temporary phenomenon, something that comes, and goes.

How can such contradicting perspectives on poverty coexist? Primarily because they are grounded in very different research methods which lead to very different outcomes. It is the difference between 'static' methods (point-in-time samples) and 'dynamic' methods (longitudinal). Petra Buhr (1995) for instance, provided the empirical material and research method for the above cited Leisering and Leibfried study that took place in the German city of Bremen. By focusing on Social Assistance use, and by using longitudinal methods, she was well able to grasp the dynamics of poverty careers. Her findings indicate that many people do manage to escape from poverty and that most people are only poor for a very short period of time.

1.2 Research goals and questions

The aim of this study is twofold. The first goal is to better understand the nature of poverty in Rotterdam. Is poverty in Rotterdam (more of) a persistent or (more of) a temporary phenomenon? Are the bulk of people experiencing poverty poor for a short period of time or a long period? The second goal of this study is to explore the dynamics of poverty in Rotterdam by studying the number of poverty spells an individual experiences. Do people experience just one spell of poverty or do they slip in and out of poverty? How mobile are 'the' poor? How long do people manage to stay of Social Assistance?

Poverty in this study is conceptualized as 'claiming Social Assistance', which I will elaborate on in chapter three. The data set used in this study, that was made available by the SwA, contains longitudinal data on all Social Assistance claims in the city of Rotterdam for the period of 1999 to 2006, covering a period of seven years.

This study gravitates around a number of research questions. The overall research question will be formulated as:

Is poverty in Rotterdam predominately a more temporary or persistent phenomenon and what are the differences between single and multiple spell claimants?

To be able to answer this question I will of course address a number of sub questions and topics as well. First of all I will outline the link between research methods and their different outcomes and their theoretical implications. This will answer the question "why do different methods lead to different outcomes and how are these outcomes translated into general theories on poverty?".

Then I will provide insight into the duration of Social Assistance spells, the development of Social Assistance claiming throughout the years and the backgrounds of short and long term claimants. How many new Social Assistance spells commence each year? How many spells of Social Assistance can we observe per individual? What is the average duration of Social Assistance spells? What are the background characteristics of these claimants? All these questions will have to be answered to get a thorough insight in the nature of poverty.

The next step will then be to analyze the differences between single and multiple spell claimants. I am not only interested in the distribution of single and multiple spell claimants

amongst the Social Assistance claiming population, but also in the background characteristics of the different claimants. How many spells can we observe per individual? Are people that experience just one spell really different from those that experience four, or five? How dynamic is the Social Assistance population in Rotterdam?

These insights on nature and dynamics of Social Assistance claiming will be used to form a typology of different Social Assistance claimants. It could very well be that different factors correlate with experiencing a single short, or a single very long spell, or multiple short spells, or multiple long spells. By analyzing all these different factors, can we come to different kinds of Social Assistance claimants?

1.3 Relevance

Studies on poverty have policy implications. When better or more accurate methods become available, these can generate valuable insights and can lead to effective changes in policy, and in the end, in people's lives. Because, as the theoretical chapter will point out, there is quite the ambiguity on the 'true' nature of poverty, there is also much need for local and accurate poverty studies. Although it is not the aim of this study to falsify or validate general theories on poverty, local studies on poverty, such as this one, can help to critically reassess our assumptions and perspectives. In the end, this will make us better equipped to target and, hopefully, abolish poverty and all its negative effects on individuals and society.

1.4 Outline

In chapter two a theoretical framework on the link between poverty research and theories will be established. In chapter three the methodology and the data set will be introduced to the reader. In chapter four the results will be presented. Chapter five will outline the most important conclusions, discussion of the results and considerations for further research and recommendations for the SwA.

Temporary and Persistent Poverty

2.1 Introduction

Different methods lead to different results. Different results lead to different theories. Different theories feed different belief systems and policy, with at the end of the chain, the lives of real people affected by whatever path taken. Poverty is a widely studied and popular phenomenon amongst an array of disciplines: sociology, psychology, anthropology and economics. As already briefly introduced in the introduction, an important present debate concerns the question if poverty is primarily a persistent phenomenon (Lewis, 1966; Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1996; Dalrymple, 2000), or a temporary phenomenon (Bane and Ellwood, 1986; Buhr, 1995; Leisering & Leibfried, 1999; Beck, 1983).

This chapter deals with the different methods and theories on poverty and is structured as follows. In paragraph 2.2 a comparison is made between static and dynamic research methods. It will give a brief overview of the chronology of poverty research and will highlight the differences between the two methods. It also explains why these different methods lead to such different outcomes. Research provides the information on which we base our assumptions and on which we build our theories.

These different theories will be elaborated on in paragraph 2.3, starting with those scholars that see poverty as primarily a persistent phenomenon (structuralists and culturalists) and concluding with those who see poverty as primarily a temporary phenomenon. In paragraph 2.4 a brief oversight of Dutch studies on poverty will be given, especially focusing on the distinction between static and dynamic methods. This chapter ends with a brief summary in paragraph 2.5.

2.2 Static and dynamic methods compared

This paragraph will briefly discuss the differences between static and dynamic research methods. Although the term 'static' has a negative vibe, it is not all the case that these methods are unsuited for poverty research or that they lead to invalid results. As some examples will show, the one method is simply better suited for the study of dynamics of poverty than the other. Poverty became a widely studied topic around the early 1960's. Research methods were yet to be developed and the availability of (especially)longitudinal data was limited, so this was an era of 'great conceptual and methodological leaps' (Thorbecke, 2004, p. 1). The building blocks of poverty research were provided, both in methodology (through the study of aggregate data, census tracts, point-in-time samples) as well as in theory building (Dalrymple's underclass, or Wilson's urban ghettoes, the culture of poverty, etc.).

However, at the end of the 1980's, when new longitudinal methods and data became available, making it possible to follow individuals through time, new findings spurred new theories on poverty. These scholars referred to their work as 'dynamic' poverty research, because they were better capable of grasping the complexity of poverty. Let us start with a quote that in short explains the differences between the two methods:

> *While point-in-time studies provide static 'snap shots' of the population at a given single moment, dynamic or longitudinal research traces the same individuals or households over time and so is able to record stories of change. [...] However, from this [static, NG] perspective, poverty can seem rather one-dimensional – as a homogenous and relatively static state experienced by a homogenous and discrete group: 'the poor'. [...] In contrast, dynamics research shows that people can experience different types of poverty, that the majority of people who experience poverty move out of poverty, and that many more people experience poverty over a period of time than they do at any one moment in time. The concept of 'the poor' is misleading and, instead, we see a broad population with diverse experiences of poverty. At the same time, dynamics research reveals who moves in and out of poverty, and why, and so sheds light on how life chances are stacked against certain individuals and families (Middleton and Smith, 2007, p. 1).*

Before moving on, let us focus on the phrase "at any moment in time." What static methods do, is take a sample of the poverty population at a given time. People with long spells of poverty have a higher chance of being included in the sample, simply because their spell covers many 'points in time'. In other words, when taking a sample, they are always overrepresented. In figure

2.1 this is visualized.

Figure 2.1 Spells in the period T0 – T2
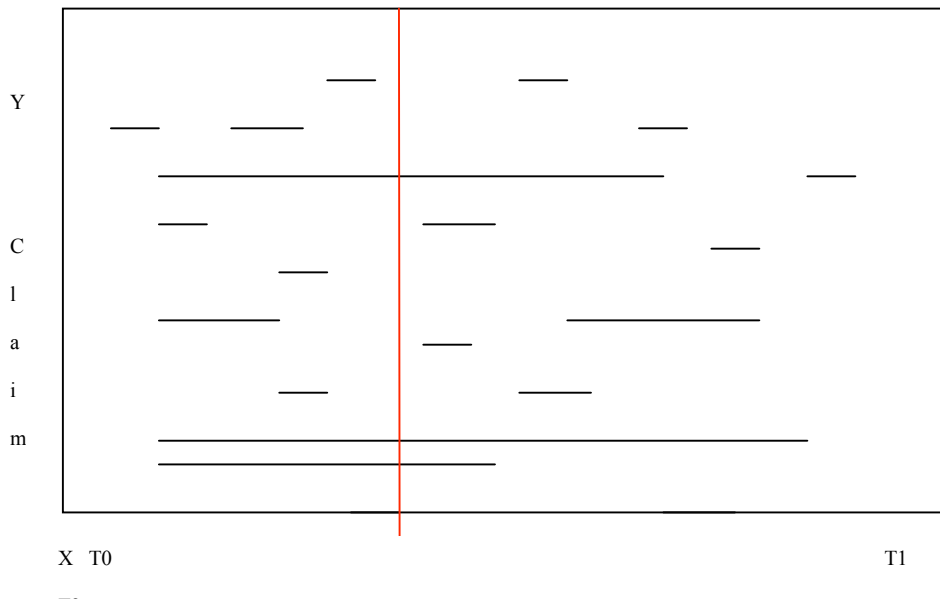
Even though short term poor make up the majority of poor in the year x, they are underrepresented in the sample taken at t=1. Even if we take many samples, the long term poor will be overrepresented at almost any given time. If we want to know who are using the bulk of resources at a given time, this is an effective research method. In other words, it is very effective in capturing the long term poor in a snapshot. However, if we have as our goal determining the number of short term poor and long term poor, or the career of a certain individual compared to another, or the chances of escaping poverty, this is not the most effective way. What we can do is include all the people that have become poor in year x, and follow these people throughout a period of say, 10 years, and find out how long they have been poor, if they manage to escape at a given time, or perhaps become poor a second or third time. Bane and Ellwood's (1986, p. 11) famous hospital example puts it this way:

> *Consider the situation in a typical hospital. Most of the persons admitted in any year will require only a very short spell of hospitalization. But a few of the newly admitted patients are chronically ill and will have extended stays in the hospital. If we ask what proportion of all admissions are people who are chronically ill, the answer is relatively few. On the other hand, if we ask what fraction of the number of the hospital's beds at any one time are occupied by the chronically ill, the answer is much larger. The reason is simple. Although the chronically ill account for only a small fraction of all admissions, because they stay so*

long they end up being sizable part of the hospital population and they consume a sizable
proportion of the hospitals' resources.

As figure 2.1 shows, the same goes for spells of poverty.

Ever since Bane & Ellwood (1986) introduced a 'dynamic' methodology for studying poverty, thereby revealing the shortcomings of conventional point-in-time samples and methods, there has been considerable debate in the field of poverty research. They found out that the majority of people are only poor for a short period of time and that people are seldom poor for a long continuous period, but rather that they tend to 'slip into and out of poverty'. Yet, as the introduction has already shown, the idea of persistent poverty is still very much alive. In the next paragraphs we will dive further into these two perspectives on poverty.

2.3 Persistent poverty

The idea that poverty is a persistent phenomenon is strong in social science and policy. Poverty became a popular object of inquiry in the 1960's. Scholars as Amartya Sen spurred methodological debates on how to effectively measure and define poverty (Thorbecke, 2004). If poverty could be accurately measured, it could also be accurately targeted with anti-poverty strategies (Bourguinon & Chakravarty, 2003). These studies in general concluded that a large share of the poverty population lives in persistent poverty. These people formed an underclass almost permanently living in poverty and often spatially segregated in urban ghettoes. Although there was agreement on the existence of such an underclass, a large and fairly coherent group of poor, scholars differed in opinion on what caused their poverty. Broadly speaking, persistent poverty was explained from two angles: a culturalist and a structuralist explanation.

2.3.1 Cultural explanations for persistent poverty

"The cultural model, the model of choice of media analysts, boasts a myriad of scholarly proponents from the right and increasingly from the left. Its adherents generally conclude that individuals become poor by a set of wrong attitudes and, ultimately, wrong choices. Most agree that the origins of the problem are found in the breakdown of major institutions, the family,

school and church" (Marks, 1991, 449). 'Blaming the victim' plays an important role in the cultural view on persistent poverty, with the poor often portrayed in a negative, stereotypical way (Ibid.).

Culturalists see the breaking down of the family and other major institutions lying at the root of poverty. "Growing up outside the family, they [culturalists, NG] conclude, produces a population unschooled in the most basic of lessons, a sense of right and wrong" (Marks, 1991, p. 450). This is why children that are raised in poor families, mostly one-parent families, resolve to crime and fall into joblessness. It is (the absence of) these values, combined and reinforced by the lack of positive role models, 'father figures', that perpetuates poverty over generations. This line of reasoning is most prominent under the more conservative scholars such as psychologist Theodore Dalrymple (2001).

Other culturalists emphasize the 'lack of self-efficacy' that produces, maintains and perpetuates poverty (Lewis, 1966). Self-efficacy refers to having the feeling ones own life is under control. The Social Security system itself, with all its good intentions, will only make matters worse, will only produce more poverty and will eventually collapse by means of what is was to alleviate (Glennerster, 2000, p.11). "The most prominent features of this group are […]welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and petty crime (Marks, 1999, p. 449)."

2.3.2 Structural explanations for persistent poverty

'Structuralists' on the other side, claim that poor people are more or less victims of a changing society and economy. People encounter job losses because of economic restructuring, they have to deal with discrimination or lack the educational credentials (or even access to education) to get further in life (Wilson, 1996). Especially Wilson (1996) is a leading scholar with his work on American inner city ghettos. Not just unemployment, but the disappearance of work altogether is to blame for the existence of massive poverty in inner city ghettos. People become alienated from working life and mainstream society. In a meritocratic society they miss the basic educational merits needed to get ahead in life (Bills, 2005).

Not surprisingly, most studies that are concerned with persistent poverty are located in an urban setting. The spatial segregation of the poor, often in so-called ghettos or old working class

neighbourhoods, is an important aspect of the studies on persistent poverty. In the American setting the spatial segregation of the poor often corresponds with a black and white racial segregation (Massey & Denton, 2005), in a European setting it are often the 'traditional' migrant groups that live in deteriorated and poor neighbourhoods (e.g. Wacquant, 2005).

While structuralist scholars emphasize the changing economic order, the transition to a postindustrial society, as the main cause of poverty, both structuralists and culturalists argue 'culture' does play a significant role in perpetuating poverty. They differ in opinion however if this is a matter of primary cause or effect. "Crumbling families, bad attitudes, and welfare dependency are seen by many structuralists, if at all, as outcomes of faulty economic organization (Marks, 1991, p. 451)." Wilson also describes a cultural side. His 'ghetto related behaviour' of crime, drugs, broken families and out-of-wedlock pregnancies definitely indicate cultural adjustments by the poor to cope with their problems. But, "[m]any of today's problems in the inner-city ghetto neighbourhoods- crime, family dissolution, welfare, low levels of social organization, and so on-are fundamentally a consequence of the disappearance of work" (Wilson, 1996, xiii). The poor are not to blame, the system is.

2.4 Poverty is a temporary phenomenon

The cultural and the structural views on poverty are based on the assumption that there is a group of permanently poor people, a fairly coherent group with shared characteristics, at the margins of society. This assumption became criticized in the late 1980's after a number of methodological breakthroughs. Earlier cited Bane and Elwood (1986) reached some unexpected conclusions. Most of those who ever become poor will have a only short stay in poverty. Most people use Social Security aid programs briefly and the bulk of aid goes to a small group that has very long stays in poverty. Changes in family structure and life cycle events explain nearly one-half of poverty spell beginnings and while a fall in the head's earnings explain a small minority of beginnings, increased earnings of all household members is the primary route out of poverty. The poverty population is also extremely heterogeneous and periods of material hardship are followed by 'better times' and vice-versa. They thus argued against the dominant assumptions on poverty.

German scholars Leisering & Leibfried (1999) went even further and argue that poverty is in many cases merely a transient phase in an individual's life course. Poverty has thus become 'temporalised' and it is largely a transient phenomenon. "Poverty is not just a characteristic of groups of individuals, but is in effect an event or phase in the individual life course. Experiences of poverty have a beginning, a specified duration, a certain course, and often a conclusion. Escape from poverty is feasible. Being poor at some point in time does not necessarily entail becoming a permanent member of a poor group" (Ibid, p. 9). They conclude that "[o]nly one claimant in every 16 in [their] sample (6 per cent) had claimed Social Assistance for an unbroken period of more than five years" and that [both] poverty and claiming Social Assistance are often only temporary situations, and whichever way one measures durations this generally remains the case" (Leisering & Leibfried, 1999, p. 86).

The majority of Social Assistance spells are thus short and often claiming has a bridging function. The main reasons for short claiming are education intervals, family changes such as the birth of a child and unemployment. Short- and long-term claiming cannot be blamed on any single group (Ibid, p. 87).

These longitudinal studies fit into the scheme of works of another major author, Ulrich Beck (1983), who concludes that the risk of becoming poor has become more widespread amongst different social standings and groups. In a more flexible labor market, even the more highly educated will face the risks of becoming unemployed and having to rely on Social Assistance. Poverty has become a genuine 'risk' for many in Beck's 'Risk Society', it has become 'democratized' since it is no longer only applicable on the lower strata of society.

If we cannot pinpoint any single group, where does that leave 'the' poor? An important consequence of dynamic poverty research is the focus on the urban concentration of poverty. As Glennerster remarks: "[D]espite this fascination with the inner city poor we should remember that most poor Americans are not inner city dwellers nor single parents nor black" (Glennerster, 2003, p. 11). Although ghettoization has mostly been an American issue, the 'democratization' and 'temporalization' of poverty thesis also have consequences for the study of urban poverty. If poverty is not a (spatially) concentrated and persistent phenomenon, what does this imply for

the effectivity of anti-segregation policy, the studies on neighbourhood effects and the effectivity of local anti-poverty policy?

2.5 Recent studies on poverty in The Netherlands

In recent years a number of studies have been published in The Netherlands on poverty. Their conclusions counter those of 'temporary poverty' scholars. They conclude that there is substantial and even increasing persistent poverty. In this section I will discuss a number of recent Dutch studies.

After studying longitudinal Dutch household income data, Achterberg & Snel (2008) found considerable ground to reconsider the democratization and temporalisation of poverty theses. Not only do their findings indicate an increase in persistent poverty, they also point out the vulnerable status of the lesser educated in a meritocratic society and a feminization of poverty. "Contrary to what leading sociologists such as Beck, Giddens, Leibfried and Leisering want us to believe, persistent poverty has not decreased during the period under observation. To the contrary, poverty is rather becoming a more persistent phenomenon. Whereas 37 percent of all poor households in 1986 were persistent poor, this was true for 61 percent of all poor households in 1997. This allows us to reject the general assumption that poverty is becoming a more temporary phenomenon" (Ibid, p. 11, translation taken from unpublished English version).

The Social and Cultural Planning Office of The Netherlands (SCP) publishes a periodical Poverty Monitor. SCP uses a point-in-time method though. The 2007 rapport indicated that even though there is high mobility amongst people entering and leaving poverty, almost one-third of the people that live below the poverty line have been in that situation for a period of over 4 years (SCP, 2007, p. 18). Although the total number of people living under the poverty line has decreased, the share of long-term poor has increased over the years (Ibid, p. 52-53).

Another angle of looking at persistent poverty is taking an 'underclass' perspective that deals with poverty as part of a broader process of social exclusion. The urban underclass has not disappeared in The Netherlands (Engbersen, 2006). There is a group of people that is stuck at the bottom of Dutch society and which is incapable of climbing the social ladder. Noordhoff (2008)argues that poverty has remained stable despite an increase in the number of jobs in the

1990's. The Dutch Landscapes of Poverty project of which his dissertation is a part estimates the number of persistent poor at around 40% of all poor. "Compared to the year 2000, that is a decline of only a few thousands, and compared to the mid 1990s, it is a decline of only 25.000 households. So, there still exists a group of long-term poor. These numbers stress the notion that persistent poverty is even now common in the Netherlands" (Noordhoff, 2008, p. 192).

Muffels, Fouarge and Dekker (2000) compared longitudinal data from Social Economic Panel surveys in Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom over a ten year period in which they conclude that "[m]any people have a single experience of poverty and do not need much help to escape from poverty and to keep out of it. In general there is much more economic mobility than the annual snapshots suggest even at these low levels of income. Their study is one of the few longitudinal studies on poverty in The Netherlands. However, there is another story told by these figures which is that, apart from the high levels of economic mobility among the poor, within particular categories like the long-term unemployed, the disabled and the separated households, there is much persistent poverty" (Muffels, Fouarge, Dekker, 2000, p. 21).

What the above-cited Dutch studies indicate is that despite economic mobility has increased (more people experience poverty and more people manage to escape poverty) persistent poverty still accounts for a large share of the total number of poor. So while more people are at risk of getting poor, this does not mean poverty has only become temporary and more democratically spread. These studies certainly indicate there is a large group of people at the bottom of the social ladder., primarily the elderly, women and the lesser educated.

Maybe Leisering & Leibfried took for granted the generalisibility of their results. Or, like Snel & Achterberg (2008) argue, it could well be that the majority of the poor is only poor for a short period of time, but that this is not a change or development. This could simply already have been the case. In that case, it is even more important to find comparable studies, like this one, that use longitudinal data and methods. What needs to be established first, is an accurate view of poverty in local settings, before trying to build on general theories, if that is possible at all.

Methodology and Data

3.1 Conceptualizing poverty

A definition of poverty is hard to give, so I will focus here on ways to conceptualize poverty. Poverty can be conceptualized along three dimensions: material versus non-material, objective versus subjective and finally, absolute versus relative (Engbersen & Snel, 1997).

To begin with the latter, we speak of absolute poverty when one does not have the means to survive. Absolute poverty is about being able to survive or not. Absolute poverty is nearly non-existent in Western societies, besides homeless people and illegal immigrants. Poverty in modern Western societies is primarily a relative phenomenon of people 'having less' than a socially defined acceptable minimum. That is why it is needless to say that poverty in this study will be regarded as a relative phenomenon.

Poverty can also be defined as either a material or a non-material phenomenon. Poverty is defined as a material phenomenon when we concentrate on experiencing a lack of goods or money. We speak of poverty as a non-material phenomenon when we are concerned with processes of social exclusion. Poverty then becomes a matter of e.g. discrimination, a lack of educational opportunities or poor health.

The last dimension, objective/subjective, is concerned with the question if being poor means falling below an externally defined objective line (e.g. annual income of x) or that being poor means 'feeling' poor. The distinction between objective and subjective here is one of figures or feelings. In the latter case we are not concerned with a number of value that indicates whether a person can be called poor, if someone can be defined as poor, but if a person thinks he or she is poor.

3.2 Social Assistance spells

In this study poverty is conceptualized as an objective, material phenomenon. A person is poor if he or she claims Social Assistance. Not only is Social Assistance a material form of aid, receiving Social Assistance automatically indicates falling below an objectively defined social minimum. Social Assistance is also a last resort in many Western societies and is therefore an adequate poverty measure when using quantitative data (Buhr, 1995, p. 19-20).

Petra Buhr's (1994) book 'Dynamik von Armut' formed the basis of the empirical and methodological sections of the work of Leisering and Leibfried (1999) in their 'Time and Poverty'. The measures used in their study will also be used in this study. We can distinguish between a number of Social Assistance duration measures, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. The measures distinguished in this study are the spell duration, the net duration and gross duration. These different measures are visualized in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Three measures of duration
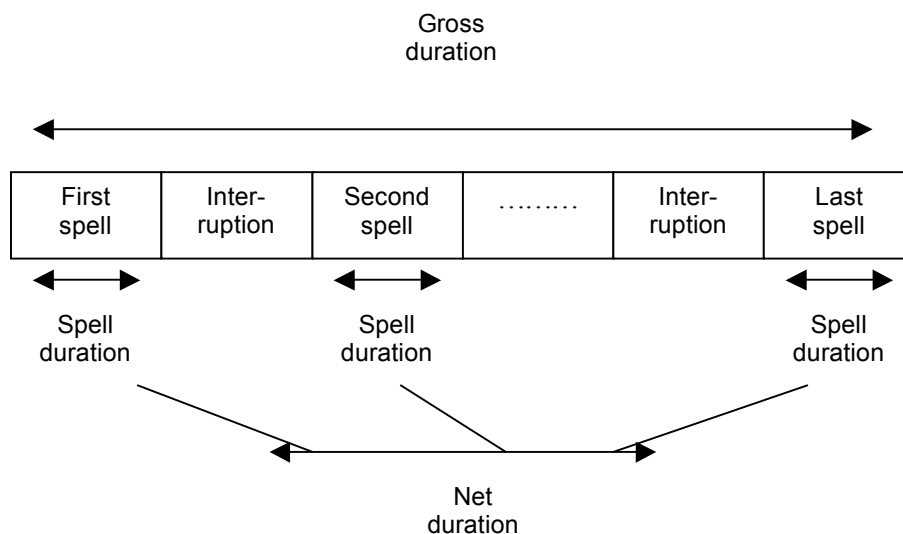
Source: Leisering & Leibfried, 2001, p. 65

The spell duration concept measures the duration of a separate, individual spell. The net duration is the sum of spell durations per individual. The gross duration is the difference between the end date of the last spell and the start date of the first spell. So where the net concept shows us the total time actually spent claiming Social Assistance, the gross duration gives us an idea of

the total span of time in which Social Assistance plays a role in individuals' lives. So if a person has a single spell of 6 months, the spell duration is 6 months, the net duration is 6 months and the gross duration is 6 months. If a person has two spells of 6 months, with an interval of 3 months between the spells, the spell durations are 6 and 6 months, the net duration is 12 months, and the gross duration is 15 months.

3.3 Variables

The first step will be to categorize individuals according to the duration of their spells and the distinction between single or multiple spell claiming. I also want to know if people with short or long poverty spells, and people with single or multiple spells, differ from each other on a number of background variables and factors. These variables are listed in table 3.1. They will be used in a number of regression and binary logistic analyses throughout this study.

Table 3.1 Variables used

Dependent variables	Measurement
Net duration on SA	Measured in months
Distribution of Spells	Single or Multiple
Independent variables	**Categories**
Sex	Male Female
Marital status	Single Married Divorced Widow
Educational level	No primary education Primary Education VBO/VMBO MBO/HAVO/VWO HBO/University
Country of Birth	The Netherlands Morocco Turkey Suriname Dutch Antilles/Aruba Refugee Countries (Irak, Iran, Somalia, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia) Other
Age	Under 24 24-55 Over 55
Childcare	Children living at home No children living at home
Experiencing Social Problems	Yes No

Experiencing Medical Problems	Yes No
Experiencing Financial Problems	Yes, if more than 3 creditors at Department of Social Affairs No, if less than 3 creditors at Department of Social Affairs
Intergenerational SA Use	Yes, if one or both parents once or more on SA No, if none of parents on or more once SA
Intervention Intensive Case	Yes, if 5 or more interventions by Department of Social Affairs No, if less than 5 interventions by Department of Social Affairs

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (either directly copied or recoded)

3.4 Dataset

The dataset consists of social security data on over 99.000 Social Assistance claimants from 1999 – 2006 in the City of Rotterdam. As always, not all the data is equally usable. After carrying out some checks I discovered a few complicating factors. For instance, some cases had multiple spells with third or fourth spells starting in 2007, after my 'end date' of 31st of December 2006. So I had to exclude these spells. Even further along the line I discovered approximately 3000 cases that had negative Social Assistance spell durations or the same start and end date, due to entry faults. These cases were also excluded.

An overview of the dataset is given in table 3.2. The majority of cases are male (55%). Roughly 56% is not married followed by two roughly equal groups of married (22%) and divorced (20%) individuals and a small group of widows (3%).

Most claimants were born in The Netherlands (31%), but this figure also includes second and third generation migrants. About 11% were born in Suriname, 13% in Dutch Antilles, 8% in Morocco, 8% in Turkey, 3% in the Capeverdian Islands, 3% in a typical refugee country (does not automatically imply they are refugees) and 26% was born elsewhere.

Only a small proportion of cases is under 24 (3%) with a low of 0.7% in 1999. There is a fairly large group of individuals aged above 55 (16%). The largest group however, is that of people aged between 24 and 55 (80%).

Table 3.2 Background characteristics data set

Cohort	1999	2000	2001	Total 1999-2001
Sex				
Male	56,1%	53,1%	54,7%	54,7%
Female	43,9%	46,9%	45,3%	45,3%

Marital status				
Not married	54,3%	57,8%	57,3%	56,2%
Married	23,0%	20,4%	21,5%	21,8%
Divorced	20,1%	19,6%	18,5%	19,5%
Other	2,6%	2,2%	2,7%	2,5%
Country of Birth*				
The Netherlands	30,7%	30,4%	30,9%	30,7%
Suriname	12,4%	11,2%	9,6%	11,1%
Dutch Antilles	12,5%	14,1%	12,7%	13,0%
Morocco	7,8%	8,8%	8,4%	8,3%
Turkey	7,8%	7,0%	7,9%	7,6%
Capeverdian Islands	2,5%	2,7%	2,2%	2,5%
Typical Refugee Country	2.8%	3.1%	2.9%	3.0%
Other	24,5%	22,7%	25,4%	23,8%
Missing of total	44,8%	42,1%	32,6%	44,0%
Age				
16-24	0,7%	2,2%	6,7%	2,9%
25-34	33,9%	39,8%	36,8%	36,6%
35-44	30,4%	28,5%	26,5%	28,7%
45-54	17,3%	15,9%	14,4%	16,0%
55-64	7,9%	7,8%	8,1%	7,9%
65-74	8,6%	4,9%	6,8%	6,9%
75-84	1,2%	1,0%	0,8%	1,0%
Educational Level				
None	18,1%	14,5%	14,2%	15,6%
Primary school	29,5%	28,0%	29,1%	28,8%
MBO/VMBO/VBO*	35,9%	38,0%	38,3%	37,4%
HAVO/VWO	12,8%	14,3%	13,8%	13,7%
HBO**	2,9%	4,0%	2,8%	3,2%
University	0,8%	1,2%	1,8%	1,3%
Missing of total	43,9%	23,7%	18,2%	30,1%
N	11082	8891	8000	27937
* Lower vocational degree				
** Higher vocational degree				

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

The educational level of cases is low. About 16% of the cases have no educational credentials, 29% have only finished primary school, 38% have a lower vocational degree, 14% have a starting qualification for a higher vocational degree or university and only 4% actually have a higher vocational or university degree.

Social Assistance in Rotterdam 1999-2006

4.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the empirical section of this study, in which the results are presented. Paragraph 4.2 discusses the development of Social Assistance claiming in Rotterdam in the period of 1999-2006. Paragraph 4.3 deals with the duration of Social Assistance spells. In paragraph 4.4 the differences between single and multiple spell claimants will be analyzed, followed by 4.5 with a typology of 'typical' Social Assistance claimants. In paragraph 4.6 these results are summarized.

4.2 Social Assistance claiming in Rotterdam in 1999-2006

In this paragraph we will take a look at the number of first-time Social Assistance claimants per year in the period between 1999 and 2006. We will also compare this figure to the development of unemployment in Rotterdam in the same period. This will give us an impression of the development of Social Assistance claiming in this period and the relationship with unemployment figures.

Figure 4.1 First-time Social Assistance claimants and unemployment in Rotterdam
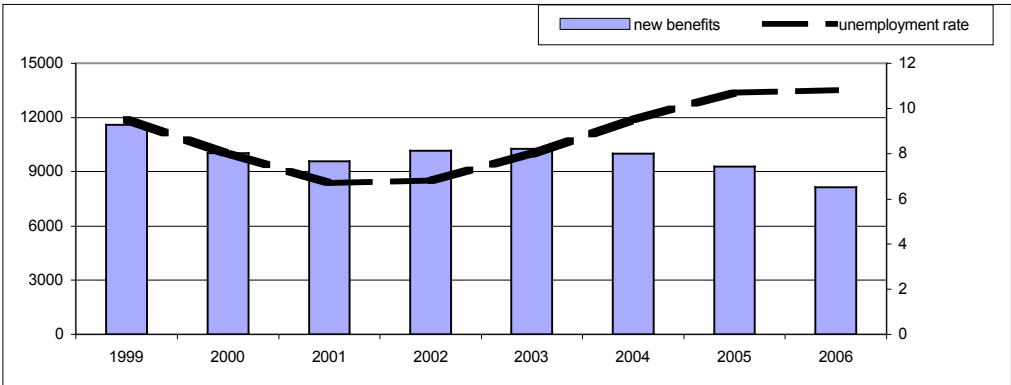
Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations) & CBS (2008)

How many first-time Social Assistance claimants do we observe per year between 1999 and 2006? The number of first-time Social Assistance claimants averages at around 9000 per year (figure 4.1). Since Rotterdam has 600.000 inhabitants, this equals about 1,5 to 2,0% of the city's population. Apart from a slight upturn in 2002, 2003 and 2004, the number of first-time claimants decreases in this period from around 11.000 in 1999 to around 8000 in 2006.

We can also ask the question if there is a relationship between the number of Social Assistance claimants in a given year and unemployment. As the black line in figure 4.1 indicates, up until 2003 the number of first-time claimants and unemployment go hand in hand. That is what one would expect: more unemployment means more people with financial problems and thus more Social Assistance claimants. However, from 2004 on unemployment rises, but the number of new Social Assistance claimants falls. This could be explained by the introduction of a new Social Assistance law in 2004 which restricts influx of new claimants. The barriers to be granted Social Assistance has been raised, leading to a drop in claimants. From a poverty perspective the question then rises: what happens to those people that would be granted Social Assistance in the old situation, but not in the new situation? How does the lack of income and work affect their daily lives? Answering this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is a question worth asking.

4.3 Cohort analysis of Social Assistance spells

In 1999, 11.081 people claimed Social Assistance for the first time in their lives. No previous spells were known in the dataset. The dataset makes it possible to follow these people throughout a period of seven years: 1999-2006, so we can establish an accurate picture of their Social Assistance careers. These 11.081 individuals will be at the heart of the calculations and analyses in the following paragraphs. On some occasions, short comparisons will be made with the 2000 and 2001 cohorts. In these instances, the time span of the cohorts is shortened to five years, to make the cohorts better comparable.

In paragraph 4.3.1 we will look at how these cases are distributed when taking into account the duration of their Social Assistance spells. After presenting how short and long term claimants

are distributed, we then look at their backgrounds and see if there are remarkable differences between these cases.

Paragraph 4.3.2 will then focus on the distinction between single and multiple spell Social Assistance claimants and will again first look at the distribution of cases and then at differences between the two categories.

In paragraph 4.3.3 then, we combine all this information in order to create a typology of 'typical' Social Assistance claimants. An attempt will be made to answer the question who the people behind the categories are. For a list of the variables used in this paragraph I refer to the methodology section in chapter three.

4.3.1 Short and long term Social Assistance claiming

This paragraph focuses on the duration of Social Assistance spells and the differences between short and long term Social Assistance claimants. The duration is measured in months and calculated according to the three duration measures distinguished in the methodological chapter: net, gross and spell duration. After presenting the duration of spells for the 1999 cohort, a comparison will be made with the 2000 and 2001 cohorts. Then we will proceed to how certain 'problem' factors correspond with different durations of Social Assistance claiming. This paragraph will end with an attempt to describe the typical short and long term claimant through regression analysis.

Table 4.1 shows us the average duration of Social Assistance spells for the 11.081 cases that make up the cohort. Let us focus on the mean averages first. The average spell duration (the sum of all separate spell durations divided by the number of cases) is 30 months. In other words, the average Social Assistance spell, lasts two-and-a-half years. The net duration average (the sum of spell durations per individual divided by the number of cases) is 39 months. An average claimant spends more than three years claiming Social Assistance in the eight year time span. The gross duration (the time between the end date of an individual's last spell and the starting date of the first spell) averages at 45 months. This is an indication that a number of claimants experience multiple spells, and that on average there is a total of six months between

spells. Whether this is accurate will be discussed in paragraph 4.2.2 when single and multiple spell claimants are discussed in more detail.

How long does it take before we can say that a claimant is no longer dependent on Social Assistance in the seven year time span of this study? For that we turn to the median, which is also calculated and presented in table 4.1. The median is calculated by ranking all the individual cases from the lowest to the highest duration. The value at which exactly 50% of all cases lie above and below is the median value. A spell median of 31 months indicates that 50% of all cases experience spells shorter than 31 months. Since the gross duration measures the total time Social Assistance plays a role (start date of claiming until last date of claiming) in the eight year time span of the cohort, a median of 36 months means that after three years exactly 50% of all cases no longer receive Social Assistance. Or, you could say, they have 'escaped' from Social Assistance dependency until at least 31-12-2006.

Table 4.1 Gross, net and total spell duration in months for the 1999 cohort

Duration Measure			
	Gross	*Net*	*All Spells*
Mean	45	39	30
Median	36	31	31

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

Of course an average value tells us very little about the distribution of cases. We need to bring a bit more detail to the analysis. For that we will divide the net duration (because we are interested in actual time claiming Social Assistance per individual) into four categories: short (<1 year), medium (1-3 years), long (3-5 years) and very long (>5 years). The outcome is presented in table 4.2. A comparison is also made with the outcomes of Leisering and Leibfried (1999) and two other cohorts , 2000 and 2001, for which these values have also been calculated.

Table 4.2 Time on Social Assistance: comparison 1999 – 2001 cohorts

	Leisering & Leibfried, 1989	1999	2000	2001	Average Rotterdam
Short < 1 year	58%	29%	33%	29%	30%

Medium 1 – 3 years	24%	26%	25%	28%	26%
Long 3 – 5 years	6%	17%	15%	22%	18%
Very Long > 5 years	12%	28%	27%	23%	26%
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations) Leisering & Leibfried (1999, p. 66)

Starting with the 1999 cohort, we can say that most Social Assistance claimants are short term claimants (29%). Medium term claimants make up more than a quarter of the population (26%) and long term claimants form the smallest group (17%). Surprisingly, there is an almost equally large group of very long term claimants (28%) compared to short term claimants. The 2000 and 2001 cohorts[1] are in proportion to the 1999 cohort. The number of very long term Social Assistance claimants is slightly lower in 2001 at the gain of the long term claimants. The 2000 cohort knows relatively more short term claimants than the 1999 cohort does. Because these figures only cover a period of three years we cannot say anything about developments. For now, the distributions seems fairly stable. On average then, Rotterdam has 30% of short term claimants, 26% of medium term claimants, 18% of long term claimants, and 26% of very long term claimants.

How does Rotterdam compare to Bremen, where Leisering and Leibfried conducted their research? Well, Rotterdam seems do to far worse than Bremen. Where the Bremen study found that 58% of the Social Assistance population experienced spells of less than a year, this figure in Rotterdam is only 30%. With roughly 25%, the medium categories are comparable. Both in Rotterdam and Bremen the long category is the smallest, however in Bremen they make up 6% of the population and in Rotterdam 18%. The same we see in the very long category: in Bremen only 12% of claimants are dependent on Social Assistance for over five years while in Rotterdam this is 26%. In both the long and very long category this is three times as much.

The results from the Rotterdam study differ substantially from those of the Bremen study. What could cause the differences? A possible explanation lies in different Social Assistance policy and legislation in Germany and The Netherlands or macro-economic conditions. Both of these

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[1] For these cohorts it is still possible to use a six-year time span. Because the 'very long' category begins at five years, these cohorts can still be compared by using the short, medium, long and very long categories.

explanations lie beyond the scope of this thesis however. If the answer does not lie in these factors, then it means that Rotterdam has a much more durable Social Assistance population. While short term claimants still form the biggest group, poverty in Rotterdam is far from temporary. Indeed, the group of persistent poor is almost as big.

Factors corresponding with longer durations

We know now that Rotterdam has a fair share of long term Social Assistance claimants. The dataset offers some variables to explore some possible explanations for long term Social Assistance claiming. Some people have the responsibility of taking care of children living at home, others struggle because of social or medical problems. In figure 4.2, for a number of these problematic factors the corresponding average net duration of Social Assistance spells has been calculated. Take in mind that the average net duration was 36 months. All the factors included in figure 4.2 show a much higher average duration.

Let us run through the table from left to right, so starting with medical problems. People experiencing medical problems spend almost 65 months claiming Social Assistance. This is a period of over five years. Another factor included in the dataset is whether people have to rely on the Social Security department to pay their bills or to help them clear their debts. These financial problems correspond with 55 months of Social Assistance claiming. Experiencing social problems (violence or crime) accounts for an average period of Social Assistance claiming of almost 50 months. The oldest age category defined, 'over 55' also ranks above the average of 39 months, indicating that age is still a factor in being able to provide in one's own maintenance. The responsibility for taking care of children living at home corresponds with 50 months as well. The last factor in figure 4.2, '>5 interventions', refers to people that are sanctioned more than five times by the Social Security department. This includes having their benefits blocked or taken away, or fining individuals, when they do not comply with Social Security regulations (e.g. not showing up at a work activation program). People with more than five interventions targeted against them spend on average 72 months claiming Social Assistance, a period of six years, almost the entire time span of the 1999 Social Assistance cohort.

Figure 4.2 Problem factors and duration of spells in months
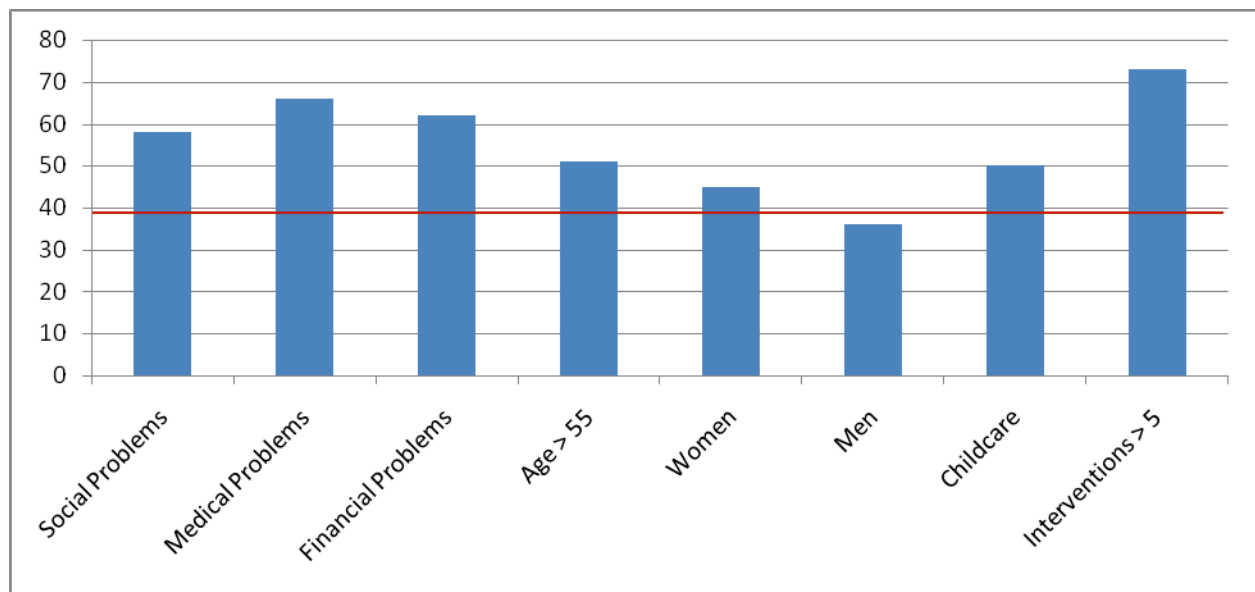
Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

Identifying the typical short and long term claimant

What we really want to know is whether short and long term claimants significantly differ from each other on a number of variables. In other words, how would we describe the typical short and long term claimants? What factors correlate with long and short term claiming? Why do some people manage to escape from Social Assistance claiming after a very short time and others seem to fail to end their spell at all?

In order to answer these questions a model was created to determine the effect of a number of independent variables[2] on the net duration of spells, which was measured in months. The results of this analysis is presented in table 4.3. All the variables were entered simultaneously because no control variables or interaction effects were studied. The model has an R^2 of 0.120, meaning that 78% of the variance in the dependent variable cannot be explained by the variables included in the model, which also explains the relatively high constant of 57,590. This variance can be ascribed to variables outside the scope of this study and the possibilities of this data set, or to measurement errors. All the variables have been tested for multicollinearity of which the results showed no significant correlations. Therefore all the variables could be entered into the

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[2] Sex, educational level, age, marital status, country of birth, experiencing medical, social or financial problems, taking care of children living at home, a family history of Social Assistance claiming and the number of interventions targeted by the Social Security department at the claimant.

model. A complicating factor is the number of categorical variables, which make significant relationships less strong.

The analysis shows that women are more likely to experience long term Social Assistance claiming than men (0,171**). Women and persistent poverty are not an unknown couple. For a variety of reasons, women are more prone to end up in long term poverty. They often face the burden of childcare, are generally paid less and work less than men as well (Bianchi, 1999).

Snel & Achterberg (2008) argue in their study on long-term poverty that in a meritocratized society the merits of education play a significant role in determining social status and life chances. The results of this analysis point in the same direction. Educational background is a categorical variable so the 'no primary education' was set as the necessary reference category. The duration of Social Assistance claiming decreases with the level of education rising[3].

Age is also a factor that contributes to the variance in the duration of Social Assistance claiming. Which age group is more prone to Social Assistance careers? We distinguish between three age categories: < 24, 24- 55 and > 55. People aged between 24 and 55 are the reference category. We see that only people aged above 55 have considerably longer Social Assistance spells compared to the reference category (0,133**), so there is an effect of age on the duration of Social Assistance spells.

Marital status does not account for major differences in variance in the net duration of Social Assistance spells. Unfortunately it was not possible to recode this variable into 'household', because poverty is often concentrated in certain households (CBS, 2008, p. 8). Now it was impossible to tell if people in the 'unmarried' category are single, or whether divorced people live alone, or that two individuals with very long Social Assistance careers are part of the same household, etc.

Although the terms resemble each other, 'country of birth' is not the same as 'ethnic background'. So we must not confuse people born in the Netherlands with ethnic Dutch people. Second and third generation Moroccans and Turks are also born in the Netherlands, but

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[3] The exception being people with higher vocational and university degrees. This category is probably too small to lead to significant results.

they have a different ethnic background than 'native' Dutch. There was only one significant effect of country of birth on the duration of Social Assistance claiming.

People that were born in typical refugee countries (Iran, Irak, Somalia, former Yugoslavia, Ethiopia) experience longer spells on Social Assistance compared to people that are born in The Netherlands (,087**), which were set as the reference category. This could be because it is harder for them to integrate into Dutch society and because of the uncertainty of their stay. All in all these factors can make it more difficult to find work and provide an income, thus making them more susceptible to Social Assistance. Note that the variable measures the number of people born in typical refugee countries, not people with a refugee status.

So far we have discussed the relationship between a number of backgrounds characteristics and the duration of Social Assistance claiming. We can also look at the 'problem' factors we have already briefly discussed when presenting average durations. Let us start with how experiencing social problems affects the duration of Social Assistance claiming.

Experiencing social problems, like domestic violence or criminal behaviour, did not have a significant effect on duration. There is a positive effect of medical problems on duration though (0,150**). Having to deal with medical issues (whether disease or a handicap, chronic or temporary) makes it of course harder to generate enough income to be able to become independent of Social Assistance. The effect can be explained in two ways however. The first is that people with medical problems experience longer spells of Social Assistance, the other being that longer Social Assistance claiming can influence the health of claimants in a negative way. There is a also relationship between experiencing financial problems and the length of spells as well. People that rely on the Department of Social Affairs of the municipality to pay for their bills or that have debts have longer spells of Social Assistance claiming (0,133**).

Table 4.3 Regression analysis with the 'net duration' as dependent variable

Variable	Beta
Constant = 57,590	
Sex (versus 'Men')	
Women	,171**
Educational level (versus 'no primary education')	
Primary Education	-,065**
VBO/VMBO	-,116**
MBO/HAVO/VWO	-,068**

HBO/WO	-,017
Age (versus '24-55') Younger than 24 Older than 55	 ,022 ,133**
Marital Status (versus 'single') Married Divorced Widow	 -,040 ,010 ,028
Country of Birth (versus The Netherlands) Suriname Dutch Antilles/Aruba Morocco Turkey Typical Refugee Country Other	 ,010 -,026 ,004 ,023 ,087** ,023
Experiencing medical problems	,150**
Experiencing social problems	-,011
Experiencing financial problems	,133**
1 or more children living at home	,109**
1 or both parents on Social Assistance	-,043*
> 5 interventions	,061**
R²	,120

* Significant at the p < 0.05 level

** Significant at the p < 0.01 level

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

Not surprisingly, childcare is also a factor in the time spent on Social Assistance. There is a positive effect of children living at home on duration (0,109**). A critical remark is necessary though. Because the data set concerns individuals and not households, it could be that individuals with children are part of the same household. This could overestimate the importance of childcare as an explanatory factor.

Do children of Social Assistance claimants have a higher chance of experiencing long Social Assistance spells themselves as well? Not according to the analysis. There is a negative effect of 'parents on Social Assistance' on the duration of Social Assistance claiming (-0,43*). Why would those people have shorter Social Assistance durations? Are they more motivated to end their Social Assistance claiming because of their family history? Or do other factors play their part? Neither of these are very plausible, since the average time spent on Social Assistance by those case with parents on Social Assistance as well is 71 months and those without is 75 months. So both these groups (mind the 77% missing cases) have very high average net durations to begin

with. The negative correlation does, in the purest sense, argue against the existence of intergenerational poverty, unlike scholars as Dalrymple (2001) or Lewis (1966) proclaim.

The last effect analysed in the model was that of experiencing more than five interventions by the Social Security department and net duration. A positive effect was found (0,061**). As always with regression analyses, the question can be asked whether these concern 'difficult' people that are hard to reform, or that people with longer spells of Social Assistance claiming are also more likely to experience more interventions.

Summarizing these results, what can we say about the typical short and long term Social Assistance claimant?

The typical short term claimant

A typical short term claimant would be male, with primary or higher education, is under 55, does not experience social, financial or medical problems, has no children living at home, had parents claiming Social Assistance and has not experienced more than 5 interventions by the Social Security department.

The typical long term claimant

A typical long term claimant is the exact opposite and is female, has no education at all, is over 55, was born in a typical refugee country, experiences medical and financial problems, has one or more children living at home and experiences more than 5 interventions from the Social Security department.

4.3.2 Single and multiple Social Assistance spell claimants

We do not know much about the differences between single and multiple spell claimants in Rotterdam. Most attention is given to persistent Social Assistance claimants. The dynamics of their careers has hitherto not been set foot on. In this paragraph we thus focus on the distinction between single and multiple spells, their numbers and distribution, the dynamics of multiple spell careers and on the differences between single spell and multiple spell claimants.

How many of the 11.081 claimants in the 1999 cohort experience multiple spells of Social Assistance claiming? The answer is presented in table 4.4. Around a quarter (23%) of all cases are multiple spell claimants. Of these 2629 cases, 1979 experience two spells of Social Assistance (17%). A small group of people experience three spells of Social Assistance (5%) and from there on the groups get very small (1%, 0% and 0% respectively).

Table 4.4 Number of Social Assistance spells per individual – 1999 cohort

Number of spells	N	%
Single spell	**8453**	**77%**
2 spells	1979	17%
3 spells	500	5%
4 spells	121	1%
5 spells	22	0%
6 spells	7	0%
Mult. Spells	**2629**	**23%**
Total	11082	100%

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

How do these results compare to those of the Bremen study? Buhr (1995, p. 113) found a share of 40% of multiple spell claimants. Comparing this result to the 23% that was found in Rotterdam, we can conclude that the Bremen cohort was more dynamic than the Rotterdam cohort. Two possible explanations can be given for this finding. The first is that in Bremen in is harder to become durably independent from Social Assistance claiming. The second is that people in Rotterdam are less mobile than in Bremen and do not manage to become independent from Social Assistance, not even for a short period of time.

Is it true that people in Rotterdam have more difficulty ending their Social Assistance claiming? Are there more persistent claimants in Rotterdam than in Bremen? In the previous paragraph we already concluded that duration of spells in Rotterdam was much longer than in Bremen. To give a conclusive answer to the questions posed above, we will again look at the net duration (short, medium, long, very long), this time with the distinction between single and multiple spell claimants added to the picture. The resulting eight categories are presented in table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Share of single and multiple spells in the 1999 cohort

Net duration	Single spell (N= 8532)	Multiple spells (N= 2549)	Of Total (N= 11.081)
Short < 1 year	93%	7%	29%
Medium 1-3 years	71%	29%	26%
Long 3-5 years	59%	41%	17%
Very long > 5 years	74%	26%	28%
Total	**77%**	**23%**	**100%**

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

Almost all short term claiming concerns single spells (93%). The medium, long and very long categories are more equally distributed, although in every category most people experience single spells. The long term category is the most evenly distributed, with 59% being single spell claimants and 41% being multiple spell claimants. The answer to the question if Rotterdam has a large share of persistent Social Assistance claimants is found in the very long category. There we see that 74% of people claiming Social Assistance for over five years are single spell claimants. These 2296 people have thus claimed Social Assistance continually for a period over five years. Further calculations found that at the closing date of the cohort, 16% of the single spell claimants were still claiming Social Assistance. In the 1999 cohort a group of 367 people out of 11.081 (3,3%) have thus continuously claimed Social Assistance during the entire time span of the study.

In between spells

When people experience more than one spell of Social Assistance, there is always a period of time between the one spell and the next. These intervals have also been calculated and are presented in table 4.7. This table of course only includes the 2549 multiple spell claimants of the 1999 cohort.

The average time between spells is 16 months. It is however better to focus on the intervals between the first and second spell and between the following spells, because they differ substantially. There is 21 months between the end of the first spell and the beginning of a second one. People manage to get by for a while, almost two years, without having to rely on Social

Assistance again. But when it comes to a third or fourth spell, the intervals only average at around eight months.

Table 4.6 Intervals between spells in months – 1999 cohort

Interval	Duration (months)
Average time between spells	16
Between first and second	21
Between following spells	8

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

Two possible explanations can be given. The first is that after the second spell people 'fall back' into claiming much faster. The second explanation, which I find more plausible, is that people with two spells and those with more than two spells differ from each other. In that case I would pose that people with more than two spells do not have 21 months between their first and second spell, but around eight months as well.

Identifying the typical single and multiple spell claimants

Can we make general statements on the differences between single and multiple spell claimants? Are the differences between them, if there are any, so clear that we can pinpoint the particular factors corresponding with either the one or the other? If we consider single and multiple spell claiming as two values of a dichotomous variable, we can try to answer the questions posed by using a binary logistic regression analysis. This will give us more insight in how certain backgrounds characteristics or 'problems' influence the chance of experiencing either a single or multiple spells of Social Assistance claiming by calculating odds ratios.

Nearly all the variables that were used in the regression analysis in the previous chapter are brought into this model as well. Two variables had to be excluded, '>5 interventions' and 'parents on Social Assistance', because they had too many missing cases. Including these variables would only leave 1000 valid cases out of 11.081. Another variable with a large number of missing cases was the educational level. Educational merits however are such an important explanatory variable that this variable was included. This left 4385 cases to be included in the model.

In table 4.8 we see the results of this binary logistical analysis on categories 'single spell claimants' and 'multiple spell claimants'. The model shows an R² of 0,173, meaning that 83% of the variance in the dependent variable cannot be explained by the variables included in the model.

Let us start with the question if men or women are more prone to endure single or multiple spells. The model indicates that women have 0,454 times the chance compared to men to experience multiple spells. Women thus mainly experience single spells. My earlier analysis on the duration of spells already indicated that women are more prone to longer spells as well, so it is not hard to speculate on women as a vulnerable category of long and continuous Social Assistance claimants.

Table 4.7 Binary Logistic Regression Analysis: single and multiple spell claimants

Multiple spell claimants *versus* **Single spell claimants**			
Variable	**Wald**	**Odds Ratio**	**Confidence Interval**
Sex			
Male (ref)		1	
Female**	100,220	0,454	0,389-0,530
Age			
24-55 (ref)		1	
<24*	9,865	0,214	0,082-0,560
>55**	131,794	0,337	0,280-0,406
Educational level			
No primary education (ref)		1	
Primary education**	67,750	2,356	1,921-2,889
VMBO/VBO**	89,426	2,681	2,186-3,289
MBO/HAVO/VWO**	50,908	2,523	1,957-3,254
HBO/WO**	8,532	1,826	1,219-4,736
Marital status			
Not married (ref)		1	
Married**	42,609	0,530	0,630-0,884
Divorced	11,500	0,746	0,438-0,641
Widow	2,556	0,671	0,412-1,094
Country of Birth			
The Netherlands (ref)		1	
Suriname	1,499	1,145	0,922-1,422
Dutch Antilles/Aruba	0,300	1,061	0,858-1,313
Morocco**	8,181	1,470	1,129-1,914
Turkey	1,181	1,164	0,885-1,530
Typical refugee country	3,336	0,771	0,583-1,019
Other	3,118	0,842	0,696-1,019
Experiencing medical problems**	19,980	0,703	0,602-0,821
Experiencing social problems*	4,487	1,101	1,013-1378
Experiencing financial problems**	24,546	1,420	1,236-1,632

Childcare	1,932	0,890	0,755-1,049
Constant	6,314	1,475	
Nagelkerke R²	0,173		

* Significant at the p<0,05 level

**Significant at the p<0,01 level

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

People aged under 24 or over 55, just like women, often form vulnerable groups. The first group having difficulties getting a good start in life, the latter often finding it hard to compete with their younger and cheaper adversaries on the labour market. This analysis showed that both these groups have a smaller chance of experiencing multiple spells than their counterparts in the 24-55 category. For the category 'under 25' (0,214) this could indicate experiencing a single spell until a stabile place on the labour market is found or a long period when one does not find a place at all. For the category 'over 55' (0,337) this probably includes individuals close to or after retirement, that have not build up enough pension or that kind find a job to make it through to retirement.

How about the effects of educational level on the chances of single or multiple spell claiming? Education matters. All educational categories have a higher chance of experiencing multiple spells than the reference category, people without primary education. Education thus increases mobility. People without, or with little, education were also very prone to long spells of Social Assistance claiming. These findings suggest that people with little educational credentials are prone to long and continuous claiming careers.

Marital status was included in this analysis as well. Again the remark should be made that there are limits to the explanatory value of this variable. First of all it does not measure household composition, so we cannot say anything on the concentration of poverty. Second, the category 'not married' does not indicate single or living alone. Married individuals have halve the chance of experiencing multiple spells, compared to 'non married' individuals (0,530). Of course it is easy to assume that married individuals can rely on another income, they are less dependent and a Social Assistance spell could either be a temporary setback or, if it concerns a long spell, be

a number of things (one of the partners provides income, both without income, stay-at-home). But because we do not have household information, this is only speculation.

In the Netherlands the distinction between *autochtoon* and *allochtoon* is very common in sociological analyses. This dataset however made use of the country of birth of claimants, and not if they are *autochtoon* or *allochtoon.* Second or third generation migrants therefore fall in the category 'born in the Netherlands' but they are officially *allochtoon.* This makes the results difficult to compare. Nonetheless, we see that people that are born in Morocco have 1,5 times the chance of experiencing multiple spells compared to people born in the Netherlands.

People that experience medical problems have lesser chance (0,703) to experience multiple spells than people that do not experience medical problems. In other words, people with medical problems have a higher chance of experiencing a single spell of Social Assistance. Earlier analyses already indicated that the group of people which experienced medical problems also experienced longer spells than people without medical problems, making it likely to conclude that people with medical problems are very dependent on Social Assistance and that they could even be experiencing long continuous spells. People with social or financial problems on the other hand are more likely to experience multiple spells. These categories also corresponded with a higher average net duration. Coping with these kind of problems does not make it impossible to escape from Social Assistance claiming, but they do make it much harder.

The typical single spell claimant

The typical single spell claimant is female, either aged under 24 or over 55, has basically no educational credentials, is married and experiences medical problems.

The typical multiple spell claimant

The typical multiple spell claimant is male, aged between 24-55, has at least some educational credentials, is not married, widowed or divorced, was born in Morocco and experiences social and medical problems.

4.3.3 A typology of 'typical' Social Assistance claimants

No 'true' sociological study is without a categorization of people. Without trying to essentialise people, it is very useful to categorize certain 'typical' Social Assistance claimants. By looking at shared characteristics of individuals scholars and policy makers are better able to understand the complexity of Social Assistance claiming and in turn to design anti-poverty policies. In this paragraph I will attempt to create a useful typology of Social Assistance claiming by combining the findings on the duration of spells and the differences between single and multiple spell claimants.

Table 4.8 A typology of Social Assistance claimants

Category	Percentage of population (N=11.081)
Incidental claimants	27%
Bridging claimants	29%
Recurrent claimants	15%
Persistent claimants	22%
Revolving-door claimants	7%
Total	**100%**

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

Combining the four duration categories (short, medium, long, very long) and the distinction between single and multiple claimants leaves us with (4x2=) 8 categories. I have narrowed the number of categories down to five.

First of all, almost all of the cases in the 'short' category concerned single spell claimants (97%). These claimants claim Social Assistance for a relatively short period and are therefore categorized as incidental claimants. In total, these cases make up 27% of the population.

My second category is a combination of all the single spell claimants in the 'medium' and 'long' categories. My assumption is that these cases are comparable, because they have all claimed Social Assistance for a continuous period of time, for a fair period of time (1-5 years), but have managed to be independent (meaning, not claiming Social Assistance) for over 2 years. These individuals claim Social Assistance as a way to bridge a difficult period in their life. These cases account for 29% of the population.

The same was done for the multiple spell claimants with net durations of 1-5 years. The assumption here is that these individuals have a multitude of problems, yet to a lesser

extent to multiple spell claimants with a net duration of over five years. Therefore these claimants are called recurrent claimants. They make up 15% of the total population.

The fourth category consists of the cases that have continuously claimed Social Assistance for five years or more. These I will call persistent claimants. These cases make up 22% of all claimants.

The last category then consists of multiple spell claimants with a net spell duration of over 5 years. These individuals have claimed Social Assistance two or more times over a fairly lengthy time-span. Because they seem incapable of a durable escape from Social Assistance, I will call these cases revolving-door clients. These cases make up 7% of all cases.

The five categories, incidental, bridging, recurrent, persistent and revolving-door, were recoded as dummies and used as independent variables in a series of multivariate and binary logistic regression analyses. The independent variable can take on two values: belonging to the category vs not belonging to the category. The background variables were set as dependent variables. We measured the effect of belonging or not belonging to a certain category on the dependent variable.

The results are summarized in tables 4.9 – 4.13. A 'male +' on the variable sex indicates that people belonging to the category 'incidental claimants' have a higher chance of being male than people that do not belong to that category. A '-' indicates a negative relationship, a 'o' is neutral/no significant relationship. All positive and negative relationships were significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Table 4.9 Incidental claimants

Variable	Main effect/predominantly
Sex	Male +
Age	o
Educational Level	VMBO/VBO and higher +
Country of Birth	"Other"
Marital status	o
Childcare	o
Social Problems	-
Financial Problems	-
Medical Problems	-
Parents on SA	+
>5 interventions	o

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

The typical incidental claimant is male, has completed a VMBO/VBO degree or higher, was not born in The Netherlands, Morocco, Turkey, Suriname, Dutch Antilles/Aruba or a typical refugee country, does not experience social, financial or medical problems and had parents that experienced a Social Assistance spell.

Table 4.10 Bridging claimants

Variable	Main effect/predominantly
Sex	Male +
Age	o
Educational Level	No primary education + primary education +
Country of Birth	"Other" + Typical Refugee Countries +
Marital status	o
Childcare	+
Social Problems	-
Financial Problems	+
Medical Problems	o
Parents on SA	o
>5 interventions	o

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

The typical bridging claimant is male, has not completed any education higher than primary education, was born in a typical refugee country or one falling in the category 'Other', has one or more children living at home, does not experience social problems, but does encounter financial problems.

Table 4.11 Recurrent claimants

Variable	Main effect/predominantly
Sex	Male +
Age	24-55 +
Educational Level	Primary education + VMBO/VBO + MBO/HAVO/VWO +
Country of Birth	"Other" + Typical Refugee Countries + Dutch Antilles/Aruba +
Marital status	o
Childcare	+
Social Problems	+
Financial Problems	+
Medical Problems	+
Parents on SA	o
>5 interventions	o

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

The typical recurrent claimant would be male, in the age of 24-55, would have completed primary education, VMBO/VBO or MBO/HAVO/VWO, would be born in countries falling in the category 'Other', typical refugee countries or the Dutch Antilles/Aruba, would have one or more children living at home and is likely to experience social, financial and medical problems.

Table 4.12 Persistent claimants

Variable	Main effect/predominantly
Sex	Female +
Age	>55 +
Educational Level	No primary education + primary education +
Country of Birth	Marocco + Other -
Marital status	o
Childcare	**+**
Social Problems	+
Financial Problems	**+**
Medical Problems	**+**
Parents on SA	o
>5 interventions	+

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

The typical continuous claimant would be female, over > 55 years of age, would have completed no more than primary education, was born in Morocco and was not born in countries falling in the category 'Other', would have one or more children living at home, would experience social, financial and medical problems and would have experienced more than five interventions by the Social department.

Table 4.13 Revolving-door claimants

Variable	Main effect/predominantly
Sex	Male +
Age	24-55 +
Educational Level	Primary Education + Vmbo/VBO +
Country of Birth	Other -
Marital status	o
Childcare	**+**
Social Problems	+
Financial Problems	**+**
Medical Problems	**+**

Parents on SA	o
>5 interventions	**+**

Source: SwA Longitudinal Data Set (2009) (Own Calculations)

The typical revolving-door claimant would be a 24-55 year old male, with primary education or a completed VMBO/VBO degree, not born in one of the countries falling in the 'Other' category, would have one or more children living at home, would be experiencing social, financial and medical problems and would have experienced > 5 interventions by the Social department.

4.4 Careers

Social Assistance is used in different ways and different patterns, for different reasons. Incidental claimants use it for a short period of material hardship. They face almost none of the listed problem factors. An intergenerational effect was found surprisingly, which seems to imply that people whose parents have claimed Social Assistance as well, actually experience shorter spells on Social Assistance than other claimants.

The group of bridging claimants have roughly the same characteristics as the incidental claimants, but they have a lower educational level and are more likely to face financial problems and to have children to look after. Surprisingly, both in the incidental and bridging claimants categories, we see a lot more people born in countries other than the most common, being The Netherlands and the typical migrant countries. In the category of bridging claimants we also find more people born in typical refugee countries. They are more likely to experience a short to medium time-span claiming Social Assistance. This could be the result of the difficulties related to settling in and adjusting to a new country.

The group of recurrent claimants differs from the group of bridging claimants on a number of issues. Recurrent claimants are slightly higher educated and more likely to experience medical and social problems. The recurrent claimant category also includes a significant number of people that were born in the Dutch Antilles and Aruba.

Let us compare this group, that included multiple spell claimants with spell durations of 1-5 years, with the group of revolving-door claimants. This group faces roughly the same problems

as the recurrent claimants. The main differences are the number of interventions by the Social Security department and the country of birth as the main differences. They form a problematic group of people seen from a policy perspective, because they fail to effectively end their Social Assistance claiming for a very long period of time.

Revolving-door claimants are more likely to experience 5 or more interventions – the times their benefits get blocked or taken away – by the Social Security department. It is hard to tell the direction of this effect: are these individuals less willing and therefore need to by disciplined, or, e.g., does the Social Security department pay more attention to these individuals because they are more visible to them?

There was also a negative significant effect on the country of birth-variable in the category 'Other'. This indicates that this group primarily consists of people born in the Netherlands, the typical migrant countries and the typical refugee countries. This strengthens the argument that people born in countries other than the ones listed before primarily claim Social Assistance as a way to bridge an adjustment period as newcomer to The Netherlands.

The last category, the persistent claimants, consists of those individuals that are continuously claiming Social Assistance for a period of over 5 years. It also seems the most diverse category described so far. First of all, this category contains significantly more people aged over 55 than people aged under 55. Older people are thus more likely to experience a long continuous spell of Social Assistance. The same goes for women and people that have no or very little education. So theses on the feminization of poverty, on old-age poverty and on the merocratization of society all seem to be in concordance with the findings on this category.

Conclusions & Discussion

The main objective was to get a more detailed view on poverty in Rotterdam than was hitherto possible. This study was bound to conclude that poverty is complex, but it was also meant to unravel some of this complexity, explain different poverty careers and highlight problematic groups on Social Assistance. In this chapter the results will be summarized and their theoretic value will be assessed.

5.1 Persistent Poverty in Rotterdam

Compared to the original Leisering & Leibfried study, Rotterdam has turned the tables upside down. Even though the majority of Social Assistance claimants still experiences short and medium term spells, there is a very large group of persistent claimants in Rotterdam. About 21% of all these claimants was on a single spell covering the entire time span of this study, a period of 7 years.

While Leisering and Leibfried themselves have done a good job in critiqueing the often-pervasive 'underclass' stereotypes surrounding poverty, they too have fallen into the pitfalls of generalizing their results one bridge too far. This study has indicated that for a very large group of people escaping poverty is almost an illusion. There is another group that have made slipping in and out of Social Assistance a career on its own. And yes, there are also people that are only poor for a short time in their life. However, the lines between all these groups are manifold: we can distinguish the 'elderly' and the 'single moms', people without education, people with some education, but not enough, divorcees, widows, young starters on the labour market, the traditional migrant groups, refugees, new migrant groups, people with disabilities and disease, financial and social problems and even the yuppies out of luck. So what can we conclude?

First of all, the debate between underclass theorists and adherents of temporalisation and democratization theses is undecided. In reality both views on poverty can coexist. In present

society it is indeed true that more people are at risk of becoming poor; and this could even be a trend as well. But this does not mean that there is no underclass, or that the underclass itself is shrinking. Both trends can be working with and against each other at the same time, in different ways in different local contexts.

There is however, considerable evidence for the existence of an underclass, or an underprivileged group of people. As Snel & Achterberg (2008) already found in their article on temporalizationd and democratization, there is evidence that poverty is even growing and that there are vulnerable groups: the people that lack educational credentials, and women, for example. People without any educational credentials have a very slim chance of escaping from Social Assistance. They are found having long and continuous Social Assistance careers. Then there is a group, with some educational credentials, which is more mobile, but also experiences very long Social Assistance careers.

Apart from educational credentials, sex also plays a large role. In every category men significantly outnumbered women, except for the category 'very long single spells'. This is in line with theories on the feminization of poverty. Women still form a vulnerable group, on the one side because of the financial and social burdens of childcare and on the other side because of fewer chances and unequal rewards on the labour market (Bianchi, 1999, Newman & White, 2001). The same goes for age. The old and the young have more difficulties, with the elderly particularly prone to long continuous Social Assistance spells.

So in the end we are confronted with a two-faced image of poverty. Cultures of poverty do not seem unthinkable, but they are only part of an explanation. So is meritocracy. So are the temporalisation and democratization of poverty theses. So is the feminization of poverty thesis. But in different local contexts different theses seem more plausible. So it is in local contexts that poverty research should be conducted. And it is important to remember that a dynamic method not always leads to dynamic outcomes.

5.2 Further research

The longitudinal method used in this study offers a lot of possibilities for further research. The method can always be improved and existing analyses can always be enhanced. First of all, in

this data set it was not possible to track changes in the cases' status. Data on when and if people got divorced, married, lost their job, got sick, or better, had a child, was not available. It could have been possible to combine certain data sets, but that was way out of the scope of this study. However, for further research this could yield extremely valuable results when combined with the different individual poverty careers. Especially the explanatory variables used in this study – social, medical, financial problems, childcare, etc. – could be used to determine entry and exit moments. Then it would become possible to not only sketch and use background variables, but also to determine what kind of events cause SA spells to start or end, or cause repeated SA claims.

It would pay off to repeat this study and compare the results. In this study only three cohorts could actually be compared, which offers valuable results, but not enough material for a truly accurate comparison over a longer time period. These results can be used for policy purposes, e.g. in identifying problem groups, as support for the decision to problematize certain groups of SA users, to more effectively intervene in individual cases, to calculate probabilities and analyze risks of certain policy initiatives, etc.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this study is never to take claims to truth at face value. Local differences are immanent and generalizing theories, especially in social policy, can have very real and harmful consequences in real life if based on wrong assumptions. Repeating and improving this study is certainly something to be considered. If not for the author himself, then for the people for whom the results of this study have consequences.

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