

No need or not eligible? A study about the decreased proportion of Social Assistance recipients in relation to need and restrictiveness in the Swedish administration process

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Information till läsaren

Denna text är tänkt att bli en av artiklarna i en sammanläggningsavhandling om ekonomiskt bistånd. Artikeln planeras att publiceras i European Journal of Social Work eller i Journal of European Social policy, beroende på var den landar. Som den är skriven nu är inriktningen på social policy, men det var inte planen från början, då var den mer tänkt som en deskriptiv studie som grundar sig i frågan hur det kan komma sig att biståndsmottagandet minskar och om avslagen ökar för ekonomiskt bistånd och att diskutera det mer allmänt i förhållande till det sociala arbetet mot fattigdom. Men jag har landat i att använda begreppet eligibilty (berättigande).

En av de frågor jag gärna vill ha feedback kring, är om det blir för mycket att ha med inramningen kring självmord, som är tänkt att rama in eligibility. Vad jag egentligen vill säga med det är att om målet om att minska biståndsmottagande har konstruerats utifrån att biståndsmottagande ses som ett "problem" så blir det svårt att veta vad som är hönan och ägget till slut. Många studier använder sig av biståndsmottagandet som ett mått på fattigdom, antagligen för att det finns mycket uppgifter i registren om mottagarna som går att jämföra med andra variabler. Det är som att alla studier bortser från att grundorsaken är fattigdom och därför kommer till slutsatsen att mottagandet av ekonomiskt bistånd har ett samband med fattigdom, eller att mottagandet av ekonomiskt bistånd leder till självmord.

Mina resultat säger inget om varför fler avslag ges, men jag vill diskutera den ökade avslagsfrekvensen i relation till målet om att minska andelen biståndsmottagare i befolkningen.

Texten är inte alls färdig, vissa avsnitt är endast skrivna i punktform. De avsnitt som är typ färdiga är introduction, methods och några av resultaten. Tänk gärna på om något är oklart eller om något saknas. Jag har hållit på med datainsamlingen så länge så det är svårt att förklara allt, men jag vill att det ska vara tydligt hur jag gjort.

Abstract

During the last two decades, the proportion of households receiving financial aid through Social Assistance (SA) have decreased in Sweden. It is unclear what the decrease reflects since the Social Service in the municipalities only report statistics to the National board of Health and Welfare (NHBW) about the approved SA, not about applications or rejections. Despite that, the conclusion drawn by NHBW is that the need for SA has decreased. This study examines the decrease in the proportion of receivers of SA from the nineties until now. The decrease is examined in relation to (a) structural factors as state economy, unemployment rate, house-hold disposal and income support from other welfare systems and (b) proportion of approvals and rejections in decisions of SA in the municipalities.

The results show that, (a) structural factors do not seem to be related to the decrease of SA receivers but (b) there seem to be a correlation between the decrease of receivers of SA and increased proportion of rejections. The proportion of rejections has increased more than three times since the nineties. The result from this study goes in line with previous research that shows an increase in restrictiveness in assessment of SA since the nineties. Previous research about the correlation between structural factors and proportion of receivers of SA in the nineties does not seem to be valid to explain the decrease of the last two decades. The receiving would then more likely have increased, considering economic recession, high unemployment rates and cutdowns in the general welfare system. The decrease of receivers can then indicate that there is a need for SA that is not provided for, by an increased restrictiveness. Since no major changes in the Social Act has been done that could explain the increase of rejections, they are discussed in relation to eligibility.

Introduction

In January the Swedish media (SVT 2024-01-16) reported about a man called Ray, 46 years old, who had committed suicide after several times been denied Social Assistance (SA) for food and shelter. He was homeless, addicted to drugs and desperate. The same day he died he applied to Social Service for help to get a place to sleep in the night and was rejected that. He had earlier tried to kill himself with a knife in the Social Office when he was refused help and had told them that he wanted to die if he could not get help.

This event may be seen as a one-time happening, but it seems like it is not. According to a report on suicidal rates among receivers of SA, published in 2023, by The National Board of Health and Welfare (NHBW 2023) there is a higher risk of suicide among receivers of SA. The sample was all individuals receiving SA during the year of 2020, who were compared with the population in general in national registers of health and of cause of death. The comparison was made one year before and one year after receiving SA. The suicidal rates among receivers were 5 times higher and suicidal attempts 6 times higher the year after receiving SA compared to the population in general. The interpretation made by NHBW is that individuals living under economic stress are in the risk-zone and when they apply for help from the Social Service these signals must be taken seriously (NHBW 2023).

The interpretation by politicians about reports like the one above, is that the receiving of SA, especially long term receipt, is negative and contribute to increased risks like ill health, exclusion, poverty, and unemployment (Government Committee Directives 2022:124). It is referred to research and reports, but those do not state that the receiving SA contributes to increased risks, only that there is relation between receiving and risks (see for example IFAU 2015; Bergmark 2016). The solution of the government to solve the problem is then to decrease the receiving of SA, that has been an aim in the state budget since the nineties. In the year 2000, an aim to decrease the amount of “the dependents of SA” into half as many until the year of 2004 was established (Budget proposal 2000/01:100 p. 16). So, what happened to the aim?

According to the yearly published statistics from NHBW there has been an overall decrease in the proportion of the population receiving SA since 1997, with exception an increase around the years 2009 to 2011, (NHBW 2023).

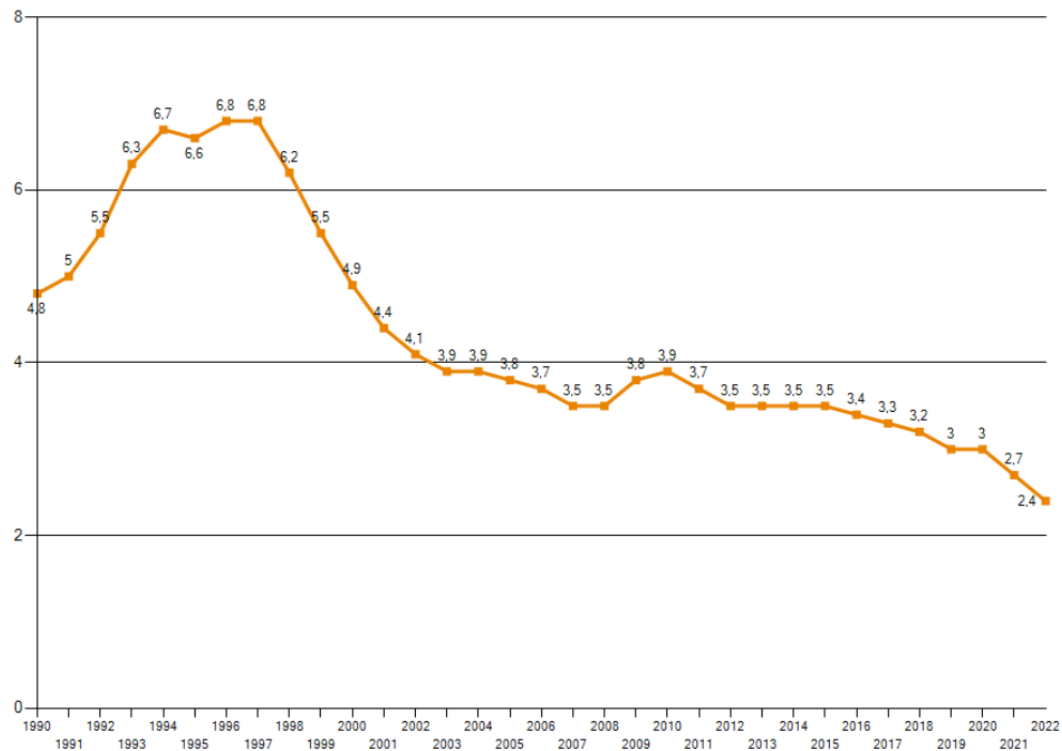


Figure 1. Yearly based proportion of the Swedish population, 18 years+, receiving SA in the years 1990 to 2022 (https://sdb.socialstyrelsen.se/if_ekb/resultat.aspx)

The NHBW claims that the decrease in receiving reflects a decreased need for SA in the population (NHBW 2021, p. 58). However, there is no data about the frequency of applications or outcomes of SA so that conclusion is only referring to that the proportion of the population receiving SA has decreased. In other areas of welfare, for example the Swedish Social Security system (socialförsäkringarna), need and restrictiveness is investigated by frequencies of applications and outcomes of decisions.

Since there is a lack of data about applications and outcomes of SA, similar analyses about assessments and restrictiveness are not possible. In previous research about s in SA, vignette-studies, fictitious cases assessed by social workers, have been used (see for example Bergmark & Stranz, 2023; Hussénus, 2021b) as well as municipality acts (Hussénus, 2021a; Stranz et al., 2016). Those studies show a large variation in the assessments, but also an increased restrictiveness over time. Restrictiveness and generosity have also been defined in terms of high and low proportion of receivers and the received amount per individual in certain municipalities compared to the receive in all municipalities (Pålsson and Wiklund 2022). It is though, difficulties in assuming that high proportions mean larger generosity when not knowing how many individuals that apply.

Need of SA have in research about the nineties been showed to be related to structural factors, such as recessions in state economy and unemployment as well as individual factors. Individual factors like poor education, health problem etcetera can affect the financial situation but also matter whether someone apply or not, there has always been more poverty than applicants of SA (Gustafsson, 2002). When there was economic recession in the nineties, the proportion of receivers of SA increased and when the general welfare system, like health- and unemployment insurance then became more restrictive, the SA in the population increased even more (Bergmark et al., 2013; Salonen, 1994, 1999). Today, the proportion of the population receiving support from the general welfare systems has decreased (Statistics Sweden 2023). The last two decades there have been economic recessions and high level of unemployment (Unemployment Report 2021). According to previous research about the relation between structural factors and the receiving of SA, there should have been an increased need of SA during the last decades, but instead, there is a decrease in the proportion of receivers of SA.

The aim and research questions

The overall aim of this study is to gain knowledge about how the decrease in the proportion of receivers of SA from the nineties until now is related to need and restrictiveness in decisions of SA and to discuss how eligibility in the assessments have changed. Research questions are:

- What information is available in the municipalities about applications and outcomes of SA?
- How does the decrease in receiving SA relate to need according to structural factors in society, such as unemployment rate, house-hold disposable income, state economy and support from other welfare systems?
- How is the decrease in receiving SA related to need through application frequencies and to restrictiveness through proportion of rejections in decisions of SA?

Background

Swedish welfare model, SA, welfare and poverty, changes in the Social Security system

The recipients and causes of needing SA

From welfare to workfare, From non-use, non-take-up to non-receivers

Legal eligibility

The right to SA is based on the Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453, Chapter 4, Section 1) stating that:

"Those who cannot supply for their own need or have them supplied in some other ways are entitled to assistance from Social Services for their maintenance (income support) and for their life in general". Income support covers monthly costs, like food, rent, insurance etc. The term "live in

general”, is in the financial aid supposed to cover costs that are not recurring, like medicine, glasses, furniture and so on.

There are no limitations in the law about what a *need* is, it is only stated that it should be necessary to obtain a “*adequate standard of living*”. How to define that standard has varied, in the legislative history (förarbeten) it is described as what an individual with a low-income standard can afford, and the reason for not defining need in a more specific way is that it should vary with living conditions in society. Besides the investigation of whether the need is necessary, the examination of eligibility also is about whether the applicants can *supply for their own needs or have them supplied in other ways*. Shortly that means that all the other possibilities to supply for needs must be exhausted before being eligible. The applicants cannot, for instance, have any savings or belongings that could be sold, and the unemployed or sick are primarily expected to use unemployment or health insurance for their livelihood. This demands an investigation about the applicant’s income and assets.

The requirement of “*supply for the needs for their own*” it has been defined through different precedents (prejudikat) as also including a *requirement for planning* by saving income from up to four months back, *requirement for unemployed* to search for jobs and to participate in skills-enhancing activities. There is also a *maintenance requirement* that makes it possible to deny SA for all family members (including the children), when one of the adults in a household is assessed as not eligible according to the other requirements. Besides those requirements the applicants also must “*participate in the investigation*” according to The Administrative Law (Förvaltningslagen SFS 2017:900). These obligations have extended the requirement of the law “cannot supply” to “could not have supplied”, and made the assessments not only include the applicant’s current situation, but also how they behaved the months before application, in spite of the principle of topicality in the Social Service Act” (see also Johansson, 2001; Kjellbom, 2017; Svensson, 2000). The maintenance requirement is framed in the law valid for married couples, but is through one precedent, from 1995, extended to cohabitant couples, and make the assessments non-individual, though it should be based at individual assessments.

There are also other principles in the Social Service Act, for example that the applicant should be seen and need assessed through a holistic perspective. The law is in the legislatures called a “goal-directed frame law”, and the goals are framed in the portal paragraph and states that the Social Service should promote financial and social safety, equal living-conditions, and participation in societal activity.

There are studies were investigated if the goals are used in assessments, for example Svensson (2000) who studied how the portal clause and the goal “adequate standard of living” in the Social

Services Acts are used. When assessing certain needs that were not financial, the goal setting clauses were used. In judgments focusing on individuals' obligations to supply for their needs themselves or in some other way, the objective clauses were not applied at all. Johansson (2001) has, in turn, investigated the development of rights and obligations for SA during the eighties and nineties. He concludes that poverty and the need for assistance have been made an individual problem through the requirements established in the precedents in the nineties that changed the rights to SA to obligations.

The construction of the Social Services Act is by some researchers seen as a bill of rights and by others a framework law. This is described by Åström (1988) as an ideological conflict, which was already included in the legislative history of the Social Service Act which entered in 1982. The conflict is reflected in the character of a bill of rights under certain conditions, but given a goal character (Åström 1988, p. 83). The law is, according to Hollander (1995, pp. 209–210) a bill of rights, but weaker than, for example, the Law on Special support and Services for disabled people, because it defines neither the personal scope nor defines what needs to be covered. According to Svensson (2000, p. 331), the rights in the law consist only in having the right to appeal, since it is not established what is meant by a "adequate standard of living". Kjellbom (2017), in turn, argues that the Social Services Act is rather a goal targeted rights law at the individual level, with reference to that the right to assistance must be separated from the content of assistance. The fact that there is a lack of precision in the content of rights does not weaken the rights in themselves (Kjellbom, 2017).

Assessments of SA (Discretion, level, implications, variation, lack of transparency)

Decisions about SA are administrated by the Social Services, on behalf of the Social Welfare Committee in the municipalities. Applications for, and decisions of SA are often made on monthly basis for recurring costs such as rent, food, electricity, etc. Applications can also be made for costs which are not monthly recurring, like glasses, dental care, health care, furniture and so on. Applicants have a right to apply and to get a decision for every application, no matter how often or how many times applications are made.

Lack of information about decisions

Need of SA is difficult to measure, both because it is not defined in the law, but also because not all individuals living in poverty apply. The non-use is widespread, according to a study (Gustafsson, 2002) 80 percent of eligible individuals were not applying. The reasons for not applying were for example lack of information, stigma, group-belonging dimensions, a stressful application process and the risk of a negative outcome. The increased receipt in the nineties was believed to relate to less stigma when more people received SA, but the study proves that there was not a change in attitude

since there was no statistically significant difference between the years of comparison in the study, 1985 and 1997 (Gustafsson 2002). There are also other studies showing that fewer individuals apply for SA than needed, because of stigma, or high thresholds in the application process, (Minas, 2005; Minas & Stenberg, 2000; Stenberg, 2000; Stenberg & Hård af Segerstad, 1998). But if there were information about frequency of applications over time it would have been possible to measure changed frequencies at least.

Usually in administrative decisions the authorities have an obligation to register every application and outcome of the decision according to The Administrative Law (Förvaltningslagen SFS 2017:900). In decisions of Social Services there is an exception in the duty, according to regulations about publicity and privacy of document (Offentlighets- och sekretessförordningen SFS 2009:641). The municipalities though, have a legal obligation to save data from individuals born on the 5, 15 and 25 of month, and some municipalities in Sweden are obliged to save all their data for research causes. That data is though saved by documents written out and archived individually and therefore not searchable for aggregated levels.

In the Social Security system, statistics about applications and outcomes are registered and analyzed on yearly basis in terms of need and restrictiveness over time (see for example Försäkringskassan 2023; ISF 2023:7). The outcomes in that system have varied over time but like in the case of SA there is a general trend of decrease. The increased proportion of rejection is seen as increased restrictiveness due to restrictions in the law but in the last ten years, restrictiveness appeared without legal changes. The increased number of rejections are said, by the administrative authority itself, to be related to increased restrictiveness in the administration process due to governmental aim to reduce costs of high sickness rates (Försäkringskassan 2023). This had not been discovered if the decisions were not registered and analyzed.

Since 2017 the NBHW gather statistics on termination causes of SA in the municipalities, but they state that the statistics are not reliable for several reasons. It is voluntary to apply for SA, therefore the municipalities have no right to investigate why individuals stop applying. There are few municipalities that report termination causes and most of them answer that the reasons are the applicants has started to work or "other reason" (NHBW 2021).

Methods

The study is based on information from Swedish municipalities, collected through questionnaires from the municipalities about their applications and outcomes of SA. Aggregated statistics at national level from 1990-2023 is also used, collected from Swedish official registers.

Data collection from the municipalities

Even if data about applications and outcomes is lacking at national level, there seem to be some municipalities, for example Stockholm, that publish their data in yearly reports. To find out if data was registered in other municipalities the collection was made stepwise during 2022 and 2023.

1. To find out what data about SA there is registered in municipalities, a questionnaire was sent to the Social Service in 10 municipalities. A sample of the 3 largest municipalities in Sweden and 7 randomly sampled municipalities was drawn. The questionnaire was about what kind of data they registered about applications and outcomes and for how long time back they had saved the data. They were also asked to provide the available data about SA on yearly basis. From this initial sample, 7 municipalities provided information.
2. With knowledge from the first questionnaire about how they registered information, a survey was constructed and sent to the remaining 280 municipalities. The aim was to get knowledge about what available information there was, without asking them to give the information. It was sent to the official e-mail of the municipalities addressed to "the responsible for registered information about SA". 181 municipalities answered this survey.
3. Based on the survey results, a second sample of 58 municipalities was made, including those municipalities that answered that they had data saved for more than 20 years. They were asked to provide data on yearly basis, into a form. When they provided the data, only 14 of them had information from more than 20 years back.
4. The sample was in the end totally 68 municipalities, 10 in the first sample and 58 in the second sample.

Table 1. Answers from municipalities divided in what year they said they had or had available information about decisions of SA from 1985 to 2022

Years	1. First sample (N=10)	2. Survey (N= 280)	3. Second sample (N=58)	4. Analytical sample (N=33)
1985-2002	1	58	14	15
2003-2009	0	24	5	5
2010-2016	4	48	2	6
2017-2021	1	47	5	6
2022	1	4		
No answer or not providing data	3	101	32	
Total	10	280	58	33

In the survey, 58 municipalities answered that they had available information from more than 20 years back, from 1985-2002. That showed to not be correct. Of the 58 municipalities only 26 of them provided the information, and 14 of them could provide data from more than 20 years back. 18 of them gave no answer at all, 8 answered that they did not have the information available, that somebody without knowledge had answered the survey wrongly. 6 of them rejected to provide the information due to the heavy workload it would cause.

Older data had been erased from the system in around half of the municipalities in the analytical sample, according to an obligation to erase personal data when more than 5 years have passed since receiving. Since the erase includes both approvals and rejections, the proportions should be the same though.

In the end, 33 municipalities (7 from the first sample and 26 from the second sample) provided information about their applications and outcomes, the analytical sample. 15 of them provided data from more than 20 years.

Data

The yearly *proportions of SA receivers in the population* were collected from NHBW for the period 1990-2023 (NHBW 2024).

Indicators of overall *need* is measured by a selection of *structural factors of society*: unemployment rate, house-hold disposable income, state economy (GDP) and approved support from the general welfare system, sick- and unemployment insurance. The data were collected from Statistics Sweden (SCB 2024).

Another indicator of need is the *frequency of applications*. Since the applications of SA were registered in different ways in the municipalities¹ and to make the statistics comparable, the applications in this study are registered as the sum of approvals and rejections. Since a few of the municipalities registered a decision as both an approval and a rejection in cases of partly approval/rejection, a minor measure error might have occurred due to that.

Restrictiveness is measured as the proportion of rejections among the applications. An annual mean for all the municipalities in the study was calculated.

¹ The municipalities used the term “actualization” instead of application. The actualization was sometimes only registered for the first application from an individual, and sometimes once a month, no matter how many outcomes were made from that application.

Results

The investigation about what information is available about applications and outcomes of SA in the municipalities showed that there is information registered and compiled about decisions of SA in the municipalities. The survey was answered by 180 of the 290 municipalities and 72 percent of them claimed to have information saved and available since before 2017, 20 percent claimed to have data since more than 20 years.

Having the information *available* in a data system where it could be easily compiled turned out to be another question, many of the municipalities had difficulties in actually providing the information. Some of the municipalities answered that was because of changed computer system or system supplier or that the supplier was not able to make a compilation. Many of the municipalities had a system administrator responsible to handle the information, but smaller municipalities said that they did not have access to that.

Another problem was that almost half of the municipalities had erased some of the data older than 5 years in the system. The municipalities have an obligation to erase personal data 5 years after receiving, but that obligation does not mean that they must erase the frequencies. Since they have their aggregated data connected to the personal data, all is deleted when they erase the personal data. Some of the data is saved and archived for research objectives. All municipalities have an obligation to save and file information about the receivers to the archives. The data was archived, but only sorted out of individual data and the applications and outcomes were then not searchable in aggregated level.

The conclusion is therefore that it is difficult to get information about decisions of SA from the municipalities, as long as it is not collected at national level and municipalities are obliged to register all decisions.

Need

Another question in this study was how the receiving SA relate to need according to structural factors in society, such as unemployment rate, house-hold disposable income, state economy and support from other welfare systems. (The results are preliminary and the variables; support from other welfare system and GDP are missing).

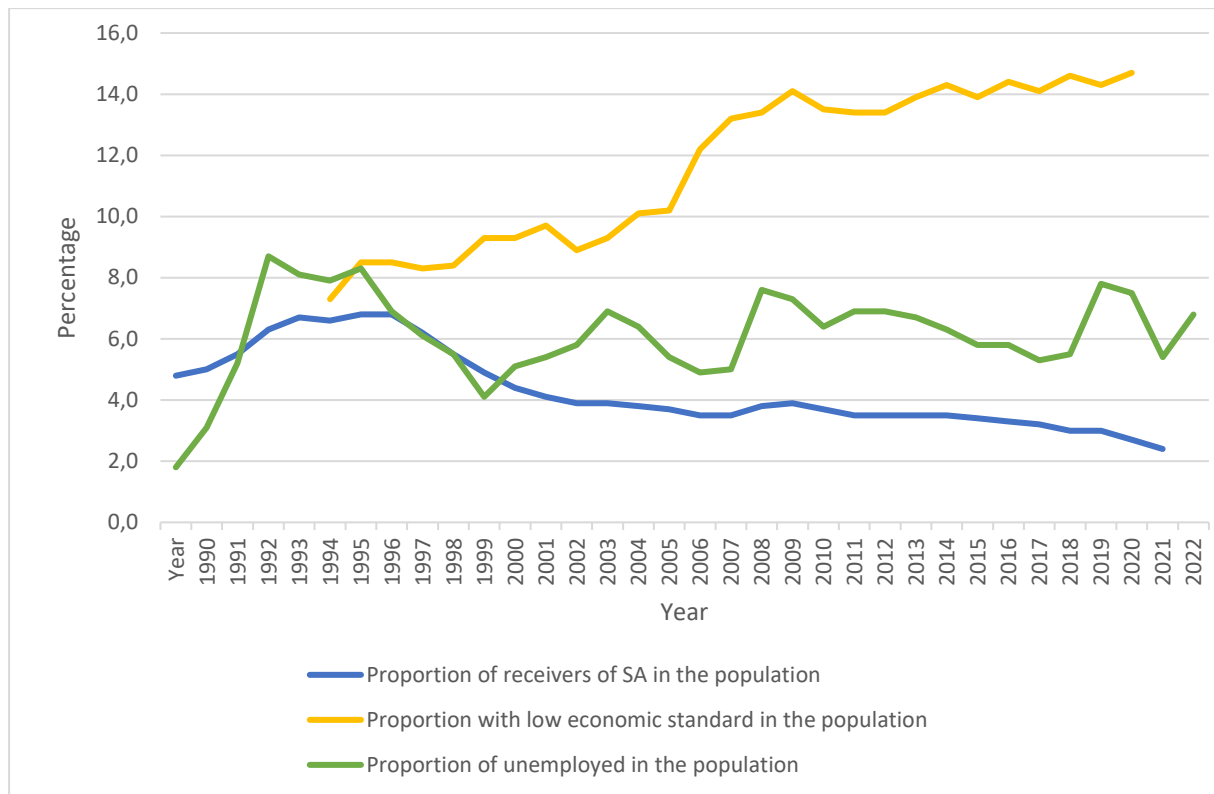


Figure 2. Proportion of receivers in the population compared to structural factors.

The blue line is the same as in figure 1 in the introduction and reflect the proportion of receivers of SA in the population (NBHW 2023). The yellow line is the proportion of the population with low economic standard, measured as those with an income less than 60 percent of the mean in the population. That is one of the ways of measuring poverty used in all EU-countries, the so-called relative poverty. It is much higher than in the nineties but has not made more individuals receiving SA, which is interesting. The green line is the unemployment rate (SCB 2024) and has been fluctuating a lot but is now almost at the same levels as in the nineties, without seem to affect the proportion of receivers of SA. In all lines there are peaks around 2010, when there was a financial recession in Sweden. There has also been a recession in 2020-2021 where the unemployment rate was high, but the receiving of SA decreased.

Application frequencies: (missing)

Restrictiveness

Preliminary results (22 of 33 municipalities counted) show that while the proportion of receivers of SA in the municipalities gradually decreased from 1997 to 2022 (from 6,8 % to 2,4 %) the average proportion of rejections of SA in the municipalities increased between 1999 to 2022 (from 7,8 to 27,3), see figure 1.

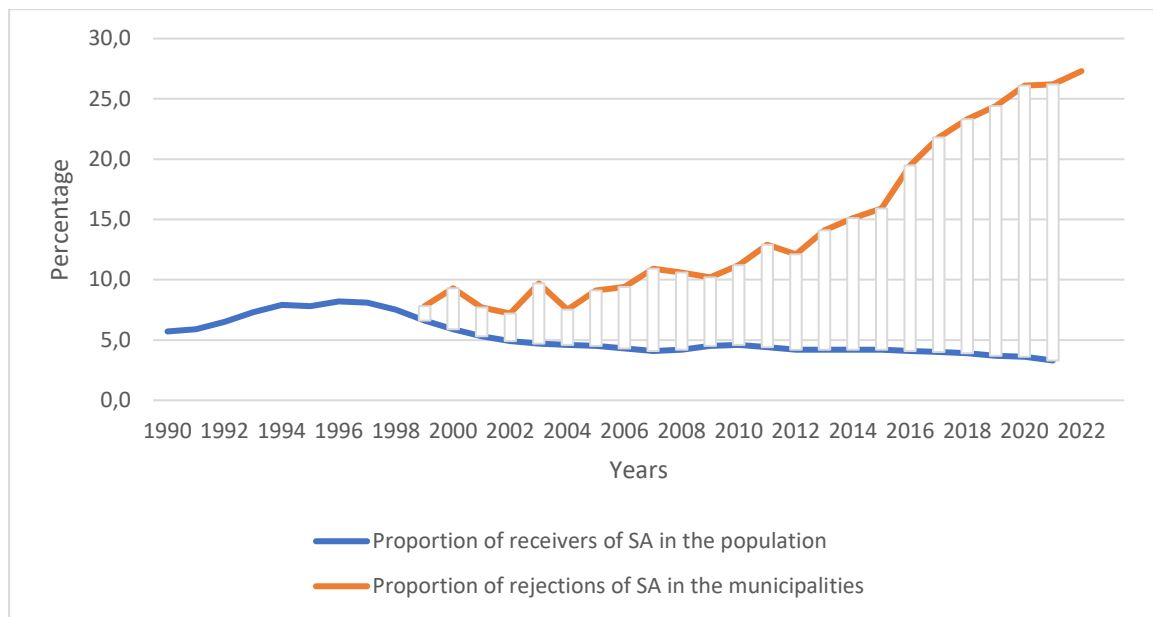


Figure 1. Proportion of receivers in the population compared to proportion of rejections of SA.

The proportions in figure 1 are not completely comparable since the proportion of SA refers to the receivers compared to the whole population and the proportion of rejections are compared to all the decisions of SA. But it is still a relation between the decrease in receiving SA and restrictiveness through proportion of rejections in decisions of SA.

Discussion

- Short statement of the main results
- Discussion about how the results relate to previous research
- Measuring problems (strengths and limitations with the study)
- What does the result say, the effects for poor people and consequences at societal level
- Conclusions

In Sweden there is no knowledge about applications or outcomes since the NHBW does not have an assignment to collect data about applications or outcomes. Maybe it is because of the volunteer aspect in the law makes that makes the collecting of personal data of “unhelped” unmotivated, but that does not explain why don’t even the frequencies are gathered. The not collecting of such data may also be due to unsureness if the frequency of applications would really reflect need. Maybe they don not since fewer apply, but they at least say something. The application and outcomes maybe have been seen as unnecessary to measure them since the role of SA as the last safety net has been

seen to guarantee that need is taken care of. Rejections then would only reflect those applicants that do not have a need for real.

The result of the report about suicidal rates (NBHW 2023) among receivers of SA rise many questions, for example whether it is the receiving of SA that is the problem, or if it is the poverty and economic vulnerability. There was no statistical difference in suicide rate between short-time and long-time receivers. They might then have received SA for a month of the year 2020 and rejections the other months. Most of the receivers in the study also had contact with psychiatric care the year before applying. If more individuals commit suicide after being in contact with Social Services, this also rise questions if the aim of SA to be the last security net and the aim of Social Services to help individuals are fulfilled. Maybe the problem, stated by lawmakers and politicians in the municipalities as the receiving of SA, is instead the non-receiving of SA. Individuals that have a need without being seen as eligible get rejection despite need. Ray was denied help, not because he was not in need, but because the municipality had made the rules more restrictive about getting help for temporary living.

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