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Who deserves to access their rights? Inequality in the action against non-take-up

Abstract

The issue of non-take-up has increasingly been brought to light by scholars and field actors during the past decade. As a result, the issue gained political traction, and programs have been designed to reduce it. In canton Geneva, Switzerland, a town's social services have recently launched two programs to enhance access to social rights. In this paper, we explore, notably through the lens of the *deservingness* literature, the variety of ways in which sub-groups of the population interact with the local authorities' commitment to tackle non-take-up. Based on 45 semi-structured interviews with recipients, social workers and managers of these municipal programs, as well as stakeholders at cantonal level, we assess how the design, implementation and reception of the programs by their targeted population influence their unequal outcome.

Our results show how the perception of various sub-groups of the population as more or less deserving informs how social policy is designed at macro level; implemented by state administration at federal and cantonal level and mediated by action against non-take-up at municipal level; and received by beneficiaries at micro level. By reproducing the deservingness rationale identified in the literature, local action against non-take-up tends to fuel a cumulative (dis-)advantage dynamic, and therefore reinforce or reproduce dynamics of inequality between sub-groups of the population whose starting point in terms of access to social rights does not seem to differ significantly.

Keywords: Non-take-up, deservingness, structural inequality, multilevel approach, local action

1. Introduction: acting against non-take-up, an emerging practice

The non-take-up (NTU) of social benefits, according to its most common definition, points to a situation where one does not receive a benefit or service even though being entitled to it. Many causes of NTU have been identified in the literature. Among the main ones there are: the lack of knowledge about the existence of the benefit or its eligibility criteria (Dubois & Ludwinek, 2015); social and psychological factors such as the shame or stigma felt by potential claimants (Baumberg Geiger, 2016), or discouragement when facing administrative complexities (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010; Currie, 2004). The first explanatory models for NTU, coming from the fields of social psychology and behavioral economics, focused on individual characteristics emphasising why eligible people made the decision not to take up benefits and services (Kerr, 1982; Moffitt, 1983). But research since the 1990s (see notably : van Oorschot, 1991, 1998) expanded these theoretical models by stressing the importance of how social benefits are designed and administered. Wim van Oorschot (1991), not restricting the analysis to the

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process that leads one to put up a claim or not, pinpointed that NTU can occur after the individual decision to claim has been made, due to various characteristics of the administration (e.g., discouragement when facing administrative burdens, argument with street-level bureaucrats, etc.), but also that it can be explained by how policies are designed (e.g., means-tested benefits, strict conditionalities, etc.). In a later stage, a still relatively marginal strand of the literature explored how NTU can also be the expression of a critique towards social policies. This perspective suggests that NTU may stem from a voluntary rejection of policy conditionalities, discontent with bureaucratic processes, or a broader contestation of the underlying assumptions and values embedded in welfare state interventions (Warin, 2016; Leresche, 2019).

Studies that have attempted to measure NTU demonstrate its prevalence, showing that non-take-up rates of social welfare benefits frequently exceed 30 % in European countries and can even go much higher depending on the benefit design (Marc et al., 2022). There are various reasons why politics should regard NTU as a priority issue (Dubois & Ludwinek, 2015, 7–15). First, social policies cannot reach their objectives, e.g. reducing poverty or promoting activation, if such a large share of their target population does not use them. Second, while addressing non-take-up of social benefits may initially entail increased public expenditure, it is claimed that, in the long run, such interventions are likely to reduce overall costs through more timely and effective management of individuals' needs, thereby impeding the escalation of social issues and their associated economic costs (e.g. health costs). Third, NTU entails an issue of fairness and equity between those who are entitled to a benefit and take it up and those who are entitled and do not claim or receive it. This also has significant consequences in terms of trust in institutions.

Long ignored by public authorities more inclined to tackle benefit fraud than their under-use (ODENORE, 2012), NTU has been increasingly acknowledged as a public concern during the past decade, with a number of actions taken to reduce it in various countries. These actions take place at different levels (Dubois and Ludwinek, 2015, 29–37). At society level, they may encompass the development of internet access or general information campaigns on social rights; at the level of social policy design, the objective is to make benefits and their eligibility criteria clearer and easier to access; at the administrative level, what is aimed is the simplification or higher transparency of procedures; at the individual level, actions aim at reaching out to potential claimants to inform and accompany them in the claiming process. Amélie Mazé and Antoine Rode (2019) suggest classifying such actions in two types which encompass all these various levels of action: on the one hand "*inviting in*" (*faire-venir*), where actions aim broadly at simplifying and destigmatising the claiming process, and on the other hand "*reaching out*" (*aller-vers*), where actions are more proactive and tailor-made. The academic literature, mostly stemming from the fields of behavioral economics and evaluation, shows the effectiveness of both categories of measures (Hanratty, 2006; Daigneault et al., 2012; Schwabish, 2012;

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Farrell et al., 2016; Battaglio et al., 2019; Finkelstein & Notowidigdo, 2019; Boost et al., 2020; Kim & Joo, 2020; Van Gestel et al., 2023). Most often, this literature adopts a rather functionalist reading of public action, seeking to establish which actions have the greatest impact in reducing NTU, rather than a comprehensive and analytical perspective, aiming at understanding how these actions interact with their target populations.

Thus, the literature has identified various forms and causes of non-take-up, some emphasising individual shortcomings or preferences, others insisting on the way social benefits are managed by welfare administrations, and still others underlining the impact of benefits and law design on the likelihood of non-take-up. Accordingly, public action aimed at reducing NTU also targets either the policy design, the administrative or the individual level. In this paper, we claim that an adequate view on NTU and actions to reduce it requires encompassing all three levels and, hence, adopting a multilevel perspective on NTU. Beyond an isomorphic perspective between these three levels (along the lines defined by DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) – that would imply that what is designed at the macro level of social policy is implemented at the level of welfare administration via the field actors' practices and is appropriated by compliant beneficiaries at the micro level – we contend that these three levels may have conflicting views about access to rights and non-take-up, i.e. that *street-level bureaucrats* (SLBs) (Lipsky, 2010; Hupe et al., 2015) may deviate from the normative expectations of policy-makers and beneficiaries may not be as compliant as expected. Empirical investigation is thus needed and, in conducting it, it is crucial to also pay attention to existing social values and norms (esp. those about the respective deservingness of the various target groups of social policies) and how they contribute to hierarchise target groups of public policies and shape how social policies and actors at different levels address them. Thus, this article adopts a comprehensive and multilevel perspective on NTU and the actions aimed at reducing it. The objective is not to assess and measure the effectiveness of such measures, but to show how actions against NTU interact with other existing policies, how the diverse rationales of such public programs interact (sometimes converging, other times conflicting), and how the societal norms about potential beneficiaries' deservingness impact on how social policies in their variety are designed, implemented and received. This multi-level approach to NTU is mobilised with a view to conducting a comprehensive investigation of unequal access to social benefits and services and its underlying reasons.

The paper proceeds to analyse these complex dynamics through an investigation of two local programs designed to tackle NTU and how they interact with laws and benefits designs higher up in the policy chain on the one hand and with recipients at the bottom of the policy chain on the other. The objective is to show how laws designed at federal and cantonal level (mostly restrictive in terms of their conditionalities and processes) interfere with local municipal programs and what impact this has on field actors' practices and individual behaviors of

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claiming (or not). We expect a diversity of situations along the various target groups, thus a variety of patterns of non-take-up rooted in specific configurations of interaction between societal norms, social policy design, implementation practices and individual reception of public policies. Section 2 briefly presents the two main components of our theoretical framework: the multi-level perspective on NTU and how it allows analysing the interaction between policy design, implementation and reception on the one hand (Bonvin et al. 2023); the deservingness literature and what criteria can be used to assess people's deservingness in a welfare context on the other hand (van Oorschot 2006; van Oorschot et al. 2017). It also briefly presents the two programs investigated and their legal and normative environment. Section 3 investigates how various sub-groups of the population are envisaged in the investigated federal and cantonal programs, and with what consequences in terms of access to benefits and services. Section 4 focuses on the two municipal programs designed to reduce NTU, how they interfere with cantonal and federal policies and with what impact in terms of NTU reduction. It notably highlights the differential impact between those who are identified as the most (the elderly) and the least (the migrants) deserving in the eyes of the public. Section 5 focuses on the reception of these two programs by their target populations, showing how the internalisation of the deservingness criteria further reinforces, at the micro level, the differentiation among publics created by the municipal programs. Section 6 synthesises the main findings of our paper, emphasising how a multilevel perspective on NTU combining with a focus on how deservingness is assessed, allows shedding additional light on the complexity of NTU patterns and the differential impact of actions taken to reduce it and enhance access to benefits and services.

2. Theoretical framework and method

The objective of the paper is to analyse action against NTU, not with a view to assessing its effectiveness, but rather to understanding how it relates to societal norms, other social policy programs and how it impacts the way individuals interact with public services. Our aim is to show how the objective of reducing NTU, which is more and more commonly stated by policymakers, materialises in different ways depending on the mechanisms that embody it and their underlying values, the publics to whom it is addressed and the way in which these get involved in such programs. To this end, we look, at a more macro level, at how the federal/cantonal design of social policy interacts with municipal programs designed to tackle NTU; how these local and federal/cantonal programs are implemented by SLBs; and, finally, how they are received (Revillard, 2018) by their target population at micro level.

In order to grasp the way social norms embedded in policy and local action address various publics, we draw on the deservingness literature (van Oorschot, 2000; 2006; van Oorschot et al., 2017; Laenen et al., 2019; Knotz et al., 2022),

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which outlines the various criteria that can be used to distinguish between different subgroups of the population when determining who should or should not receive public support. The five main criteria identified in the literature result in the so called "*CARIN*" framework: 1) the degree to which the person can be held responsible for his or her situation (*control*); 2) the person's attitude towards institutions (docility, gratitude, etc.) (*attitude*); 3) the degree to which the person has contributed to the common good prior to receiving help (*reciprocity*); 4) whether the person is considered part of the in-group or out-group (*identity*); 5) the person's degree of need (*need*). In our fieldwork, these criteria can be identified in practices and speeches at different institutional levels, and therefore contribute to explain the relationship between public agents and various sub-groups of the population. Concretely, according to the target groups, policymakers, field actors and beneficiaries themselves develop different views of their (own) deservingness, of what can/should be expected from them in terms of regaining autonomy and to what degree they should be encouraged or dissuaded to use their entitlements to rights, benefits and services. The paper thus focuses on how such deservingness assessments at various levels interact with one another and how and why such interaction results (or not) in reducing unequal access to benefits and services and NTU.

Our empirical data focuses on the interaction between federal/cantonal laws and two local programs launched by the social services of a sub-urban town of roughly 40,000 inhabitants in canton Geneva, Switzerland, with a low average income in regional comparison and a highly diverse population. The focus on one specific canton makes sense in the Swiss context where a large share of social policies is organised at the cantonal level. The first of the two local programs under scrutiny, *P1,* proactively reaches out to people aged 75 and older through a letter and a phone call to offer them administrative support. People aged 65 and older can also benefit from it if they claim P1 themselves or are referred to it by family members or anyone from the local and sociosanitary network. The focus on the elderly derives from the observation by the municipal social services (MSS) that this sub-group struggles in performing basic administrative tasks such as paying the bills and, in many instances, suffer from isolation. Once contact is established, social workers meet those who are willing to participate at their home and take stock of their situation, defining in which domain and how often they would need support. Among other tasks, activating the social rights of the beneficiaries to existing federal or cantonal benefits is an important part of MSS activity. Most of the time, this relates to the elderly's entitlement to so-called supplementary benefits (SB) of the Swiss pension system: in a nutshell, retired people who get an income lower than a certain threshold from their retirement pension are entitled, under certain conditions, to get a supplementary benefit from the pension system, but they need to put a claim and to provide a variety of documents to support this claim. This social benefit is governed by national law but implemented at the cantonal level; it is a complex device which results in various forms of NTU, due to

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the lack of knowledge of the system or the heavy administrative burden represented by claiming. A central objective of P1 is to support the elderly in their claiming endeavors. The second program, *P2*, aims at facilitating access to municipal and federal or cantonal public services in a more general way. It is available for the whole population, from people in a precarious situation who need financial support to middle-class families who seek information or legal counseling on various topics. Concretely, it includes a daily hotline which allows getting in contact with a social worker to answer questions about any service or benefit, or to reorient claimants towards other competent services such as a public letter-writing service or legal counseling services also set up within the MSS premises. It thus aims at reducing the duration and complexity of administrative processes, acknowledging that some give up their demand when they are tossed around too many services while seeking support. Among many other benefits and services, P2 aims to facilitate access to another kind of supplementary benefit, destined to low-income families with children. This kind of SB for families follows the same general eligibility principles and calculation methods as the one destined to retirees presented above, and is administered by the same cantonal institutions, but it is organised by a cantonal, instead of federal, law. These two municipal programs are an interesting empirical basis as they embody the two overarching logics at play when it comes to tackle NTU, which Mazé and Rodé (2019) call "*aller-vers*" (*reaching out*) and "*faire-venir*" (*inviting in)*. P1, with its proactivity and tailor-made services embodies a *reaching out* logic, while P2 mainly focuses on an *inviting in* logic, proposing a single gateway office acting towards the dissemination of information and facilitation of administrative procedures.

The data was collected through 45 semi-structured interviews with canton, town and program officials (5); town's social workers engaged in the first (3) and second program (6); state clerks in charge of administering the two supplementary benefits (5); and beneficiaries of the first (11) and second program (15). Interviews with beneficiaries of the programs were conducted with an interpretive and biographical approach in order to grasp how respondents made sense of their experience with various state benefits throughout their life-course. This approach allowed assessing how the town's programs interlock with federal and cantonal legislative frameworks and how such interaction affects NTU on the one hand, and their beneficiaries' life-course and experience of state institutions on the other hand. Interviews with officials and street-level bureaucrats were conducted in the same semi-structured and interpretive manner, allowing to grasp how laws and formal goals are reinterpreted and even, at times, redefined in the implementation process. In this regard it is worth mentioning that SBs are administered by clerks while the two municipal programs are run by social workers. The interview transcripts were openly coded following the principles of *reflexive thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke 2021a; 2021b; Byrne, 2022). The flexibility and adaptability of this approach makes it well suited to analyse the very rich and diverse material resulting

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from the comprehensive interviews we conducted with different actors in various institutional contexts.

3. The complexity of accessing state social benefits, acknowledged and valued by the clerks who administer it

Cantonal SLBs in charge of implementing SB acknowledge the complexity of accessing such benefits, but, for various reasons, do nevertheless not advocate for a simplification. First, most of them see very little scope for simplifying the forms and procedures as this would go against the injunctions placed on them by public authorities and existing legislations. One of them explains: *"Anyone asserting their right to benefits must register with the competent insurer, in the prescribed form for the relevant social insurance."* (Clerk SB_2), he goes on to explain that an automatic access to benefits, i.e. without having to fill up complex forms and abide by time-consuming procedures, is not an option in such a context. The federal legislation indeed has a rather loose conception of social rights. If we look at the federal Constitution, the only constitutional right strictly speaking is the "right to obtain assistance in situations of distress" (art. 12). Apart from these extreme situations, the Constitution uses the notion of *social goals*, specifying in article 41 that "no subjective right to state benefits may be deduced directly from social goals". In the same article, it explicitly states that the Confederation is committed to guaranteeing a series of social minima "as a complement to individual responsibility and private initiative" and "taking due account of the available means". This restrictive notion of social rights is echoed in the speech of a SB manager:

> "*For the moment, I must confess that every time I've been asked [at the federal level] for my opinion as a manager on what could be done for supplementary benefits, it's not to give more benefits, to be honest with you. It was to suggest ways of saving money*". (Manager SB)

Beside these arguments emphasising that more proactivity in facilitating the access to social rights would go against the federal law, the majority of SB clerks happen to be hostile to the very principle of such simplification or automated access. They insist that obtaining a benefit should be the outcome of a personal endeavour and commitment to a process. Being able to overcome the intricacies of such a complex process is interpreted as a sign that people really need and deserve it. This is also justified by the fact that SB are funded not by people's contributions but by taxes as this clerk explains: "[...]It's [financed] with our taxes, it's not like the retirement or disability pension where you've contributed, so it's normal that you claim" (Clerk SB_2). Thus, the receipt and use of SBs, which is formally a right in the same way as for social insurance benefits, is presented as less legitimate, as if it was not really or fully an entitlement because the benefit is financed by taxes and not by contributions. Another clerk emphasises the risk that an excessive use of SBs might jeopardise the balance of public finances:

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"*I support that we don't advertise social benefits. In my opinion, people need to find out by themselves about it. [...] There was a director at federal level who said that if Switzerland paid for everything that was insured, it would have gone bankrupt a long time ago. So I don't think we need to do more.*" (Clerk SB_3)

These quotes show that the SB administration at regional level shares to a large extent the federal authorities' vision, of which they see themselves as compliant executors. This is also reflected in the centrality given in their discourse and practices to fraud detection. One clerk pinpointed the behaviour of certain SB beneficiaries who try to divert them from their original mission:

"*Supplementary benefits* [in this case family SB] *were created to reintegrate people in the labour market, and here we see that this is not the case, that people somehow "settle into" the benefit, worse still, sometimes they adapt their professional situation to keep their benefits: 'I work a little less to avoid a benefit reduction*'." (Clerk SB_3)

The interviews also show how, mirroring their vision of the welfare claimant as a potential cheater, members of the SB administration portray the non-user as a 'virtuous' individual. Indeed, a dominant idea is that people waive their rights out of pride, or even out of virtue: "For me, these are people who don't want help, for whom it must be a matter of pride, a matter of shame, and they prefer to live with what they have rather than ask for help from the state" (Clerk SB_3). Interestingly, all publics are not perceived equally in that respect, and some clerks tend to express a perception of the elderly as more upright and legitimate: "It's really just suppositions... so for the elderly as they are from another generation, for them it's perhaps a shame to call for help" (Clerk SB_2). Another one says: "I think there are some who don't dare, some who are too proud. Especially the generation before, I think, the generation of good workers who came from Italy or Portugal, they're very proud..." (Clerk SB_4). This last quote combines a generational distinction (elderly vs. working age population) with one based on origin, according to which the first generations of migrants from European countries are more "hard-working", and therefore less inclined to apply for benefits, than more recent generations of non-European origin. This clerk also believes that, for the elderly, whose need for support is presented as more documented, access to rights should be promoted and enhanced: "I think we should do more. Here we are a service that is supposed to give rights to people who are in precarious situations, who are either old or disabled, so by definition they need help" (Clerk SB_4). For the elderly, NTU seems to be less a matter of individual responsibility. If, for everyone else, one needs to be vigilant to avoid fraud, senior citizens would deserve to have their access to social rights facilitated. A SB manager justifies this generational distinction in the following way:

"*So we're in a special world [...]. It seems to me that we consume everything and that we... have become part of a world where some of the people on the receiving end also consume social security, like an iPhone, like a pair of shoes from China. Which makes things even more complex, you know? [...] I started working in this office a [long] time ago [...] and my job was to phone up and say: 'Listen, Madam, your pension is very, very low, so if you don't have much money, you can ask for [help]'. And I was greeted with these*

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words: 'Oh well, I'll get by like that, I've never asked anyone for anything, you know, I'll get by'. And then, on the other side, today, we see a world that has changed radically." (Manager SB)

These differences in the clerks' speeches as regards the deservingness of the various publics are not trivial in the sense that SLBs in charge of SB administration for retirees and for low-income households with children have some discretionary power in the way they allocate the benefits. This may involve making more or less extensive requests for documents, having some margin for interpretation where the law is not very specific, for instance having some leeway in calculating the average income to be taken into account when determining the person's eligibility. However, despite this margin of manoeuvre, the difference in treatment of the various SB potential claimants remains marginal, as the formal eligibility criteria and modes of calculation are the same for all publics, elderly and working age population alike. We will see in the next section that this is not the case at the municipal level, where differences between publics based on their relative deservingness are translated in the design of the various programs against NTU.

4. At the local level, the action against non-take-up framed by social policy at the state level as well as deservingness criteria

The overarching goal of municipal social services is to empower individuals towards autonomy. In line with this objective, they insist on the *free adherence* (*libre adhésion*) of the potential beneficiaries, wherein the responsibility for initiating contact with social services is left to the individual autonomous choice. Nonetheless, MSS in the investigated town make a distinction between a population deemed *a priori* autonomous and another deemed *a priori* non-autonomous. The former comprises all individuals of working age (up to 65 years), while the latter encompasses the elderly, generally considered as such from the retirement age onwards. This distinction has materialised institutionally in the creation of two different services: a so-called *senior delegation* (*délégation aux seniors*), responsible for P1, and a so-called *social action delegation* (*délégation à l'action sociale*), who runs P2.

For the MSS, the specificity of the elderly population justifies their special treatment through P1. It stems from their presumed lack of autonomy, perceived as a necessary consequence of their declining physical and cognitive capacities, coupled with their higher exposure to social isolation. For this specific group, a certain degree of proactivity in reaching out and initiating contact, which might be perceived as contrary to the principle of *free adherence*, is considered legitimate and even necessary. A document outlining the objectives of P1 explicitly states that:

"The elderly are a specific population, for whom the risk of isolation is increased due to difficulties in terms of mobility and the gradual loss of autonomy (social, cognitive, in terms of health, etc.)."

When it comes to the working age population, however, the preference for the principle of *free adherence* and the opposition to too proactive an intervention are clearly expressed in some of P2 social workers' speeches. One of them criticises proactivity

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based on its lower efficiency: "going to people's doorsteps to take them by the hand, I don't know if that's the right solution either. We know that things improve when people take responsibility for their own situation" (SW P2_1). Another one explains the stigmatising effects proactivity might have in certain cases:

> *"I have always been in favour of maximizing the means to reach the population in terms of providing information, allowing them to approach us voluntarily if they choose so. This perspective is rooted in my firm conviction, accumulated over years of professional experience, regarding the difficulties individuals face in stepping in a social service. […] Therefore, free adherence is crucial in the sense that we cannot compel individuals to take specific actions." (SW P2_2)*

In this sense, refraining from too much proactivity in initiating contact is meant above all to avoid offending people who might take it as insulting to be offered support. The norm of autonomy is strongly present in the background: proactivity can be perceived negatively because it suggests that the targeted person is not *normal*, in the sense that he or she deviates from the norm of autonomy.

We note that, in this quote, the interviewed social worker distinguishes between two modes of proactivity: one that aims to disseminate information as widely as possible, so as to enable people to make an informed decision on whether to claim or not – which he thinks suitable – and another one that aims to contact people individually and follow them up, which corresponds to what P1 does and would be in his eyes contrary to the principle of free adherence. When asked about their daily practice, P2 social workers emphasise that even a proactive dissemination of information is hard to implement, not due to a lack of will – they are committed to the principle of disseminating information about social rights with a view to facilitating their access, as long as it is not contrary to the principle of free adherence – but to a lack of time and resources. Indeed, a large share of their workload is devoted to the administrative procedures required to meet the demands of cantonal institutions, notably with regard to the supplementary benefits (SB) administration, leaving little room for other activities. This shows that the MSS stance on "*reaching out*" versus "*inviting in*" is not only due to endogenous preferences for free adherence and autonomy but is also constrained by the design of supplementary benefits, whose logic seems more concerned with tackling fraud and undue payment of social benefits and with discouraging claiming through the imposition of heavy administrative procedures, than with reducing NTU.

Beyond the administrative complexity in the policy design of SB and the impact of the norm of autonomy, interviews also show the centrality of deservingness assessment when it comes to allocating resources at the local level: if elderly are more supported in claiming their rights, it is not only because they are considered as less autonomous, but also because they are perceived as more deserving: they have the right mindset towards public support; they are not ill-intended; they have worked hard before, etc. A conception of different sub-groups of the population as more or less deserving of receiving public support is explicit in the response of a P1 social worker to the question what she thinks of the Swiss welfare system:

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"*It's a sensitive point because it affects me a lot. I don't think it's fair at all. For example, I couldn't work at the [cantonal social welfare institution] [...]. For me to find meaning in my work, I work with the elderly, with people who have worked their whole life [...]. I find that some benefits are not fair [...] because there are people who can work and don't, and there are people who are really in need and have to justify themselves. [...]. I've always wanted to work with elderly, because my aim in being a social worker is to feel useful, and to do something for people, to make them autonomous... well, autonomous, you're not going to make them autonomous at 75 but [...] to be really useful, to help, to support, something that makes sense. And I've found that with the elderly, because sometimes these are people who don't really have anyone to support them, and who rely on you to do things and [...] you get a thank you, you see that things are moving forward. I feel useful. It's not like being in an office, where you receive people and say 'OK, here's your cheque to go and get your 300 francs; you haven't found a job, it's okay here!'. I wouldn't feel fulfilled [...]There are profiteers everywhere, including among the elderly, but... I think the best part of social work is working with seniors.*" (SW P1_1)

This social worker explicitly suggests that the elderly are more deserving of help than others, because seniors "have worked all their life"; they "can no longer work", "are really in need", "can no longer be self-sufficient" and they "are grateful" when receiving support. These criteria closely correspond to those identified in the deservingness literature (i.e. control, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need), which has established that the elderly are considered across Europe (whatever the welfare state regime) to be the most deserving (van Oorschot, 2006). These deservingness assessments are reflected in the allocation of resources between the MSS programs, with more resources devoted to seniors than to the general working age population. In this respect, conceiving a group (the elderly) as victims of a natural deficit of autonomy is tantamount to considering them in a situation of real need (*need*) for which they are not responsible (*control*). In the light of the deservingness literature, the emergence of a program for the elderly that stands out for its quality and extensiveness comes as no surprise.

In contrast to the elderly, the deservingness literature has shown that migrants are perceived, according to the same criteria, as the least deserving of receiving public support (van Oorschot, 2000; van Oorschot & Uunk, 2007; Ford, 2015; Thomann & Rapp, 2018). In the case of the town under scrutiny, this raises the question whether a qualitatively similar program designed to promote access to rights for migrants could have raised the same funds, whether from the political authorities and therefore the taxpayers, or from private foundations. If the rationales emphasizing the elderly's deservingness seem to hold across the board, i.e. from the national to the municipal level, symmetrically the reasons underlining the lesser deservingness of migrants also seem to apply across all levels. As we have seen in the previous section, some SB clerks point to a negative evolution of their migrant beneficiaries from the old "good workers from Italy or Portugal" to the more recent extra-European migrants who are presented as less "hard-working" and therefore less deserving. This deservingness rationale can be found in the federal law itself. Indeed, the fact that migrants are less deserving of public assistance than others is objectified in the federal bill on foreigners and integration (*Loi fédérale sur les étrangers et l'intégration*), which stipulates that long-term and substantial receipt of

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social welfare is a legitimate reason for not renewing the residence permit. The message is clear: it is legitimate for nationals – members of the *in-group* – to receive public assistance, but not for foreigners – members of the *out-group*. It is in this sense an expression of "*welfare chauvinism*" (Careja & Harris, 2022), which research has shown to particularly affect people with temporary residence permits (Banting & Koning, 2017). For them, the norm of autonomy, objectified in the federal law, directly competes with their right to social benefits through the mediation of deservingness criteria. One P2 beneficiary stated that such a link between claiming social welfare and taking the risk of losing one's residence permit was explicitly presented to her when she received her temporary permit:

> "*When we applied for the permit, they explained that we had rights but that it was better not to claim them, to prove that we could be economically independent. […] It wasn't compulsory, but it was something they recommended, so that the canton would see that we were independent and not living off the social system. And we stayed with that in mind. And even though we were in serious trouble, we decided to stay that way.*" (Woman 35 y.o._P2)

Faced with this well-documented cause of NTU in Geneva – i.e. the fear of non-renewal of the residence permit in the event of a claim to social welfare – the MSS are powerless and can only emphasise the risks associated with claiming.

At municipal level, then, the action against NTU is constrained by external legislative provisions upper in the policy chain (administrative burdens related to SB administration but also severe restrictions in the federal bill on foreigners). At the same time, the MSS own programs design and implementation modalities are also influenced by differentiated deservingness assessments of their target groups. Therefore, while the MSS team certainly has a general perception of NTU and the need to tackle it that goes against that of the SB administration, their room of maneuver is still constrained by the requirements of the SB device and other federal provisions on the one hand, but also influenced on the other hand by a view on the norm of autonomy and the deservingness criteria, and more precisely on the way it differently applies to diverse target groups, which is similar to that of the SB clerks. Indeed, at both SB and MSS levels, the only dependence on the state which appears to be acceptable – and even expected and encouraged by MSS – is the elderly's, who are deemed *naturally* non-autonomous as well as more deserving. In the following section, we analyse how this also has an impact on the reception process at micro level.

5. Deservingness rationale as a foundation for the reception of social policies at micro level

If a positive perception of deservingness is a prerequisite for legitimising resource-intensive, proactive, and tailor-made action, the implementation of such extensive local action also seems to shape, in turn, the recipients' own perception of their deservingness. Elderly interviewees indeed report that the fact that P1 contacted

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them in the first place made the idea of claiming their rights more acceptable for them. A lady described her first encounter with a P1 social worker as follows:

> "*[Social worker's name] knocked at my door and said: I'm from the town of [town's name], I can help you, I said 'What for?,* '*For the red tape and all that*'*, I said* '*Gladly when I need it, thank you*'." (Woman 91 y.o._P1)

This lady – who describes herself as so independent that "she cannot [imagine] going to a retirement home" and as "too proud [to ask for help], sickly proud" – seems to place herself in the position of receiving a service that has been graciously offered to her, and which she has accepted, but which she could also have refused. This strategy allows her to *save face* in Goffman's words (1974) in a normative context that stigmatises help-seeking, while still receiving support. P1's reaching-out strategy therefore appears to have the effect of relieving the burden (or stigma) of initiating the process of claiming from people who are in need but reluctant to ask for help. Listening to the lady above, it is almost as if she is being supported against her will. This mechanism adds up to the higher perceived legitimacy of a target group who already uses its very identity of elderly to justify receiving help. The lady above, for example, explains: "I'm 90, I have the right to ask for help" (Woman 91 y.o._P1). The age criterion is used by several other P1 beneficiaries to explain why they feel entitled to receive help despite their attachment to independence. It is for example the case of this other lady, aged 94, who, even though she uses a double negation as if to minimise the matter – "I don't think I don't deserve it" – asserts that her age and the fact that she has worked for a long time legitimise her receipt of welfare:

> "*I find that in my situation, as a very old person who had to support oneself, it's quite normal. I've never abused anything... I don't feel I don't deserve it. That's not to say that I only want to be assisted; when I had to, I looked for work, I looked for training, I worked for 15 years, I started at 50.*" (Woman 94 y.o._P1)

This shows how, on top of being internalised by P1 target population, the deservingness rationale is confirmed by the program design and available resources, reinforcing its legitimising effect. Here, the *need*, as well as the *control* and the *reciprocity* criteria are mobilised by beneficiaries to display their own deservingness as elderly.

On the side of those considered the least deserving, namely the working age migrants, the barriers to benefit claiming remain largely the same as before the implementation of P2. The less deserving the target group is perceived to be, the less resources are allocated to promote access to social benefits, and the more minimalist and impersonal the services targeted at them are. Not surprisingly, then, this pattern barely succeeds in countering the self-deprecating trend of a group who has a weak sense of its own deservingness. This applies to the whole P2 potential public of beneficiaries who are of working age – and therefore are expected by social norms and institutions to be autonomous from the state – but it is even more

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salient for migrants. As explained above, these are strongly dissuaded by legislative provisions and official institutions to claim their rights to benefits and services, but they also have the disadvantage to meet fewer deservingness criteria, which reinforces their feeling of being illegitimate support claimers. More specifically, the lack of the *reciprocity* criterion, which has been identified in the literature as the most important to determine migrants' deservingness in the eyes of the general public (Kootstra, 2016) and of the migrants themselves (Osipovic, 2015), is explicitly endorsed in this quote by a lady freshly arrived in Geneva when asked how she feels about asking for help:

> "*Even if I had the permit to be here, I wouldn't feel I have the right to receive social assistance from Switzerland.... I'm Venezuelan, so I don't really have the right to ask for anything. [I would be legitimate to ask] after I've at least worked here for a few years because then I'd feel like 'Ah I've paid at least for my right, I've worked, I've contributed.*" (Woman 28 y.o._P2)

Another P2 beneficiary of foreign origin, who worked for many years in Switzerland, used a completely different tone when explaining how frustrating it was for her not to know how she was going to be supported after her accident insurance stopped covering her expenses:

> "*Personally, I thought we were going to get help, and not be seen as people… I don't know, but I have the impression that all the work we've done, it's not taken into account […]. And now that we're in this situation, [it's like] we've never worked, we've never done anything, and that's something I don't understand.[…] if you look it up, we've worked, I've been working for 15 years, he's been working for 18, and now we find ourselves in a 'go here, go there, go there' situation, that's what I find hard to understand.*" (Woman 45 y.o._P2)

This quote confirms the importance of the *reciprocity* criterion in the migrants' own perception of their deservingness. The inability to mobilise the *reciprocity* criterion, coupled with administrative and language barriers which are higher for newly arrived migrants, makes them less likely to put forward a claim. A program such as P2, with its limited resources and its "inviting in" logic, can hardly alter this dynamic.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we investigated how, and on what ground, actions taken at municipal level to reduce NTU interact with existing laws at federal or cantonal level on the one hand, and with the perceptions of their target population on the other. We have seen that the norm of autonomy and the mobilisation of deservingness criteria are omnipresent at every level of the policy process, i.e. the level of laws and social benefit design; the level of social benefit implementation by SB clerks, but also by social workers active in the MSS; and the micro level of reception by the target populations themselves. Most SB clerks see the fight against NTU either as an issue that does not concern them since they consider themselves as executors of federal laws; or as a threat to public budget or to privacy; or even, in certain cases, as an encouragement to vice: providing for oneself being seen as the adequate behavior

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and NTU being then framed as an appropriate behavior, so to say a solution, not as a problem to be solved. In any case, SB clerks do not call for simplified access to social rights, although they recognise the complexity of the procedures. However, the elderly seem to be an exception. Discourses depict them as people of integrity who, despite having worked hard all their lives and living on a meagre pension, remain proud, resilient, and keen to cope without seeking help from the State. All criteria which resonate with those identified in the literature on the perception of the deservingness of different publics, which showed how the elderly are generally perceived as the most deserving group. Their supposed virtue is then used as the main explanation for their NTU, which is mostly interpreted as a praiseworthy decision. This generational difference in deservingness assessments also provides a background for the differences in the actions against NTU conducted at municipal level: while elderly are perceived as deserving people for whom an additional action to promote their access to social rights is legitimate, other beneficiaries are perceived as autonomous or able to become autonomous, and, therefore, individually targeted proactive action against NTU does not apply to them in the same way. We have also seen how the elderly can get freed from the requirements of the norm of autonomy as they are perceived as naturally non-autonomous due to their age and are therefore deemed more legitimate receivers of resource intensive reaching out and tailor-made programs.

Using the literature on the perception of deservingness, then, allowed us to better understand the contrasted ways to assess the deservingness of various subgroups, emphasising that not only the elderly's presumed need of support and absence of control over their situation of dependency (on the ground of their lack of autonomy) made them more deserving in the eyes of welfare institutions, but also, and very significantly, the *reciprocity* criterion, i.e. the fact that they worked and contributed through paying taxes before receiving help. We also showed that this latter criterion is precisely what many migrants with temporary permits cannot fulfill, which might be an important factor to explain why they are not targeted with such a qualitative and resource-intensive program as P1 by the MSS and why they are discriminated against in their access to social benefits by laws at the federal level. Finally, we showed that the differentiated perception of deservingness contributes to explaining why, in some cases, local interventions against NTU can more efficiently mitigate the effect of discriminatory laws and practices at federal level, while in other cases, such local interventions are of much more limited scope and impact and leave inequality in the access to social rights mostly unchanged. Hence, on the one hand, the perception of the elderly as deserving is internalised by the elderly themselves and materialised in more ambitious and extensive forms of local action against NTU (P1); such local action, with its proactivity, contributes then to reinforce the elderly's sense of deservingness, and, through that, enhances their access to social rights. On the other hand, the lack of perceived deservingness of the population of working age, especially the migrants, results in the MSS

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implementation of a generalist information and orientation-based service (P2), which falls short of meeting the needs of middle-aged people, who in some cases are in very precarious situations, with a limited degree of autonomy that compares with that of elderly. In some cases, P2 could even be said to add another layer of complexity to a system which is already hard to navigate, especially for migrants who lack administrative literacy and knowledge of local institutions.

In conclusion, our results show that local programs introduced to reduce non-take-up are strongly impacted by the norm of autonomy conveyed by state institutions and measures. These, for their part, are influenced by socio-structural and normative parameters (the position of beneficiaries within society, their past contributions, and how these factors shape the way their deservingness is assessed) while at the same time they contribute to reproducing such structural and normative patterns. By this token, local municipal programs whose purported objective is to reduce NTU tend to allocate a disproportionate share of their resources towards those who are perceived as the most deserving although they might not necessarily face the most difficult challenges in accessing their rights, while providing more limited services and resources to others, of working age, who might, in some cases at least, face more urgent situations. Indeed, the dynamics and patterns of NTU observed across sub-groups of the population are rather of a compensatory nature in the case of the elderly, with municipal programs able to counter more successfully the negative impact of federal and cantonal laws and measures, whereas they follow a cumulative disadvantage logic in the case of the working age migrants, with local programs unable to mitigate the negative impact of federal and cantonal measures upper in the policy chain. If our investigation confirms the effectiveness in tackling NTU, already pinpointed in the literature (Boost et al., 2020; van Gestel et al., 2023), of programs reaching out to potential beneficiaries to offer them tailor-made support, it does however also highlight the structural barriers and difficulties opposing an extension of such programs to the entire population. This is an important contribution to the literature on NTU, showing that inequalities in that respect do not only result from individual and social characteristics, but also from how public action – including public action against NTU – is designed and implemented and, aven more significantly, how these individual and social characteristics interact with public action. This demonstrates the high relevance of a multilevel approach to NTU.

Our study eventually raises more general questions of social justice: the very idea of social citizenship (Marshall, 1949) seems to lose most of its substance when a group of individuals – the permanent residents of canton Geneva – share the same formal rights and entitlements but have such a differentiated effective access to them. This issue is bound to remain salient in an increasingly ageing and diverse society, and it seems likely that without an evolution in the normative framework at the institutional and, more broadly, at the socio-structural level, actors and devices mobilised to tackle NTU will have a limited impact and inequalities in the access

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to social rights will be to a large extent reproduced. This issue is not specific to canton Geneva or Switzerland, as any region where institutions convey similar norms of deservingness and autonomy risk producing the same unequal outcomes when trying to reduce NTU. We indeed find similar dynamics at work in Belgium, the United Kingdom and Sweden, where the most proactive measures against NTU all target the elderly, as has been identified in the Belgian research project "Take" (Van Mechelen & Van der Heyden, 2017).

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