

# 17. Migrants and social policy: shifting research agendas

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## INTRODUCTION

New immigration waves gained hold in European countries some 60 years ago. Since then, continuous immigration has increased the ethnic and religious diversity in these countries. These immigration waves reflect a diversity of dynamics, including new opportunities for migrant workers and, not least, how wars and conflicts have displaced an increasing number of people. By the end of 2019, the number reached 79.5 million, meaning approximately 1 per cent of the world's population is displaced according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Many of these migrants have looked towards Europe, and around the peak of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015, the total number of annual applications for asylum to the European Union (EU) peaked at over 1.3 million (Eurostat, 2020). Internally, the enlargement of the EU and its common market has caused work-related migration on an unprecedented scale. Among the EU citizens of working age, 3.3 per cent resided in an EU country other than that of their citizenship in 2019 (Eurostat, 2020). Therefore, the topics of migration and social policy are at the top of the political agenda, and many countries have developed policies to deal with this intersection between migration and social policy (Breidahl, 2017; Koning, 2020; Gschwind, 2021).

In this edited volume, social policy is defined as 'an institutionalized response to social and economic problems' (Béland, 2010: 9). Examining social policies in relation to migration and integration therefore raises crucial questions about the rights of migrants within this institutionalized response, the inclusiveness of social protection systems, and how the conditions migrants are facing shape their life conditions (Koning, 2020; Gschwind, 2021). These topics lie at the heart of the social policy discipline as they lay the foundation for migrants' social citizenship, granting entitlement to social rights that guarantee a basic level of socio-economic and cultural wellbeing (Marshall, 1950). These research themes are less concerned about future

(worst-case) scenarios and more about how institutionalized social policies influence migrants' formal rights, welfare usage, and attitudes. Consequently, social policy scholars are not only interested in how immigration as a phenomenon influences welfare states and social policies in the future, but also the role that social policies play in migrants' everyday life, wellbeing, life prospects, and attitudes. These topics are of particular concern in a European welfare state context, which is characterized by an elaborate system of redistribution and services in place to mitigate social risks like unemployment, sickness, and old age (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Before the turn of the century, these questions did not receive much attention among social policy scholars (Sainsbury, 2006). However, migrants' rights to, usage of, and attitudes towards social policies have gained much attention in social policy debates recently, and research findings on these topics have revealed interesting and nuanced insights we wish to highlight.

## PRELIMINARY DISCUSSIONS: EXTENSION OR DOWNGRADING OF SOCIAL RIGHTS?

Before going in depth with the current research agenda on the social rights of migrants, we start by providing insights on some of the earliest discussions dating back to the early 1990s. At that time, several important studies showed how a number of European countries became more inclusive in terms of migrants' social rights during the 1970s and 1980s. A citizenship-based model of social protection was weakening, as residence became the main criteria for social rights in many questions (Hammar, 1990). Consequently, social rights became equally available to everyone.

These rather optimistic predictions were followed by studies revealing how a stratification of social rights – between citizens and migrants more broadly – took place during the 1990s and 2000s, despite the weakening of the citizenship-based model (Wenzel & Bös, 1997; Morris, 2002; Andersen, 2007; Breidahl, 2017). These studies provided a new but rather scattered picture of the status of social rights of migrants in Western democracies as they focused on a range of different programmes, including housing policies, labour market policies, education, medical care, etc.

One of the most important preliminary theoretical starting points stems from Sainsbury's 2006 article, which was expanded into a book in 2012. This scholarship has been highly influential in terms of bringing discussions on the social rights of migrants to the front of social policy debates. Among other things, Sainsbury (2006, 2012) argued for the importance of combining insights from comparative welfare state research and international migration literature to fully capture the complex patterns of migrants' social rights. This included a more explicit focus on different categories of migrants (entry categories) as

their legal statuses and therefore rights vary considerably across these categories (Söhn, 2013). Asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are the groups that are most vulnerable in terms of social rights. Moreover, newly arrived migrants, most notably refugees, face many additional social rights restrictions compared to other groups (Boucher, 2014; Breidahl, 2017).

## THE FORMAL SOCIAL RIGHTS OF MIGRANTS

Fundamentally, the topic of formal social rights of migrants raises the question of the inclusionary capacity of welfare states (Sainsbury, 2006). This research agenda has expanded considerably over the last decades, reflecting how the topic has increasingly entered the political scene. Recently, new indexes have entered the discussion, providing fertile grounds for systematic cross-country comparisons across time and different migrant groups (e.g., Römer, 2017; Koning, 2020). In terms of the current research agenda on formal social rights, three central debates have recently gained prominence.

The first speaks to the debate on the dualization of social policies between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ that has become a prominent topic in the social policy literature (Emmenegger et al., 2012). Following the long line of research on majority welfare chauvinist attitudes, meaning social rights are granted to in-group members only (Sides & Citrin, 2007), it is an intriguing question whether the social rights provided to migrants reflect these attitudes. At the heart of this debate lies the question of the extent to which the social rights of migrants reflect overall institutional logics of different welfare states. For instance, are universal welfare states, which in general are generous towards in-group members, also more generous towards migrants? Or are generous welfare states more likely to exclude migrants from access to welfare benefits due to fiscal pressures and welfare chauvinism (Römer, 2017; Gschwind, 2021)? Basically, this debate has led to two competing hypotheses prominent within social policy research: the so-called ‘generosity hypothesis’, presuming welfare generosity is positively associated with the social rights of migrants, and the ‘dualization hypothesis’, presuming that welfare generosity is negatively associated with the social rights of migrants (Römer, 2017).

In a 2017 study based on the Immigration Policies in Comparison index, covering 18 states in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development from 1980 to 2010, Römer mainly finds support for the generosity hypothesis by concluding that ‘generous welfare states are more likely to grant immigrants access to welfare benefits, and less generous welfare states are more likely to exclude immigrants from access’ (Römer, 2017: 173). These findings are in line with earlier studies (Sainsbury, 2012; Eugster, 2018) pointing to how migrants in generous welfare states tend to have lower poverty risks. Altogether, it is a prominent finding in the social policy literature, showing that

migrants generally are more likely to gain access to social benefits in generous welfare states (Schmitt & Teney, 2018). However, studies focusing on specific benefit programmes (e.g., unemployment benefit provision) have also challenged these findings. One example is Gschwind (2021), studying the case of unemployment benefit provision for newly arrived migrants, which points to a *negative* relationship between generosity and social protection. Such findings remind researchers that indexes merging many policy programmes bear the risk of neglecting important nuances within different social policy areas.

The second central topic on the formal social rights of migrants concerns the extent to which welfare states differentiate between migrants and native-born citizens in terms of social rights (Koning, 2020). Despite heterogeneity, migrants face specific barriers due to their migrant status (Lafleur & Vintila, 2020; Gschwind, 2021). Hence, numerous studies point to how welfare states are less inclusive towards different categories of migrants compared to natives – especially when it comes to so-called third-country nationals (Breidahl, 2017; Lafleur & Vintila, 2020). These studies point to specific programmes that are less inclusionary towards these groups, for instance, social assistance programmes, pensions, or unemployment benefits. Can the same pattern be identified when welfare programmes across Western democracies are more broadly considered? This question has recently attracted substantial scholarly attention due to the release of the so-called Immigrant Exclusion from Social Programs Index in 2020. This index pays explicit attention to whether different welfare states differentiate in the benefits provided to migrants compared to native-born citizens. The index relies on a mapping of differentiation in benefit extension across 20 Western welfare states, at four moments in time (1990–2015), based on 25 indicators that span seven different social programmes, including tax-paid pensions, health care, contributory unemployment benefits, contributory pensions, housing benefits, social assistance, and active labour market policy (Koning, 2020). However, in an overview article from 2020, Koning shows that not all Western welfare states have moved in a more exclusionary direction. Rather, the results point to large cross-national differences and striking variation across time, place, and social programmes in the extent to which migrants are excluded from social programmes and services (see also Schmitt & Teney, 2018). Norway and Portugal stand out as the most inclusionary countries, where the differences in social rights between migrants and natives are the smallest. At the other end of the scale, we find countries like the United States and Austria being the most exclusionary.

Third, and not least, the question around the social rights of EU citizens also figures as an important topic. This debate has moved to the centre of political debates in many EU countries (Bauböck, 2019; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2019), reflecting several trends, including the United Kingdom's (UK) Brexit vote, an increase in voters supporting anti-EU populist parties, and how the 'welfare

or benefit tourism' debate has entered political decision making. From current research, however, it is difficult to find empirical evidence that intra-EU mobility is driven by widespread 'welfare tourism' (Martinsen & Werner, 2019; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2019). Compared to other migrant categories, migrants from EU countries are privileged in terms of their social rights (Sainsbury, 2012; Koning, 2020), reflecting how EU member states, from the very beginning of European integration, have been obliged to provide the necessary grounds to provide freedom of movement for workers (Hantrais, 2007). This status stems back to the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty whereby 'European Union citizenship has formally become a reality and citizens of European Union Member States are no longer only citizens of the respective Member States, but also "multinational citizens" of the European Union' (Seeleib-Kaiser, 2019).

Despite this formal status, the equal treatment of EU citizens is a contested topic in many EU member states. A number of current studies document how a remarkable stratification of substantial social rights for EU citizens has taken place between different categories of EU citizens (Bruzelius et al., 2017).

## WELFARE USAGE AMONG MIGRANTS

As shown above, studies on migrants' formal social rights demonstrate how welfare states differ in the social rights they grant to newcomers. But what do we know about migrants' actual realization of these rights (Söhn, 2013)? To stress the distinction between formal and substantial social rights, Morris (2002) describes the former as 'civic inclusion' and the latter as 'civic gain'. One dominant research topic focuses on the extent to which migrants make more use of welfare benefits and resources than natives, reflecting how the usage of welfare benefits, particularly unemployment benefits and social assistance, is costly. In 2019, the EU spent around 2699 billion euros on social protection schemes, or 19.3 per cent of the EU's gross domestic product. Migrants tend to be overrepresented in these statistics, though usage varies a lot by origin country, which is why migrants are often a group receiving special attention (Breidahl et al., 2021). Moreover, some studies tend to suggest that welfare usage is strongly related to migrants' integration prospects, as non-take-up of social assistance or unemployment benefits (i.e., a significant number of people who are eligible for these welfare benefits do not use them) can contribute to the poverty spiral of certain migrant groups (Lucas et al., 2021). Economists also speak of moral hazard problems, which are typical for welfare states and have specific implications for migrants' integration chances. Following rational choice theory, accessible welfare states might weaken migrants' incentives to take on the costs of integrating into the receiving society. These costs could be time consuming and include difficult tasks like acquiring a new language or adapting to new norms. On the other hand,

welfare dependency can be a facilitator of integration as it supports migrants in times of need and enables them to take care of their family, but also pay for language courses, school activities, etc. Concerns about migrants' welfare usage are therefore widespread. Research has extensively studied the extent to which migrants make more use of welfare resources than natives (Brücker et al., 2002; Bruckmeier & Wiemers, 2017; Kornstad & Skjerpen, 2018; Roman, 2019; Yilmaz, 2019; Jakubiak, 2020).

Although sociologists and political scientists have a strong interest in the topic of migration and welfare states, the *interplay* between migration and welfare usage was predominately in the hands of economists until the early 2000s (Boeri et al., 2002; Nannestad, 2007). One of the most prominent theories is the Welfare Magnet Theory, according to which people migrate to countries with the highest levels of welfare (Borjas, 1999). In addition, it has been argued that migration to countries with a well-developed welfare state is predominantly negatively self-selected since generous welfare states reduce earning dispersions in economies, making migration more attractive for low-skilled migrants than for high-skilled migrants. This has led to the assumption that welfare usage should be higher in extended welfare states with high levels of low-skilled migration (Nannestad, 2007).

Whereas Borjas (1999) found that people within the United States tend to move to more generous states, the evidence is more mixed in the European case, likely reflecting how studies vary in terms of the studied time periods, countries, and categories of migrants (Martinsen & Werner, 2019; Ponce, 2019; Agersnap et al., 2020).

A related question in social policy debates concerns whether migrants make more use of the welfare state than natives do. Indeed, in most European countries, the share of migrants receiving unemployment benefits and social assistance is significantly higher than among the native population (Brücker et al., 2002; Jakubiak, 2020). Research conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s explained this ethnic gap mainly with ethnic variation in human capital. In most European countries, migrants are lower educated and less likely to find employment, thereby self-selecting into welfare benefits such as social assistance and unemployment benefits (Brücker et al., 2002). Moreover, the ethnic gap in welfare take-up increased significantly in the early 1990s when several European countries received a significant share of refugees (Riphahn, 1998; Fertig & Schmidt, 2001). However, when looking only at households that are eligible for welfare benefits, the pattern changes: in certain countries such as the UK, Australia, Spain, and most notably in Cyprus, migrants display significantly lower welfare dependency than natives (Giulietti, 2014; Jakubiak, 2020). The literature therefore also speaks of non-take-up of welfare benefits (Bruckmeier & Wiemers, 2017; Dewanckel et al., 2021; Lucas et al., 2021).

Recent political developments, such as Brexit or the ‘refugee crisis’, have further inspired scholars to look deeper into group characteristics when studying welfare take-up. Yilmaz (2019), for example, looks at the interplay of social policy and the welfare take-up of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Roman (2019) examines the welfare take-up of Eastern European migrants in the UK. The analysis compares migrants from countries belonging to the EU8 enlargement in 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) to migrants from the EU2 enlargement in 2014 (Bulgaria and Romania). Although different social policies applied to these groups, impacting their labour market chances, Roman (2019) finds no difference between EU8 and EU2 migrants with regards to their welfare behaviour. After establishing the status quo in the early 1990s, follow-up research was interested in whether migrants’ welfare dependency changes over time. Whereas research in the late 1990s finds that the longer migrants reside in the host country, the less likely they are dependent on welfare assistance (Brücker et al., 2002), more recent research suggests that this pattern might vary between migrant groups: Kornstad and Skjerpen (2018) also find a decreasing welfare usage over time, however, only for refugees. Labour migrants, on the other hand, are more likely to make use of welfare benefits the longer they stay in the host country. Again, these studies show that welfare behaviour not only depends on the migrant group in question, but also on the context which varies between countries and changes over time.

Altogether, these studies suggest that welfare take-up among migrants is a complex topic and depends on several factors including time, host country, origin country, and several other migrant-specific characteristics such as language skills and education.

## MIGRANT ATTITUDES TO AND KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIAL BENEFITS AND THE WELFARE STATE

Studying migrants’ attitudes to social benefits and the welfare state is a natural last step after covering formal rights and take-up rates, as this provides insights into how migrants view social benefits and what they know about them. This is a topic that has received increased scholarly attention in recent years. Three streams of research are of particular interest.

The first stream of research focuses on how migrants view the welfare state and aims primarily at testing established theories, such as the self-interest theory on migrant populations, trying to understand what migrants living in Europe think about specific policies or the welfare state in general (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2015). These studies reflect the significant growth in social policy research around integration and assimilation since the turn of the century (Breidahl, 2017). For instance, several studies are based on the idea

that if migrants have different attitudes to what benefits the state should grant to whom and on what basis, then it might challenge the fundamental structure of welfare states (see, e.g., Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2015 for that kind of framing). This is especially relevant in many Western European countries where migrants are becoming a larger part of the population and eventually also the electorate (Eurostat, 2020).

Therefore, studies have looked into general support for the welfare state (Dancygier & Saunders, 2006; Galle & Fleischmann, 2020), the preferred role of government in providing welfare (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2015; Schmidt-Catran & Careja, 2017; Breidahl et al., 2021), and attitudes towards specific social policies like unemployment, childcare, and health care (Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017; Renema & Lubbers, 2019; Breidahl et al., 2021; Seibel & Renema, 2021). Most of these studies are interested in explaining the differences between migrants and natives in their attitudes towards the welfare state (also see Chapter 13 by van Oorschot, Laenen, Roosma, and Meuleman, this volume). Generally, migrants show greater support for the welfare state than natives do (except for health care; see Seibel & Renema, 2021), which can mainly be explained by their lower socio-economic status. However, migrants' welfare state attitudes converge to the native average over time, supporting the notion that migrants adapt their attitudes to the host country (Breidahl & Larsen, 2016).

The second stream of social policy literature focuses on which social rights migrants think different migrant groups should have. This part of the literature takes its starting point in the debates on 'benefit tourism' or the 'welfare magnet' (Borjas, 1999), referring to the fear that migrants might be attracted by higher levels of benefits in their new receiving countries compared to their origin countries, and therefore be less inclined to work. This debate especially blossomed with the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, as it gave the citizens of new Eastern European member countries free movement inside the EU. As migrants are seen to be some of the least deserving of access to social benefits by the majority population (van Oorschot, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2020), this has been argued to lead to welfare chauvinism, suggesting a part of the native population prefers to reserve social benefits for natives, excluding migrants (Andersen, 2007; Bay et al., 2016; see also Chapter 18 by Greve and Paster, this volume). This literature again builds on the current debates within the field, but also turns them on their head by asking whether migrants prefer social benefits for all migrants, or whether they themselves also acquire welfare chauvinistic attitudes.

The general finding is that migrants support what Kremer (2016) calls a 'conditional welfare state' for migrants, where access should depend more on contribution than on need. This is found in studies conducted across Europe, using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Kolbe & Crepaz, 2016;



Degen et al., 2019). The literature further finds that the level of contribution is generally perceived to be high from the migrants' own group, while other migrant groups are viewed as contributing less (Hedegaard & Bekhuis, 2019). Combined, the results thus show that both migrants and natives have, to some degree, what could be described as welfare chauvinistic attitudes, as there seems to be little support for unconditional access.

The third and most recent major debate in the literature concerns what migrants know about social benefits and how to access them. This debate has its roots in welfare domains where migrants, on average, make significantly lower use of welfare benefits than natives, namely health care and childcare (O'Donnell et al., 2007; Migge & Gilmartin, 2011; Seibel, 2019, 2021). One assumption, though hardly tested, is that migrants underuse certain welfare resources because they lack the knowledge to do so (Seibel, 2019, 2021). In addition, one study in the Netherlands also looks at migrants' rights regarding their access to pensions, unemployment benefits, and social assistance and finds that migrants know surprisingly little about these programmes (Renema & Lubbers, 2019). Since migrants' knowledge about their social rights depends very strongly not only on their migrant status but also on the welfare domain, this area of social policy research seems to be more fragmented as the studies focus on different groups of migrants. Some studies focusing on how migrant workers experience the welfare state find that they rarely know much about the welfare state or specific welfare programmes. Instead, knowledge often comes with integration into the host society and changing needs, e.g., losing one's job and needing unemployment benefits or becoming a parent and needing childcare (Seibel, 2019, 2021; De Jong & De Valk, 2020). Yet other studies focusing on asylum seekers find that migrants are quite knowledgeable about welfare programmes, though they are somewhat disappointed about the level of service (O'Donnell et al., 2007; Migge & Gilmartin, 2011). Combined, these studies suggest that future social policy research needs to consider that migrants come from very different countries, have very different socio-economic positions in society, and different legal statuses, in order to assess migrants' knowledge about accessing social benefits adequately.

## CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

The institutional framework of social policies for migrants represents a politically conflicted area filled with inherent dilemmas – competing concerns for the protection of national borders and deterrence on the one hand, and the inclusion of newcomers and ensuring human wellbeing on the other. These concerns are difficult to reconcile. That the social rights of migrants are politically conflicted also reflects the prominence of other key social policy debates on 'benefit tourism' and 'welfare magnets' stating how migration decisions are

made based on the relative generosity of the receiving nation's social benefits (Borjas, 1999). As we have shown in this chapter, it is debatable whether this is what motivates migrants. Instead, we have directed attention towards research on migrants' rights to, usage of, and attitudes towards social policies. These areas deserve to be highlighted as they lie at the heart of social policy scholarship on migration and contain a number of interesting and important research insights. Although this research agenda has expanded considerably over the last decades, important questions remain unanswered, which point towards ways of moving social policy research in this area forward.

To start, social policy research is challenged to conclude something definitive about the social rights of migrants, as their social rights differ depending on several factors, including their migration status, the host country, their length of stay, etc. Moreover, the literature measures social rights in different ways and focuses on different welfare programmes. The development of indexes partially tries to solve these issues. However, there seems to be a trade-off between overall standardized indexes that cover a number of social policy areas versus studies that go in depth on specific programmes. Hence, as demonstrated in the empirical findings by Gschwind (2021), the inclusive role of social policy programmes depends on which programmes we are focusing on. Moreover, insights from indexes are not always updated (most indexes end in 2010 and 2015). Therefore, we do not know much about what has happened after the high influx of asylum seekers and refugees from 2015/2016 and onwards. Keeping social policy and migration and integration indexes up to date is thus crucial for future social policy research. Moreover, we are still missing insights into why some migrants refrain from using certain welfare resources, whereas others seem to overuse them. Many studies, mainly conducted by economists, use valuable and extensive data on both the macro and micro levels. These studies, however, often lack an understanding of migrants' own perceptions and rationales behind their decision of whether to make use of certain welfare resources.

Studies of how migrants view the welfare state and social benefits are still in their infancy and there is much work to do in expanding the general understanding in this field. This is especially the case for studies of migrants' knowledge about the welfare state. Another significant scholarly gap is geographical. Most of the studies included here focus on Northern or Western Europe. Therefore, we believe there is much to gain by expanding scholarly attention towards Eastern and Southern Europe, where countries have different migration patterns and attitudes towards migrants are often more sceptical (Senik et al., 2009). Similarly, a more explicit focus on the status of migrants might benefit the social policy research agenda in the future as their rights are influenced by legal status (Sainsbury, 2012). However, more in-depth and nuanced insights on these differences remain absent. Finally, the future

social policy research agenda could gain from linking different research areas together, including the extent to which dualization trends within the welfare state might also affect how migrants view the welfare state and their role in it. If the observed dualization trends, more prevalent in some countries than in others, continue to drift apart, how will it affect migrants' views about the welfare state, their national identification, and their role in society in general?

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