9   The Street-Level Activation of the Unemployed Remote and Very Remote from the Labour Market

The Dutch Case

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Social assistance recipients are an important target group of welfare-to-work policies in many countries. Compared to recipients of unemployment benefits, they are considered more difficult to employ. Social assistance schemes often function as safety-net schemes for those people who are not, or no longer, entitled to other benefits such as unemployment benefits. Thus social assistance recipients include people without any or without a recent work history as well as long-term unemployed people who exhausted unemployment benefit entitlements—and both the absence of a (recent) work history and long-term unemployment increase people's vulnerability in the labour market. In addition, long-term unemployed people are often confronted with problems besides their unemployment that affect their labour-market opportunities as well, such as debts, health problems or family problems.

Nevertheless, the social assistance population is a heterogeneous population. Even though 'on average' social assistance recipients may be classified as a vulnerable group on the labour market, their employability and labour-market distance are diverse. Of course, features of social assistance schemes are an important determinant in defining the characteristics of the people who are entitled to and receive social assistance (Saraceno, 2002). Therefore, generalized cross-country statements about these characteristics should be made with caution. Nevertheless, it is not unusual in academic and policy debates to distinguish three groups of social assistance recipients in terms of their labour-market distance. Some groups are 'job ready'; that is, they are considered ready to accept a job when job opportunities become available. Some are considered remote from the labour market: they are considered to be able to (re-)enter the labour market in the foreseeable future if adequate (activation) support is provided. And some are seen as people very remote from the labour market who are considered unlikely to enter the labour market soon (usually, this means within six months or a year). Whereas some countries neglect the latter group in activation policies as it is considered 'inefficient' to invest in their employability, others introduced activation policies focused on promoting social participation (rather than labour-market participation) on the short-term and, possibly, labour-market participation in the future (see Rice, 2015).

    This chapter focuses on activation support offered to Dutch social assistance recipients considered remote or very remote from the labour market. The chapter is based on empirical research among frontline workers responsible for activating these groups of social assistance recipients in 14 Dutch local welfare agencies. In the Netherlands, local welfare agencies are the municipal agencies that are responsible for administering social assistance and for activating social assistance recipients. The argument in this chapter runs as follows. Nowadays, Dutch social assistance policy stipulates that all social assistance recipients of working age should be activated and have obligations to participate in activation. During the last two decades, successive Dutch governments gradually decreased the options of local welfare agencies to exempt social assistance recipients of working age from the work obligation and the obligation to participate in activation—and those exempted from these obligations often involved people considered very remote from the labour market. Thus social assistance recipients remote and very remote from the labour market have become more similar in terms of the importance formal activation policies attach to their activation and in terms of the pressure exerted on them to promote participation. Nevertheless, our research showed that welfare-to-work *practices* look quite different for both groups. Frontline workers responsible for people very remote from the labour market work under considerably different conditions of work than those responsible for clients remote from the labour market. In contrast to formal policy rhetoric, at the frontlines of local welfare agencies the activation of unemployed people remote from the labour market is given priority over the activation of those very remote from the labour market. At the same time we found quite some variation among local welfare agencies in our study, which shows that local policy decisions and circumstances (in short, local contexts) matter. In sum, the chapter argues that frontline welfare-to-work practices are influenced by a complex set of context factors, that these factors include but are not limited to national formal policies and that these 'other context factors' shape frontline practices in ways that 'redefine' social policies in directions for which no explicit justification can be found in formal policies.

    The chapter is structured as follows. The next section briefly describes the research project that provided the data presented in this chapter. Then the context of frontline work is analysed, following the analytical model introduced in Chapter 1. The third section analyses and explores frontline practices and their outcomes, comparing local service provision for social assistance recipients remote and very remote from the labour market and relating them to the various contexts distinguished in the analytical model underlying this book. The final section discusses the main findings and reflects on how these can be interpreted and explained.

The Research Project

During the last decade, policy makers as well as local welfare agency managers in the Netherlands have developed an increasing awareness of the role of frontline workers in the delivery of activation to social assistance recipients. Disappointing results of welfare-to-work in general and of marketized service

provision models specifically stimulated a debate about the professionalization of the frontline delivery of activation (Van Berkel, Van der Aa & Van Gestel, 2010). Our research project took place against the background of this development: a consortium was created including researchers and practitioners that aimed to investigate the nature of the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work and to identify opportunities and constraints for professionalizing this type of frontline work.

In the context of the project, qualitative and quantitative research methods were combined. The qualitative research took place in three local welfare agencies; the quantitative research involved 14 local welfare agencies, including the three agencies where we did qualitative research. The sample included large and small local welfare agencies. It should be noted that the agencies involved in our study were not selected at random and that the results of the quantitative study cannot be considered statistically representative for frontline work in Dutch local welfare agencies in general. Nevertheless, *grosso modo* our findings are in line with those of other studies of frontline workers in Dutch local welfare agencies (Regioplan, 2012; Rice, 2015; Van der Aa, 2012). So without claiming statistical generalizability, our research project revealed insights into frontline work that seem to be not merely typical for the agencies in our study.

In the qualitative part of the study, 19 frontline workers providing welfare-to-work to clients remote or very remote from the labour market were interviewed. Based on the results of these interviews as well as a review of the academic literature, an online survey was developed. All frontline workers involved in the activation of social assistance recipients considered to be remote or very remote from the labour market in the 14 agencies in our sample were invited to complete the survey. The response was 52 per cent (n = 163). Of the respondents, 30 per cent were male, 70 per cent female. Respondents' average age was 44 years. On average, respondents had been involved in providing welfare-to-work services for 11 years.

The Contexts of Activation Frontline Work

Dutch Social Assistance Policy

Although reforms aimed at activating social assistance recipients in the Netherlands started in the late 1980s and early 1990s, efforts to activate the unemployed very remote from the labour market lagged behind. During the 1990s, exempting people considered very remote from the labour market (such as the older unemployed, single parents with young children, social assistance recipients with considerable social and personal problems) from the work and activation obligations was widespread practice in local welfare agencies,[1] backed up by social assistance policies in those days that allowed local welfare agencies to exempt specific categories of people as well as individuals in vulnerable positions from these obligations. Since the mid-1990s, however, this situation started to change. Options to exempt social assistance recipients of working age

from the work and activation obligations were phased out and activation programmes aimed at people very remote from the labour market were introduced; subsequently, the obligatory nature of these programmes was strengthened. For example, social assistance reforms in 1996 provided local welfare agencies room to experiment with what were called 'social activation' programmes that aimed at promoting the social participation of this target group, mainly in voluntary work and on a voluntary basis. The most recent reform of social assistance, the Act on Participation of 2015, gives municipalities the possibility to oblige social assistance recipients very remote from the labour market to 'do something in return' for social assistance entitlements, and this *quid pro quo* explicitly includes voluntary work and other unpaid activities, lending the concept of 'voluntary work' a rather ambiguous character. Current social assistance policies hardly distinguish anymore between the obligations of people remote and very remote from the labour market, even though the content of these obligations may differ. So in terms of formal social policies, practically all Dutch social assistance recipients of working age are subject to the same obligatory activation regime nowadays.

Social Assistance Governance

In the academic literature on welfare-to-work, the Netherlands gained reputation (and sometimes notoriety) for being one of the first EU countries to introduce a far-reaching marketization of the provision of activation services (Struyven & Steurs, 2005; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005). Another characteristic of the Dutch governance of social assistance has received far less attention, although it is of similar—if not greater—importance: the high level of deregulation and decentralization of welfare-to-work policies, combined with a new public management style funding system for municipal social assistance payments (see Minas, Wright & Van Berkel, 2012; Rice, 2015). In 2004, a new Social Assistance Act was introduced that brought significant deregulation and decentralization. This involves the content of local activation policies: national policies provided options for activation (such as wage subsidies) but it is up to municipalities and their local welfare agencies to decide about the nature of activation services provided locally. Decentralization and deregulation also involve governance models for the provision of services: the obligation—which was part of the introduction of service marketization in the early 2000s—imposed on municipalities to buy a significant proportion of local activation services on the market was abolished in 2006 and since then, municipalities are free to decide whether or not they want to marketize activation services and to what extent. Finally, decentralization and deregulation affect operational aspects of the provision of welfare-to-work, such as the assessment of social recipients' labour-market distance. Even though it is common practice in Dutch municipalities to distinguish the three types of client groups mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, and although several attempts have been made to introduce

standardized profiling tools, it is up to local welfare agencies to decide upon the procedure used to profile social assistance recipients and diagnose their employability and labour-market distance. In our study, we found a variety of profiling methods: sometimes agencies used more or less standardized and validated assessment tools, sometimes frontline workers themselves developed an assessment tool, and sometimes it was up to individual frontline workers to decide upon how clients are assessed. As a consequence, disagreements about assessment outcomes are not uncommon, both between workers within local welfare agencies and between these agencies and external providers (Van Berkel, 2014). It should be emphasized that social assistance benefits remain subject to national regulation. Interestingly, recent years witnessed a centralization of regulations concerning sanctions that mainly aimed to introduce a stricter sanction regime.

The policy autonomy that municipalities acquired with the deregulation and decentralization of activation policies was accompanied by an increase of their financial responsibilities. Before the introduction of the 2004 Social Assistance Act, local social assistance expenses (that is, expenses on benefits; activation is funded through a separate budget) were reimbursed by national government. In terms of new public management discourse, municipalities and their local welfare agencies had no incentives to reduce social assistance expenses, either by providing effective activation services or by strict gatekeeping. A new funding system of local social assistance expenses intended to create these incentives. Municipalities nowadays receive a yearly budget for benefit expenses. When municipalities are successful in keeping numbers of social assistance recipients low and spend less than this budget, the surplus they end up with can be spent on other local provisions. Municipalities that spend more on benefits than the budget they receive from national government will have to find other local funds for financing benefits (special regulations are in place in cases where budget shortages exceed 10 per cent of the allocated budget). Although principally, municipalities can take the political decision to run the risk of overspending, decreasing municipal funds as a result of the crisis and national austerity policies made this option less likely as they simply left municipalities with less budgetary room for manoeuvre. Therefore, the reduction of numbers of social assistance recipients turned into a core priority for local authorities. At the same time, national government has reduced the budget available for activation services significantly (as mentioned before, separate budgets exist for social assistance benefits and activation services): whereas in 2006 approximately 1,6 billion euros were available for municipal activation, the budget for 2015 amounted to around 0,7 billion euros—a significant cut that took place in a context of rising unemployment (early 2015: 8 per cent) and rising numbers of social assistance recipients (early 2015: around 400,000 people). Evidently, the crisis put an end to the Dutch reputation of being a 'big spender' on activation.

The Organizational Context of Frontline Work

Whereas the policy and governance contexts of the frontline delivery of activation analysed earlier focused mainly on national policies and regulations, this subsection on the organizational context looks at the 14 local welfare agencies involved in our study specifically. For although decisions concerning organizational issues take place within certain constraints (such as resources available for frontline service delivery, the numbers of social assistance recipients in municipalities and their characteristics), they are not subject to national regulation and take place at the local level. Following the discussion of organizational context characteristics in Chapter 2, three such characteristics are discussed here: job design, caseload and performance management of frontline workers. As local decision-making room makes the existence of local variation likely, our analysis of the organizational context will look at the overall picture in all 14 local welfare agencies in our study as well as pay attention to local variation by comparing the five largest agencies in our sample.[2]

When we look at job design, two issues are important: the client groups' frontline workers provide services for and their tasks (providing activation services only or combining the provision of activation with benefit administration; see Table 9.1).

The figures in Table 9.1 show that in our study, about a quarter of frontline workers worked for clients remote from the labour market and an almost similar proportion worked for clients very remote from the labour market. The others had a mixed client group. Sixty-three per cent of frontline workers in our study were responsible for providing activation services only, the others combine activation and benefit administration (workers exclusively responsible for benefit administration were not included in our study). Workers working with clients very remote from the labour market were most likely to combine the tasks of providing activation and benefit administration. Local variation is considerable. In two large agencies in our sample, only 20–25 per cent

Table 9.1 Job Design (Tasks and Client Group) of Frontline Workers Responsible for Activation

Client group	Tasks		Total
	Activation only	*Activation + benefit administration*	
Remote from the labour market	17%	7%	24%
Very remote from the labour market	15%	11%	26%
Mixed	31%	18%	49%
Total	63%	36%	99%

of frontline workers with activation tasks specialized in providing activation services without being responsible for benefit administration. In two other large agencies, a very different situation existed: 95 per cent of frontline workers in these agencies with activation responsibilities had no benefit administration related tasks.

The average caseload of frontline workers in our study was 105 clients, but there were significant differences in size of caseload depending on workers' client groups. Workers working with clients remote from the labour market had an average caseload of 77, workers working with clients very remote from the labour market of 170. Workers with a mixed client group have an average caseload of 84. In pure quantitative terms—and assuming that other work characteristics are similar—this means that workers working with clients remote from the labour market had more time for providing each individual client in their caseload activation support than workers working with clients very remote from the labour market. This is even more so when we take workers' tasks (see Table 9.1) into account: workers working with clients very remote from the labour market more often combined benefit and activation related tasks, thus combining a higher caseload with a higher workload.

Here again, local variation is considerable. Comparing the five largest agencies, overall caseloads varied between 58 and 181. Variation was particularly large when looking at caseloads of frontline workers working for clients very remote from the labour market, but in all large agencies, these frontline workers' caseloads were at least twice as large compared with frontline workers working with people remote from the labour market.

Performance management of frontline workers was rather usual in the local welfare agencies in our study: 60 per cent of our respondents worked with targets concerning the number of clients that needed to find a job or start voluntary work; in some cases, workers had both types of targets. Not surprisingly, the nature of the client group workers work for and the type of targets were related (see Table 9.2). Performance management was most common among workers working for clients remote from the labour

Table 9.2 Performance Targets of Frontline Workers

Client group	Percentage of workers having performance targets re. number of clients finding a job	Percentage of workers having performance targets re. number of clients starting voluntary work
Remote from the labour market	68	10
Very remote from the labour market	30	35
Mixed	60	9

market. For these workers as well as for workers with a mixed client group, performance targets mainly (though not exclusively) focused on the number of clients that needed to find a paid job: 68 per cent of workers working with clients remote from the labour market and 60 per cent of workers having a mixed client groups had this type of targets. The targets were more diverse for workers working with clients very remote from the labour market: about a third had performance targets regarding the number of clients that should find a paid job, and a more or less similar proportion of them had performance targets concerning the number of clients that should start voluntary work.

Comparing the five largest agencies we see that the proportions of workers with performance targets differed, ranging from one-third to over 80 per cent of workers.

Occupational Context

Educational backgrounds of Dutch frontline workers involved in providing welfare-to-work to social assistance recipients are rather diverse: frontline work is not dominated by one specific professional group. This diversity clearly manifested itself in the educational profiles of the respondents in our survey; see Table 9.3. The most common educational profiles were social work (24 per cent of respondents), social administration (18 per cent of respondents) and personnel and labour (17 per cent of respondents; this type of professional training prepares students for Human Resource Management functions in organizations). This leaves us with a large category of workers with another educational background (41 per cent), including workers with no specific professional education and workers with university degrees in, among others, psychology, economics or law. Educational diversity may show that local welfare agency managers are still in the process of discovering what educational profile best fits the job requirements of frontline workers involved in activation. However,

Table 9.3 Educational Profile of Frontline Workers Working for Different Client Groups

Educational profile	Client group			Total
	Remote from the labour market	Very remote from the labour market	Mixed	
Social Work	30%	33%	16%	24%
Social Administration	12%	21%	19%	18%
Personnel & Labour	20%	7%	21%	17%
Other Types of Education	38%	39%	44%	41%

it also tells us something about the diversity of tasks and client groups of local welfare agencies: they need to administer social assistance benefits, activate unemployed social assistance recipients and provide services and support to a target group that is very heterogeneous in terms of labour-market distance and needs. Comparing the educational profiles of workers working with clients remote and very remote from the labour market, we see a somewhat stronger 'social administration' profile among the latter group of workers, whereas the first group has a somewhat stronger 'personnel and labour' educational profile. Social workers are more or less equally represented among both groups of workers.

Local preferences seem to matter again, given the diversity of educational profiles of workers in the five largest agencies in our sample. This is especially clear when we look at the proportions of frontline workers with a social work background that ranged from eight to 52 per cent of frontline workers in these agencies.

Most workers (almost 78 per cent) acquired a degree at an institute for Higher Professional Education. The others have a university degree (8 per cent) or completed training at an institute for Intermediate Professional Education (14 per cent). In this respect as well, local welfare agencies' personnel policies are diverse. Looking again at the five largest agencies, the proportion of workers with an Intermediate Professional Education background ranged from 4 to 31 per cent, the proportion of workers with a Higher Professional Education background from 66 to 94 per cent and the proportion of workers with a university degree from 3 to 21 per cent. Interestingly, the two agencies employing the lowest and highest percentage of workers with a university degree are both located in university cities.

Contrary to what is the case in some other countries (such as Denmark; see Chapter 10), professional associations of frontline workers play no role in political and public debates on Dutch welfare-to-work policies and their delivery up until now. Only recently (2012), a Professional Association of Client Managers was established—client manager is the usual job title of frontline activation workers in the Netherlands. On the website of the association, its aim is described as "to promote professionalization and to guard the quality of practice of professionals who implement social policies in a municipal organization and whose task is the participation or re-integration of citizens" (www.debvk.nl; our translation). As will be clear from workers' diverse educational background, the association organizes people working in a specific occupation rather than people with a specific professional training. Because the association was founded during the period in which our survey data were collected, we have no data on frontline workers' membership of the association.

To summarize this discussion of the organizational and occupational contexts, Table 9.4 provides a comparative overview of the main characteristics of the contexts in which workers working for clients remote and very remote from the labour market work.

Table 9.4 Comparing the Organizational and Occupational Contexts of Workers Working with Clients Remote and Very Remote from the Labour Market

Context element	Remote from the labour market	Very remote from the labour market
Job design	Comparatively somewhat more often activation only	Comparatively somewhat more often combining activation and income provision
Caseload size	Below average	Above average
Performance targets	Comparatively somewhat more common	Comparatively somewhat less common
Type of performance targets	Mainly number of clients finding a job	Mix: number of clients finding a job or number of clients finding voluntary work
Educational profile	Comparatively stronger representation of workers with personnel and labour profile	Comparatively stronger representation of workers with social administration profile

Activation Practices and Outcomes

After having analysed the context of frontline activation work in local welfare agencies in the former section, this section will look at the practical delivery of activation and its outcomes. Again, we are specifically interested in the way in which services are provided to unemployed social assistance recipients remote and very remote from the labour market. As our research studied frontline workers, we focus on what frontline workers do for their clients rather than on experiences of clients. This section again will pay attention to both the overall picture arising from our survey and to local variation on the basis of a comparison of the five largest local welfare agencies in our study.

Diversity of Services

We start our analysis of activation practices by looking at the diversity of services that frontline workers provide to their clients in finding a paid job or voluntary work, in mediation to jobs or voluntary work and in providing social care. For example, where services aimed at job finding and mediation are concerned we asked frontline workers whether they look for vacancies for their clients, forward vacancies to clients, contact employers to see if vacancies are available, help clients in writing an application letter, accompany clients during job interviews, or use other ways to find jobs or provide job mediation services. Our data show that frontline workers working with clients remote from the labour market offered significantly more diverse services in the area of job finding and mediation than frontline workers working with clients very remote from the labour market. The opposite is the case when we look at the provision of social care services. Somewhat surprisingly, no differences were found in the diversity of services aimed at starting voluntary work. One might expect that

frontline workers working for clients very remote from the labour market provide a larger variety of services in this area given the nature of their client group and given the fact that they more often have performance targets regarding the number of clients that should start voluntary work, but this was not the case.

Comparing the five largest local welfare agencies, we found considerable differences in the diversity of services offered to clients in all three areas. Service diversity most strongly varied where services aimed at starting voluntary work were concerned. In other words, where clients live matters in terms of the diversity of services offered to them.

Caseloads, Caseload Reduction and Selection

In the aforementioned discussion, we saw that frontline workers who work for clients very remote from the labour market have a considerably higher caseload than workers working for clients remote from the labour market. Against this background, the findings concerning diversity of services that were presented earlier may be surprising. One might expect that high caseloads result in lower service diversity across the board and that workers working with clients very remote from the labour market offer their clients services of lower diversity than workers with clients who are remote from the labour market. However, the findings presented earlier revealed a more mixed picture. One of the reasons for this is that frontline workers do not (or not only) deal with high caseloads by distributing their resources more or less equally across their clients. They (also) use another strategy: they reduce the number of clients that actually receive activation support at a given point in time. As was elaborated elsewhere (Van Berkel & Knies, 2016), reducing caseloads is an effective strategy in that it mitigates the negative relationship between caseload size and service diversity. Although all frontline workers use the strategy of reducing their caseloads, Table 9.5 shows that its consequences are most far-reaching for clients of frontline workers working for people very remote from the labour market: 56 per cent of these workers' clients are (temporarily) parked and do not receive activation support, compared to 22 per cent of clients of workers working for clients remote from the labour market.

Table 9.5 Frontline Workers' Total and Reduced Caseloads

Client group	Total caseload	Reduced caseload	Reduced caseload as percentage of total caseload	Parked caseload as percentage of total caseload
Remote from the labour market	77	60	78%	22%
Very remote from the labour market	170	75	44%	56%
Mixed	84	63	75%	25%

It is not merely caseload size that seems to drive frontline workers to reduce their active caseloads in providing welfare-to-work services. Their tasks play a role as well: frontline workers who combine activation support and income provision reduce their activation caseloads more severely compared to their colleagues with activation tasks only, which may probably be explained by the fact that frontline workers combining both tasks spend more time on administration and less on contact with clients. As this combination of tasks is most common among workers working for people very remote from the labour market, here again the proportions of clients very remote from the labour market that are actually receiving activation support are affected most.

Given the variety in workers' caseloads and tasks that we observed when comparing the five largest agencies (see the earlier discussion), it is not surprising that the proportions of clients that are (temporarily) being parked differ significantly across these agencies as well. However, the general picture is valid for each single one of them: frontline workers working with clients very remote from the labour market park larger proportions of their clients than frontline workers working with clients remote from the labour market.

One of the issues arising when selection processes take place, as is the case when workers reduce their caseloads and park clients, is what selection criteria are used (see Chapter 2). Unfortunately, we do not have administrative data on the characteristics of clients that are being served and parked. We did ask workers, however, what criteria they use in selecting the clients they serve. The frontline workers who reduce their caseloads selected the following client groups most frequently (respondents could mention more groups): clients who are considered to need activation most (44 per cent), clients who are considered motivated (44 per cent) and clients with whom results can be realized quickly (40 per cent). We found no significant differences when comparing workers working with people remote and very remote from the labour market.

Results: Job Finding and Starting Voluntary Work

Workers working for clients remote from the labour market realize results that are almost twice as high as those of their colleagues working for clients very remote from the labour market (of workers' *total* caseloads, 46 per cent and 26 per cent of these workers' clients, respectively, managed to find a paid job or start voluntary work during the year preceding our survey).[3] A quite similar 'performance gap' appears when we look at the five largest local welfare agencies only. What is most striking when we compare these agencies is that some agencies perform considerably better than others, and this involves both groups of frontline workers: in one agency, both groups of workers perform considerably above the average; in two others, they perform considerably below the average. Interestingly, the best performing agency provides the highest diversity of services but workers in this agency do not have the lowest average caseload. Workers working in the agencies where results are lowest provide the lowest diversity of services and have the highest average caseloads.

Not surprisingly, when we operationalize results as the proportion of workers' *reduced* rather than *total* caseload that found a job or started voluntary work, the 'performance gap' between both groups of frontline workers becomes considerably smaller (58 per cent and 45 per cent of the reduced caseloads of workers working for clients remote and very remote from the labour market, respectively). Although we realize that causal inferences based on these crude measures are very tricky, this seems to indicate that caseload sizes explain part of the variance in the performance of both groups of workers—of course, a full explanation is more complex given, among others, the different client groups workers work for and the different results that are at stake.

Sanctions

Another noteworthy difference between both groups of frontline workers concerns the proportion of clients that they sanction for not complying with activation obligations. Workers working with clients remote from the labour market sanctioned a significantly larger proportion of their total caseload (9 per cent) than workers working with clients very remote from the labour market (4 per cent). An explanation for different sanction rates may be that workers working with clients very remote from the labour market service smaller proportions of their clients: clients that are parked are not only monitored less closely but also have fewer obligations to fulfil, as no activation support is given to them, and this may reduce the likelihood of sanctioning. Support for this explanation can be found when we compare the proportions of both groups of workers' *reduced* caseloads that were sanctioned: differences between both groups are no longer significant then.

Sanction frequencies differ considerably across the five largest agencies. Overall, sanction rates vary between four and 15 per cent of workers' total caseloads in these agencies. Differences become somewhat smaller but remain considerable when we calculate sanction rates on the basis of workers' reduced caseloads (ranging from 7 to 17 per cent). Although we did not investigate this issue, we consider it rather unlikely that these differences can be explained by client characteristics only. Apart from these differences in overall sanctioning rates, analysing sanctioning rates among the two groups of frontline workers revealed a diverse picture as well when the five agencies are compared. In all but one agency, frontline workers working for clients remote from the labour market sanction larger proportions of their total caseload than their colleagues working for clients very remote from the labour market. But whereas in one agency sanctioning rates between both groups hardly differ, in another workers working with clients remote from the labour market sanction clients four times as frequently.

Table 9.6 provides an overview of the main differences in practices and outcomes when comparing workers working with clients remote and very remote from the labour market.

Table 9.6 Comparing Activation Practices and Outcomes of Workers Working with Clients Remote and Very Remote from the Labour Market

Practices and outcomes	Remote from the labour market	Very remote from the labour market
Diversity of services	Comparatively larger diversity of services in job finding and mediation	Comparatively larger diversity of social care services
Caseload reduction	Some reduction of total caseload	Considerable reduction of total caseload
Selection criteria used when reducing caseloads	No significant differences found	
Quantitative results	Comparatively higher results, measured in terms of total caseload and reduced caseload (though smaller differences in latter case)	Comparatively lower results, measured in terms of total caseload and reduced caseload (though smaller differences in latter case)
Sanctioning rates	Comparatively higher, but only when calculated in relation to *total* caseload	Comparatively lower, but only when calculated in relation to *total* caseload

In the final part of this section, we look at the role of performance management and educational profile in shaping workers' practices and the outcomes they realize.

The Role of Performance Management

Elsewhere (Van Berkel & Knies, 2016) we investigated in more detail how performance management is related to workers' diversity of services, the results they realize and sanctioning. Performance targets concerning the numbers of clients that should find a job or should start voluntary work were not significantly related to the results on these targets—calculated on the basis of workers' total caseloads—that workers actually realize, nor to sanctioning. However, performance targets are related to the diversity of services that workers provide. Workers with performance targets concerning the numbers of clients that should find a job provide a larger diversity of services aimed at job finding compared to workers without these targets, and the same goes for workers with performance targets concerning the numbers of clients that should start voluntary work. These findings (performance management is related to service diversity but not to results) may be somewhat surprising. Part of the explanation is that workers with performance targets provide activation services to smaller proportions of their total caseloads than workers without performance targets. So even though performance management stimulated workers to improve service diversity, this did not pay off in terms of realized results because larger numbers of clients were parked.

In Chapter 2, we saw that performance management might turn workers' attention away from results that are valued but not measured. We found this process in our local welfare agencies as well: performance management concerning the number of people that should find a job is negatively related to the result that workers with these targets realize in terms of the numbers of clients who start voluntary work. The opposite is not the case: performance targets concerning the numbers of people who should start voluntary work do not result in significantly lower results in job finding (Van Berkel & Knies, 2016). Maybe workers consider paid work a more valuable result than voluntary work—or maybe they assume that that is what clients, agency managers or policy makers think—irrespective of what their performance targets tell them.

Performance management is also related to the clients that workers select, at least when they have targets concerning the number of people that should find a job. Compared to workers without this type of performance targets, workers with these targets significantly more often engage in creaming—that is, selecting clients with whom quick results can be realized. However, this type of selection takes place mainly by workers with a mixed client group. In itself this makes sense: workers working with a mixed client group have more diverse clients in their caseloads in terms of labour-market distance and therefore more to choose when deciding on what clients they will focus service provision. It is therefore not illogical that performance targets steer selection processes most clearly in the case of this group of workers. And although we have no data to substantiate this, it is not unlikely that selecting clients with whom quick results can be realized will result in parking those clients whom workers consider to be most remote from the labour market.

Educational Profile, Diversity of Services and Results

As was discussed in Chapter 2, there is some research evidence showing that education matters in terms of the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work. In this type of research, often comparisons are made between workers with a social work education and workers without social work training. When we make this kind of comparison, we find that social workers deliver a larger diversity of services aimed at finding voluntary work for their clients than workers without a social work education. For diversity in services aimed at job finding and care-focused services, no differences were found. We also found no differences regarding results and sanctioning. No differences whatsoever were found when these analyses were done for workers working with clients remote and very remote from the labour market separately.

As the group of workers without social work education is rather heterogeneous, we also compared two professional groups: social workers and workers with a personnel & labour educational background. Overall, we found that social workers provide their clients a larger diversity of services aimed at finding voluntary work and care. However, no differences were found when the groups of frontline workers working for people remote and

very remote from the labour market were analysed separately. Although the validity of these results is questionable given the small sizes of the separate groups of workers, these findings might simply reflect that most workers with a personnel & labour background work for clients remote from the labour market, whereas social workers work for both clients groups (see Table 9.3). Thus differences in service diversity provided by groups of workers with different educational profiles may reflect the client groups they work for rather than their educational backgrounds.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we looked at the services provided by workers in Dutch local welfare agencies who provide activation support for social assistance recipients considered remote or very remote from the labour market. We saw that at the level of national formal activation policies targeted at social assistance recipients, people remote from the labour market are not explicitly given priority over people very remote from the labour market. As a matter of fact, the importance that formal policies attach to activating the latter group has increased over the last two decades. Nevertheless, the frontlines of local welfare agencies tell a different story. There, a clear priority for people remote from the labour market—compared to those very remote from the labour market—can be observed. This is most clearly visible in the numbers of clients that workers working for both groups of clients are supposed to activate, the caseload of workers working for clients remote from the labour market being considerably lower than that of workers with clients very remote from the labour market. In addition, workers working with clients very remote from the labour market more frequently combine activation tasks with the administration of social assistance. In other words, in allocating resources local welfare agency managers make a clear choice to direct most resources to clients remote from the labour market. As some of the frontline workers we interviewed highlighted, decisions concerning resource allocation also affect the budgets available for outsourcing services for clients very remote from the labour market. Against the background of significant cuts in the budgets available for activation that were being introduced while our research project took place (and have continued since then), frontline workers working for clients very remote from the labour market increasingly relied on the 'voluntary' cooperation of local partners, as the following interview quote illustrates:

> We work without a budget. We rely on what is already there. For example, we refer clients to an agency that mediates volunteers. But their subsidies are reduced, so they don't have time to coach clients. They can place clients in voluntary work, but many of the clients also need coaching. (. . .) For care we also rely on organizations that are already here in the municipality. All resources go towards placing people in paid jobs.

As we saw, the internal allocation of resources in local welfare agencies contributes to a situation in which considerable numbers of social assistance recipients very remote from the labour market are not receiving services, at least temporarily. Numbers that exceed the numbers of clients remote from the labour market that are being parked by far. From the point of view of frontline workers who want to provide a reasonable quality of services to the clients they do serve this strategy is not without effects as it helps them to maintain a certain service diversity level and to realize results with the clients they are actually servicing that are not that much behind the results that their colleagues working for clients remote from the labour market realize. However, the prize is considerable given the numbers of clients that do not receive activation support and are left on their own to find a job or start voluntary work.

Performance management has an impact on service provision practices for both client groups as well. Although it seems to affect service diversity positively, it also strengthens caseload reduction practices, leaving even more people very remote from the labour market without support. In addition, having performance targets concerning the numbers of clients that need to find a job reduces caseload proportions that start voluntary work, which may point at creaming processes. Creaming processes were also found among frontline workers with a mixed client group who had performance targets concerning the numbers of clients that need to find a job. In sum, these findings provide indications that performance management—or rather, the types of performance management and performance targets that are prevalent in the agencies in our study—focuses workers' attention towards clients relatively less remote from the labour market. As far as workers' educational background is concerned, no convincing results were found to substantiate that educational profiles matter in terms of the treatment of clients remote and very remote from the labour market.

The new funding system for social assistance expenses seems to be a likely candidate in explaining the prioritization of people remote from the labour market. The system clearly incentivizes municipal efforts aimed at reducing the numbers of social assistance recipients, so that focusing on people considered closer to the labour market (and on stricter gatekeeping: to prevent people from entering social assistance in the first place) seems a rational response. In a way, the increasing emphasis in formal social assistance policies on the activation of all client groups can be seen as an attempt by national government to correct the bias in local priorities towards people closer to the labour market—but as long as this does not translate into changes in the funding system, these reforms of formal policies will not be very fruitful, especially in a context in which many municipalities lack financial reserves to take budgetary risks.

Although our research was not designed to test the effects of the funding system on frontline practices, we think that pointing at the new funding system in itself is insufficient to explain the practical service provision for both client groups. Two arguments can be put forward to substantiate this. First of all, prioritizing people closer to the labour market characterized local activation practices long before the new funding system was introduced. As was

mentioned before, exempting 'hard-to-employ' social assistance recipients from work and activation obligations was widespread practice in municipalities—up until national policy reforms made exemptions more difficult. Thus prioritizing people closer to the labour market is not a new phenomenon. Several reasons can be mentioned for prioritizing this group even in the absence of the financial incentives provided by the new funding system: preferences of employers (and organizations offering voluntary work) combined with insufficient resources or capacities of workers to change these preferences; a lack of adequate services to help people in finding and retaining a paid job (or voluntary work); opinions of policy makers, managers or workers that the 'hard to employ' should be 'left alone' or that people closer to the labour market 'should not live on benefits'; the view that all efforts should be directed at 'early interventions' and preventing people closer to the labour market from becoming part of the 'unemployable' unemployed, etcetera. The second argument concerns the considerable local differences that we found when comparing the five largest agencies in our study. These differences make clear that deterministic accounts of the impact of national policies (such as those regulating the activation of people remote and very remote from the labour market) or governance structures (such as the new funding system) are inadequate and that other context factors play a role in setting local priorities and shaping local practices. As a matter of fact, the type of local differences in frontline practices and conditions of frontline work that were found are an interesting starting point to gain more insight into what context factors might help to improve service provision for people very remote from the labour market. So even though we have little reason to believe that the new funding system helps to improve service provision for people very remote from the labour market, pointing at this system as the main culprit of the differential treatment of people remote and very remote from the labour market ignores the complexity of this issue.

Notes

1 Significant local differences existed in local exemption practices, as several studies showed (Hospers, Schuyt & Van Geuns, 1998; Knijn & Van Wel, 1999).
2 Given the size of our sample, comparing local welfare agencies implies a comparison of rather small groups. Therefore, these comparisons intend to provide tentative rather than robust evidence of local variation.
3 As we did not have access to administrative data in all agencies in our study, we used self-reported results.

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