SURVEILWEL

WELFARE SURVEILLANCE: DIGITAL SEAMS IN THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

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KEY MESSAGES

The digitalisation of welfare management in Slovenia has streamlined the exchange of data on claimants between Centres for Social Work and multiple governmental and private databases. This improved efficency and provided an easier path for welfare support for many claimants.

Welfare surveillance is a key pillar of the digital welfare state. While it provides valuable data to frontline social workers and policymakers, its emergence and growth raise significant questions on privacy, transparency and consent. Claimants may have limited understanding of data processing activities, what information is collected about them, where it comes from, and how it is used. Greater transparency and meaningful informed consent can and should give claimants more control over their digital representations and strengthen accountability. This is also important for maintaining trust in welfare institutions.

Digital systems do not eliminate the biases and assumptions already present in welfare administration. Particularly, members of the Romani community and recent migrants often face higher hurdles when accessing welfare rights in Slovenia. Fair digital welfare requires both safeguards against bias and space for accountable professional judgement. The project findings show that social workers' professional judgement remains important for understanding information in the context of claimants' lives. Discretion, coupled with adequate training, can therefore complement and correct incomplete or misleading digital representations, and should not be treated only as a source of potential human inconsistency.

Fair welfare decisions depend on accurate and up-to-date data. Delays, outdated records, or political ad-hoc exceptions can lead to inconsistent treatment of claimants, lead to unjustified discrimination and undermine trust in the welfare system. Welfare authorities should ensure that key administrative data is regularly updated and subject to clear, consistent rules. Potential overhaul of automated data exchanges should prioritise not only efficiency but also data quality and reliability.

INTRODUCTION/SUMMARY OF THE PROBLEM

SURVEILWEL, a MSCA project funded by a Horizon ERA fellowship, addresses the emergence and development of welfare surveillance in Slovenia. Over the past decades, new digital technologies for the collection, sorting and processing of (big) data have allowed welfare authorities unprecedented reach into the private lives of claimants, recasting suspicion on citizens through an automated, algorithmic decision-making process that determines their eligibility to the most basic of needs. Since 2011, Centres for Social Work (CSWs) in Slovenia have been equipped with digital tools, and a legal framework, that facilitate data transfer, exchange or comparison/matching between CSWs and over 50 public and private databases, with the aim of automating decisions on eligibility to welfare benefits and to detect instances of irregularities or fraud. While supporting efficiency, welfare surveillance tools can also turn complex, contextual lives into simplified data points, making eligibility and suspicion dependent on the limits of what can and is recorded. They can also shift the burden of proof onto claimants, intensify scrutiny of already marginalised groups, and make errors or incomplete records consequential for access to basic social rights.

METHODS AND APPROACHES

This project studies how the adoption of new data-centric and automated welfare surveillance technologies transforms the inner work of welfare institutions and practitioners. It further aims to trace the movement of information across the institutions and databases involved in welfare surveillance, the analysis and manipulation the data undergoes before the algorithmic decision-making reaches its verdict, and the possibilities for claimants to understand the outcomes and appeal or seek redress. Theoretically, this project draws on scholarship on welfare surveillance, digitalisation, and street-level bureaucracy to examine how digital systems reshape the relationship between welfare claimants and the state. It introduces the concepts of digital "papereality" and data scarcity to describe how administrative representations of claimants, or lack thereof, increasingly shape decisions about their access to social rights.

The project employed a qualitative methods approach, drawing on an in-depth qualitative, ethnographic research within 3 Centres for Social Work in diverse parts of Slovenia, complemented by 14 semi-structured interviews with Slovenian social workers. These were in addition to analysis of additional sources including media articles, parliamentary protocols and national audit reports, and interviews with additional stakeholders. The results, collected through field notes, recordings and transcripts, were catalogued by the lead researcher using pre-defined categories, and analysed to illustrate the data journeys involved in welfare surveillance and automated decision making.

CONCLUSIONS

The project's findings highlight the limitations of welfare surveillance and automated decision-making, while also demonstrating the enduring role of professional discretion and bias in welfare administration. Despite the growing reliance on digital systems to assess eligibility and detect fraud, these technologies do not eliminate the ambiguities and complexities of welfare encounters. Rather, they coexist with the enduring discretionary judgements of social workers, whose interpretations and decisions continue to shape how information collected through welfare surveillance is understood and acted upon. At the same time, digitalisation does not necessarily remove existing biases. instead, established assumptions about claimants can inform how data - and its absence - are interpreted, potentially reproducing inequalities through ostensibly neutral technological and administrative systems.

The results further show the enduring agency of welfare claimants to negotiate their digital dossiers. Rather than being passive subjects of digital surveillance, claimants learn how information about them is collected and assessed, and take steps to manage what becomes visible to welfare authorities. This includes correcting records, limiting the information available about them, or presenting information that supports their eligibility for social assistance. For many disempowered welfare claimants, difficulty navigating the digital welfare state may result in the denial of access to even the most basic social rights.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Data minimisation

Welfare authorities should rigorously apply a data-minimisation principle to automated eligibility assessment, limiting data collection and exchange to information that is strictly necessary and proportionate to determining social benefits. The current system draws on extensive data flows from more than 50 public and private databases, making a wide range of information available for automated assessment at Centres for Social Work and is more attuned to policing goals than welfare support. This has significant consequences for the privacy of claimants. Data exchange and broad access rights of welfare authorities could instead be designed around specific eligibility questions. For example, rather than providing a claimant's complete vehicle ownership history, the vehicle registry could return only whether the claimant currently owns a vehicle, owns more than one vehicle, or owns a vehicle above a relevant value threshold. This would allow welfare authorities to make the necessary eligibility assessment without exposing unrelated information about a claimant's past transactions and possessions. Such an approach would reduce unnecessary surveillance, limit the potential impact of irrelevant or outdated information, and better protect claimants' privacy and access to social rights and make state actions more proportionate.

Recommendation 2:. Towards transparency and informed consent

Welfare authorities should make the flow and use of claimants' data more transparent and strengthen claimants' ability to understand and, where possible, consent to how their information is shared. Claimants should be clearly and actively informed about which public and private databases are accessed for the purposes of the welfare regime, what types of information are retrieved, how this information is used in eligibility assessments, and which other institutions receive or can access it. Where consent to data sharing is not strictly required by law, claimants should be given meaningful opportunities to decide on the particular uses of their data without jeopardising their access to social support. This should specifically be the case with entitlements afforded to the general population (e.g. children's benefits), and with demands for access to private databases, such as banks. Greater transparency would allow claimants to better understand and navigate their digital "papereality", while also strengthening accountability and trust in welfare institutions. Proposals for future integration of machine learning and artificial intelligence tools into welfare systems should be considered carefully and critically, as these have been shown to reduce transparency, consent and equality when accessing welfare benefits.

Recommendation 3: Accurate data towards a fair assessment; not ad-hoc solutions

Decisions on eligibility for social support depend on access to accurate and up-to-date information about claimants. However, for over 6 years, since 2020, Centres for Social Work (CSWs) have not received an update on the valuation of real estate owned by claimants - data that are used to determine eligibility and the amount of social support received by tens of thousands of claimants. Recently, instead of updating the database, the Slovenian government passed a law postponing the update for 18 months, arguing that higher valuations could unfairly affect claimants.

While the actual needs of claimants should be addressed, accurate and timely data remain important for the fairness of the process. Making an exception for owners of high-value real estate threatens to reduce trust in the welfare system and can unfairly affect other claimants. The rehaul of the automated data exchange between welfare authorities and governmental databases should be streamlined and not subjected to ad-hoc solutions.

Recommendation 4: Empower social workers to use their discretion while tackling bias

OrganWelfare authorities should develop safeguards against bias without removing the professional discretion of social workers. Digital systems, such as KRPAN and ISCSD2, should support, rather than replace, social workers' assessment of claimants' circumstances, particularly where data are incomplete, outdated, or do not reflect lived realities. This requires clear guidance on how digital information should be used, interpreted, regular training on potential biases, and procedures for documenting and reviewing discretionary decisions. Social workers should be able to question, contextualise, and override digital information when appropriate, while such decisions should remain transparent and accountable. This approach recognises that discretion is not necessarily a weakness of welfare administration: when properly supported and monitored, it can help prevent automated systems from turning incomplete data or existing assumptions into unfair decisions.

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