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Abstract

In the late 1990s, the German sociologists Leisering and Leibfried (1999) argued that most poverty is of a temporary nature. In their poverty study in the German city of Bremen, Leisering and Leibfried found that more than half of all social assistance claimants were out of poverty within a year. Based on their work, individualization theorists such as Giddens and Beck argue that ‘for most people poverty is only a temporary experience’. This article replicates Leisering and Leibfried’s study using statistical data about social assistance claiming in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In doing so we find significant numbers of short-term claimants (about 30 percent), as well as surprisingly large numbers of long-term claimants. One in four Rotterdam social assistance claimants is poor for at least 5 years – more than twice as many as Leisering and Leibfried found in their study. We also show that recurrent benefit spells, for Leisering and Leibfried another typical feature of contemporary poverty, is only the exception in Rotterdam. Leisering and Leibfried (and sociologists such as Giddens and Beck in their footsteps) are wrong in claiming that short poverty experiences are typical for poverty in late-modern society. Persistent poverty is still present in our age and in our cities.

Keywords

individualization theory, persistent poverty, poverty spells

Introduction

In the late 1990s, the German sociologists Leisering and Leibfried (1999) surprised poverty researchers with their research finding that most poverty is of a temporary nature. The authors polemically argued that phrases often used in public and political debates, such as ‘welfare mothers’ or ‘underclass’ (in the USA) and ‘social exclusion’ or ‘new poverty’

(in Europe), are incorrect because these notions suggest that poverty is a stable situation in people’s

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lives. However, this suggestion is 'based on a static way of looking at things' (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 8) and neglects the fact that many poor people are only transiently poor. In fact, Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 66) show that at least half of all poor individuals in their study – social assistance claimants in the German city of Bremen – were poor for only 1 year or less. In their view, this remarkable outcome is not the result of an extraordinary empirical situation they happened to study, but of their innovative method to measure the duration of poverty spells – the 'dynamic' or 'life course' approach to poverty spells:

This approach has revealed poverty conditions are far more transient than has hitherto been believed; poverty is often no more than an episode in the course of life and is actively overcome by most of those afflicted by it. ... Poverty is not just a characteristic of groups of individuals, but is in effect an event or phase in the individual life course. Experiences of poverty have a beginning, a specified duration, a certain course, and often a conclusion. Escape from poverty is feasible. Being poor at some point of time does not necessarily entail becoming a permanent member of a poor group. (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 8)

Leisering and Leibfried lean heavily on Ulrich Beck's thesis regarding the individualization of poverty and social inequality in late modern 'risk society' (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Leisering, 1997; Snel and Engbersen, 2002). Beck's argument runs as follows: traditional poverty risks of capitalist society (unemployment, illness, ageing) have lost significance in late modern society and have been replaced by new social risks related to the dominant trend of individualization. The late-modern 'elective biography' or 'do-it-yourself-biography' can easily result in a 'breakdown biography', and thus in (mostly temporary) unemployment, poverty and social assistance claiming. As a consequence, the poverty population is far more heterogeneous than before. Contemporary poverty is no longer a characteristic of certain marginalized social categories, but is closely related to individual life choices and unexpected life events: 'Lives become more varied, discontinuous, heterogeneous. This also means that a growing part of the total population is at least

temporarily exposed to unemployment and poverty' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 49). Following Beck, Leisering and Leibfried introduce the thesis of 'temporalization' ('Verzeitlichung') of contemporary poverty (Leisering, 1997; Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 9).

Leisering and Leibfried's study is closely related to current sociological individualization theories, but has simultaneously influenced the ideas of these individualization theorists. Citing their study, Giddens (2000: 92) writes that 'a surprising number of people escape from poverty'. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 49) observe, also referring to their work: 'although the number of excluded may be growing, there is a lot of coming and going in respect of poverty and unemployment'. Elsewhere Beck cites Leisering and Leibfried's study at length and approvingly:

Lutz Leisering and Stephan Leibfried's study *Time and Poverty* is one of many which have shown how poverty loses its collective meaning and takes on a new shape under conditions of individualization. Poverty in the rich countries is becoming more of a phase in the average working life that *most* people pass through rather than a lifetime situation. This means the experience of poverty is now more widely generalized. The majority of the people in the rich countries are now poor in income terms at some point of their life. But for *most* people this is only a temporary experience. (Beck and Wilmms, 2004: 102; our emphasis)¹

Beck, in fact, argues that contemporary poverty in *most* cases is a temporary phenomenon, an unfortunate life phase one has to pass through. Persistent poverty seems to have lost significance in late-modern society.

Beck's arguments have been criticized by poverty researchers and other sociologists. For instance, Atkinson (2007a,b) gives a theoretical critique on Beck's thesis that individualization 'killed off the concept of social class', pointing out the vagueness of many concepts used by Beck and the lack of empirical support for his main claims (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Goldthorpe, 2002; Marshall, 1997).² Indeed, Leisering and Leibfried's study is one of the rare incidences where Beck does refer to the outcomes of empirical research.

Despite the criticism voiced by poverty researchers, Leisering and Leibfried's findings are generally in line with outcomes of so-called dynamic poverty research (the longitudinal study of poverty spells). Smith and Middleton (2007) summarize the outcomes of dynamic poverty research in three points. First, the standard point-in-time measurement vastly underestimates the number of individuals or households that are confronted with income poverty over a longer period of time. For instance, in the Netherlands, where the standard poverty measurement measures a population of about 7 percent poor individuals each year,³ longitudinal measurements show that not less than 22 to 34 percent of all Dutch individuals experienced income poverty at least once during a longer period of 9 or 11 years (depending on the study and the poverty measurement used in the study) (Snel and Karyotis, 1998; Snel and Engbersen, 2002; Vrooman and Hoff, 2004).⁴ Second, dynamic poverty research shows that indeed many poor individuals or households are poor for only short periods of time. Third, as Smith and Middleton (2007: 31) emphasize, however, this 'should not obscure the fact that a significant proportion of individuals remain in long-term, persistent poverty'. For instance, the Dutch longitudinal poverty studies mentioned above show that 7 percent of all Dutch individuals were poor for at least 3 years in a time frame of 9 or 11 years (Muffels et al., 1998; Snel and Engbersen, 2002; Snel and Karyotis, 1998; Vrooman and Hoff, 2004). Similar longitudinal poverty research in the UK found that 14 percent of all British individuals were poor for at least 3 years in a time frame of 4 years (Jenkins and Rigg, 2000: 21). These are significant numbers of persistent poor individuals that Leisering and Leibfried (1999) tend to overlook.

The figures about persistent poverty mentioned above are derived from Dutch and British *national* income panel data. However, persistent poverty and social assistance claiming will obviously be more prominent in cities such as Rotterdam. In fact, local authorities in Rotterdam – as in many other cities – are deeply concerned about residents that seem to depend on social assistance permanently and about the 'culture of poverty' in the city (Reelick et al., 2008). This article therefore replicates Leisering and Leibfried's analysis, comparing their outcomes with

similar *local* statistical data about social assistance claiming in Rotterdam.

This article focuses on two different issues. The first issue is Leisering and Leibfried's claim concerning the 'temporalization' of poverty. We will examine the duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam and offer a statistical explanation for the duration of these spells. The second main issue in our analysis relates to another phenomenon that Leisering and Leibfried portray as typical for contemporary poverty: repeated poverty spells. We will examine the proportion of single versus multiple or recurrent poverty spells of Rotterdam social assistance claimants (within a specific timeframe), and will describe who has single and who has multiple benefit spells.

In what follows we shall first explore the socio-economic context of our research location, the city of Rotterdam. We will then discuss some methodological issues before turning to the outcomes of our statistical analyses. We will conclude with a discussion that attempts to offer some explanations for the – as we shall see – huge differences in outcomes regarding persistent poverty in our study and in Leibfried and Leisering's study.

The context: Rotterdam's local economy and social security system

Rotterdam has a history of being a major port and industrial economy. In fact, Rotterdam had and still has one of the largest ports in the world. However, the city suffered heavily from the process of industrial restructuring in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Due to the rise of the low-wage countries and to technological developments, Rotterdam lost significant numbers of jobs. Between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, the total employment in the Rotterdam inner city fell by about 25 percent. The surrounding districts lost even more jobs in these years (Kloosterman, 1996). Rotterdam is a typical industrial monoculture and has trouble attracting new economic activities and new service employment. Whereas the emerging service sector in Amsterdam created extensive low-skilled employment (in international tourism, catering, personal services and the urban 'fun industry'), Rotterdam

mainly lost low-skilled jobs (Burgers and Musterd, 2002; Kloosterman, 1996; Kloosterman and Trip, 2005; Steijn et al., 2000). As a result, Rotterdam suffers huge and persistent unemployment. Between 1996 and 2007, the unemployment rate in Rotterdam fluctuated between 12.2 percent (in 1996) and 6.2 percent (in 2001) – above the average in the Netherlands and also higher than in other Dutch cities.

When people lose their jobs in the Netherlands they have the right to a benefit that amounts to 70 percent of their last earned wages. The length of this benefit depends on the time one has been employed, with, at the time of our study, a maximum of 38 months. When people fail to find employment during this period they are eligible to social assistance. A single person receives the Dutch minimum income of €649 a month, and a family of €1299 a month. During the period of unemployment people continue to receive social assistance. The claims for a social assistance benefit are assessed by the local social assistance office, in our case, the Rotterdam Social Affairs and Employment Department. The main purpose of this department is to motivate the claimants to find employment as soon as possible. For a large group of claimants this is not an easy task. In Rotterdam, for instance, people on social assistance are generally low educated, somewhat older than the average Rotterdam citizen, are often single female parents and relatively often have social and health problems. These characteristics make it hard for them to find a job and may lead to a long dependence on social assistance (Reelick et al., 2008). Our study deals with these Rotterdam citizens (see next section).

Methodological notes

Like Leisering and Leibfried, we define ‘poverty’ as claiming a social assistance benefit. In fact, the (more or less) official poverty line in the Netherlands is defined as a household income below or around (maximum 105 percent) a social assistance income. We should be aware, however, that this poverty definition gives only a partial view on poverty. Recent Dutch research showed

that about half of all Dutch poor households claim social assistance. The other half of the Dutch poverty population lives off other social benefits or pensions or is working (Netherlands Statistics, 2009: 21). In Dutch cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, households on social assistance are an even larger part of the total poverty population (Dienst Werk en Inkomen, 2006; Lautenbach and Siermann, 2007). We particularly define poverty, however, as claiming social assistance because the central aim of our endeavour is to compare our outcomes with those of Leisering and Leibfried (1999). Defining poverty in this way enables us to examine poverty and the duration of poverty spells by using the administrative statistical data of local social assistance agencies. Here we make use of a longitudinal dataset from the Social Scientific Research Department (Dutch acronym: SWA) of the Rotterdam Social Affairs and Employment Department, which contains information on social assistance benefits that started in or after 1999 (in total almost 80,000 benefits) (Reelick et al., 2008). Our analyses of the duration of social assistance spells only refer to new social assistance benefits that started in 1999. As we lack reliable information about social assistance benefits prior to 1999, we cannot exclude the possibility that new claimants in 1999 were also on social assistance previously. However, as there are only relatively few recurrent social assistance claimants in Rotterdam (as we shall see later on), we assume that the majority of the new claimants of 1999 were actually on social assistance for the first time. In 1999, more than 11,000 (N=11,579) new social assistance benefits were issued in Rotterdam.⁵ We will trace these benefits and the claimants concerned until 2006 (for a maximum of 7 years).

The Rotterdam dataset lists both the month and year of the start and (if applicable) the end of the social benefit. It is also registered if social assistance claimants had multiple benefit spells. This information allows us to calculate the duration (in months) of all individual social assistance benefits in Rotterdam that started in 1999, as well as the duration of social assistance claiming of all individuals

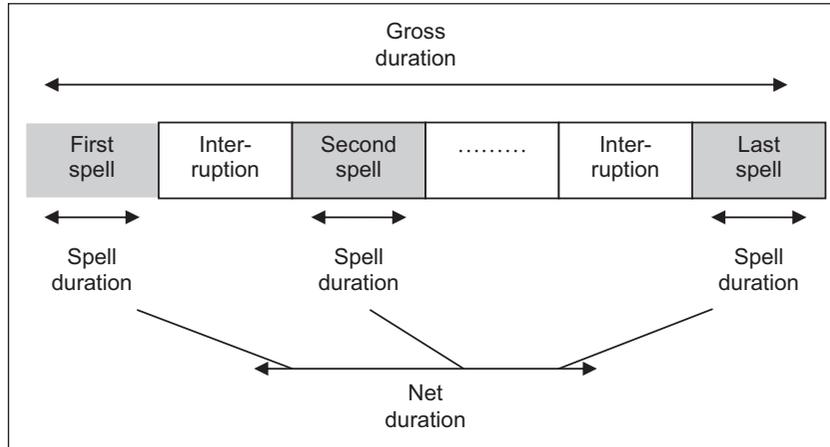


Figure 1. Conceptualization of poverty spells.

Source: Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 65.

that received a new benefit in 1999. Following Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 65) and Buhr (1995), we will use three different measurements of benefit duration (see Figure 1):

- *spell duration* refers to the duration of each separate spell of claiming social assistance, irrespective of whether it concerns just one or multiple spells;
- *net duration* refers to the combined length of all spells of claiming social assistance within the observed period;
- *gross duration* refers to the total period from the start of the first benefit claim to the end of the last claim (if completed), including possible periods of interruption.

If social assistance claimants have only one benefit spell in the years under observation, then the three measurements of poverty duration (spell duration, net duration and gross duration) will be identical. They only differ for individuals who have multiple social assistance spells with periods of non-assistance in between. In our analysis we will describe the number and duration of social assistance spells of claimants in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, and will also analyse the personal characteristics of short-term and long-term claimants.

Poverty spells of Rotterdam social assistance claimants: empirical findings

New poverty spells

We start our analysis by counting all new social assistance spells in the period of observation (1999–2006) (Figure 2). As mentioned earlier, almost 80,000 new social assistance benefits were issued in Rotterdam between 1999 and 2006: an average of about 10,000 per year with a gradual decline in the more recent years (especially after 2004). Rotterdam has about 580,000 residents; about 366,000 of them are between 20 and 64 years old (the potential target group of social assistance). This means that, on average every year, 27 new social assistance claims per 1000 residents were issued in Rotterdam. In the more recent years, this average fell to 22 new social assistance benefits per 1000 residents in 2006. As Figure 2 makes clear, the number of new social assistance benefits in Rotterdam is not related to the local unemployment rate. Particularly after 2004, the number of new social assistance benefits fell although local unemployment was increasing. The declining number of new social assistance claims is related to the new Dutch social assistance act of 2004. This act, with the telling name of *Work and Social Assistance Act*, made access to social

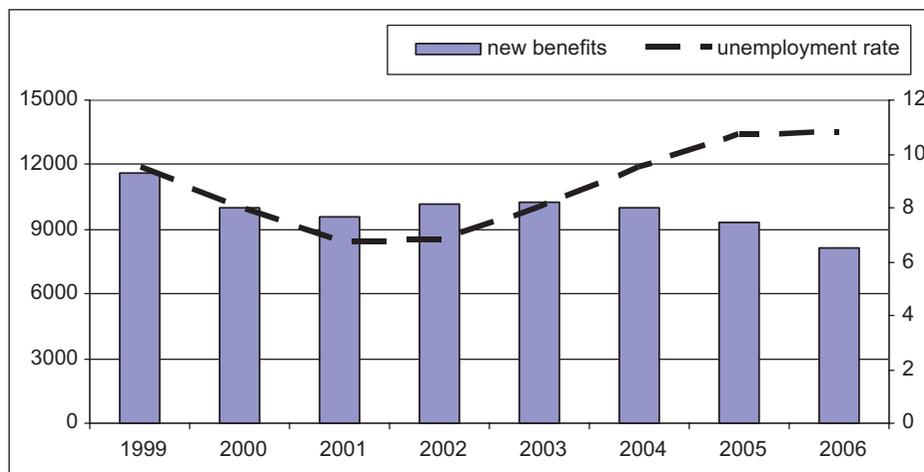


Figure 2. New social assistance benefits and local unemployment rate in the city of Rotterdam (1999–2006).

Source: Social assistance claims: Department of Social Affairs (SWA) Longitudinal Data Set (Reelick et al. 2008) (authors' calculations), Rotterdam unemployment rate: Netherlands Statistics, Statline.

assistance more difficult and, more than previously, promoted work for social assistance claimants. As evaluation studies have shown, the new social assistance act was particularly successful in limiting the inflow into social assistance – more than in stimulating the outflow from social benefits (Bosselaar et al., 2007: 47)

Duration of poverty spells

Our central concern, however, is the duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam. In the following we will focus on all benefit spells that started in 1999 (N=11,579). These benefits were followed up to 2006. Table 1 summarizes our findings concerning the duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam. We will compare our findings with the outcomes of Leisering and Leibfried's Bremen study. The table gives data concerning all three duration concepts (gross duration, net duration, spell duration).

Our outcomes with regard to the duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam differ greatly from Leisering and Leibfried's findings. Their central research finding is that the majority of all social assistance claimants in Bremen are only temporarily poor (1 year or less): 'Irrespective of which measure of duration is used, the short-term claimant is by far the most common type' (Leisering and Leibfried,

Table 1. Duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam (1999–2006) by different measurements of poverty duration (percent of claimants).

	Duration concept		
	Gross	Net	Single spell ^a
Short (1 year or less):	30	30	35
Medium (1 to 3 years):	20	25	24
Long (3 to 5 years):	15	19	13
Very long (more than 5 years):	35	26	28
Median	40.0	30.3	23.0
Standard error	35.1	31.9	33.6

Note: ^aPercentage of all spells.

Source: Department of Social Affairs (SWA), Longitudinal Data Set (Reelick et al 2008) (authors' calculations).

1999: 66). When looking at the net duration (the total time a person is on social assistance, not counting possible interruptions of non-claiming), we find that 30 percent of the benefit claimants in Rotterdam was on social assistance for 1 year or less. In Leisering and Leibfried's study in Bremen, this was almost twice as high (58 percent). Forty-five percent of all Rotterdam social assistance claimants were on social assistance for 3 years or longer; in Bremen

this was 18 percent. One in four social assistance claimants in Rotterdam was on social assistance for 5 years or more. In Bremen, this was less than half as much (12 percent).

The same picture emerges when looking at the other measurements of poverty duration. When looking at the gross benefit duration (the total time between the start of the first and the end of the last benefit), 30 percent of the Rotterdam benefit claimants were on social assistance for 1 year or less. In Bremen this was 50 percent. With this duration concept, 35 percent of all Rotterdam benefit claimants were on social assistance for at least 5 years. In Bremen this was only 16 percent. The largest differences in outcomes between the two cities emerge when looking at the single spell duration. In Bremen almost three-quarters of all separate benefit spells lasted 1 year or less. In Rotterdam, this was the case with 35 percent. Conversely, in Leisering and Leibfried's study in Bremen there were only few social assistance spells that lasted at least 5 years (only 6 percent of all social assistance spells). In Rotterdam, this was the case with not less than 28 percent of all benefit spells.

We can conclude that social assistance in Rotterdam is far less an issue of 'coming and going' (to quote Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 49) again) than Leisering and Leibfried found in their Bremen study. Other figures support this central finding. Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 75) found that the median social assistance spell (gross duration) lasted 12 months. This means that 50 percent of all benefit claimants in Bremen were out of social assistance within 12 months and 50 percent were not (gross duration); in Rotterdam the median social assistance spell lasted not less than 40 months (gross duration) or 30.3 months (net duration). All data make clear that short-term social assistance claiming is far less prominent in Rotterdam than Leisering and Leibfried found and that, on the other hand, long-term social assistance claiming is far more prominent in Rotterdam than Leisering and Leibfried suggest in their Bremen study. Irrespective of how it is measured, the share of long-term benefit claims (5 years or longer) in Rotterdam is at least twice as high as in their study. In our discussion we will explore possible explanations for these huge differences in outcomes

Explaining poverty duration in Rotterdam

How can the variation in poverty duration be explained? Leisering and Leibfried try to explain this variation through the background characteristics of social assistance claimants, as well as through the main reason for claiming. On the one hand, they observe that women, single parents, older people, low-skilled claimants, people with children and large families claimed social assistance for longer than average (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 83–4). On the other hand, they show that social benefits issued because of family reasons, illness, low earnings (working individuals receiving additional social assistance) and miscellaneous reasons also last longer than average, whereas particularly social benefits after immigration last shorter than average (1999: 75). Although these factors clearly overlap, the authors do not present a multivariate analysis of these factors explaining the duration of benefit spells, as we shall do.

Table 2 shows the outcomes of a multiple regression model with the net duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam (in months) as the dependent variable. Table 2 singles out six factors contributing to prolonged social assistance spells: gender, age, low education, household situation, financial problems and medical problems.

Female claimants have much longer benefit spells than male claimants. This is in line with the feminization of poverty thesis (Bianchi, 1999). Women are more prone than men to remain poor for longer periods, for a variety of reasons that are beyond the scope of this article. Older claimants (55 years or older) also have longer benefit spells than younger age categories. The household situation also makes a difference to the benefit duration. Couples with children, but particularly single parent families have longer benefit spells than singles (reference category). Couples without children, on the other hand, have shorter benefit spells than singles. That particularly single parent families experience longer benefit spells is not surprising. Benefit duration is also related to educational qualifications. Benefit claimants without any educational qualifications (in practice mostly people with an immigrant background)

Table 2. Regression analysis with 'net benefit duration in months' as dependent variable.

	B		Beta
(Constant)	55.365		
Gender (ref = male)			
Female	9.587	***	0.165
Age (ref = >54 years)			
<24 years	-6.374	*	0.183
24-55 years	-17.898	***	0.163
Household situation (ref = single)			
Single parent	11.162	***	0.163
Couple, no children	-5.498	***	-0.058
Couple with children	6.067	***	0.060
Educational level (ref = no primary education)			
Only primary education	-2.722	*	-0.044
Lower vocational or general	-6.607	***	-0.110
Intermediate vocational or general	-6.872	***	-0.077
Higher vocational/university	-1.295	n.s.	-0.008
Country of birth (ref = the Netherlands)			
Morocco	0.006	n.s.	0.000
Turkey	0.589	n.s.	0.006
Suriname	-1.682	n.s.	-0.019
Dutch Antilles/Aruba	-5.694	***	-0.068
Refugee countries	1.365	n.s.	0.012
Other countries	-2.881	*	-0.039
Has financial problems (ref = no financial problems)	17.675	***	0.208
Has social problems (ref = no social problems)	1.639	n.s.	0.027
Has medical problems (ref = no medical problems)	12.904	***	0.196
Adjusted R ²	0.215		

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

n.s., not significant; ref, reference.

Source: Department of Social Affairs (SWA), Longitudinal Data Set (Reelick et al. 2008) (authors' calculations).

have considerably longer benefit spells than claimants with more qualifications. This confirms our previous finding that persistent income poverty in a meritocratic society is strongly related to lack of educational qualifications (Achterberg and Snel, 2008).

Another salient outcome is that once all these variables were incorporated in the analysis, the ethnic background of benefit claimants no longer makes a difference for the benefit duration. Thus, in so far as foreign-born benefit claimants have longer benefit spells, this is mainly due to the familiar background characteristics of gender, age, household situation and lack of educational qualifications. This goes for benefit claimants born in Morocco, Turkey,

Suriname or in typical 'refugee countries' (such as former Yugoslavia, Iraq or Afghanistan). Benefit claimants born in the Dutch Antilles or Aruba or, to a lesser extent, born in other foreign countries even have shorter benefit spells than claimants born in the Netherlands (including second generation migrants). Finally the data contain information about several kinds of problems of benefit claimants such as financial problems (such as debts or the inability to pay the rent), social problems (such as relational problems) or medical problems. Social assistance claimants that have medical problems or financial problems have longer benefit spells than claimants without such problems. However, one may question

the causality. Are benefit claimants longer on social assistance because they have medical or financial problems? Or do they have medical or financial problems because they have spent so much time on social assistance?

Our findings partly corroborate Leisering and Leibfried's outcomes with regards to the factors contributing to longer benefit spells, but with one important difference. Leisering and Leibfried claim that immigrants generally have shorter benefit claims (60 percent of all immigrants in the Bremen study are on social assistance for 1 year or less; Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 70). In Rotterdam, except for Antilleans and migrants from 'other countries' and after controlling for differences in gender, age, household situation and educational qualifications, we found no differences in benefit duration between foreign-born and native Dutch claimants.

'Recurrent poverty'? Single versus multiple poverty spells

A second issue in our analysis relates to the claims by Beck and by Leisering and Leibfried that repeated or multiple poverty spells are typical for contemporary poverty. People not only 'come and go' in and out of poverty, but they often also return into it. Almost one in three social assistance claimants in Leisering and Leibfried's study had two or more spells of claiming. Moreover, they claim that only 6 percent of all Bremen claimants had an uninterrupted social assistance spell for 5 years or longer (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 64). However, other German poverty research already found that these discontinuous or recurrent poor households 'occur only very rarely' (Andreß and Schulte, 1998: 346).⁶ In addition, Rotterdam social assistance officials observe the phenomenon of 'revolving door' claimants. However, as Table 3 makes clear, recurrent or multiple social assistance spells are rather the exception in Rotterdam. The large majority (80 percent) of all claimants who started social assistance in 1999 only had one benefit spell in the following 7 years. Only 20 percent of them had multiple benefit spells. Obviously, social assistance claimants with longer benefit spells had multiple spells more often. All the same, three-quarters of all social assistance

Table 3. Single and multiple benefit spells of all social assistance claimants in Rotterdam that received a new benefit in 1999 by duration (net duration).

	Single spell	Multiple spells
Short (1 year or less)	93	7
Medium (1 to 3 years)	71	29
Long (3 to 5 years)	59	41
Very long (more than 5 years)	74	26
Total	80	20

Source: Department of Social Affairs (SWA), Longitudinal Data Set (Reelick et al. 2008) (authors' calculations).

claimants who were on social assistance for 5 years or longer still had only one benefit spell. Leisering and Leibfried's claim that multiple poverty or social assistance spells are becoming the normal pattern is thus refuted. Multiple benefit spells are rather the exception, as shown previously by Andreß and Schulte (1998).

Table 4 shows which background characteristics of benefit claimants contribute to the odds of having multiple benefit spells. In the table, having a single spell is coded 1 and having multiple spells is coded 2. This implies that social categories with an odds ratio smaller than 1 more often have a single benefit spell, and that social categories with an odds ratio larger than 1 more often have multiple benefit spells. Female claimants, elderly claimants (those aged over 55 years), claimants without any educational qualifications, migrant claimants from refugee countries and from other countries, and claimants who experience medical problems more often have single benefit spells. Apparently these claimants are from vulnerable social categories who more often have a single but prolonged period of benefit dependence. The same goes for benefit claimants without any educational qualification. With regard to education we see the same outcome as before: benefit claimants with the lowest educational qualifications ('no primary education') have significantly more often a single benefit spell than claimants with higher qualifications. We already saw that unskilled benefit claimants also tend to have longer benefit spells. The two observations combined imply that both unskilled benefit claimants more often have single and longer

Table 4. Binary Logistic regression analysis with 'multiple spell claimants' as dependent variable (single spell = 1, multiple spells = 2).

	B		Odds ratio
Constant	-0.188		0.829
Gender (ref = male)			
Female	-0.739	***	0.478
Age (ref = 24–54 years)			
>55 years	-1.144	***	0.319
>24 years	-0.033	n.s.	0.967
Household situation (ref = couple with children)			
Single parent	0.139	n.s.	1.149
Couple, no children	-0.073	n.s.	0.930
Educational level (ref = no primary education)			
Only primary education	0.964	***	2.621
Lower vocational or general	1.102	***	3.010
Intermediate vocational or general	0.994	***	2.701
Higher vocational/University	0.627	**	10.872
Country of birth (ref = the Netherlands)			
Morocco	0.217	n.s.	1.242
Turkey	0.029	n.s.	1.029
Suriname	0.097	n.s.	1.101
Dutch Antilles/Aruba	0.072	n.s.	1.074
Refugee countries	-0.402	*	0.669
Other countries*	-0.201	n.s.	0.818
Has financial problems	0.220	**	1.246
Has social problems	0.087	n.s.	1.091
Has medical problems	-0.395	***	0.674
Nagelkerke R ²	0.163		

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

n.s., not significant; ref, reference.

Source: Department of Social Affairs (SWA) Longitudinal Data Set (Reelick et al. 2008) (authors' calculations).

benefit spells, whereas higher qualified claimants more often have multiple but shorter benefit spells. Unskilled benefit claimants are thus particularly vulnerable for persistent benefit claiming and poverty. Table 4 finally shows that singles more often have multiple benefit spells than all other household categories. Again, single parents do not differ from couples (with or without children) with respect to having multiple spells of claiming.

A surprising outcome in Table 4 is that benefit claimants facing financial problems more often have multiple benefit spells than benefit claimants

without financial problems. Again, one wonders what the causality is. Are people who manage to escape from social assistance for some time more subject to financial problems? We would rather argue that it is the other way around. It seems that as a consequence of having a single (but prolonged) social benefit, people get accustomed to the limited financial situation and thus incur fewer debts. Claimants with recurrent benefit spells are less able to cope with the financial limitations and thus incur more debts. Claimants with medical problems, finally, more often have a single (mostly prolonged) benefit spell.

Discussion

In their prominent study, *Time and Poverty in Western Welfare States*, Leisering and Leibfried (1999) argue that poverty has changed in contemporary welfare states. Poverty is not a static situation of certain marginalized social categories any more, but a mostly transient experience in the lives of many. In their study, they show that more than half of all benefit claimants in the German city of Bremen were out of social assistance within a year. As they equal poverty with claiming social assistance, Leisering and Leibfried argue that this finding shows that contemporary poverty is often a temporary life experience. Their research findings match perfectly with Giddens (2000) and Beck's (2001) notion of the individualization of contemporary poverty. For Beck, contemporary or 'modernized' poverty is often the result of unexpected life events. The late-modern 'elective biography' or 'do-it-yourself-biography' can easily result in a 'breakdown biography', and thus in mostly temporary poverty and social assistance claiming. As a result, 'a growing part of the total population is at least temporarily exposed to ... poverty' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 49). Following Beck, Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 9) introduce the notion of the 'temporalization' ('Verzeitlichung') of poverty in late-modern society.

Inspired by these theoretical notions about the assumed nature of contemporary poverty we examined the duration of social assistance spells in Rotterdam. Using administrative data about social assistance claiming in Rotterdam, we set up our study in such a way that it enabled an optimal comparison with Leisering and Leibfried's outcomes. The differences between our research findings and theirs were striking. Our central outcome is that, compared with what Leisering and Leibfried found in Bremen, far fewer social assistance claimants in Rotterdam were transiently poor and far more of them were persistently poor. We also found that recurrent social assistance claims – for Beck and for Leisering and Leibfried another characteristic of 'modernized' poverty – is rather the exception in Rotterdam, as only one in five of all social assistance claimants had multiple benefit spells. The latter corroborates the outcome of previous German research

(Andreß and Schulte, 1998). All in all, our research findings in Rotterdam refute the *general* claim by Leisering and Leibfried, and in their footsteps Beck and Giddens, that most contemporary poverty is of a temporary nature. Unfortunately, persistent poverty is still present in our age and in our cities.

To conclude, we will reflect on possible explanations for these remarkable differences in outcomes in the two cities. A first explanation could be that the large numbers of transient poor in Leisering and Leibfried's study were a period effect, typical for the period under observation in their study (the early 1990s). More recent German poverty research indeed found an increase of persistent poverty. Measuring income poverty (although that is different from benefit claiming), Groh-Samberg (2007: 179) found that more than 8 percent of all German individuals live in persistent poverty. In addition, the Bremen researchers themselves, in a more recent paper, acknowledge that 'persistent poverty has increased, discontinuous [poverty] courses have decreased' in Germany (Buhr and Leibfried, 2009: 115; our translation). However, if the large numbers of transient poor were only a temporary phenomenon in Germany in the early 1990s, Leisering and Leibfried (and others in their footsteps) are wrong in presenting temporary poverty as typical for late-modern societies.

Another explanation may be that Leisering and Leibfried's outcomes are the result of administrative peculiarities of the German social assistance system at the time of their research. For instance, almost half (44 percent) of all Bremen social assistance claimants are so-called 'waiting cases': they received social assistance 'pending a decision on entitlement to or payment of a prior benefit' (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 70, 71). It seems questionable if these cases may be counted as examples of an 'escape from poverty' as they generally enter another minimum payment or benefit. In Rotterdam, a decision about a social assistance claim will be taken the moment it is clear that the claimant is not entitled to any other social benefit. In other words: there are no waiting cases in Rotterdam as there are in Bremen.

More generally, we can conclude that Leisering and Leibfried's remarkable outcome that most poor people in Bremen are only temporarily poor may be the result of the specific situation at the time and

place of their research (including the local labour market, existing social assistance system, and so on). In Rotterdam, in a different context (including a somewhat different social assistance system), a different period and with a different population, we come to very different outcomes. This means that the temporariness of poverty and social benefit claiming, that Leisering and Leibfried observe, is not typical for late-modern society but rather a local phenomenon. Further research should explore what economic, social and institutional factors contribute to transient poverty and what factors result in more persistent poverty.

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Notes

1. Beck goes on to say: 'The permanent poor are those who get stuck in the valley of poverty while everyone else is passing through. Those few end up as professional poor. They develop negative careers which take them further and further away from the normal labour market and everything that goes with it. So this is not a class destiny; it is a starkly individual destiny. To update the image of Schumpeter, we might say that the bus of the poor no longer takes everyone to a collective fate. It is instead a permanent getting on and off. The few who are left on the bus conceive themselves as individual failure precisely because their fate is no longer experienceable as a collective one. That is why it is no longer possible to organize them as if it were' (Beck and Wilmms, 2004: 102).
2. Particularly Goldthorpe (2002) is very critical about Beck's substantiated claims. For Goldthorpe, Beck's idea of 'capitalism without class' is 'scarcely to be taken seriously' and 'empirically ... without foundation' (p. 11). Beck's notion of 'reflexive biographies' expressing individual choice is 'merely fanciful' (p. 12).

3. Between 2000 and 2008 the annual poverty rate (individuals living in poor households) in the Netherlands varied between 7.8 and 6.3 percent. The poverty threshold used in this analysis is a household income under or around (maximum 105 percent above) the social minimum incomes as defined in Dutch social assistance legislation. *Source*: Netherlands Statistics, Statline.
4. Jenkins and Rigg (2001: 22) also found that one-third of all individuals in the UK were poor at least once in a time frame of 4 years.
5. Our dataset is much larger than the dataset used in Leisering and Leibfried's study. Their analyses were based on a representative sample of 922 'files' of Bremen households that first claimed social assistance in 1989. In total, 1420 individuals living in these 922 households actually received social assistance. In the Bremen study, these 'files' (households) were followed from 1989 to 1994 (maximum 6 years) (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 56).
6. Andreß and Schulte (1998: 352) summarize their findings: 'we could distinguish two groups of households: continuously poor households and escapers from poverty, both about the same size. Discontinuously poor households are only a small minority.'

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