

IAB-Colloquium

zur Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung

Street-Level Organizations and US Workfare: The “Success Narrative” Revisited

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American workfare (sometimes called welfare-to-work) was the central feature of welfare reform legislation signed into law in 1996. As a general matter, it is part of a broad category of policies in the US and Europe that promote paid work and make cash benefits conditional on work effort. Since the law's enactment, debates over workfare in the US have been dominated by a *success narrative* that builds on assumptions about workfare as a strategy for *enabling* the poor. These assumptions can thrive, largely uncontested, in a context in which workfare-as-practiced is nontransparent, occurring through discretionary activities taking place in myriad street-level agencies and offices around the country.

In most policy studies, these practices are largely unobserved (at least in any systematic way). Nor are they made legible by regularly collected administrative data used to assess "performance."

(Fortsetzung auf Seite 2)

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A different picture emerges from studies that bring the distinctive perspective of street-level analysis to bear. Using analytic strategies that allow for direct examination of *how* workfare works and *what* it does in practice, these studies investigate the diverse and discretionary activities occurring in the street-level organizations (SLOs) that effectively “make” policy on the ground. Over the past two decades, street-level research has laid the foundation for a critical counter-narrative, in which workfare, in important respects, is understood to be a policy *failure*. These studies, which necessarily developed piece by piece, state by state, have provided important pieces of the workfare puzzle over time. But the cumulative findings and the critical narrative they support have yet to be assembled and the accumulated weight of the evidence fully considered.

This chapter initiates that process, taking a fresh look at some of the major contributions made by street-level research and the cumulative picture of workfare they provide. This review recognizes that there are important differences between the US and European countries and between US workfare and European activation; however, it is possible that, in some respects, the US experience may be more different in degree than in kind. This review provides an opportunity to consider how a street-level perspective may be instructive to the study of European activation.