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Trajectories among recipients of social assistance in Norway: A local approach

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1 | INTRODUCTION

A local perspective on individual work and welfare careers has become more urgent in the past decades due to recent political, economic and social developments (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). In general, the Nordic welfare regime is more service oriented than other welfare regimes. To state the obvious, service provision and use take place at the local level. As Andreotti and Mingione (2016) have claimed: "The 'new active welfare' lays its foundations at the local level, …". Recent work and welfare reforms have increasingly emphasized activation and integrated or coordinated provision of a multitude of services. This development also seems like a necessity as new target groups include more disadvantaged individuals farther from the labour market and who have more complex problems and hence need a variety of services.

Kazepov (2010) has asserted that 'the territorial dimension of social policies has long been a neglected perspective in comparative social analysis'. Recent scientific contributions have met this challenge mostly by mapping variations in local welfare arrangements and by analysing sociopolitical drivers of decentralization of such welfare provisions (Andreotti et al., 2012; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016; Vampa, 2017).

The ambition of this paper is to bridge the gap between the local social policy/regime literature and scholarship on benefit users' dynamics and trajectories. It addresses the actual trajectories or pathways of social assistance recipients in domains like work, welfare and education. The aim is to investigate how these trajectories are related to characteristics of the municipality of residence in Norway. We ask: Net of labour market conditions and individual characteristics, to what extent are resources provided by the local municipality and particularly the local Labour- and Welfare office (NAV office), able to further work oriented trajectories among younger recipients of social assistance?

Young social assistance recipients are selected for scrutiny as they have several and varied disadvantages (van der Wel et al., 2006). Hence, many are hard-to-assist and need a variety of resources and services. In the public debate, many are worried that young recipients are entering their adulthood as "dependent" on social assistance. Young people (< 30 years of age) in general and social assistance recipients in particular are among the target groups of The Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We employ a conceptual framework inspired by three theory traditions, Local Welfare Systems (LWS), social investments, and organizational performance, in addition to life course theory. The concept of LWS was coined in the late 1990s (Mingione et al., 2002; Saraceno, 2002) and later developed and applied by Andreotti et al. (2012) and Andreotti and Mingione (2016). The notion of LWS starts "from its socioeconomic and cultural conditions and from the social structures in which it is embedded" (Andreotti et al., 2012:1934). This broader sociopolitical and economic context that characterize a municipality or a region is thus a key condition. Each local unit has its own economic and social resources and different mix of actors – public, private and third sector, contribute to the pool of resources in each local context. LWS is considered as specific configurations of population needs, providers of services and benefits, and resources raised at the local level. More specifically, local patterns of receipt of social assistance will depend on variations in institutions that regulate access to, treatment of, duration of and exit routes from receipt careers (Mingione et al., 2002). Five key institutional factors may be listed in this regard, (1) activation, – and/or active labour market programs, (2) benefit levels/generosity, (3) recipients' duties (4) selectivity/composition of the needy populations and (5) duration rules (Bonny & Bosco, 2002; Mingione et al., 2002). Empirically, variables on the local level measuring (1), (2) and (3) are unavailable to us. With respect to 1, all NAV offices have access to slots in state funded ALMPs. To a large extent, national legislation and constraints regulate (4). Yet, locally the social composition of the users may certainly vary considerably. National legislation poses no time limits on receipt of SA, so no formally induced variations between municipalities are to be expected. Thus, as specified in Section 5, we have access to empirical measures of (4) that is, the composition of recipients, in addition to an index variable reflecting the broader municipal social and economic context.

The scholarship on *social investments* draws attention to ways in which social policy can further economic and social aims simultaneously (Midgley et al., 2017; Morel et al., 2012). Social investment policies seek to empower citizens through education, training, employment, and policies reconciliating work and family life (Bonoli, 2012; Jenson, 2012). Under a social investment perspective public financing and/or provision of welfare is considered crucial to ensure equitable access to services like kindergartens, schools, and work oriented programs, as well as income transfers, such as social assistance and housing support (Morel et al., 2012). One key policy aim is participation in the ordinary labour market in jobs that are decently paid and of reasonable quality (Nelson & Stephens, 2012). In a comparative perspective, the Nordic countries are considered social investment states (Morel et al., 2012). Yet, there are significant variations in such investments per capita between Norwegian municipalities (2021_ny_tabell-1-korrigerte-frie-inntekter-for-alle-kommunane.xlsx (live.com)). Our empirical measures of municipal social investments are described in Section 5.

Our further focus is on the local the NAV office that provides labour and welfare services in the municipality. We draw on a system for goal-oriented performance implemented by the NAV directorate and reported by all NAV offices in Norway (Roaldsnes, 2018). Each NAV office are obliged to fill in scorecards that specify a set of operational measures reflecting the entire organization's goal structure and the degree to which goals have been achieved by the office (Kaplan & Norton, 2005; Roaldsnes, 2018). This performance approach invites us to focus on certain organizational aspects believed to be important for our outcomes of interest (Roaldsnes, 2018). In Section 5 we have accounted for these performance variables in detail.

Finally, concepts derived from *the life course perspective* combined with insights from social policy and comparative welfare state analysis seems fruitful for our purpose (Elder Jr., 1998; Leisering, 2003; Leisering & Leibfried, 1999). The life

course perspective is preoccupied with life trajectories and careers. Life, or life phases, consist of trajectories made up of different states, their ordering and duration, as well as transitions between states. A central idea originally coined by sociologists is *accumulation* denoting the tendency that over time advantages tend to cumulate among some, whereas disadvantages cumulate among others (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). This notion has inspired how we have constructed the input to the sequence analysis, see below. Leisering & Leibfried (1999:25) distinguish between three life phases, childhood/youth, employment/family phase, and old age. Each of these life phases is structured by the welfare state, that is, the education system, risk management arrangements, and old-age pensions, respectively. In addition to the structuring forces of the welfare state in each phase, it also seeks to integrate the different phases. A "successful" integration of life stages is occurring in cases where people graduate, get a job and stay employed until they retire at the "normal" retirement age. A prime goal of social assistance is to enhance labour market participation among recipients in their working ages by providing work related services of good quality (carrots) and by imposing conditionalities (sticks) (Dahl & Lorentzen, 2017).

In summary, the LWS perspective invites us to explore broader characteristics of the local context. In this study these include the users' composition and welfare needs, and structural social and labour market characteristics. The social investment paradigm calls for a scrutiny of some of the key resources raised by the municipality. The organizational performance approach draws attention to organizational aspects the local Labour and welfare office that are expected to yield positive labour market outcomes. These local entities and operating factors are linked to SA careers and trajectories through concepts derived from life course research. Due to limitations in access to many of the dimensions of the perspectives on the "local" we will emphasize that we are not able to put any of the theoretical approaches on empirical tests. Rather, the perspectives serve as inspiration for choosing variables of potential importance for the outcomes of interest.

3 | INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Since the early 1990s, Norwegian authorities have put a heavy emphasis on the 'work approach' that is, the principle that work should be the first choice among all able-bodied citizens, men and women alike. As such, the work approach may be seen as the political counterpart to the work focus in social assistance as well as in the life course perspective, as discussed above. In agreement with the work approach, a massive merger between the labour exchange, the social insurance administration and municipal social services were launched in 2006 and brought to its conclusion in 2010 (Askim et al., 2011). The explicit aim of the reform was "less people on benefit and more people in work". The resulting Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) became responsible for all employment and welfare services in Norway. With the establishment of NAV, also SA recipients were granted access to the full portfolio of services for rehabilitation and job training that previously were reserved only for recipients of social security benefits (Andreassen & Aars, 2015). The merged NAV offices are run jointly by the state and each municipality through the Partner Agreement, and social assistance is the purview of the municipal part of this Agreement.

Recent reforms also include the introduction of activity requirements for all claimants below 30 years of age. Despite the NAV merger, a large degree of local autonomy persists in the social services. SA benefits remain means tested and left to the professional discretion of the NAV-office and/or social worker. National guidelines for measuring SA benefits are in place, but these are just guidelines: it is up to the municipality to comply. Although 80% of the municipalities have adopted the guidelines, actual payments to the recipients vary quite considerably (Kommunal rapport, 2016). The Norwegian state is funding the municipalities' by block grants. The size of these grants are based on criteria related to selected sociodemographic factors pertaining to each municipality (The General Purpose Grant Scheme—regjeringen.no).

4 | REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

Different, but related outcomes have been studied from a local social policy perspective. Examples are social assistance (SA) payments (Minas, 2010; Minas et al., 2014), SA rates (Dokken, 2016; SSB, 2019), and exits from SA

(Bergmark et al., 2017; Saraceno, 2002). In the following we review studies that have linked local characteristics to social assistance rates and transitions.

Saraceno (2002) compared social assistance dynamics in 13 cities in six European countries and interpreted variations in patterns of receipt in light of the notion of LWS. This unique design allowed the researchers to probe into differences both within and between countries and thus distinguish between national welfare regimes and local welfare systems. Of particular interest to us is that several of the above mentioned dimensions of the local welfare system have a profound impact on the social composition of the beneficiaries and hence on SA dynamics and the likelihood to leave SA. Thus, one lesson stands out as particularly relevant in the present context: analyses of duration on SA and exit from SA, and most likely more complex trajectories, must consider the composition of the SA population.

In Sweden, Bergmark et al. (2017) studied how social assistance exit rates were related to how social assistance work was carried out and organized. Information was collected by semi-structured interviews with department managers and front-line social workers. Their findings suggested that shorter social assistance spells follow from activation with a focus on human resource development, programs targeted at young adults, well-functioning collaboration, and use of sanctions or an overall approach.

In the Netherlands Broersma et al. (2011) studied the effectiveness of active labour market policies and programmes, and how it was related to governance, management, and coordination with neighbouring municipalities and educational institutions. The authors find positive yet small effects of control, activation, employment creation, and coordination strategies on inflow to and outflow from social assistance.

De Wilde and Marchal (2019) carried out a vignette experiment in Belgium to assess variations in the use of conditionalities and sanctioning. They collected data that made it possible to distinguish between the effects of case managers who assess individual cases and characteristics of the local welfare agencies and municipalities in which they operate. The results reveal relatively little variation between municipalities, which can be largely explained by characteristics of the municipalities (e.g., political ideology and organizational setting). They found however, extensive variation at the case-manager level. A substantial share of this variation can be explained by characteristics of individual case managers such as age and attitudes.

A few relevant Norwegian studies also exist. Dokken (2016) looked at geographical variations in long-term receipt of social assistance in Norway. She finds that long-term receipt is related to individual characteristics such as weak attachment to the labour market, having immigrant status, and status as single. Long-term receipt is more common in the capital and in other urban areas. The multilevel regression analysis shows that the major reason for this is the higher prevalence of immigrants in such areas. In other words, the explanation for this contextual "effect" is the particular composition of the social assistance population in the urban areas. The regional unemployment rates on the other hand had no significant effect on the prevalence of long-term recipients. An interpretation of this is that a large share of these recipients is very distant from the labour market. Statistics Norway (SSB, 2019) found that in Oslo social assistance claimants receive social aid longer than in other Norwegian big cities like Stavanger and Tromsø. In Oslo also more people recycle into and out of the SA system. The authors speculate whether these different patterns can be explained by the fact that in Oslo a larger share of the social assistance population consists of immigrants and has a more unfavourable age composition and troublesome family situation (SSB, 2019). Other potentially powerful factors like varieties in service provision or different labour markets were not considered.

A couple of comments are in place here. First, few studies exist on local variations in social assistance rates and transitions. Second, we have found no studies of local variations in more holistic trajectories among social assistance recipients, which is the main interest of our investigation. We are aware, however, of several national studies, for example, from Finland (Ilmakunnas & Moisio, 2018), Germany (Bruckmeier et al., 2019), Norway (Lorentzen & Dahl, 2020), and Switzerland (Gutjahr & Heeb, 2016), that apply sequence analysis to map more complex and holistic welfare and work trajectories.

To sum up this literature review: Some relevant transition studies of social assistance recipients clearly suggest that different aspects of the local matter for patterns of receipt. However, we have not found any studies that

address the association between the local context and the patterning of more holistic trajectories among social assistance recipients. The literature review has identified knowledge gaps on the links between local structural features and social policy arrangements and the dynamics of individual trajectories. The ambition of this article is to fill this knowledge gap.

5 | DATA AND METHODS

5.1 | Study population

The study population is all first-time «young» social assistance recipients aged 20–23 years in 2012 derived from the nation-wide Norwegian population register. This makes a total of 4654 persons that is followed over the period from 2012 through 2018. Due to missing values on some of the variables, *N* will vary from analysis to analysis. Extending the observation period to seven years (84 months) allows us to shed light on the long-term trajectories of social assistance recipients by following them through young adulthood to later adulthood, a period of life often characterized by labor market- and family establishment. The reason for setting 20 years of age as the lower limit is that we are interested in young people who are supposed to have left high school, or upper secondary education, that is, either graduated or dropped out. We do not want to address the high school dropout theme as we think that drop out processes are an important research topic in itself, a topic that we have scrutinized earlier (van der Wel et al., 2021; Vogt & Lorentzen, 2020). In the NAV system the upper age limit of the target group "young people" is 30 years of age. By setting the upper age at 23 years, no one would have turned more than 30 years in the observation period. The period 2013 and on is the post-NAV reform period. The chosen period is one where NAV is expected to invest a lot of attention, effort and resources to bring young social assistance beneficiaries (back) to work.

5.2 | The dependent variable: Constructing the welfare-work trajectories

The trajectories, spanning the years 2012–2018, consist of episodes of social assistance, social security, work and educational activity and will be analysed by means of sequence analysis. Sequence analysis is a useful tool when exploring longitudinal trajectories covering a complex set of statuses and transitions. The use of sequence analysis combined with cluster analysis allows the identification of "ideal typical" trajectory types. It is therefore a well-suited to reduce complexity and organize seemingly chaotic individual sequences into more manageable clusters of similar trajectory types.

The construction of trajectories was conducted in three separate steps, as described below.

We *first* defined a status alphabet containing eight mutually exclusive monthly statuses. These statues covered positions within school, work, and welfare. The information is derived from the national registers which have longitudinal data for the entire Norwegian population (van der Wel et al., 2019). The statuses were operationalized in such a way that if two or more statuses were overlapping the same month, the topmost status in Table 1 was given preference. Thus, disability takes precedence over all other statuses, health related benefits over all except other except the more permanent disability benefit and so on. The system of preference was based on the idea that more permanent and/or disadvantaged statuses were given preference over less permanent and/or disadvantaged statuses. "Disability" was registered if a person was receiving disability benefits the current month. In Norway, the disability benefit is generally considered a permanent status, and is assigned when work capacity is reduced by at least 50% caused by health problems. "Health related" is a collective term for work assessment allowance and sickness allowance. The former is a health-related benefit meant to bring people with impaired health back into work, but also as an assessment for disability benefits. Sickness allowance is a contributory benefit for persons who work. "Social

TABLE 1 Status alphabet.

Disability	Registered with disability pension current month
Health related	Registered with either sickness benefit or work assessment benefit current month
Social assistance	Registered with social assistance benefits current month
Unemployed	Registered as unemployed current month
Education	Registered under education current month if month is in a year with a valid educational record and none of the above monthly statuses apply
Work, earnings 1st quartile	Monthly status is based on annual income in the 1st income quartile (age 16–66) and none of the above monthly statuses apply
Work, earnings 2st quartile	Monthly status is based on annual income in the 2nd income quartile (age 16–66) and none of the above monthly statuses apply
Work, earnings 3rd and 4th quartile	Monthly status is based on annual income in the 3rd or 4th income quartile (age 16–66) and none of the above monthly statuses apply

assistance" is a means tested benefit, often considered to be the last-resort safety net of the welfare state. "Unemployment" was registered if the person had registered as unemployed at a NAV office the current month. Both compensated and uncompensated unemployment spells have been included in this status. "Education" was registered for months in a year with a valid educational record. The status does not separate between different educational levels or types. Labour market attachment was operationalized into three groups based on earnings derived from Norwegian tax registers, covering the full workforce aged 16–66. "Work, earnings 1st quartile" contains persons with annual earnings in the lower 25% of the income distribution. The 2nd quartile contains persons in the 25%–50% segment of the income distribution. Earnings above 50% of the earnings distribution have been collapsed into one category.

The *second* step was to calculate the pairwise distances based on the Chi-square distance. This distance measure weighs the squared distances for each state by the inverse of the overall proportion of time spent in the state. Thus, the Chi-square distance is highly sensitive to the time spent in each status, and not the exact order and timing of the states (Studer & Ritschard, 2014). This reflects the importance of the cumulative experience of labour market inclusion/exclusion over the crucial life curse transition from young to later adulthood, see the account of accumulation of (dis)advantages above.

In the *third* step, we identified the trajectory types utilizing cluster analysis. For the clustering procedure, we followed the example of Studer (2013) combining hierarchical clustering (Ward) and partitioning around medoids (PAM). Here, Ward clustering was used to set the starting values of the PAM clustering. Clustering quality was very good as assessed by the Silhouette coefficients. The best cluster solution produced eight distinct trajectory types depicting typical pathways within school, work, and welfare for first-time social assistance recipients.

5.3 | Independent variables

5.3.1 | Variables pertaining to the LWS perspective

To reflect the social composition of the population of social assistance recipients, the following individual variables are included: gender, age, country of birth, drop-out from upper secondary school, hospital admission, growing up in a low income household, and parents' education. These variables stem from the national register that include all Norwegian citizens. These are characteristics that have been shown to account for social assistance dynamics as well as welfare-work trajectories among social assistance beneficiaries (Bäckman & Bergmark, 2011; Lorentzen & Dahl, 2020). See Table 2 for categorization and reference groups. Since our main interest is with the local context, we will not devote much attention to results pertaining to these variables.

TABLE 2 Descriptives: Distribution of variables by eight trajectory clusters and in total.

	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4	Outcome 5	Outcome 6	Outcome 7	Outcome 8	Total
Male	55.14	42.86	57.23	48.65	51.66	46.38	79.02	48.95	53,46 (2362)
Female	48.86	57.14	42.77	51.35	48.34	53.62	20.98	51.05	46,54 (2056)
Norway	73.51	72.55	50.67	70.87	46.96	70.43	67.86	53.66	63,40 (2801)
Western-Europe	7.57	13.03	10.21	9.91	9.67	10.59	11.61	9.03	10,57 (467)
Non-Western	18.92	14.43	39.11	19.22	43.37	18.99	20.54	37.3	26,03 (1150)
Finished upper secondary ed.	24.86	26.05	27.55	21.92	41.71	32.34	38.99	53.66	35,13 (1552)
Early school leaver	75.14	73.95	72.45	78.08	58.29	67.66	61.01	46.34	64,87 (2866)
Age (mean)	21.15	21.08	21	21.22	21.04	21.12	21.36	21.04	21,13 (4418)
Non-poor	69.19	74.51	49.9	66.07	52.21	66.86	67.11	58.51	63,54 (2807)
Poor	22.16	18.35	17.92	19.52	11.6	20.48	17.86	12.43	17,32 (765)
Poverty missing	8.65	7.14	32.18	14.41	36.19	12.66	15.03	29.06	19,15 (846)
Parents upper secondary or lower education	76.76	72.27	81.89	82.58	81.77	79.06	79.91	71.86	77,57 (3427)
Parents higher education	23.24	27.73	18.11	17.42	18.23	20.94	20.09	28.14	22,43 (991)
Not hospitalized	11.35	8.82	22.54	21.32	26.24	23.25	22.02	25.39	20,62 (911)
Hospitalized	88.65	91.18	77.46	78.68	73.76	76.75	77.98	74.61	79,38 (3507)
Income per inhabitant (mean)	45,960	45,851	46,029	46,273	46,457	46,369	46,017	46,693	46,231 (4418)
Exp. for social services (mean)	2897	2978	3078	2841	3189	2896	2836	2978	2956 (4418)
Long-term municipality debt in % of inc. (mean)	193	194	187	195	189	193	193	192	192 (4414)
Inhabitants in municipality (mean)	25,507	29,775	30,262	26,363	31,945	28,010	26,015	30,040	28,701 (4414)
Big city region 1	16.28	18.52	22.15	15.51	20.98	15.19	13.92	21.65	18,04 (747)
Big city region 2	6.98	7.85	7.93	6.6	10.06	6.67	7.84	8.52	7,80 (323)
Medium city region 1	12.21	17.19	21.2	14.85	13.22	16.17	11.36	12.29	13,96 (578)
Medium city region 2	14.53	9.19	11.59	9.9	11.78	10.74	11.04	8.66	10,46 (433)
Small town region 1	17.44	17.04	16.67	18.15	15.23	15.93	19.04	15.78	16,81 (696)
Small town region 2	6.98	8.15	7.32	6.93	4.02	7.9	8.16	6.98	7,32 (303)
Rural district 1	8.14	8	7.72	10.89	11.78	9.88	7.68	9.92	9,15 (379)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4	Outcome 5	Outcome 6	Outcome 7	Outcome 8	Total
Rural district 2	6.4	4.59	5.49	5.61	3.74	5.8	6.4	3.77	5,14 (213)
Regions without urban centre 1	7.56	6.22	5.69	6.93	5.75	7.04	9.44	7.82	7,15 (296)
Regions without urban centre 2	3.49	3.26	3.25	4.62	3.45	4.69	5.12	4.61	4,18 (173)
Share business contact (mean)	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.09	0,08 (4418)
Job-match (mean)	0.2	0.21	0.22	0.2	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.21	0,21 (4418)
Public sector sickness absence (mean)	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.07	0,06 (4362)
Share of journal recording (mean)	0.89	0.9	0.91	0.89	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0,90 (4418)
Clients per social worker (mean)	41.66	41.99	41.98	40.62	40.8	41.42	41.26	40.06	41,22 (4418)

Note: $N = 4418$.

Social and labour market structure

This is a composite variable that classifies the municipalities into 10 so called center structure regions. Each municipality is ranked according to position on each of the following variables: number of inhabitants, number of work places, number of incoming commuters, number of services, number of public institutions, travelling distance to center functions. The center structure variable reflects the mean rank of the rank order on each of these variables (Gundersen & Juvkam, 2013). The variable has hierarchical properties, but in the analysis it is treated it as a categorical (dummy) variable. It is useful for our purpose since it measures more permanent features of the municipality and reflects resources like size and structure of labour markets as well as the availability of private and public services and institutions. For this reason, we expect that social assistance recipients will have more work oriented trajectories in higher ranked regions than in lower ranked regions.

5.3.2 | Variables pertaining to social investment perspective

Variables measuring selected aspects of municipal social investments stem from KOSTRA (Kostra indikatorer (hatoanalyse.no)), a national information system that provides management information about municipal activities. The following three indicators are included:

Free incomes per capita

This indicator reflects the economic revenues from taxes and block grants that the municipality has at its disposal without constraints imposed by the state other than national rules and regulations. Free incomes are by far the largest income component as they constitute 77% of the total municipal income package on average (Frie inntekter, 2023—regjeringen.no). Major priorities of the municipality are to provide education, and health, and social services. Higher free incomes increase the municipality's economic decision latitude and allow it to invest broadly in the citizens human capital. We expect higher free incomes to be related to more work oriented trajectories.

Long term debt

This indicator is expressed as a percentage of revenues and denotes the financial health and hence the financial decision latitude of the municipality. We expect that higher long term debt reduce the room for manoeuvring and leads the municipality to invest less in human capital which will result in less work oriented trajectories.

Expenditures on operation of social services

This indicator measures net operation expenditures per capita 20–66 years of age. It is intended to reflect investment in the capacity of the social services to promote self-sufficiency among the users. We expect that higher operation costs are related to trajectories that to a larger extent are dominated by labour market activity.

5.3.3 | Variables pertaining to the organizational performance perspective

The five variables used in this part of the analysis are derived from Roaldsnes (2018). In his analysis many of these variables were significantly related to an aggregate measure of transition to work among NAV users with reduced ability to work. Information on the three first is extracted from NAV's score cards. Information on the three last is collected from the NAV Directorate. Together, these variables are intended to capture factors that enable the NAV office to meet its goals (Roaldsnes, 2018). We are investigating five NAV office variables:

Company contact

This indicator measures the percentage of enterprises in the local labour market that the NAV office has had contact with the last month. We aggregated and calculated means. We expect that higher percentages are associated with more work oriented trajectories.

Job match

Job match is an indicator that reflects the degree to which the NAV office has assessed the users' employability in relation to available jobs. The variable may thus be interpreted as an indicator of the extent to which the NAV office has a work oriented approach vis a vis the users. We expect that high scores on this indicator are associated with trajectories dominated by work activity.

Keeping journals

The NAV office is obliged to contact a user 48 h after the first inquiry. Failure to do so may indicate a disorderly NAV office. A "messy" office is likely to be less effective and hence be associated with trajectories characterized by little labour market participation.

Sickness absence

This indicator measures the levels of sickness absence in the state part of the NAV offices. High levels of sickness absence are likely to reflect poorer follow up of users and thus lower likelihood of work oriented trajectories.

Work load

Work load is measured by dividing the number of users on the number of employees in the state part of the office. High work load is expected to reduce the effectiveness of follow up efforts and will result in lower likelihood of work oriented trajectories.

All these variables are pertaining to the state part of the NAV office. Similar aggregated information on the municipal part does not exist. As mentioned, social assistance belongs to municipal part of the NAV office. Yet, we will argue that the information we have on the state part is useful, first because it is reasonable to assume that the performance of the two parts will be positively correlated; second because only a small minority of our social assistance recipients continues on social aid: 12% belongs to the social assistance cluster. The large majority, 88%, belongs to trajectories characterized by receipt of different social security benefits (run by the state), by activity in paid work or education.

5.4 | Linking independent variables to SA trajectories

We carried out multinomial logistic regression on the eight trajectory types identified above. The estimates of the independent variables are presented as average marginal effects (AME). AMEs allow for a more intuitive interpretation of the statistical relationships than odds or odds ratios offer. AMEs are interpreted as the average change in the probability of a certain outcome when the independent variable increases by one unit. The AMEs related to the normalized variables, that do not have a reference category, are interpreted from minimum to maximum. An example may illustrate this: The effect of "Free income per capita" on a given outcome is interpreted as going from the municipality with the lowest to the municipality with the highest "Free income per capita".

Moving out the municipality is an issue. Sensitivity analyses have been carried out to check how such emigration influences the results.

An initial VIF analysis of all independent variables shows that multicollinearity is hardly present and thus poses no problem for the multivariate analysis. Results are available from the first author upon request. To account for clustering in the data and to calculate more correct standard errors we have applied the "robust" option in STATA.

6 | RESULTS

6.1 | Descriptives

Table 2 presents the distribution of the variables in total (right column) and by the eight trajectory clusters. Due to a relatively large study population, most cells contain a reasonable number of observations.

We can immediately observe that there are larger variations in trajectory affiliation in the individual variables than in many of the contextual variables, including the NAV office variables. This is a clear hint that the contextual variables may be of less importance in the multivariate analysis than the individual. One may also note that young social assistance recipients are quite severely disadvantaged in several life domains (van der Wel et al., 2006).

6.2 | Results from the sequence analysis

Figure 1 shows the graphs of the eight trajectories produced by the sequence analysis. We see that the four trajectories (1–4) are characterized by receipt of different types of benefits, three dominated by work activity (5–7), and one long education trajectory (8).

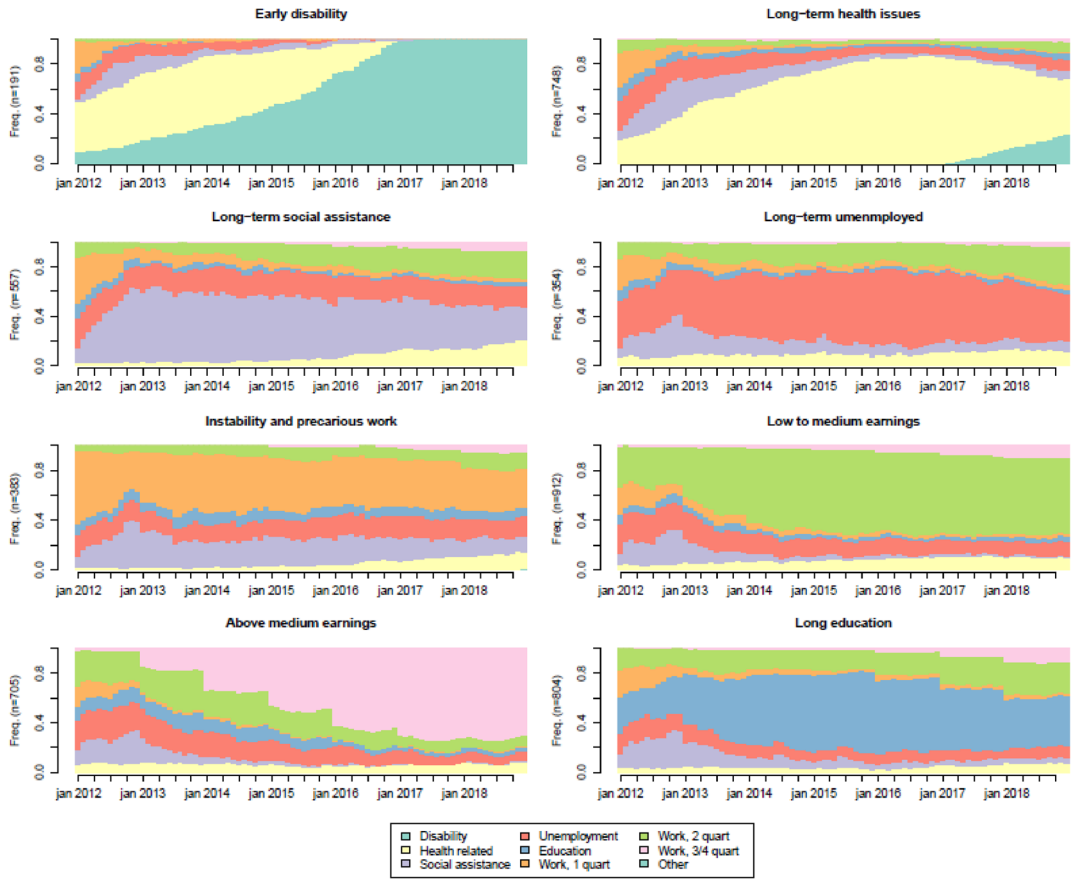

FIGURE 1 Eight trajectory clusters produced by sequence analysis.

40% belongs to any of the benefit clusters, the largest (16%) being the cluster labelled long-term health issues. Then 60% is affiliated with one of the work oriented clusters. Three of these (6–8) may be considered successful and constitute slightly more than half of the total social assistance population under investigation. Tying back to the life course theory laid out above, and alluding to the "work approach", participation in the labour market is thus created, or restored, for more than half of the young recipients of social assistance.

6.3 | Results from multinomial logistic regression analysis

Our expectations are that "everything else equal" NAV offices that are work oriented, that are ordered, and that have lower work loads more often will be affiliated with trajectory 5–7 and particularly trajectory 6–7 since trajectory 5 is characterized by unstable and precarious work. We also consider trajectory 8 as work oriented since long education regularly leads to decent work; we see that long education gradually tapers off and is replaced by work with medium or higher incomes.

Table 3 shows how the five office characteristics are related to each of the eight trajectories.

Looking first at the AMEs pertaining to the five NAV office variables we observe that there are few significant coefficients, whence individual, municipal, and labour market factors are controlled for. We see that two coefficients related to work load are significant at the 0.05 level, but not at the 0.01 level. We are, however, inclined not to pay too much attention to these significant effects as the sensitivity analysis presented in Table A1 of stable recipients fails to confirm these results. In addition, altogether more than 30 coefficients related to the NAV office are tested, and this increases the likelihood that coefficients will appear as significant purely by chance, that is, there is a high probability to commit a type 1 error (Armstrong, 2014).

Moving to the municipal social investment variables, Table 2 shows that 4 coefficients are significantly different from zero. The sensitivity analysis (Table A1) indicates, however, that the association between free incomes per inhabitant and trajectory 7, "above median earnings" is the only common significant estimate whereas the other 3 coefficients turn out to be insignificant. The mentioned estimate is also significant at the 0.01 level, is quite substantial and indicates that higher investment is less likely to be related to the "above median earnings" trajectory. This result is contrary to expectations, so we will return to it in the discussion.

As for labour market region several coefficients are significant both in the main analysis and in the sensitivity analysis. Recipients living in rural district are less likely to belong to the long education trajectory. Due to lack of higher educational opportunities in these peripheral areas, this makes sense. Moreover, beneficiaries in regions without an urban center are less likely to follow the trajectory labelled long term health issues, and more likely to be affiliated with the trajectory dominated by relatively well paid work (trajectory 7). These latter results are contrary to expectations and will be discussed in Section 7.

As compared with the contextual variables, the individual variables seem to matter more. Gender, missing on the poverty variable (probably indicating that the respondent did not live in the country when they grew up), parents' education, and in particular hospitalization are all significantly related to trajectory clusters. The sign of the coefficients is mostly as expected and in accordance with previous research, see above. Country of birth and age are of little significance, however. We will not comment further on these associations since our main focus is on the local and the NAV office.

7 | SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we have examined whether characteristics of the Local Welfare System (LWS), municipal social investments, and in particular the local Labour and Welfare agency (the NAV office) mattered for the subsequent welfare-work trajectories of young social assistance recipients in Norway. A sequence analysis identified eight trajectory

TABLE 3 Multinomial logistic regression: Average marginal effects pertaining to eight trajectory clusters. *N*=4435.

Average marginal effects	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4	Outcome 5	Outcome 6	Outcome 7	Outcome 8
Female (male ref.)	−0.00508	0.0526***	−0.00768	0.0249**	0.00915	0.0567***	−0.160***	0.0291**
Western-Europe (Norway ref.)	−0.0124	0.0252	0.00163	−0.00432	0.00269	−0.000541	0.00662	−0.0190
Non-western	0.00361	−0.0367	0.0345*	−0.0151	0.0254	−0.0333	−0.0254	0.0469*
Early school leaver	0.0133*	0.0499***	0.0535***	0.0442***	−0.000739	0.0168	−0.0440***	−0.133***
Age	0.00745	−0.00906	−0.0252	0.0225	−0.00728	0.00506	0.0792***	−0.0727***
Poor (Non-poor ref.)	0.0101	−0.00151	0.0232	0.00265	−0.0152	0.0242	−0.00635	−0.0372*
Poverty missing	−0.0203	−0.0864***	0.0838***	0.00275	0.0430*	−0.0366	−0.0130	0.0268
Parents higher education (lower ref)	0.00180	0.0392**	−0.0196	−0.0255**	−0.0141	−0.0127	−0.0296*	0.0605***
Hospitalized	0.0214**	0.106***	−0.00974	−0.0127	−0.0249*	−0.0526**	0.0238	−0.0514**
Income per inhabitant	−0.0252	0.0620	−0.00985	−0.0231	0.0877	0.0804	−0.283**	0.111
Exp. for social services	−0.00377	−0.0307	0.0382	−0.0322	0.129*	−0.00936	−0.0483	−0.0427
Long-term municipality debt.	0.0209	0.116*	−0.107*	0.00382	−0.0134	−0.0439	−0.0312	0.0551
Inhabitants in municipality	−0.0402	0.0126	0.0387	−0.0108	0.0240	0.00716	−0.0417	0.0102
Big city region 2 (ref. big city reg. 1)	−0.00669	−0.0202	−0.0152	−0.0131	0.0301	−0.00913	0.0276	0.00660
Medium city region 1	−0.00509	−0.00101	−0.0250	0.00870	0.00242	0.0523	−0.00288	−0.0295
Medium city region 2	0.0111	−0.0435*	0.00143	−0.00212	0.0236	0.0237	0.0148	−0.0290
Small town region 1	−0.00771	−0.0310	0.00435	0.00479	0.00993	0.0127	0.0301	−0.0231
Small town region 2	−0.0104	−0.00871	0.00773	−0.00605	−0.0232	0.0333	0.0274	−0.0201
Rural district 1	−0.0138	−0.0572*	−0.00420	0.0124	0.0357	0.0347	0.00573	−0.0134
Rural district 2	−0.00430	−0.0567*	0.0281	−0.00208	−0.00808	0.0386	0.0620*	−0.0577*
Regions without urban centre 1	−0.00426	−0.0527	−0.0179	−0.00647	−0.00761	−0.00362	0.113**	−0.0203
Regions without urban centre 2	−0.00286	−0.0773*	−0.0408	0.00188	−0.0345	0.0331	0.171**	−0.0505
Share business contact	−0.0285	−0.0121	0.0381	0.0645	−0.0193	−0.0887	−0.0139	0.0598
Job-match	−0.0117	−0.00784	0.0635	−0.0243	0.00815	0.0439	−0.0336	−0.0382
Public sector sickness absence	−0.115	0.161	−0.0911	0.0334	−0.0684	0.0385	−0.0645	0.106
Share of journal recording	−0.00857	−0.00954	0.0505	−0.0389	0.0113	−0.0157	0.0167	−0.00574
Work load	0.0149	0.110*	0.0221	−0.0262	−0.0580	0.0416	0.00644	−0.111*

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

clusters spanning seven years, four dominated by benefit receipt, and four work oriented including an education cluster.

The analysis of one aspect of LWS, the social composition of social assistance recipients, showed that several individual characteristics, such as growing up in poverty and poor health were significantly related to trajectory affiliation. Furthermore, social and labour market structure had an "impact", but contrary to expectations: recipients living in regions with smaller and less urbanized regions tended to end up in trajectories characterized by relatively well paid work. An ad hoc explanation, or perhaps speculation, is that in these labour market regions there are several municipalities with rich fisheries, salmon farming and/or a thriving tourist industry. An additional sensitivity analysis shows that low unemployment in general does not seem to play a role since controlling for unemployment rate hardly changes the significance values of the "region without urban center" variables. In the full model, unemployment rate in itself is insignificant.

By and large, neither did municipal social investments exert significant effects on trajectory affiliations. An exception was free incomes per capita which turned out to be negatively related to cluster 7, that is, relatively well paid jobs. This result was unexpected and quite counterintuitive, but one explanation may be that many municipalities with higher levels of free incomes per capita are quite small, located in rural and remote areas and have few well paid jobs to offer.

Our expectations were that NAV office indicators that reflected employer contact, matching efforts, orderliness and work load would be positively related to work oriented trajectory clusters. Results from multinomial logistic regression analyses did not confirm these expectations: There were hardly any significant associations between NAV office indicators and the likelihood of belonging to any of the trajectory clusters.

If we compare these results with previous research, we note first that existing findings are rather mixed. Some find associations with local or regional features and outcomes (Bergmark et al., 2017; Dokken, 2016; Roaldsnes, 2018), whereas others fail to do so (Aasprang, 2022). The reasons for this mixed picture may be multiple as the conceptual and methodological approaches, selection of study populations and outcomes between the different studies vary considerably. Thus, it is hard to pinpoint one specific explanation for these mixed findings. In one respect our approach differs from all the other studies reviewed in the paper; we examine trajectories rather than for example, *transitions* from welfare to work (Bergmark et al., 2017; Roaldsnes, 2018), or *rates* of long term beneficiaries (Dokken, 2016). Due to these differences in outcomes alone, comparisons are hard to make.

Another important aspect to consider is what theories, concepts and operationalisations have been adopted in previous research. We have been guided by concepts derived from LWS, social investments and organizational performance to conceptualize aspects of the "local". Others have used concepts like local governance or territory (Aasprang, 2022; Kazepov, 2010). Meaning and focus will thus be different as well as the operationalisations that entail, which again will lead to different results. Further, there is little consensus on what the important dimensions of the local setting or the welfare agency are, when our research interest is in how the users fare over time and in particular whether they become self-sufficient and (re)enter work. Inspired by some theoretical contributions, we have selected one set of dimensions and operationalisations, but there are other dimensions that may be fruitful as well. Obvious candidates are dimensions embedded in the LWS perspective, such as use of conditionalities and sanctioning, provision of ALMPs, both volume and type, and degree of collaboration/coordination between different professions, agencies, services and between agencies and employers (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016). We have not had access to such information in our analysis, so here are topics for future research.

We have found only negligible "effects" of the variables describing social investments, such as free incomes per capita and operating costs related to provision of social services. Does this mean that these kinds of municipal social investments in human capital do not matter for trajectory affiliation? We think it is premature to jump to such a conclusion. Both cost measures are rather crude. Free incomes per capita do not reflect variations in population needs and hence differences in cost structure between the municipalities. We have, though made an attempt to control for "need" in the social assistance population, that is, its social composition, but this may not be sufficient. Further, operating costs tell nothing about how effective the social services are in conducting their tasks. And it applies to both

types of costs that the same amount of money may be prioritized differently in different municipalities. As mentioned, Norwegian municipalities have a high degree of autonomy. Thus, based on these considerations it is a bit hasty to conclude that municipal social investments do not matter for young social assistance beneficiaries' welfare work trajectories.

7.1 | Limitations

As mentioned in the theory section, one limitation pertains to the lack of several of the dimensions that are inherent in our three theoretical perspectives. Future research would clearly benefit from drawing on variables that are more appropriate and more comprehensive representations of the conceptual frameworks that have inspired our investigation.

Another limitation is related to the research design. Similar to the design of Bergmark et al. (2017), the information on the local level (level 2, i.e., municipalities, NAV offices) is cross-sectional whereas the information on individuals (level 1) is longitudinal. Ideally, one would have annual information on both levels and investigate how the relationship develops over time. First, we do not have access to annual variables on the organization of the local NAV offices. Second, even we had, we would not be able to formally link changes on level 2 to changes on level 1 by means of sequence analysis. Here transition analysis (life event analysis) appears to be a better choice, but then we would miss out the complexity that is the bonus of sequence analysis. It seems that if we favour a holistic description of life courses and trajectories, we need to acknowledge and accept this limitation.

A further limitation is that the design is potentially sensitive to the consequences of people moving out of the municipality. We have attempted to take this into consideration by rerunning the analysis on the subsample of those who remained stable in the municipality of origin over the entire observation period. The results from this sensitivity analysis have informed the assessment of which coefficients to trust and to interpret substantively. Thus, our conclusion is supported both by the main analysis and by the sensitivity analysis.

7.2 | Conclusion

More than half of the SA recipients, up to 60%, has work oriented trajectories. Since we have detected only minor local variations in this pattern, it implies that most municipalities and local NAV offices achieve this result. Social policy reforms often imply changes in organizational dimensions that are believed to have an impact on the life courses of the users of the services that the local welfare systems provide. Against this background it is rather remarkable that there are so few studies that link local traits to relevant outcomes, that is, trajectories among the users. Our findings corroborate with and add to previous studies that have found little impact of local characteristics on how users fare over time.

Yet, was such a claim ever justified, here more research is needed. We need more information on local settings, the organization of the welfare office, and more specific descriptions of labour markets to increase our understanding of the relationship between characteristics of the "local" and welfare—work trajectories among welfare users.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data subject to third party restrictions.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Multinomial logistic regression: Average marginal effects pertaining to eight trajectory clusters. Sensitivity analysis of stable sample. *N*=1850.

Average marginal effects	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4	Outcome 5	Outcome 6	Outcome 7	Outcome 8
Female (male ref.)	−0.00261	0.0551**	−0.0139	0.0196	0.00387	0.0421*	−0.145***	0.0405**
Western-Europe (Norway ref.)	−0.0197	0.0149	0.0189	−0.0175	−0.0176	0.0467	−0.0224	−0.00332
Non-Western	0.0149	−0.0591*	0.0358	0.0161	0.0342	−0.0285	−0.0563*	0.0429
Early school leaver	0.00634	0.0438*	0.0502***	0.0442***	0.00608	0.00258	−0.0331	−0.120***
Age	0.00761	−0.0139	−0.0132	0.00942	−0.0105	−0.00119	0.0749**	−0.0532*
Poor (Non-poor ref.)	−0.000549	−0.0279	0.0158	−0.0195	−0.0167	0.0267	0.0270	−0.00496
Poverty missing	−0.0502**	−0.0456	0.0732**	−0.00344	0.0236	−0.0418	0.0635	−0.0193
Parents higher education (lower ref)	−0.00235	0.0504*	−0.0437**	−0.0307*	−0.00973	−0.00625	−0.00598	0.0484*
Hospitalized	0.0423**	0.121***	0.00381	−0.0377*	−0.0481*	−0.0544*	0.00754	−0.0344
Income per inhabitant	−0.0846	0.210	−0.0711	−0.0941	0.109	0.0300	−0.380**	0.280*
Exp. for social services	−0.0461	−0.0676	0.110	−0.0281	0.0557	0.0254	0.0484	−0.0973
Long-term municipality debt.	0.0244	0.0554	−0.116	−0.0817	−0.0364	0.0710	0.0153	0.0676
Inhabitants in municipality	−0.0374	0.0223	0.0105	0.0695	−0.0323	0.0410	−0.0970	0.0235
Big city region 2 (ref. big city reg. 1)	−0.00703	−0.0828*	−0.0398	−0.0101	0.0129	0.0466	0.0534	0.0268
Medium city region 1	−0.00270	−0.0104	−0.0343	0.0244	−0.0207	0.0769	−0.000470	−0.0327
Medium city region 2	0.0444	−0.0196	−0.0286	0.0258	−0.0105	0.0259	0.0107	−0.0481
Small town region 1	0.00246	−0.0788	0.00564	0.0332	−0.0312	0.0377	0.0558	−0.0248
Small town region 2	0.00439	−0.0198	−0.0310	0.00184	−0.0554	0.0808	0.0416	−0.0225
Rural district 1	−0.0169	−0.0445	−0.0742*	0.106**	0.0130	0.0179	0.0263	−0.0277
Rural district 2	0.0192	−0.0732	0.0203	0.0842	−0.0921***	0.0817	0.0424	−0.0826*
Regions without urban centre 1	0.0225	−0.0866	−0.0668	0.0563	−0.0498	−0.0169	0.190**	−0.0483
Regions without urban centre 2	−0.0178	−0.153**	−0.0739	0.0349	−0.0653	0.133	0.260*	−0.119**

TABLE A1 (Continued)

Average marginal effects	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4	Outcome 5	Outcome 6	Outcome 7	Outcome 8
Share business contact	0.0533	0.0534	0.0539	0.0367	0.0333	−0.228*	−0.156	0.154
Job-match	−0.0279	−0.00627	0.0829	−0.0278	0.0263	−0.0301	−0.0530	0.0357
Public sector sickness absence	−0.156	0.0271	0.232	−0.119	−0.0138	−0.00186	−0.0212	0.0529
Share of journal recording	0.0196	−0.0937	0.0496	−0.0536	0.0363	0.0648	0.0473	−0.0704
Work load	−0.00976	0.158	−0.0359	−0.106	−0.0459	0.0243	−0.0474	0.0627

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.