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## Municipal activation policy: A case study of the practical work with unemployed social assistance recipients

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IFAU – INSTITUTE FOR  
LABOUR MARKET POLICY  
EVALUATION

# **Municipal activation policy: A case study of the practical work with unemployed social assistance recipients**

Katarina Hjertner Thorén

WORKING PAPER 2005:20

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# Municipal activation policy: A case study of the practical work with unemployed social assistance recipients<sup>\*♦</sup>

by

Katarina Hjertner Thorén<sup>+</sup>

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005

## Abstract

In the 1990s, many municipalities developed local activation programs for social assistance recipients as a response to increasing social assistance expenditures. This study investigates the practical implementation of municipal activation policies in two different activation programs, Jobbcentrum in Skärholmen and Källan in Osby. The purpose with the study is to highlight how the front-line workers systematically translate activation policy into practice in their interactions with the clients. The study utilizes a street-level bureaucracy perspective, which illuminates the role of bureaucratic and professional discretion and how institutional factors shape the practical responses of front-line staff. Coping behaviors at the ground influences the practical work with activation requirements. The staff develop such coping strategies to manage working conditions marked by ambiguous legislation, organizational pressures, limited resources, and little responsibility for program accountability. Findings from this study suggest that the implementation practices in Skärholmen and Osby frequently diverge from formal intentions of activation policy and the programs' own goals and descriptions of their work.

**Keywords:** Municipal activation policy, social assistance, street-level bureaucracy theory, front-line workers, implementation, Jobbcentrum, Källan.

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# 1 Background

During the 1990s many municipalities implemented activation programs for social assistance recipients in order to combat unemployment and rising social assistance expenditures. Municipal activation programs are today a regular component in the Swedish welfare system and there are around 800 municipal activation programs in Sweden. One of the rationales for these programs, much simplified, is that unemployed social assistance recipients essentially are “passive” while receiving social assistance. In order to end such passivity, they need a combination of enforcement and support to “activate” them, which will make them self-sufficient workers, and accordingly, lower the social assistance costs.

The expansion of local activation programs has led to a decentralization of the Swedish labor market policy system with separate arrangements beside the governmental labor market policy system delivered by the Public Employment Services (Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004). Municipal activation programs are organized and administered locally and can range from mandatory work requirements to training and education with large variations in both quantity and quality between different municipalities. A labor market policy system based on local and discretionary translations of the formal legislation is difficult to standardize and the social assistance claimants are subject of front-line workers individual discretion. Today, this discretion involves both the determination of entitlement to social assistance and the content of the activation requirement.

These programs are both praised and criticized in the current welfare debate. Some scholars argue that this is the right way to social inclusion by improving their possibilities to enter the regular labor market. Other argues that municipal activation measures only are a new form of control and work enforcement for those dependent of social assistance. Our current knowledge about municipal activation programs is rather limited since little systematic research is conducted about municipal activation programs. To fill one gap in our understanding about activation, this study examines how municipal activation policy is implemented in two different municipalities. It attempts separate the formal legislation and official program rhetoric from the practical implementation of activation policies. It is important to note that activation measures are not viewed as something inherently positive or negative in this study, because we do not know if activation improves clients’ chances to find a

regular employment and escape social assistance dependency. The two research sites are Skärholmen city-council<sup>1</sup> and Osby municipality. Skärholmen has an activation program called Jobbcentrum and Osby has a program called Källan.

## 1.1 Labor market policies in Sweden

It is known that Sweden exhibits extensive governmental interventions designed to redirect production and maintain full employment through active labor market policies (ALMP). ALMP programs, which have been in operation in Sweden since the 1940s, focus on a general development of the labor market itself and an improvement of the work force (Olofsson, 1996). The ALMP system provides a number of various programs and activities, ranging from job matching, training and education, rehabilitation, income support as well as services and support to employers and vulnerable regions.<sup>2</sup> The “work-line” is an important element of the Swedish welfare system and emphasizes work requirements for unemployed individuals plus re-training and skills-enhancement instead of passive income benefits alone. Another component of the ALMP system is the Public Employment Services (PES), which implements many of the governmental labor market policy services and programs.

All unemployed persons in Sweden are allowed to utilize the services at the PES, including social assistance recipients. In fact, one pre-requisite for social assistance is that unemployed social assistance recipients need to be registered at the PES. The development of municipal activation programs is a supplement to the governmental ALMP system. For this particular study, it is important to illuminate the relationship between the traditional ALMP system and municipal activation policy since they are operating side by side in the Swedish labor market policy landscape. One principal difference between the governmental system and the municipal system is the source of income for the participants; most participants in the governmental system have qualified for unemployment

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<sup>1</sup> Skärholmen city-council is part of Stockholm municipality (Stockholm City) but as a city-council, Skärholmen has autonomy and independence in organizing both its social assistance system and activation program, similar to independent municipalities. Due to the above circumstances, I will use the term municipality and municipal activation program when discussing Skärholmen’s activation program.

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, an average of 116,600 people participated in various programs organized by AMS each month, which make up around 39 % of all unemployed and in the following year that number was reduced to 92,000 participants each month. In 2004 the number had increased to 106,000 (National Labour Market Board, 2005).

insurance<sup>3</sup> while those receiving social assistance recipients are referred to the municipal social services for their income support.

## **1.2 Municipal activation programs**

Despite the governmental ALMP system, municipalities started to develop their own activation programs for unemployed social assistance recipients during the recession in the 1990s (Svenska Kommunförbundet, 1998). This was a consequence of the high influx of unemployed individuals to the social assistance system. These individuals did not qualify for unemployment insurance or other governmental income schemes due to stricter entitlement rules and they were compelled to apply for social assistance (Salonen, 1997). Another reason was that many of those who must apply for social assistance was not viewed as “job ready” according to the PES and did not receive much support from the governmental programs. This is a fact that still is true for many social assistance recipients. The local dimension of municipal activation programs is one of the main features of this system. It is therefore difficult to illustrate the ‘typical’ organization of a municipal activation programs due to the vast variation between different municipalities and different programs. In a recent study, Salonen & Ulmestig (2004) projected that there was around 800 activation programs with around 13,000 participants in 2002. This is equivalent with 30,000 people per year and 12 % of all social assistance recipients. The administrative cost per client and month in these programs could range from 15,000 SEK to 1000 SEK, which illustrates a large financial variation as well. Salonen & Ulmestig argue that activation policy for social assistance recipients operates, as a “second rate” labor market policy for those who do not qualify for unemployment insurance. Municipal programs are often arranged on a project basis, which results in many different types of programs, large disparity and inconsistency in target groups, program goals, length of time in program, and program content. It is therefore important to discuss whether municipal activation programs signify a different type of labor market measure compared to traditional ALMP measures in Sweden.

Municipal activation programs are regularly organized by the social service organizations and their social assistance administration. These municipal systems are characterized by high levels of municipal autonomy and marked with

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<sup>3</sup> Unemployed individuals can also be entitled other types of governmental income support such as cash assistance support (KAS) and activity support (Aktivitetsstöd) delivered by the PES.

significant bureaucratic and professional discretion. Front-line workers often perform eligibility determination, assigning individuals to work related activities, and monitoring clients' compliance with high levels of discretion.

### **1.3 Comparison between traditional ALMP and activation programs**

Traditional ALMP programs build, in general, on higher levels of voluntary participation and financial reimbursement, often through unemployment insurance. Some ALMP programs are not completely voluntary as there are firm requirements (e.g. in the Activity Guarantee) in order to receive unemployment insurance support or other types of governmental income support. But in comparison with many municipal activation programs the level and character of the compulsion is generally lower for ALMP programs (Salonen 2000). An additional consequence is that most ALMP programs have similar rules in the whole country while the municipal system has large disparities in how rules and regulations are applied. Yet another concern with the development of a municipal activation system is the lack of systematic follow-ups and evaluations of this type of programs. These programs can have more than 290 responsible authorities as they are arranged on municipal levels and it is therefore difficult to have standardized measures to control the results of the programs. The governmental ALMP system has more resources and routines to evaluate the results of their programs and keep track the participants, compared to the municipal systems.

However, the local character of municipal activation programs can be something positive. Municipalities have a better knowledge about the local employment situation and more flexible in regards to local circumstances. But it is important to note that such claims must be understood in the light of citizenship. When citizens that live in similar situations, but in different geographic areas, receive very different support, due to local variation and workers' discretion, it can weaken the right to equal legal treatment of the individuals. The large variation in activation programs does not only occur between municipalities, it is also common that different administrative areas within the same municipality arrange activation programs in different ways. The implementation of activation requirements can also vary between workers in the same organization since discretion at the front-worker level is significant. Hence, interpretations of what social assistance recipients should be required to do vary both between municipalities and front-line workers. It is problematic in

terms of equal citizenship as it reduces the legal security for the individuals (Rothstein, 1994). Such implementation problems can occur within the ALMP system as well, but with its stronger emphasis on local discretion it is more likely to become an issue in the municipal activation system.

Below is a schematic comparison of the main principal differences between ALMP programs and municipal activation programs. Although, it is important to note that the differences in the two different systems are not definite as certain elements can be noticed in both systems.

**Table 1** Comparison between ALMP programs and municipal activation programs

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>ALMP programs</b>	<b>Municipal activation programs</b>
<b>Responsible organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Swedish National Labour Market Administration</li> <li>▪ Public Employment Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Local municipalities (290 different responsible authorities)</li> <li>▪ Social services/the social assistance bureaucracy</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluation and follow-up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ More systematic evaluations and resources for follow-ups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Few systematic evaluations of outputs or follow-ups</li> </ul>
<b>Participation principle</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lower levels of compulsory participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Higher levels of compulsory participation</li> </ul>
<b>Sanctions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reduced or lost unemployment insurance or other forms of financial support (e.g. activity support)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reduced or lost social assistance</li> <li>▪ Large variation in time before sanctions are enforced.</li> </ul>
<b>Type of financial support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rights-based support through unemployment insurance and other type of governmental income support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Needs- and means tested benefits (i.e. social assistance)</li> </ul>

## 1.4 Social assistance legislation and activation policy

Municipal activation requirements are regulated in the Social Service Act (see Appendix A) and its policies about social assistance delivery.<sup>4</sup> During the last decades, the individual's responsibility to become self-sufficient has been increasingly underlined in the legislation. Municipal activation requirement was legally sanctioned in 1998 when the Social Service Act was changed in order to make it possible to require participation in work related activities in

<sup>4</sup> SFS 2001:453 The Social Service Act.

exchange for social assistance. The Supreme Administrative Court and the National Board of Health and Welfare has accentuated this development in the sense that they have insisted that unemployed social assistance recipients should participate in work related programs (Johansson, 2001).

However, the right to demand activation requirements is not unconditional for the municipality. The Social Service Act has some general principles, including both rights and obligations, which should be considered in the social assistance administration. Municipalities shall not grant social assistance unconditionally and without requirements on the individual. All social assistance recipients shall be “doing what he or she can” in order to support for him or her self. Unemployed social assistance recipients are required to “be to the disposal to the labor market” and registered at the PES, which means that they should actively search for jobs and accept reasonable job offers. The obligations can involve participation in ALMP programs, work rehabilitation, public relief work, and language education for immigrants. Clients can also be required to participate in municipal job search activities.<sup>5</sup> Källan and Jobbcentrum can, from a legal perspective, be viewed as such activities. Clients below 25 years can be required to participate in work related programs for young people with the special aim of improving their possibilities to enter the regular labor market.<sup>6</sup>

According to the legislator, social assistance delivery and its related activation requirements are associated with a number of additional principles. These principles are that clients’ self-determination should be respected and that individual preferences should be taken into account when possible. The activation requirements should also be appropriate for each individual in terms of individual needs and whether it can improve the individual’s possibilities to enter the regular labor market. The legislator’s intention is that the municipality should collaborate with the local PES and other relevant authorities prior to referring a client to a municipal activation program. Municipalities are also allowed to reduce or withdraw the social assistance benefit in case of non-compliance with the rules of being to disposal to the labor market and if clients refuse to participate in work related programs. Furthermore, the legislation formulates specific rules for young people and people with particular needs for work related support perform in a subsequent section in the Social Service

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<sup>5</sup> Proposition 1996/1997:124.

<sup>6</sup> Ses SFS 2000:453, Section 4, § 4.

Act.<sup>7</sup> These rules specify first, under what conditions they can be required, second, what type of requirements they need to perform, and third, what type of responsibilities the municipality needs to fulfill. The municipality has more responsibilities for young people toward in the sense that the activation requirement must follow an individual plan and has a stronger emphasis that the activity should be competence enhancing for the individual. How the municipalities are applying the different rules in the legislation is unclear and varies a lot between different municipalities (Socialstyrelsen, 2005).

The Social Service Act generates a very complex and ambiguous situation regarding the intention and the meaning of municipal activation requirements. The legal situation is unclear for a number of reasons. First, few legal cases have, this far, clearly advised how the legislation should be interpreted in terms of the content of the activation requirement. Second, the fact that the Social Service Act is a “framework” law produces a vast array of interpretations of “who can be required” and what clients are “required to do”. On one hand, it is a possibility for municipalities to require clients to participate in both ALMP programs as well as municipal activation programs. On the other hand, such requirements should be in line with clients’ own preferences as well as improving the individual’s labor market opportunities. Third, the legislation is vague in terms of rights and obligations for both the individual and the municipality. Currently, the formal legislation open up for a situation in which the activation requirement can entail both “carrots” and “sticks” for both the clients and the front-line workers.

These ambiguous conditions create a situation in which activation can take many possible shapes. For example, which clients are required? Under what circumstances are clients required? What do clients have to do? What support do they receive? Who determine what is skills-enhancing or not? What happen if clients fail to fulfill the activation requirement? These interpretations are for the moment left to the front-line workers discretionary practices.

## **1.5 Prior research of activation policy**

The current relationship between the governmental labor market policy system and the municipal system is both complex and problematic. Scholars have previously indicated that the welfare system in Sweden rests on a dual

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<sup>7</sup> SFS 2000:453, Section 4, § 4 and § 5.

structure, where those with a stable relationship to the labor market experience high levels of social security in contrast to marginal segments of the population that enjoy much less social security (Marklund & Svallfors, 1987). Lødemel (1997) has also drawn attention to the fact that countries with well-developed ALMP programs and social insurance plans, also have very stigmatized and means-tested social assistance programs. Lødemel claims that high levels of surveillance characterize this type of social assistance programs and benefits are commonly conditioned on various forms of activation requirements. Under such conditions, activation policy constitutes an “offer you can’t refuse” according to Lødemel & Trickey (2000) and it is this type of implications that might show up in the practical administration of municipal activation programs.

Activation has frequently been discussed in the international literature for the last couple of years (Andersen et al 2002; Giddens, 1998; Hvinden et al 2001; Wright 2002) and has both proponents and opponents. Those critical towards activation requirements argues that activation is a shift from the right to voluntarily participate in training and education toward a workfare model with work-tests and sanctions are used in case of failure (see van Berkel & Hornemann Møller, 2002 for a longer discussion). According to the critics, activation is a punitive program with limited prospects for clients’ to influence their participation and it is not disclosed whether activation provides real opportunities for a reattachment to the labor market (Handler, 2004; Hanesch & Baltzer, 2001). Activation is also viewed as either an enabling model or a coercive model and Salonen (2000) describes these two models as:

“In the enabling version the targeted measures stimulate a bottom-up perspective which gives the individual a voice and expands his or her civic potential. Individualization is regarded as a way to increase the individual’s self-determination and control over his or her own life (the concept of empowerment is also being increasingly used in the Swedish discussion). The coercive version is in contrast dominated by a top-down perspective in which the authorities and the political system determine the design of the measures. In this interpretation, the activated individual has extremely limited influences over his or her participation” (Salonen, 2000, p 5).

The Swedish form of activation policy cannot be distilled to either an enabling or a coercive model as it has attributes of both. For example, the

policy's enabling features lie in the assessments of individual needs and the focus on clients' skills-enhancement. Its involuntary aspects with attendance requirements in order to receive social assistance and close monitoring exemplify coercive elements. In reality it is up to each municipality to create programs that consist of enabling elements, coercive elements or both.

In Sweden, only a handful of studies have examined the recent municipal activation development. The major findings from these studies are the following; individuals with weak ties to the labor market are often enforced to the social assistance system in case of unemployment (Salonen, 2000). There has been a shift in the interpretation of individuals' rights to social assistance between the 1980s and the 1990s with greater emphasis on the individuals' own responsibility and increased activation requirements (Johansson, 2001). Salonen & Ulmestig (2004) finds that the new forms of activation programs contain several differences in the legal rights for participants in municipal activation program compared to participants in traditional active labor market programs at the PES. They also demonstrate that social assistance recipients are treated very dissimilar in different municipalities due to the variance in local practices. Hedblom (2004) finds that program contents and client experiences depend on the local administrative context. She concludes that activation measures can both include clients to the regular labor market as well as marginalize them from the mainstream society due to different implementation practices and differentiation strategies.

Whether activation programs are effective in terms of increased work participation or higher income is still unclear. Giertz (2004) finds only modest effects employment and income for long-term social assistance recipients while examining activation programs in Malmö. Hallsten et al (2002) find that there was no difference in employment rates between the control group and the study group after the completion of an activation program in Rinkeby city-council in Stockholm. In a new study, Ekström (2005) has recently examined "Skärholmsmodellen" in which Jobbcentrum is the main component. She argues that Jobbcentrum does not consist of any new working methods as it has many similarities with established models for the work with unemployed social assistance recipients (e.g. the Hallstahammar model and the Uppsala model).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Uppsala model was introduced in the late 1980s by Eileen Rönnlund (1992). The model is characterized by strict work requirements for social assistance recipients and that the social workers should not make any decisions without a "night's sleep" and discussion with colleagues.

The author also highlights that Jobbcentrum's official objectives does not always correspond with the staffs' statements about the program or how clients' experience the program. Ekström concludes that the model is rather ambiguous in relation to the Social Service Act's directions and intentions. These prior studies have provided valuable knowledge about activation requirements but supplementary studies are necessary in order to better understand this policy field. Hence, we do not know enough in order to declare if such programs are beneficial or not for its target populations. And especially, what type of activation practices is created and why they take that particular shape.

## **1.6 The research question and scope of study**

In contrast to previous research approaches, this study investigates how activation policy is practiced via a study of the day-to-day implementation practices of two municipal activation programs. The study examines how activation policy is "produced" through the informal bureaucratic routines at the street-level. The main research questions are:

- How are municipal activation programs organized and implemented within two municipal social services organizations?
- How do the organizational contexts influence the practical implementation of municipal activation policy?
- What does the implementation of municipal activations programs consist of in practice?

The study examines the front-line practices in two different municipal social service organizations and their activation programs and utilizes an ethnographic approach to clarify what is distinctive about the front-line practices of activation programs. The official rhetoric and the general debate about increased activation requirements claims that activation measures assist social assistance recipients with individual support and skills-enhancing

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Many municipalities claim today that they are using modified forms of the model in their social assistance administration. The Hallstahammar model was introduced in the early 1980s and involved that unemployed social assistance recipients received a small additional amount of money ("stimulansbidrag") if they performed work or a work related activity. See Bergmark & Lundström, 2000 for a discussion about different working models within the Swedish social services.

activities that will improve their economic situation through employment, that ultimately will help them to escape dependency and social exclusion. This study highlights how frontline workers translate such claims into practice and how the organizational contexts influence the practices on the ground.

It is also important to describe the limitations of the study and what the study does not accomplish. The study does not examine the results of activation programs, which mean that it does not measure whether the clients find employment or if they are self-sufficient after leaving the programs. The study does not offer any results about clients' income levels after the completion of programs or whether they have improved their financial situation. The study does not examine whether the two activation programs are conducting successful activation services in terms of reducing clients' social assistance dependency. The focus is on the front-line workers' practices and the clients are not in the spotlight for this study. However, clients' responses will occasionally be used as a method to crosscheck observational information about the front-line workers' behaviors. Consequently, it is not a regular evaluation of the programs and the study does not attempt to evaluate neither activation policy nor specific activation programs. Since the study is limited to a case study of two municipalities, it is inadequate to generalize about all municipal activation programs in Sweden but it offers detailed examples of the daily work in two principally important activation programs.<sup>9</sup>

## **2 Street-level bureaucracy theory**

It is frequently noted that formal policy often bears little resemblance with practice (Elmore, 1978, 1979-80; Palumbo & Calista, 1990). Scholars have highlighted the importance of the street-level organization when implementing political decisions and that organizations are not neutral and unbiased in this process. In fact, Rothstein (2001) writes that the organization regularly influences the implementation process in the sense that it is the organization that determines the practical experience of a policy. It is common to focus on the implementation problem, which means that political decisions never are implemented as intended, and implementation is often viewed as the process in

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<sup>9</sup> Both programs have received a lot of attention, both from mass media but also from other municipal social services that are interested in developing similar methods.

which the political decisions fall short (Rothstein, 2001; Sannerstedt, 2001). Sannerstedt (2001) describes the implementation problem as normal aspects on political decision-making due to the diverse responsibilities for politicians and front-line workers, in addition to, conflicting opinions in the public debate, as well as the difficulty to control and monitor complex organizations.

The role of implementation in the policy process has been further developed in Lipsky's (1980) influential work on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky develops the key notion that front-line workers constitute the link between the government and the citizens in their direct encounters with clients and refers to them as street-level bureaucrats.<sup>10</sup> Lipsky suggests that street-level bureaucrats encounter certain institutional conditions—for example, a greater demand for services than can be met with existing resources, huge caseloads, formal policies and legislation that are ambiguous or contradictory—which prompt them to develop coping behaviors that allow them to contend with the constraints and challenges in their work environment. Discretion is necessary for several reasons, but street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion in this type of jobs means that policy is actually made by the front-line workers.

Street-level bureaucrats develop coping mechanisms to manage their daily work. For example, they develop practices that limit demand, maximize the utilization of recourses, and obtain client compliance. They modify their concept of their job and the clients in order to narrow the gap between available recourses and assigned objectives. They ration services, utilize creaming (the selecting of clients who seem most likely to succeed), categorize and standardize clients to “fit” services instead of assessing individual needs, and limiting information about services to which clients are ostensibly entitled. They rationalize or provide ad hoc explanations about their decisions afterwards in order to justify their practical responses.

Thus, street-level bureaucracy theory casts front-line workers as important agents in the policy-making process and seeks to explain their behavior by pointing to the role of organizational structures. Lipsky does briefly note that “... [organizations] are embedded in a larger system that creates and fortifies working conditions” (Lipsky, 1980, p 180), but he does not systematically relate organizational structures, and their implications for street-level practice, to political processes. A subsequent generation of implementation researchers

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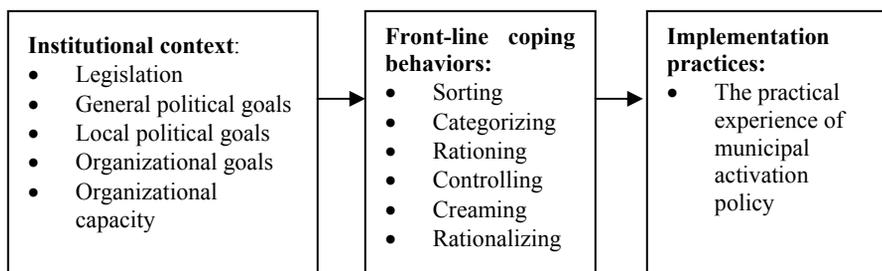
<sup>10</sup> Lipsky defines street-level bureaucrats as public workers that have face-to-face encounters with clients in their work, e.g. social workers, policemen, teachers, doctors, and nurses.

(Brodkin, 1997; Morgen, 2001; Meyers et al, 1998; Lin, 2000; Schierenbeck, 2003a) has addressed this limitation, seeking to understand street-level practice as an extension of political processes and goals and not only as an organizational experience. The development of street-level bureaucracy theory highlights how politics affects street-level practices via its implications for the contours of formal policy and the organizational entities charged with interpreting such policy mandates (Brodkin, 1986; 1987–88; 1990; 2000).

This study directs the analytical attention to the interrelationship between the institutional context and the implementation processes, in particular how front-line workers’ use of discretion and coping strategies affect the practical experience of activation. Hence, the study attempts to demonstrate how the front-line workers in Skärholmen and Osby manage their specific political and organizational contexts while practically implementing the activation requirements. By applying a street-level bureaucracy perspective on the analysis I will be able to perceive how activation policy is articulated and re-interpreted in practice provide insights about “what is activation policy’s practical meaning” and “why does street-level practice take its particular shape” (Brodkin, 2000, p 5).

## 2.1 The analytic model of the implementation practices

The analytic model assists to examine how the front-line staff develops coping behaviors, which ultimately add up to the organization’s interpretation and implementation of activation policy at the street-level. See *figure 1*.



**Figure 1** Analytic model of how the institutional context and front-line workers’ coping behaviors affect the implementation practices.

The model highlights issues such as:

- How front-line workers *ration services* and *prioritize* among clients when resources and time are limited.
- How front-line workers *cream* among clients to select those who are most likely to succeed in the activation process.
- How front-line workers *categorize* clients in order to match them to available services instead of assessing clients' individual needs and preferences.
- How front-line workers *limit information* about services and support to which clients are ostensibly entitled, when it is difficult for staff to provide adequate support.
- How front-line workers *rationalize* and *provide ad hoc explanations* about their decisions in order to justify their decisions.
- How front-line workers *control and monitor* clients and *use sanctions* to obtain clients' compliance or check clients' motivation to become self-supporting.
- How front-line workers *disclaim accountability* and *separate the responsibility* of formal decisions.

The above examples of informal bureaucratic practices will be used to illustrate and analyze the practical character of municipal activation policy and how the municipalities respond to activation policy on the ground.

## **2.2 Study design and research method**

The study is an observational case study with the focus on the organizational context (see Schwartzman, 1993 for organizational ethnography) in order to obtain thorough insights regarding the every-day practices in two local social assistance and activation organizations. A case study design is useful when the goal is to achieve a detailed and complex understanding while investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, utilizing multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). The case study approach is also beneficial when the study is exploratory and when prior knowledge is relatively limited (ibid). Then, it is more relevant to collect lots of information from few cases rather than the opposite. As activation policy is a rather new and unexplored field in the Swedish labor market policy landscape, and this study wants to understand the theoretical aspects the implementation process, a case study approach is suitable (see Esiasson at al, 2004, chapter 7).

The rationale for selecting more than one setting is to increase the study's external validity by examining multiple organizations that are located and structured differently (Huberman & Miles, 2000). The comparative case study strategy does not allow generalizations about municipal activation programs in general, but permit an analysis to distinguish unique aspects from systemic aspects of the organizational practice and to consider specific differences in the particular local context. The studied municipalities are chosen through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) where the field sites have been selected due to their articulated engagement in municipal activation policy. They have utilized the legal opportunity to create activation requirements for their unemployed social assistance recipients and almost all unemployed social assistance clients are mandated to attend an activation project in these municipalities. These activation programs do not represent an *average* activation program in Sweden, but the selection is justifiable in order to be able to observe *activation-in-practice*.

Furthermore, both municipalities have received public attention in mass media as well as amongst other municipalities and are often viewed as 'prototypical' activation models. Other municipalities and organizations have visited them; they have figured in a number of newspaper articles and appeared in TV and radio programs. Managers for the programs in these municipalities are often invited as speakers at conferences. Additionally, these programs are often used as "good examples" by politicians, which make them principally interesting and valuable to scrutinize. Other municipalities have tried to replicate their activation approaches only with superficial knowledge from study visits, conference presentations, and anecdotal stories regarding the unknown relationships between reduced social assistance expenditures and the activation program.

Creswell (1998) suggests that it is useful to select cases that differ in certain conditions in order to confirm or disconfirm certain results. The two field sites differ in organization, size, administrative structure and capacity, client demographics, local economic conditions, and local political orientation. For example, one field site is located in an urban setting and has a heterogeneous demography with large numbers of immigrants whereas the other field site is smaller, located in a small town, and has a more homogenous demography and less unemployment.

## 2.3 Direct observation

The data collection consists of direct observations of front-line workers in both the social assistance administrations and the activation programs. Direct observation provides a method for understanding how people behave and operate within a specific and natural context (see Billquist, 1999 for an observation study). The documentation of front-line workers' interactions, practices, and attitudes help to uncover behaviors that are unlikely to be recounted in formal interviews (Burawoy, 1991). Observations are particularly suitable when the goal is to examine processes or structures that are difficult to explain (Esiasson et al, 2004). I have observed the daily routines of the interaction between front-line workers and clients, the interactions between colleagues, and other regular administrative practices. In addition to the observations, interviews have been conducted with social workers, "activation workers", managers, and local politicians. Interviews, semi-structured and open-ended, and conversations with front-line workers have occurred multiple times in order to check the interpretation of the observations and to clarify the daily practices. I have also observed staff meetings, social service board meetings and various other activities related to the social service and the activation programs.

The fieldwork took place between August 2002 to June 2003 and more than 400 hours of observations have been made and involves observations of approximately 90 client meetings. I have observed client meetings as they have occurred during a regular working day without manipulating the content or the order of the meetings. I have followed the daily work within the social assistance administration in the two municipalities, by following social workers' and other staff members' daily work. Around 50 staff members on various organizational and hierarchical levels have been observed. I have conducted interviews and informal conversations with the majority of the staff. I have observed staff meetings, administrative meetings, supervision, plus participated in informal discussion and conversations in hallways and in lunchrooms.

I have tried to make my participation as little intrusive as possible and I have never been active in the client meetings. During client meetings, I have been sitting in the background taking notes when observing the interaction between the front-line worker and the client. The clients and the staff were always given an opportunity to decline my attendance but I received only a handful of rejections during the fieldwork. My participation might have

influenced the work and the behavior of the front-line workers and the clients but since I was part of each organization for a considerable amount of time, I argue that my participation became a rather natural element. Therefore, I believe that my presence did not influence workers' or clients' behavior significantly.

## **2.4 Data analysis**

In this type of qualitative analysis, control of validity involves a control of the empirical support for the findings and whether a sound interpretation of the data has been made. This has been done as an on-going procedure throughout the research process. For example, I have spent significant amount of time and followed the front-line work closely and repeatedly in order to secure my findings (Merriam, 1994). Using multiple data sources, like multiple observations in different settings, by basing the study in theory, and by systemize data collection and data analysis, can minimize the risk for "observer bias" (Creswell, 1998; Esiasson at al, 2004). Therefore, observations are supplemented with interviews and informal conversations in order to check my observations and interpretations. The research is also complemented with analysis of written documents such as legislation, manuals, memos, directives, and case reviews. This means that I have used a strategy of combing a number of information sources and that allows us to crosscheck alternative explanations and the accuracy of the collected information and my interpretations. This form of triangulation of data in qualitative methods has helped to validate the findings (Creswell, 1998; Esiasson at al, 2004).

During observations and informal conversations detailed filed notes have been taken to make "thick descriptions" of the studied situations (Silverman, 2001). The field notes have been organized in a systematic way with the following information: time, place and who are participating. The activities have also been sorted into a number of main categories: client meetings, staff meetings, conversations or interviews with social worker/activation worker /program manager/client, morning meetings, political meetings etc. I have transcribed the hand written field notes after each day of the observations. Interviews have also been documented through hand written notes, which have been transcribed and categorized afterwards. I have linked the 'content' in the observations and interviews to theoretically defined concepts, by the street-level bureaucracy theory, and highlighted them in the transcribed field notes.

Field notes have been analyzed, by repeated and careful reading, to elucidate patterns and to separate the systematic from the idiosyncratic in the observed street-level practices. The focus in the data analysis has been on how front-line workers are utilizing their discretion in their interactions with clients to detect systematic patterns of coping behaviors. These coping behaviors, in aggregated form, add up to what activation means in practice. In case studies, conducted over time, certain behaviors and situations will reoccur multiple times and it is these repetitions that constitute the systematic patterns, which exemplifies *activation-in-practice*. The presentation of the research is based on excerpts from field notes and interviews and they are presented as authentic as possible, but not as direct citations. The excerpts from the observations are used as empirical examples of the typical and systematic elements of the practical work of activation (i.e. what front-line workers regularly are doing when interacting with clients). I have also used examples from conversations and interviews in order to demonstrate how the staff view or describe their actions. Although, I have selected the parts of the field notes that demonstrates the most common responses and behaviors in order to make the text more readable. In some cases, the excerpts demonstrate an exceptional or idiosyncratic situation to highlight what is uncommon in the practical work of activation. When such examples are used it will be described in the text.

### **3 Description of the local activation programs**

Jobbcentrum and Källan are closely linked to the municipalities' social assistance system. In both organizations, social workers make the formal assessments whether clients are entitled to social assistance and determine the amounts of the support. Hence, social workers perform the exercise of public authority.<sup>11</sup> It is also the social workers that refer the clients to the activation programs and determine what should be required of the clients. Other staff categories are responsible for the work related activities in the activation program. The social workers and the activation workers have regular contact with each other to follow up the clients' compliance and results at the act-

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<sup>11</sup> "Myndighetsutövning" in Swedish (my translation).

ivation program. The right to social assistance is based on the clients' participation and performance at the activation program.

In Skärholmen and Osby, most social assistance clients are referred to the activation programs when unemployed or in part-time work. In general, it is the social worker that decides what type of activity the client should be doing at the activation program. Jobbcentrum and Källan are non-voluntary programs in the sense that clients are required to participate in order to receive financial support. The entitlement to social assistance is therefore linked to their participation in the activation programs. Clients are consequently mandated to participate until they find employment or decline social assistance support. The financial reimbursement for participating in activation programs is the same as the client's social assistance benefit and participation does not provide additional income or an automatic inclusion in governmental unemployment insurance. Sanctions in form of reductions or a total loss of the cash assistance can be made in case clients fail to fulfill the activation requirement.

The primary activities at Jobbcentrum and Källan are independent job search in which clients search for vacancies through newspapers, billboard ads, and the Internet. Clients are at various stages in their job search process and the staff process both new clients and clients that have been in the programs for extended periods of time. Clients can be offered, when available, practical training and short-term courses. Källan offers Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) and Jobbcentrum offers some basic language training for a small selection of clients. Many in the staff do not have a formal education or training in employment service or experience from other job-related services and only a handful of the staff is trained social workers. A number of the staff at both programs have recently experienced unemployment themselves and have received different kinds of employment support. According to Jobbcentrum's program manager, as many as 70 % of the staff has been unemployed prior to their work at Jobbcentrum.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.1 Jobbcentrum: program description**

Jobbcentrum opened in 1998 with the focus on intense job search for unemployed social assistance recipients. It started as a small-scale local program for young people, but has grown to include social assistance clients of

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with program manager 2003-06-16

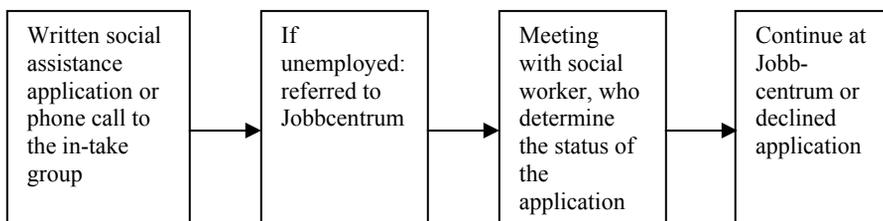
all ages. Jobbcentrum is today a permanent part of Skärholmen's social assistance administration. It collaborates with three other city-councils; Hägersten, Älvsjö, and Liljeholmen plus the local Public Employment Services and the Social Security Offices, in the sense that they purchase slots at Jobbcentrum and send their clients to the program.

The social assistance administration has a director, who is the overall manager for both the social workers and Jobbcentrum's staff. Jobbcentrum has also a program manager who is in charge for the programs' daily operations. Jobbcentrum has around 25 staff members, most of the are called "job coaches" and the on-going caseload is approximately 1000 clients with as many as 200–250 clients attending Jobbcentrum every day.<sup>13</sup> The client group range from 18–65 years and both men and women attend the program. Many participants are immigrants and language barriers are common. The social assistance organization has 12 social workers plus 11–12 administrative assistants.

New social assistance applicants, whom are unemployed, are directly referred to Jobbcentrum by an in-take group without an initial meeting with a social worker and ongoing cases can be referred at any time when the social worker assess that the client should be activated. Initially at Jobbcentrum, clients undergo an assessment of the clients' employment situation and how Jobbcentrum can assist the clients' advancement into the labor market. Individual job search is what most clients are involved in at Jobbcentrum. There are around 10 computers with Internet access that clients can reserve for 15 minutes each time. The waiting time is significant and clients seldom use the computers for more than one time slot each day. Clients have also access to 10 additional workstations on which they can write applications and resumes. When clients ask for help, the staff assists clients with applications and resumes. The program have contacts with employers, recruiting companies, and training programs, to which some clients are matched toward, when it is possible or slots are available.

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<sup>13</sup> Many clients are on sick leave, on practical training or just disappeared but are still registered at Jobbcentrum.



**Figure 2** The referral process for new clients at Jobbcentrum<sup>14</sup>

According to program documents, the main goal for Jobbcentrum is to support social assistance recipients to enter the labor market or to an education that will improve their possibilities to become self-supportive. It is a program where different authorities and organizations shall encourage participants' individual development and a place where they can find support for their individual aim in life and to help them to an independent life. The program claim in the 2003 annual report that their main objectives are:

- All unemployed social assistance recipients in Skärholmen shall be offered a job or another work-related activity within 5 days.
- Provide clients with support that will improve their personal power.
- Give all clients at Jobbcentrum a respectful treatment.
- Help the clients to find strategies to increase their healthy attendance in the society and the work place.
- Give the clients the help they are asking for.<sup>15</sup>

Other goals is to reduce social assistance dependency and increase the employment rates and the program is defined as a method that breaks the vicious cycle of hopelessness, obstruct "black-market jobs" (i.e. jobs on the informal labor market), reduce social isolation, and decrease deteriorating mental and physical health. In other program documents, it is also stated that Jobbcentrum has a "solution focused" working method in which the clients' own ideas and solutions are important. Jobbcentrum's aim according to official

<sup>14</sup> The referral process illustrates the process for new clients and not on-going cases that already have a contact with a social worker.

<sup>15</sup> From "Jobbcentrum Sydväst Annual Report 2003" (my translation).

statements is that it should allow for flexible solutions based on individual assessments. There is also a strong focus on clients' self-determination and individual resources. Margareta Johansson, the political chairman in Skärholmen city-council, is convinced that Jobbcentrum is a very positive element for social assistance recipients and that clients should do something in return for social assistance. At the same time, she emphasizes both the individual focus at Jobbcentrum and that some clients cannot work for various reasons and that they must be exempted from the requirement. She contends that the social workers must do individual assessments:

It's very important with flexible solutions that are individual for every client.<sup>16</sup>

But Margareta Johansson points also to the fact that the social workers have a difficult work situation that affects their practical responses:

It is important, how we, as politicians, can support the social workers as they are working under enormous pressures with high caseloads and that they must satisfy a number of different goals simultaneously, it's the clients' the managers' and the politicians' desires ... and in the end it's the money that determine the organization's activities.<sup>17</sup>

This speaks to the fact that the front-line workers in Skärholmen works under demanding conditions, which ultimately will affect both their time and their interactions with clients. But despite such organizational traits, the formal goal, as described, both in program documents and by the local political leader is that Jobbcentrum is a place where clients should be given individual support to grow as individuals and improve their chances to enter the regular labor market.

### **3.2 Källan: program description**

Källan is the activation program in Osby municipality. Around 5–10 social assistance clients participate in the program each day. 10–20 immigrant clients that are referred from the social assistance office to study SFI and participate in work related activities. Unemployed social assistance recipients are required to

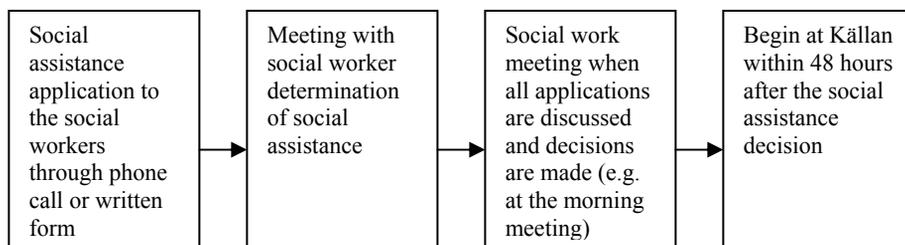
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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Margareta Johansson political chairman in Skärholmen, 2003-04-08

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Margareta Johansson political chairman in Skärholmen, 2003-04-08

attend Källan 48 hours after their social assistance application has been approved. Källan collaborates with the PES and the Social Security Offices in Osby. It has also contact with schools and employers in the area. In addition to job search, clients can be involved in internal job-training activities, such as carpentry, kitchen work, and cleaning, the computer lab (i.e. “Datortek”, which is a PES program) and a rehabilitation program. Most immigrant clients participate in SFI, and in contrast to Jobbcentrum, clients are encouraged to complete language courses. All clients are allowed to participate in courses and practical placements provided by the PES and get the financial reimbursement from the PES when possible.

Occasionally, Källan provides practical training with local employers. Källan had an ambitious plan to build a bank of practical training slots with companies in the local area but this idea was not very successful. It was difficult to find employers that were interested in Källan’s clients. The availability of practical training was also very dependent on the general employment situation in the area. When the unemployment rate was low, employers made such slots available, but when the unemployment rate increased and it became difficult for Källan to regularly provide practical training for their clients. In addition to the work related activities, Källan provides, “personal development courses” including presentation techniques, interview skills, and self-assessments. They also help clients with their job applications and resumes. A handful of people are working at Källan and the social assistance administration is also small with only four social workers. The social assistance director is the head for both the social assistance organization and Källan and a program manager is responsible for Källan’s program activities.



**Figure 3** The referral process for new clients at Källan

In program documents it is stated that the goal with Källan's activities is that "as many participants as possible shall be self-supportive" and that the program shall provide the clients with different forms of individual competence development.<sup>18</sup> Ingmar Bertsson was the political leader in the social welfare committee in Osby when Källan was initiated and he explains:

During the 1990s, there were high costs for the elderly and for social assistance. And we frankly said, "the social assistance costs must be reduced to 10 million" and it was then Källan was created. Källan has given the social workers an instrument to work with and I believe that Källan is the reason why Osby has reduced the social assistance costs ... But it is not only Källan as structural factors are important too. It's Källan combined with the [Uppsala] model, which means that one should mobilize clients' own resources. I think that this method is in line with social work treatment methods as it focuses on the client.

It must be meaningful for the individual to go to an activity like Källan but it's also important to show them that life is not always happy and joyful. It shall not be fun all the time but it's important that they also focus on improving the clients' self-esteem.<sup>19</sup>

In Osby, the general political vision is that the work-line is important and that Källan together with the Uppsala model make up a working model that focus on clients' individual needs in addition to activation requirements. The official idea is that social assistance clients are in need for both rights and requirements in order to become self-sufficient. But the clients' own resources should be taken into account when determining the support.

### **3.3 Program statistics**

Neither Skärholmen nor Osby has systematically evaluated their activation program in terms of program outputs and there is no knowledge whether the clients find jobs as a result of the programs. Both municipalities are measuring their "results" by correlating the program's "result" to the reduction in social assistance caseloads on the municipal level. Such correlations are rather complex and the interpretation is unclear since most municipalities, with or without activation programs, have reduced their caseloads during the last

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<sup>18</sup> From Källan's Annual Plan 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Ingmar Bertsson, politician in Osby, 2003-04-29

years.<sup>20</sup> According to Ekström (2005) the social assistance reduction in Skärholmen between 1998 and 2003 is not remarkable when comparing with similar city-councils in Stockholm City.<sup>21</sup>

A systematic examination of the programs' results is nearly impossible due to the lack of program data that would allow such analysis. In lieu of systematic program data, sources like annual reports, internal program and information has been utilized in order to find information of programmatic outputs. A statistical analysis has been made on Jobbcentrum's attendance registration data.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.3.1 Jobbcentrum in figures

Between the start in September 1998 to May 2003, Jobbcentrum has served over 2,900<sup>23</sup> individuals according to the attendance registration data. The influx of new clients varies between 20 and 120 clients per month, suggesting that the flow of clients is very inconsistent. The table below indicates the number of clients starting in the program for each year.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 2** Number of program starts and year

Year	Program starts
1998	174
1999	499
2000	701
2001	670
2002	900
<b>Sum</b>	<b>2,944</b>

<sup>20</sup> Social assistance caseloads and expenditures are currently increasing in Sweden.

<sup>21</sup> For example, when comparing with Kista, a city-council similar to Skärholmen in terms of size, demographic situation, and unemployment rates, but without a program like Jobbcentrum, between 1998 and 2003 the reduction of social assistance clients was 50.6 % in Kista and 47.4 % in Skärholmen, reduction of social assistance clients in regards to population was 53.5 % in Kista and 49 % in Skärholmen, and reduction in social assistance household was 49.1 % in Kista and 41.8 % in Skärholmen (Statistics Stockholm 2004).

<sup>22</sup> It is impossible to examine the quality of the data (e.g. if all clients are incorporated in the data, correct coding or the conditions of the information). But despite the limitation in this type of program data, it is still interesting to analyze clients' program times based on this data.

<sup>23</sup> This number includes social assistance clients from other city-councils as well as participants referred from the Public Employment Services.

<sup>24</sup> 2003 is excluded since observation ends in May 2003.

Most clients attend Jobbcentrum for one period, but a number of clients attend Jobbcentrum between two and four times. See table 3 below.

**Table 3** Number of times in the program

Number of times	Number of clients de-registered	Number of clients still in program
1	2,090	377
2	226	137
3	38	36
4	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,354</b>	<b>552</b>

In general, it was 15 % of the clients who participates in the program for more than one period. But interestingly, in May 2003 as many as 32 % (175 of 552) has been at Jobbcentrum more than once. The data does not tell why the clients in May 2003 had been registered at Jobbcentrum several times. On average, clients stay for 258 days (median 162) in the program, but it is to some extent dependent on starting year.<sup>25</sup> It suggests that program duration correlates with the general employment situation, as the unemployment rate was lower in the early 2000s when program duration was shorter. See table below 4 for program duration.

**Table 4** Program duration after starting year at Jobbcentrum

Start in program (Year)	Program duration (Days)		Percent of clients still in program (Censored)
	Mean	Median	
1998	490	399	0
1999	405	350	0
2000	255	218	0.4
2001	218	164	4.8
2002	150	99	19.4

<sup>25</sup> Analysis made with a Kaplan-Meier survival analysis.

Note: Analysis made with a Kaplan-Meier survival analysis. Year 2003 is excluded since the observation window ends in May 2003. 19.4 % of the clients from 2002 and 71.6 % of the clients from 2003 are still participating in the program.

The attendance data also provide information about different exit factors and how the exit is related to program duration. See table 5 below.

**Table 5** Exit factors from Jobbcentrum 1998–2003

Exit factor	Number of clients (N)	Percent of clients (%)	Program duration in days (Mean)
Work	511	17.7	186
ALMP Measures	187	6.5	303
Activity and Youth Guarantee	11	0.4	431
SFI (language education)	24	0.8	278
Education	71	2.5	255
Sick leave	150	5.2	361
De-registered	1,613	55.7	212
Re-referred	33	1.1	362
Other factors	295	10.1	248
<b>Sum</b>	<b>2,895</b>	<b>100</b>	

It is clear that the exit factor “work” has shortest program durations (186 days), but it is only for 511 clients that “work” has been known as the reason for the program exit. For as many as 1,613 clients the exit factor was “de-registered”, which does not entail information about the client’s situation after leaving the program. This means that it is rather uncertain what clients are doing after attending Jobbcentrum. Are they still receiving social assistance, do they have a job, or have they moved to another municipality? In sum, we know that the average program duration was 8,5 months and that most clients (around 85 %) attended Jobbcentrum one time. Finding a job is the fastest way to leave the program, but this is only certain for 18 % of the clients. The majority of clients leave Jobbcentrum without information about the reason for the exit.

### 3.3.2 Källan in figures

Källan do not have attendance data equivalent to Jobbcentrum and an analysis compared to the above is impossible. But Källan has some internal program statistics, which has been used for a brief statistical analysis of the program.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Statistical information for Källan is provided by Tony Perssson, program manager.

Between 1998 and June 2004, Källan has served approximately 222 clients, who have started 307 times in the program. It is regularly only a small share, 6 to 10 individuals, of social assistance clients at Källan. Immigrant clients are a large group and between January 2002 and July 2004, 15 to 30 immigrant clients attended Källan each day on average. The majority of the clients at Källan are coming from the PES and the social Security Office. In the program component called “Activation”<sup>27</sup>, which is the most common activity for social assistance clients, between January 2002 and July 2004, 88 individuals started 108 times in the program.

Källan has much shorter program durations compared to Jobbcentrum, as clients stayed in the program for 49 days on average. The maximum number of days varied between 350 and 153 days during the last six years. However, as most of Källan’s clients are referred from the PES or the Social Security Office they have often a different situation compared to the social assistance clients. For a detailed description of program durations, see table 6 below.

**Table 6** Program duration by starting year at Källan

Year	Number of Days (Mean)	Number of Days (Max)	Number of days (Min)
1998	55	350	4
1999	76	350	2
2000	37	259	1
2001 (7 months)	30	60	2
2002	49	153	1
2003	51	156	4

Clients at Källan attend the program, in general, only one time. 72 % of the clients had one program start, 20% has two program starts, and 8 % of the clients started three times or more.

Källan’s program data indicate that the exit factor “work” has fluctuated between 10 % in 1998, up to 37 % in 2002, and down to 11 % in 2004, suggesting that clients’ ability to find employment after Källan is much dependent on the employment situation as the variation follows the general

<sup>27</sup> “Sysseättning” in Swedish (my translation).

unemployment rates. Another significant exit factor is “absenteeism” (unaccepted non-attendance or failure to comply with program rules), which has varied between 10 % and 24 % since 1998. This means that a number of clients must leave the program due to an inability to fulfill the activation requirement. See table 7 below.

**Table 7** Exit factors from Källan between 1998–2004

Exit factor	Number of clients (%)
Work	21
Other Labor Market Measures	12
Education	14
Absenteeism	15
Client’s own request	6
Still in program	23
Other factors	9
<b>Sum</b>	<b>100</b>

In sum, clients tend to spend much less time at Källan compared to Jobbcentrum as the average program time is 49 days. But the program duration analysis include all participants at Källan and it is not disclosed whether social assistance clients tend to have longer or shorter times compared to other client groups. 21 % of the clients find an employment, but the majority of the clients transfer to other type of support systems. Finally, the statistical analysis of both Jobbcentrum and Källan is curtailed due to the lack of systematic program data but the above analysis offers an indication about programmatic “results”. However, the lack of output data is interesting in itself as it highlights the limited understanding about municipal activation programs.

## **4 Activation in street-level practice: the daily work at Jobbcentrum and Källan**

In this section, I will describe and analyze the practical work at Jobbcentrum and Källan from a street-level bureaucracy perspective. I will discuss how front-line workers implement activation requirement in their daily

work. The focus is on how the front-line workers respond to their working conditions. Front-line workers adopt coping mechanisms in order to manage internal organizational dynamics and constrained work conditions, such as ambiguous goals, insufficiently resources, and limited professional skills. In effect, they develop informal bureaucratic routines that manage the mismatch between capacity and potential demands (Lipsky, 1980; Brodtkin, 1997).

Examples of such routines are how front-line workers rationing services and prioritize among clients when resources and their time are limited, how they select those who are most likely to succeed in the activation process, how they categorize and standardize clients in order to match them to available services instead of assessing clients' individual needs and preferences. They also rationalize or provide ad hoc explanations about their decisions afterwards in order to justify their decisions. They utilize control and monitoring mechanisms as well as sanctions in order to obtain clients' compliance or to check clients' motivation to become self-supporting and ultimately clients' eligibility to social assistance. Another common street-level method in the activation process is to separate the responsibilities of the exercise of public authority and formal decisions when program accountability is difficult to obtain.

The above examples of coping behaviors will be used to analyze and illustrate how the institutional context shapes the practical implementation of activation policy. Hence, the analytic model for this study is how the informal coping mechanisms in the daily bureaucratic practices form the practical experience of activation policy. From a street-level bureaucracy perspective, it is the front-line workers' responses to the institutional contexts that furnish the practical experience of activation policy.

#### **4.1 Referral process: selecting clients to the activation programs**

The activation process in both Skärholmen and Osby is initiated with the social assistance application. Social workers do the first sorting of the clients and determine who will be referred to the activation programs or not. Even though the legislation and local politicians probes for an individual assessment, most clients are sorted into the group that must participate in the activation program. A social worker in Osby said:

It's supposed to be an individual assessment behind the policy, but I'm restrained by the local model ... it's limited room for exceptions and the flexibility is small ...<sup>28</sup>

In Skärholmen it was described like this:

I select all unemployed clients if they don't have a doctor's certificate ... I don't do many exceptions ... Jobbcentrum works as a control function to see if they are at 'disposal to the labor market' ...<sup>29</sup>

Social workers refer clients to the activation program even in situations when they are not convinced that it is helpful for the clients. A social worker in Osby said:

... she can search for jobs on her own ... but this is the local policy [meaning that she had to refer the client to Källan, my comment].<sup>30</sup>

It is reasonable that most clients are referred to the program without much individual assessments, as social workers must justify exemptions to managers or colleagues, and most exemptions undergoing close scrutiny. This process is described like this in Skärholmen:

It's uncomfortable that one must justify every decision about every small thing ... it's common that managers ask ... why did you pay that, was that necessary and so on...<sup>31</sup>

Exemptions from the activation requirement are not common, as managers and directors do not support decisions that deviate from the local administrative norms. The director for Skärholmen's social assistance organization explained her view:

It's different now ... it's not good to live on social assistance and we should always have expectations on our clients. It's always

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<sup>28</sup> Conversation with social worker in Osby, 2002-12-09

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen, 2002-12-17

<sup>30</sup> Conversation with social worker in Osby 2003-02-06

<sup>31</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen, 2003-06-12

special cases that social workers advocate for, but these ‘specials’ should not be the norm.<sup>32</sup>

When their directors and managers screen the front-line workers, the political leaders monitor the organizational leaders. In both Osby and Skärholmen, it is a political decision that the social assistance costs shall be reduced. In order to control the numbers, directors are monitored in the sense that the social assistance caseload should, at least, not increase. On this matter, a social worker in Skärholmen said:

... the social welfare committee has set the goals and they are monitoring the management, but not on a case level... they are only interested in the overall numbers [meaning that politicians are less concerned about the unemployment rates or whether clients find employment or not but concerned about the costs for social assistance, my comment].<sup>33</sup>

Whether all clients should be referred to the activation programs is ambiguous. Local politicians call for individual assessments and state that it is important to lower the social assistance caseload at the same time. The two goals are not necessarily contradictory but might create working conditions where social workers tend to refer most clients, as this is the most straightforward practice for them. A practice that is consistent with the organizational ambition and with the managements’ interest in demonstrating to the politicians that the social assistance caseload is being contained. But such practice is sometimes at odds with the activation programs’ objectives as they want to work with those easiest to find employment for. On this matter, Jobbcentrum’s program manager said:

... we need to reduce the cost for social assistance and, then, it’s best to send us the easiest clients to find jobs for. It’s hard for us to work with difficult clients because we don’t succeed with such clients.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, this means that most unemployed social assistance clients must participate in Jobbcentrum’s and Källan’s activities. It illustrates that the

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with program manager in Skärholmen, 2003-06-16

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen, 2003-06-12

<sup>34</sup> Conversation with program manager at Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-30

organizational goals force social workers to re-interpret the formal intention of activation that clients should undergo individual assessments before being required to participate in a work program.

## 4.2 Exemptions from the activation requirement

In both Skärholmen and Osby, some social workers are able to make individual assessments and exceptions from the activation requirement more often than others. But the bureaucratic process is somewhat different in the two municipalities. In Skärholmen it is described as a justification process when the social workers must convince the management about the deviating decision. A social worker said:

One can do exceptions but then you need to have strong arguments and be able to justify the decision that gives something extra or different to a client. To walk the extra mile for a client is more difficult and takes more work.<sup>35</sup>

This exemplifies that clients experience different assessments due to the social workers' potentials to cope with management demands. The observations have indicated that "more experienced"<sup>36</sup> social workers are more likely to make individual assessment or exceptions for clients as they are better equipped to justify their decisions for the managements. Similar strategies are described in Schierenbeck (2003b), where she found that newly hired social workers utilized a stricter interpretation of integration policy as a way to support their decisions. A strict interpretation means that the social workers do not utilize the complete range of discretion that they are granted. In her study, most of the social workers agreed that the possibility to justify their decisions is crucial in how they are using their discretion. Schierenbeck writes "[a]s a layman, one can get the impression that the bureaucratic work for the most part is about the art of justifying one's decisions" (Schierenbeck, 2003b, p 114).

In Skärholmen and Osby, managers and directors play an important role in how the workers are allowed to use their discretion when interpreting the legislation, either by close monitoring or by allowing more freedom. Some

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<sup>35</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen 2003-06-12

<sup>36</sup> "More experienced," means a social worker that has been working within the social work field for several years and with a professional education. I have received information regarding the social workers' experiences through the fieldwork.

social workers have a greater ability to justify exceptions that is different from regular practices. From an activation policy perspective, it is clear that clients will be affected by the front-line workers' ability or inability to justify the decision about the clients' individual needs for activation.

In Osby, the selection of clients and exemptions from the activation requirement is less about management control but more about a strong peer pressure among the social workers. In Osby, the Uppsala model is used as a "working model" in the social assistance administration. This model emphasizes close monitoring of the social workers' decisions and the clients' job search performance. This arrangement fosters practices in which the social workers must justify atypical decisions strongly towards each other. On the other hand, clients experience an equal legal treatment in Osby as the social worker's decisions rarely deviate from each other. In this type of organization it is difficult for social workers to diverge from the local practical norms. A social worker describes her experience with the activation requirement at Källan like this:

The model is strange sometimes ... it has some advantages, but it's not suitable for some clients ... it's good for clients who don't want to work but bad for clients who have barriers to work. It's also good that we know each other cases and that clients receive an equal treatment from all of us ... but to question [the model], as a social worker, the model is very negative and difficult.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, it is a strong peer pressure to refer most clients to Källan, which is justified by the social workers as either "the local policy" or "the formal legislation".

The above examples show how front-line workers cope with pressures associated with the selection process in which social workers follows the local organizational norm rather than consider clients' individual need of activation. The front-line behaviors in both Skärholmen and Osby are understandable from a street-level bureaucracy perspective, as the social workers must justify deviating decision very thoroughly for either colleagues or directors and managers, even though the legislation and local politicians points to the importance with individual assessments and decisions.

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<sup>37</sup> Conversation with social worker in Osby, 2002-12-09

### 4.3 Daily routines: who is responsible for activation?

Most clients are involved in independent job search at Jobbcentrum and Källan, and clients should be searching for jobs on their own. This structure implies that the daily routines are dependent on clients' own ability to be active. Hence, much of the responsibility for the activation is left to the clients. The first impression when entering Jobbcentrum is that many clients are unoccupied and very passive. Clients are drinking coffee, chatting with each other, or reading newspapers. When asking the staff at Jobbcentrum why clients are inactive, a common reply is:

... it's up to the clients to help themselves ... they must ask for our support.<sup>38</sup>

Or:

... sitting here is a function in it self ... they see other clients that eventually got a job or practical training ... they also see that we see them and we can't monitor them if they are sitting at home.<sup>39</sup>

When questioning Jobbcentrum's program manager about their strategy he answers:

... the staff should not activate them because it's up to the clients themselves to find a job. If it's boring to be here it would motivate them to find a job faster so that they can leave.<sup>40</sup>

Another explanation was:

We don't want structured services because we want clients to ask for help themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Källan do provide more activities in addition to job search and clients are sometimes performing tasks, such as, study for driving license, complete homework, and train their computer skills. But it is still a focus on clients' own

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<sup>38</sup> Conversation with job coach, 2003-06-16

<sup>39</sup> Conversation with job coach, 2003-03-14

<sup>40</sup> Observation program manager at Jobbcentrum, 2002-07-01

<sup>41</sup> Interview with program managers in Skärholmen, 2003-06-16

motivation to be activated. Occasionally, social workers are critical about this strategy and questioning Källan's usefulness for certain clients. One social worker said:

... I don't think Källan is skills-enhancing for certain clients ... but these are the rules and I don't question what they are doing there ... but be there between 8 am to 4 pm without results, that's the wrong signals from the society too.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, both the staff and politicians in Osby claim that Källan should not provide a lot of activities. A staff member at Källan said:

It shouldn't be fun at Källan ... because clients want to stay then.<sup>43</sup>

To understand why the staff does not activate clients or why the programs do not provide structured activities, one must recognize how the organizational structure shapes what front-line staff is able to do in their daily work. In Skärholmen, the job coaches at Jobbcentrum serve large amount of clients and it is impossible for them to work individually with each client on a daily basis. Källan serves fewer clients but resources are still limited in terms of what the activation staff really can do in terms of finding jobs or practical training for their clients. Thus, the approach in both municipalities is to let the clients help themselves and ask for support. If not, the staff argues that clients are not interested or motivated enough to become self-supporting. These practical responses are rational, as it assists the staff to handle the demand for support. Support that not always is available. According to street-level bureaucracy theory, it is logical to move the responsibility for what the activation programs can do from the staff to the clients. Since, these programs do not control the supply of job vacancies and practical training and if clients do not find employment it is rational to say that they are not motivated or active enough. They have themselves to blame instead of the program.

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<sup>42</sup> Conversation with social worker in Osby, 2003-01-22

<sup>43</sup> Conversation with program staff at Källan, 2003-01-22

## 4.4 Program accountability

When the much of the responsibilities are passed on to the clients, what are the programs accountable for? It is argued that accountability is difficult to obtain when discretion is a regular part of a policy's practical implementation. In other countries, discretion is frequently constrained by performance measures that pressure street-level organizations to "make the numbers" and put clients into work and move them off the caseload (i.e. funding is dependant on the numbers of clients moved from the caseload or retention rates on stable jobs). These types of formal accountability measures do not exist in the Swedish activation context (although, as noted, there are political pressures to reduce social assistance caseloads)<sup>44</sup> and the organizations have more leeway to shift responsibility from the bureaucracy to the individual. In fact, the rationale for both the management and front-line staff is that activation is largely a matter of "self-activation," dependent on individuals' motivation and capacity to figure out what to do and how to do it. Since it is up to the clients to "help themselves", the staff have a passive role in the sense that they are not required to perform any specific tasks. But if activation workers are dissatisfied with what clients choose to do, they may report them to the social worker, which may result in the loss of their benefits (Thorén & Brodtkin, 2003). Hence, clients are monitored all time but program staff is rarely held accountable for their actions.

One component of the activation program in Skärholmen that would appear to impose accountability on the program involves the so-called "Job Guarantee". The Job Guarantee means that new clients are given a "job offer" within the first five days at Jobbcentrum. However, in practice, the Job Guarantee entails that clients will be given the opportunity to apply for jobs, not offered a job. The meaning of the Job Guarantee becomes even more reductionist, as the opportunity to apply for jobs mainly consists of providing clients with printed copies of vacancy advertisement that are found on the PES website and other kind of advertisement. Thus, this program component has been criticized and questioned by both social workers and clients due to the misleading promise that clients actually will get a job. The response to this critique was that the name of the Job Guarantee was altered to "Job Focus". However, Job Focus is essentially the same policy as the Job Guarantee.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> For example, in Osby the politicians reduced the social assistance funding markedly from one year to another.

<sup>45</sup> Information from program manager at Jobbcentrum 2004-08-18

practical experience is that job coaches provide clients with ‘offers’, without control of the quality of the offer or if the job is realistic for the client. The implication of this policy is not to ensure the accountability of the program, since it does not deliver the manifest function to guarantee a job in practice. Källan do not have a policy similar to the Job Guarantee, but the accountability of the program is seldom related to the program itself or to the workers’ performances.

There is no formal strategy to control the accountability of the front-line workers in either Skärholmen or Osby. In such situation, where the front-line staff performance cannot be controlled (e.g. if they are able to find jobs for their clients) and resources that would improve clients’ possibilities to enter the labor market are scarce, coping mechanisms such as disclaiming accountability is a rational strategy to make their work manageable.

#### **4.5 What kind of support and services are available for clients?**

Although much of the responsibility and accountability is passed on to the clients, Jobbcentrum and Källan do provide useful services. For example, both programs try to have close relations with local employers and companies that eventually will hire their clients. Jobbcentrum do occasionally invite employers to recruiting sessions. These recruiting sessions are talked about as valuable and clients are encouraged to participate. However, it is not clear how many clients that actually find an employment through these sessions. During the time for the observations, one cleaning company was recruiting at Jobbcentrum and a handful of clients were interviewed.<sup>46</sup> But when questioning a job coach about the recruiting session later on, I was told:

... it’s terrible, none of the interviewed clients has heard anything from the cleaning company. Our clients shouldn’t be treated like that they should at least have contacted them ... even if they didn’t get the job.<sup>47</sup>

Recruiting sessions are viewed as a helpful resource and job coaches are still encouraging clients to participate in them even though they have little

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<sup>46</sup> This was the only recruiting session at Jobbcentrum during the time for the research.

<sup>47</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-04-09

evidence that it would lead to an employment for the clients. No recruiting session took place at Källan but they tried to build a pool of employers who could provide both practical training and employment for their clients. This effort largely failed, as many local companies were not interested in Källan's clientele at this time due to a slow economy. The program manager at Källan describes the situation like this:

It's difficult to find jobs and practical training slots right now due to structural problems in the area. Our idea about a practical training pool has not been successful and most local employers are telling us that they want to wait until the economy has improved before they hire someone or offer practical training ...  
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From a street-level bureaucracy perspective, the practical experience of activation becomes what the staff can offer. The street-level logic to offer what is available is also present when looking at training and education services. Skills and competence upgrading are regularly the means to make unemployed individuals more attractive on the labor market. As described earlier, Jobbcentrum encourages work as the first alternative and job search are promoted prior to education or training. A job coach at Jobbcentrum explained that:

... we do not offer or encourage clients to participate in education and training as the first alternatives for clients ... clients shall find a job initially ... it's later on that we suggest training and education and other programs that is the responsibility of the Public Employment Services.<sup>49</sup>

This is an opposite strategy compared to Källan, where the staff encourage clients to participate in education and training measures to improve clients' skills and competence. The practices to limit participation in education and training services are rationalized in a variety of ways in Skärholmen. For example, when questioning program managers and job coaches at Jobbcentrum, they maintain that traditional ALMP programs delivered by the PES hold back participants' advancement into the labor market. They also

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<sup>48</sup> Conversation with program manager at Källan, 2003-02-28

<sup>49</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-25

contend that if clients spend time in ALMP programs, they are not motivated to become self-supporting as fast as possible as these programs create lock-in effects. Occasionally, clients are able to successfully negotiate for training services in Skärholmen. But the probability of success is substantially contingent, in part, on whether those services are readily available. For example, a client with poor Swedish skills expressed her interest in vocational training in childcare or in a food service company in order to practice her language skills. The job coach responded positively and promised to explore available training slots. The job coach explains after the meeting that childcare training is rather easy to arrange because:

... it's free labor for the childcare system and they accept clients even clients with little language skills and sometimes it actually leads to a regular job.<sup>50</sup>

This illustrates that exceptions from the 'work first' approach are made when training slots are available. Furthermore, during a staff meeting at Jobbcentrum, information about new and available vocational courses was disclosed. The staff was told that they should try to fill as many slots as possible with clients from their municipality. Hence, job coaches were encouraged to persuade clients to apply for these courses. Afterwards, almost every client was suggested to apply for the courses regardless of the client's background or individual interest in the courses. Normally, clients was encouraged to apply for jobs, but this time, clients were encouraged to apply for the course instead. For example:

Client: I want a job now!

Job coach: ... many other [clients] want to work too ... but what do you think about a course for retail cashier work?

Client: Is it good for me?

Job coach: It's very good for you and you get practical training too.

Client: I'm good at restaurants and retail jobs ...

Job coach: We have a restaurant assistant course too ... very good ... you will be out of here very fast ... let's meet next week and write your application.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2002-10-09

<sup>51</sup> Observation client meeting at Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-14

Analytically, the assessments of clients' need are 'elastic', more dependent with the logic of street-level work and what the front-line workers can offer, instead of clients' real needs. Such practices can be observed when training slots are easier to obtain and clients are then more likely to be recommended as 'needing' training compared to periods when those slots are unavailable.

#### **4.6 Client categories and matching services**

Social workers also perform a rudimentary sorting, meant to cue the activation staff about the clients' employment prospects and, significantly, the motivation of the clients. In Skärholmen, this is made with written forms, in which social workers separate clients into different levels based on how the social worker view the client's motivation and capacity to work.<sup>52</sup> These assessments are highly discretionary and do not create an automatic sorting of services that will be made available for the clients at Jobbcentrum. However, they do implicitly signal, to the job coaches, different categories of clients that they have more incentives to help (those apparently prepared to take advantage of good job opportunities) and others that they have incentives to control (those whose supposed lack of motivation makes them suspect as resistance to activation, in effect, a client who is a "trouble"). Although the precise relationship between clients' scores on these assessments and their treatment at Jobbcentrum cannot be stated with certainty, but they indicate practical consequences of the sorting process (Thorén & Brodtkin, 2003).

In Osby, clients are not sorted in such formal manner, but one can notice similar sorting patterns of clients' motivation and capacity in relation to support or control functions. For example, clients who are viewed as unmotivated and not interested in finding a job are often required to either perform internal work at Källan (e.g. carpentry, painting, kitchen etc.) and/or have detailed schedules of the activities the client must accomplish. Consequently, informal sorting processes are in place and these practices can be viewed as individual adaptations and/or methods to test the eligibility to social assistance.

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<sup>52</sup> On the written form clients are sorted into four different categories depending on their motivation and capacity to work. A category = High capacity, high motivation, B category = High capacity, no motivation, C category = Low capacity, high motivation, D = Low capacity, low motivation.

Additionally, observations of the sorting processes suggest that clients are divided into a number of informal categories, which influence clients' experience at the activation programs. These categories are constructions developed from observations of the sorting processes and do not constitute formal program categories.

- *Clients motivated and willing to work:* these clients are 'seriously' looking for jobs and wish to leave social assistance as soon as possible. They should move into a regular job fast and are given multiple job search supports such as ads for job vacancies, practical training placements, and job matching programs. Alternatively, 'serious' clients are left alone to do job search by him/herself as it is viewed that these clients are capable to find employment independently.
- *Clients motivated to work but with little capacity:* these clients really want to work but have limited abilities such as little Swedish skills, low education levels, or other barriers to find a job. Clients in this group are also offered various job search support, for example, practical training placement or programs with the aim to improve language or other social skills. In Osby, many immigrant clients fit this category and they are, in general, in language education (SFI).
- *Unserious clients without motivation to work:* this type of clients is 'unserious' as they have abilities to work, such as, enough language skills and competence in application writing, but show no interest in finding employment. They can also be suspected for working on the "black labor market" The willingness to work will be 'tested' by offering the client different job 'offers'. These offers are often in tedious or undesirable jobs like jobs in the fast food sector or the "park group"<sup>53</sup> in Skärholmen. In Osby, this group of clients is carefully monitored with a tight schedule at Källan and various internal tasks to accomplish in order to control their willingness to work. This category is rarely offered attractive practical training slots or education support.
- *Clients temporary excused from participating in activation:* these are clients with verified health problems, clients on sick-leave with doctor's verifications, clients on parental-leave, or clients close to the retirement age or giving birth may be excused from participation in the activation program.

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<sup>53</sup> The park group does largely maintenance work in public parks and other outdoor spaces. It consists mainly of clients with substance abuse or mental health problems, but also for clients whose willingness to work needs to be 'tested.'

As these informal categories are not equivalent with formal program categories, instead they are responses to organizational dynamics inherent the social assistance with its focus on eligibility determination. In practice, the clients are informally divided into groups depending on motivation and capacity and not their needs of labor market support. Järvinen (2002) describes how social workers in Denmark try to investigate clients' motivation and desire to participate in activation measures. If clients refuse to participate they are a "bad" clients and their social assistance will be withheld or reduced. Hence, in practice the activation requirement becomes a way to control the clients' motives and function therefore as a traditional "work-test". This is in correlation with the eligibility determination process, which control is a natural part of the social assistance system. And when municipal activation measures become a part of the social assistance system, control becomes one of the main features of activation policies as well.

#### **4.7 Prioritizing clients when resources are limited**

Another form of coping strategy occur when resources needs to be rationed and the staff selects clients who either are most easy to help (e.g. less time consuming) or those who will leave the program fast (e.g. leave the staff's caseload). Such practices are consistent with *creaming*, a coping mechanism used to portion limited resources to make the situation manageable (see Lipsky, 1980). The prioritizing among clients due to a high workload is exemplified with a comment from a job coach at Jobbcentrum:

So many clients need my help with their applications letter that I'm 'attacked' in the computer room ... and it becomes a balancing act of helping them or letting them to do the job themselves.<sup>54</sup>

At Jobbcentrum, job coaches often has caseloads with more than 50–70<sup>55</sup> clients, makes it almost impossible for job coaches to give clients individual attention. At times, Jobbcentrum are closing their intake due to an over-

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<sup>54</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-10

<sup>55</sup> A caseload of 50–70 clients is probably smaller compared to the staff at the PES, but as Jobbcentrum has a goal to provide individual support to a rather demanding population, a such large caseload per job coach makes this goal unattainable.

whelming workload and meetings with clients are rarely longer than 20 minutes.<sup>56</sup> Job coaches often confessed that they wished they had more time to focus more on individual clients in order to properly help them with the job search, and finally, into the labor market. The common procedure is according to job coaches:

... to select a handful of clients, to which I can provide more help. I pick a handful of clients mostly those that are close to the labor market to which I give extra assistance with job applications. They will leave Jobbcentrum fairly quickly. I will also pick a few 'long-timers' that I try to find a suitable job or activity for but that's much more difficult.<sup>57</sup>

Even the program manager confirmed Jobbcentrum's limitations to work with clients with more barriers and difficulties:

We want to work with the easiest clients ... if one wants to reduce the social assistance costs, we must work with the clients close to the labor market first ...<sup>58</sup>

This example illustrate that job coaches only can support a small selection of clients individually and they select those clients on the basis of time and what support the client requests. Hence, the large caseloads force them 'cream' among the clients in order to help some. The result is that activation becomes a policy in which certain clients are helped, whereas others are left without support depending on the workers discretion of who is going to be served. Despite this situation, some clients are more able to obtain the front-line workers attention and support. For example, one client asked for help with the registration at the PES. The job coach made an exception and helped the client with the long and complicated registration procedure together with the client. The job coach explained that she regularly does not do such things because it is too time consuming. But she was willing to support the client this time because she thought that the client was "serious" and enthusiastic to work and "nice to work with". The job coach said:

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<sup>56</sup> According to

<sup>57</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16

<sup>58</sup> Conversation with program manager Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-30

I wish I could do this with more clients but we don't have the time so we need to select a few clients and focus on them.<sup>59</sup>

In Osby, prioritizing among clients is not as evident as they serve a smaller client group, but some clients receive more attention than others. The selection process is not formed as much by time and resources as in Skärholmen, it is rather about on front-line workers motivation and willingness to work with certain clients. This becomes a function that separates between “good” and “bad” clients depending on clients’ behavior instead of their needs.

The practical response from the front-line workers entails that some clients are given extra support and this selection is based on four main factors. 1) *time* – when staff have the time, 2) *available services* – when the client ask for help that the staff actually can provide, 3) *clients’ behavior* – when clients are considered serious and motivated, and 4) *clients’ status on the labor market* – their closeness to the labor market. These bureaucratic practices demonstrate that activation programs support clients due to different kinds of creaming.

#### **4.8 Activation based on clients’ behavior**

A “good” client is a common expression among both social workers and activation workers and the staff often refer to clients as “serious and motivated to find a job”, “I can trust them”, and “they don’t want to cheat us”.<sup>60</sup> The observations in Skärholmen and Osby have demonstrated that a good client is a client that follows the rules and who show motivation and willingness to both work and leave social assistance. Good clients are often those who make the work uncomplicated for the front-line staff. Hence, the logic behind this type of labeling of clients can based on both the clients’ behaviors as well as the front-line workers’ own values according to a street-level bureaucracy perspective. As discussed above, clients that social workers or activation workers find deserving are often given extra support and services and experience less control and monitoring. If clients fail to comply with the local activation rules they are viewed “unserious” and might receive less support from the activation program or their social worker. In one exceptional case, the social worker spends extra

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<sup>59</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-04-09

<sup>60</sup> There are common responses from front-line staff in both Skärholmen and Osby about the clients.

time with a client conducting hands-on application writing. The social worker explains her actions by:

... this is a 'good' client because she is motivated to find a job and if I give her some extra support she will find a job quickly and become self-sufficient ... Jobbcentrum has too many clients now so they do not have the time with all of them ... but this client is worth spending some extra time on ... she really wants to find a job ... but I can't do this with everybody ... but this is a serious client ...<sup>61</sup>

This action point to the fact "good" clients are more likely to get extra support. According to a street-level bureaucracy view, front-line workers have an incentive to offer additional help to "good" clients, as it is also more satisfying. They will probably leave the program more rapidly as well. The activation requirement is also often based on front-line workers possibility to trust the clients' intention and motivation to become self-supporting. In one situation a young man showed up the social service office in Osby and a social worker met him briefly to discuss his case. The client was very hostile toward the activation requirement at Källan and the social worker became suspicious toward the client. Afterwards, the social worker told me that:

This client was very unpleasant ... I didn't like his attitude toward Källan and I will make him go there just because of that.<sup>62</sup>

Clients' individual performance are important factors when staff decide what kind of support clients will receive, but these decisions are also dependent on front-line workers moral judgment of clients' behavior and intentions.

#### **4.9 Clients' scope of negotiating**

What the client should do while attending the activation program is also negotiated in the interactions between front-line staff and the clients. In addition to the social workers assessments, activation workers conduct additional assessments to learn about clients' specific employment needs. Observations at Jobbcentrum has indicated that front-line staff tends to solicit

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<sup>61</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen, 2003-02-20

<sup>62</sup> Observation social worker in Osby, 2003-02-10

employment related information, but avoid discussions of more complex matters that would be difficult to address. They also tend to steer clients into job areas, in which vacancies are easy to locate, although they may diverge markedly from client interests or skills. At Källan, social workers and activation workers collaborates more closely in this process, but it is in this interactions that clients' scope of negotiation are disclosed. Källan's clients have more individual options, but still within the range of activities that the program can offer. One major difference between Källan and Jobbcentrum in terms of clients, possibilities to influence their participation is that Källan encourage clients to take part in programs and activities that are delivered by other authorities and organizations. The practices in Osby can be explained by a closer collaboration between different authorities, which might be a consequence of it being a smaller town or of a different labor market situation.

At Jobbcentrum, clients are initially asked what Jobbcentrum can do for them in order to become self-supporting and what the client is planning for the future. A job coach once said:

... the initial meeting is about finding clients a job, we don't tell clients about our education and training possibilities until the client has spent some time here at Jobbcentrum ...<sup>63</sup>

Another job coach explained:

... we don't suggest educations or training in the beginning since we want client's to find a real job first ...<sup>64</sup>

The point here is that Jobbcentrum has a "work first" approach and focus primarily on work. To have a work first approach is nothing remarkable or incorrect but such practices can be problematic if they eliminate clients' negotiation opportunities. Given the goal of a fast movement from social assistance, the staff has little incentive to provide information about additional resources or explore to the clients' individual circumstances. But it can be questioned as many clients have difficulties to actually find a stable employment without support that could improve their education and skills. In contrast to Jobbcentrum, neither the social workers nor the activation workers in Osby

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<sup>63</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-25

<sup>64</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-14

experience the same pressure to put clients into jobs that rapidly and the front-line staff are normally encouraging clients to participate in different training activities. Hence, the clients in Osby are often transferred, when possible, to other programs and other benefit schemes (e. g. activation support from the PES and introduction support for immigrants).

Moreover, at Jobbcentrum, clients are also asked a number of standardized questions to obtain information about their job goals and to check the clients' interest in finding a job. The use of forms with pre-suggested job areas does this work easier but much routinized for the job coaches. One job coach told that:

... it's very hard when clients have very specific job desires, like car mechanics, as that makes it very difficult for us to give them 'job offers' to apply for ... but it is also hard when clients have too broad job wishes. It's best when clients are moderate in their desired job alternatives.<sup>65</sup>

The forms also cue clients that compliance with the rules provides an opportunity to become a "good" client. It can otherwise it be judged that they are not to "the disposal to the labor market". The forms definitely limit the scope of negotiation for the clients. For example, one client was afraid that she could lose the social assistance if she did not check all boxes on the form. She told me that:

I checked all the boxes on the job area form, because you want to show that you are active and motivated to search for jobs.<sup>66</sup>

Clients' level of negotiation is much affected of the local and organizational context and how the front-line workers respond to these different situations. A more difficult labor market situation in Osby gives the staff more incentives to refer clients to other authorities and education programs as it is hard to find jobs. In Skärholmen, a work first approach is more functional as it is easier to find jobs. These strategies are in line with the Social Service Act's objective that clients shall "do what they can to be self-supporting". On the other hand, when front-line staff does not have the means to respond on clients' requests,

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<sup>65</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16

<sup>66</sup> Conversation with client at Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-17

front-line staff tries to simplify the activation process to make it manageable. Then it is actually disincentive to follow up clients' own suggestions, which diverge from the rationale of respond to clients' individual employment needs, which also is an objective with the legislation and the programs own descriptions as well.

#### **4.10 Separation of the exercise of public authority<sup>67</sup>**

A common bureaucratic practice in the activation process in Källan and Osby is the separation of the responsibility to exercise public authority between social workers and activation workers. Both Jobbcentrum and Källan are separated from the exercise of public authority and formal decision-making in the social assistance process. A result is that activation workers seldom make any formal decisions about the clients' social assistance cases. They just pass on the clients' concerns to the responsible social worker. The separation of public authority and formal decision-making between social workers and activation workers is also found in other organizations. For example, Carstens (1998) discover similar findings in her study of activation measures in Denmark. Carstens claims that social workers in Denmark avoid issues that remind both the client and the social worker that their relationship is very asymmetric and that there is an underlying conflict between the client's interest and the organization's interest. In her study, the social workers do not want to send out messages that their relationship is not a friendly meeting on equal terms. Carsten argues that this is to pretend that the social worker is there to support the client, even though Carsten maintain that activation is not about clients' long-term employment, it is rather about checking clients' motivation to participate in the activation activities.

In both Osby and Skärholmen, activation workers present their support as an "offer" to the clients even though their services are closely related to the social assistance administration. By doing so, the activation workers can hold up an image that the services are voluntary and avoid the coercive element of the activation requirement. This strategy becomes a coping mechanism for the front-line staff when the activation requirement is more a way of determining social assistance eligibility rather than providing services that will support clients to find an employment. The activation workers want to cover the

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<sup>67</sup> Myndighetsutövning (my translation).

coercive elements in order to keep a good relationship with the clients. Thus, the social workers become the formal decision-makers and the “bad guys”, while the activation workers can avoid unpleasant decisions that might upset clients. Already at the first information meeting about Jobbcentrum, clients are informed about this arrangement and they are told; “it’s not the staff at Jobbcentrum that decides that you are required to be here, it’s your social worker”.<sup>68</sup> The decision-making is also the responsibility for the social workers in Osby, and Källan’s staff claims that they are not involved in this process.

However, the separation of formal decision-making can never be complete since the social assistance claim is based on the client’s performance in the programs. From a street-level bureaucracy perspective, it is logical to keep activation workers neutral, as it becomes an informal method to hide the close relationship between the social workers and the activation workers. But it can be a fragile arrangement, with tensions between social workers and activation workers if their close relationship is disclosed for the client. For example, a social worker once told a client that the job coach had reported that the client was ‘inactive’ at Jobbcentrum. The client was very upset with the job coach’s actions and the job coach told me:

... this is not how it should be ... we must be able to work with the clients here at Jobbcentrum and we can’t be ‘bad’ in the clients’ eyes ... the exercise of public authority is the responsibility of the social workers ... if it crashes it’s here and we are not behind locked doors ... [meaning that the job coaches are working face-to-face with the clients all the time, my comment]<sup>69</sup>

This statement exemplifies that the bureaucratic practices of the separation of public authority has an important latent function for front-line staff. Hence, by leaving all formal responsibilities to the social workers, the activation workers can escape hostile reactions and hold-up an image that their support is an “offer”. From a street-level bureaucracy perspective this is a rational strategy as the front-line workers can keep a neutral role in the threefold relationship between the social worker, the activation worker, and the client. But as noted, such arrangement is not free from conflicts as activation and social assistance, in practice, are closely related. The separation of public

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<sup>68</sup> Observation information meeting at Jobbcentrum, 2002-08-29

<sup>69</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-14

authority becomes a coping strategy for the staff to manage this complex arrangement.

#### **4.11 Monitoring clients' attendance and performance**

The activation workers and the social workers closely monitor clients' attendance and performance at the activation programs. For example, at Jobbcentrum, clients line up every day at the reception desk, both entering and leaving the premises in order to register their attendance. This is a time consuming activity for clients and some clients have made written card with their personal identification number so that they do not need to tell their identification number loud two times every day in a crowded corridor. Today, Jobbcentrum has upgraded their attendance registration system and clients can register themselves through a computer. Källan do not monitor attendance through a formal registration process but they keep close records of clients' attendance. Social workers have access to the attendance data in both Osby and Skärholmen and the social assistance benefit is based on clients' attendance and performance.

In addition to the attendance registration system, the schedule at Jobbcentrum change every two weeks between a morning and an afternoon session in order to control clients' time allocation. Clients attend the morning session (8:00 am to 11:30 am) during one week and the afternoon session (12:00 pm to 3:30 pm) the following week. The reason behind this schedule change is not to increase clients' employment opportunities but to make it difficult for clients to work in the "black-market economy" according to the staff. The schedule switch compels clients to follow a daily schedule and be punctual, two traits that are important as an employee also according to the staff. Källan do not monitor clients with schedule changes and computerized systems, but the staff argues that following a regular schedule is an important competence that many social assistance clients need to practice. Especially young clients need to get up in the morning and follow a daily routine according to the staff in both Osby and Skärholmen. In Osby, the staff is also concerned with clients' passivity and according to a social worker:

Källan is good for negative and lazy clients that are passive ... but it's not meaningful for all clients ... <sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Conversation with social worker in Osby, 2002-12-09

When reviewing case files in Osby the formal decision regarding the activation requirement is often based on statements like:

... “in order to prevent passivity the client is referred to skills-enhancing activity at Källan.”<sup>71</sup>

Hence, monitoring clients’ attendance is a street-level strategy to compel clients to show up every day as well as a function to reduce passivity in it self. Both social workers and activations workers have said that the clients need the attendance requirement in order to induce clients to come as well as stay in the programs. The post-hoc rationalizations at the staff level are that clients need this monitoring as an incentive to leave passivity and marginalization by having a structured day. However, there is no systematic knowledge whether a structured day and attendance requirements improve clients’ possibilities to find employment. These control mechanisms can also be scrutinized from the perspective of the official rhetoric about the main principles of activation programs. The main principles is often said to be a focus on clients’ resources and not on their limitations and the message from politicians, the staff, and program documents is that all clients as capable and resourceful individuals that can be self-sufficient. According to the program managers at Jobbcentrum:

... we believe that clients has resources themselves and that they can make sound decisions about their life ... we don’t see clients as victims.<sup>72</sup>

With such philosophy it sounds rather contradictory that clients, in practice, need to be monitored and controlled carefully. Viewed from the street-level bureaucracy perspective the control system becomes an important tool to monitor clients’ eligibility to social assistance, which an important element of the social assistance administration, rather than a method of improve clients’ possibilities to enter the labor market.

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<sup>71</sup> Review of case files in Osby, 2003-03-20

<sup>72</sup> Conference “Minskad långtidsarbetslöshet ... ” 2004-05-27.

## 4.12 The use of sanctions in activation programs

Sanctions are a legal strategy when clients do not comply with the rules and they are not entitled to social assistance anymore. But in the street-level practice, it can also be used as an informal function in the practical delivery of social assistance and the activation requirements. For example, in practice sanctions can be used as a gate-keeping function in times of high workloads as it will result in fewer clients to serve (Lipsky, 1980, Brodtkin 1997). It can also be used a method to control clients' motivation to work or if they have other alternatives than social assistance to become financially independent. Sanctions or threats of sanctions can also be used as a method to make clients comply with the rules and to collaborate with the front-line worker.

In this study, it has been revealed that sanctions or the threats of sanctions are utilized for many reasons and in different situations in both Skärholmen and Osby. According to administrative data, Skärholmen is the city-council in Stockholm City that has most declined social assistance claims.<sup>73</sup> To decline an application is sometimes used as a strategy to make clients appeal the decision in court, which then will provide a principal decision for that particular situation. However, it is known that social assistance clients seldom appeal to court and that the social services often are better prepared in such legal disputes. In Osby, sanctions are also a part of the social assistance administration and it is often an encouraged method by the management. According to the social assistance manager:

We use sanctions for clients who don't fulfill the requirement, the whole family can loose the benefit if one parent don't comply with the activation requirement ... it is a 'gate-keeper' and we have declined or reduced the social assistance several times.<sup>74</sup>

The management in both Osby and Skärholmen are positive to the use of sanctions in the administrative process and a practical consequence is that sanctioning is a widespread tool among the front-line staff. One example is that sanctions are often used to control the motivation of clients. A social worker told me that she had declined the social application for a client who was not 'active' enough and she said about:

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<sup>73</sup> Statistics Stockholm 2002-2004

<sup>74</sup> Conversation with the social assistance manager in Osby, 2002-08-15

The sanctioning made the client change her attitude ... and the client does now understand what this is about and she is now searching for jobs more actively ...<sup>75</sup>

In other words, clients can be sanctioned in order to change their behavior or comply with the rules. At Jobbcentrum, for example, a client can be offered to participate in the park group or the dog park, and if the client refuses, the social worker is informed, and the client will most likely experience a total loss or a reduction of the social assistance, based on the social workers' discretion. The reason, and the social worker's rationalization, behind the sanction is that the client is categorized as not "to the disposal to the labor market" if declining such proposal. Another client lost social assistance when his job coach judged that he was not sufficiently pursuing his job search and it was reported to the social worker. The job coach explained that:

He was sanctioned because he didn't apply for any jobs, he was just talking and was drinking coffee at Jobbcentrum. He hasn't applied for social assistance again, so he must be self-sufficient now.<sup>76</sup>

This client was cut off due to inactivity, which is not in conflict with the rules in the Social Service Act. On the other hand the staff at Jobbcentrum has also claimed that sitting unoccupied is a function in itself as it makes clients motivated to leave Jobbcentrum. In this perspective, it is rather ambiguous that clients occasionally can be sanctioned when being inactive according to the staff. Since the sanctions are based on the front-line workers' discretion, it becomes interesting to ask: when are clients cut off and under what circumstances? For example, when is it not enough to attend Jobbcentrum on a daily basis day and which clients need to do more in order to fulfill the local rules?

In Skärholmen job coaches and social workers meet regularly to review their joint clients. In a client review session, a job coach and an administrative assistant talked about a client:

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<sup>75</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen, 2002-10-31

<sup>76</sup> Conversation with job coach at Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-23

Job coach: It's impossible to work with her ... I offered her to apply for the retail course but she declined ... we should set up a three-part meeting to check her intentions.

Social worker: She should be sanctioned if she refuses to go ...

Job coach: Yes, that's a clear signal for her ... but you must do it because we have no money to threaten with. [In this case the staff wants to control the client's behavior by using the threat of rejecting the social assistance claim, (e.g. if you don't go to this course you will lose your benefit). But since the job coach does not have the authority to decide about the economic situation, the job coach wants the social worker to do it in practice.]<sup>77</sup>

Here, the staff is discussing how they can use the threat of sanctions by reducing the social assistance in order to change the clients' behavior. The job coach wants the social worker to execute the threat, as the staff at Jobbcentrum does not have control of the financial means to do it. However, sanctions must be justified in the clients' formal decisions. In one case in Osby, the social workers were concerned about a client's intention to participate in the activation program. They discussed the case and how to rationalize decision about rejecting the client's social assistance. The social workers had the following conversation about the case:

If we refuse to give him social assistance, we must justify the decision ... not only because of the social worker's vacation ... but he was asked to turn in some additional documents too ... and his attendance is not so good ... we can refuse social assistance if we can 'bend' the decision as an activation referral according to Social Service Act § 4:4 ...<sup>78</sup>

Regularly, § 4:1 in the Social Service was used when clients were required to attend Källan, but in this case, the response was to twist the decision formulation in order to fit their practical actions. This exemplifies that front-line workers use their discretion when interpreting the legislation so that their practical use of sanction will correspond with the policy's formal obligations. This example speaks also to the fact that the legislation is unclear about the conditions under which activation can be required as well as sanctioned.

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<sup>77</sup> Observation of client review session in Skärholmen, 2003-03-11

<sup>78</sup> Observation social work meeting in Osby, 2003-02-27

The use of sanctions is a normal part of the social assistance administration when clients are not entitled the support and should be used when clients fail to comply with the rules in the legislation. But it is a risk that the practical use of sanctions or threat of sanctions becomes a tool based on the front-line workers own values instead of the clients' behavior and compliance with the rules. For example, a client in Skärholmen was considered "strange" and "mysterious" by the job coach and the social worker and the staff was therefore discussing if a sanction or a three-part meeting would be the best method to deal with the client.<sup>79</sup> This exemplifies that the use of sanction can be used as an informal strategy when clients do not fit with the programs. Another example demonstrate that clients who are viewed as unmotivated are more likely to be reported to the social workers as inactive. One social worker said:

Sanctions are my only method to control what the client really wants and is motivated for. I often reject the social assistance application but I'm willing to change my decisions if the clients show motivation to find a job.<sup>80</sup>

The possibility of being sanctioned makes clients to behave in ways that will reduce the risk of loosing the social assistance. For example, clients are afraid to be sanctioned and some clients pretend that they are looking for jobs in order to look active even though they have no more vacancies to apply.<sup>81</sup> Another purpose with sanctions is a gate-keeping function, which is a proper method if it prevents a misuse of the policy. But if sanctions in various forms are used discourage clients that are entitled to social assistance to apply for the support, it is not in line with the legislations intention.

#### **4.13 Summary: the practical implementation of activation policy**

In this study, I have directed the analytic attention to the informal bureaucratic practices of activation policy. With the street-level bureaucracy perspective as the analytic framework, it has been disclosed how different coping behaviors add up to the organizational response of municipal activation policy. The fieldwork in Osby and Skärholmen has demonstrated that the front-line

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<sup>79</sup> Observation of client review session in Skärholmen 2003-03-12

<sup>80</sup> Conversation with social worker in Skärholmen 2003-05-12

<sup>81</sup> Observation at Jobbcentrum 2003-01-30

workers sometimes follow a street-level bureaucracy rationale when translating municipal activation policy into practice. For example:

- Clients are selected to the activation programs based on the pressure to refer all clients because exemptions are difficult to get approved.
- The concrete support that clients are given is often based on front-line workers' time or clients' deservingness and not always in relation to clients' needs.
- Control and monitoring of clients is used to make clients to comply with the rules or to check clients' motivation to become self-supporting. Different kind of "offers" is also given to the clients in order to control their willingness to work.
- If clients fail to find employment, front-line workers are passing on the responsibility to the clients (i.e. they are not motivated enough).
- Program accountability is nearly unknown, as the programs have no responsibilities to provide substantial measures of support and it is up to the clients to 'help themselves'.
- Sanctions or the threat of sanctions are sometimes latent functions to change clients' behaviors and a gate-keeping function to control the demand of support.

The above practices are typical street-level bureaucracy behaviors and they demonstrate that front-line workers are doing what they are able to do considering their demanding working situation. The institutional contexts that they are working within, are marked with ambiguous goals and limited recourses. With such organizational capacity, they follow the rule of least resistance and they are doing what is practically feasible when delivering municipal activation policy. However, these practical responses add up to *activation-in-practice*, which sometimes diverge from both the intentions in the Social Service Acts as well as the programs' own goals and descriptions.

## 5 Concluding remarks

The development of municipal activation programs in Sweden was a response to the increasing social assistance costs in the 1990s. It was also a reaction in the municipalities that many unemployed social assistance recipients did not receive much support from the traditional ALMP system delivered by the PES. Simultaneously, politicians, policy makers, and the public changed their

attitudes, in the sense that individuals should more strongly be required to do something in return for social assistance. A similar trend has been seen in most western welfare states during the last decades as many EU countries and the U.S. have developed policies with the goal of activating unemployed citizens. However, it is debated whether the activation approach has the capacity or the intention to reduce unemployment and combat social exclusion.

In this study, it is demonstrated that the value of activation policy must be understood in relation to its implementation practices. Analytically, the study has drawn the attention to the importance of front-line workers' discretion and the practical work at the ground. By examining the multifaceted relationship between the legislation, the organizational context, and the practical work one begins to understand how the practical implementation of activation policy translates into the real experience for the clients. The practical work is not necessarily inconsistent with the formal legislation, but ambiguities are shown in relation to the legislator's intentions and the programs' own official goals. The findings presented here suggest that the implementation processes in Skärholmen and Osby often signify practices that select clients without much individual assessments, clients are controlled with mandatory offers, and support is based on the availability of resources instead of individual needs. Program accountability is negligible and the responsibility for the activation process and its result is transferred from the staff to the clients, as front-line workers' performance rarely is monitored. Another problem with the activation requirements is that clients are in general "involuntary", meaning that they have no other means to support for themselves. They can therefore not hold the municipalities accountable for the content or the quality of the services they receive. It is almost impossible within the legal framework for clients to appeal against the activation requirement. If clients try to reject or negotiate the content of the activation requirement, they are considered uncooperative and can easily lose their social assistance benefit.

Many activation requirements have similarities with old forms of the "work test" used to separate deserving from undeserving clients (Johansson, 2001; Lindquist & Marklund, 1995). Despite such resemblance, I argue that it is not accurate to say that activation practices today are unimportant or unhelpful. The programs, occasionally, provide valuable support in the transition from social assistance to regular work. But the programs' limited capacity in terms of time and resources, limited access to practical training and education, and few real employment opportunities shape the practical work with the clients. It

seems that activation can be meaningful for certain client groups, especially for those with rather strong ties to the labor market. My impression is that this group of clients finds job listings, computers, phones, and printers as useful tools in the job search process. On the other hand, many clients in this particular group are capable to search for jobs on their own or through the PES. It is rather common with a negative attitude towards services and programs delivered by the PES, and in Skärholmen, many clients are not encouraged to participate in programs other than Jobbcentrum. I find this attitude problematic as it is stipulated in the Social Service Act that social assistance recipients must be registered at the PES and that the social assistance administration should collaborate with the PES. In Skärholmen, the practical response to the collaboration with the PES was, for the most part, that client's "individual action plan" from the PES was copied and put in the client's case file without further considerations. In Osby, the staff collaborated much closer with the PES and the attitude was in general that other programs and schooling was something positive, but unemployed social assistance clients were most often referred to Källan as the first alternative.

The observations have demonstrated that most unemployed social assistance clients are referred to these programs without much individual assessment. A finding that suggests that Osby's and Skärholmen's activation models symbolizes an "one size – fits all" approach in which clients are required to participate without much thought of the clients' individual need of the programs. Staff in both Skärholmen and Osby noted that they have difficulties serving certain clients, especially those with many barriers to enter the labor market or other social difficulties. I find this notable since the municipal social services are supposed to serve the client groups that are most marginalized and those who cannot find support from other sources in the Swedish welfare system. Such finding, make me question, who should be served and with what kind of support within municipal social assistance system? When municipal activation policy is a component of the social assistance bureaucracy it will easily employ features embedded in the social assistance logic, which have a practical meaning different from some of the intentions and goals with requirements intended to improve clients' employability.

As seen in this study, the practical work is also politically and organizationally embedded and one must understand the link between the implementing organization and the wider social political context. It was reasonable that municipalities started to provide programs for unemployed

social assistance recipients, when the social assistance costs increased dramatically in the 1990s. But as the organizational goal often is to reduce the social assistance caseloads, I believe that the practical work easily start to diverge from the policy's formal objective of placing clients in stable jobs. I argue that municipal activation policy, as exemplified by Jobbcentrum's and Källan's strategies, not always provide clients with adequate work-related services as they follow a logic that is in line with the social assistance administration. In practice, much of the work is about simplifying complex tasks, monitoring clients, and disclaiming responsibility. Another important part of the social assistance administration is to keep the social assistance costs down. This is an important goal, but different, in relation to supporting clients on their way from social assistance dependency to self-sufficiency. Both municipalities in this study reduced their social assistance cost during the time for my fieldwork, but it is still unknown if (and if so, what part of) the activation programs have contributed to the reduction. Most municipalities reduced their social assistance cost in the early 2000s, with or without articulated activation policies. Currently, municipalities are seldom held accountable for the outcome of the activation programs and clients cannot reject participation in programs as a method to claim program accountability. Such institutional context creates practices that merely monitor clients' time allocation and control possible cheaters.

The most important lesson to draw from this study is that activation policy becomes nothing else than the organizational capacity is allowing. The real and practical content of municipal activation policy is negotiated and executed in the daily interactions between the front-line staff and the clients. Front-line workers capability to deliver high-quality support depends on access to useful services, such as training and education, their professional skills to manage clients' employment and social needs, and the access to real jobs. I want to stress that front-line workers do provide valuable services to clients, but such support is not always based on the needs or interests of the clients. Such help is often provided when it is available and when it does not significantly violate the logic of the social assistance administration. Consequently, municipal activation policy in its practical form will not necessarily improve clients' prospects to find employment since its primary function rather is as a method to control clients' entitlement to social assistance.

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# **Appendix A**

## **Social Service Act: SFS 2001:453**

### **Ministry of Health and Social Affairs**

#### **Chapter 4. Entitlement to assistance**

##### **Section 1**

Persons unable to provide for their needs or to obtain provision for them in any other way are entitled to assistance from the social welfare committee towards their livelihood (livelihood support) and for their living in general.

Through the assistance, the individual shall be assured of a reasonable standard of living. The assistance shall be designed in such a way as to strengthen his or her resources for independent living.

##### **Section 2**

The social welfare committee may furnish assistance beyond what is provided in Section 1, if there is cause for so doing.

##### **Section 3**

Livelihood support is provided for reasonable expenditure on

1. food, clothing and footwear, play and leisure, disposable articles, health and hygiene, a daily newspaper, a telephone and a television licence fee,
2. housing, domestic electricity supply, journeys to and from work, household insurance and membership of a trade union and an unemployment insurance fund.

Reasonable expenditure referred to in point 1 of the foregoing shall, as more exactly prescribed by the Government, be computed according to a norm applying to the whole country (the national norm), on the basis of official price surveys regarding basic consumption in various types of household. The social welfare committee shall, however, compute this expenditure at a higher level if, in a particular case, there is special reason for doing so. The committee may also, in a particular case, compute the expenditure at a lower level if there is special reason for doing so.

#### **Section 4**

The social welfare committee may require a person receiving livelihood support for a certain time to take part in work experience or other skill-enhancing activity to which he is referred by the committee, if it has not been possible to provide a suitable labour market policy programme for the individual and

1. he is under 25 years of age, or
2. he is aged 25 or over but, for special reasons, is in need of skill-enhancing measures, or
3. is engaged in a training programme for which special financial arrangements are available but is in need of livelihood support during an intermission in the studies.

Work experience or skill-enhancing activity as aforesaid shall have the purpose of developing the possibilities for the individual to be self-supporting in future. The activity shall strengthen the possibilities of the individual entering the labour market or, where appropriate, further training. It shall be framed with reasonable consideration for the personal preferences and aptitudes of the individual concerned.

Before making a decision as provided in subsection one, the social welfare committee shall consult the county labour board.

#### **Section 5**

If the individual declines, without acceptable cause, to participate in work experience or other skill-enhancing activity to which he has been referred as indicated in Section 4, further livelihood support may be refused or reduced. The same applies if he absents himself, without acceptable reason, from the work experience or the skill-enhancing activity.

#### **Section 6**

A person taking part in work experience or other skill-enhancing activity as referred to in Section 4 shall not for such purposes be deemed an employee. Insofar as the individual performs tasks agreeing with or similar in nature to those usually performed in gainful employment he shall, however, be equated with an employee for the purposes of Chap. 2, Sections 1–9, Chap. 3, Sections 1–4 and Sections 7–14, Chap. 4, Sections 1–4 and Sections 8–10 and Chaps. 7–9 of the Work Environment Act (1977:1160) and the Work Injuries Insurance Act (1976:380).

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