

# Towards an Understanding of Mobility in Social Policy Research

Cecilia Bruzelius\* and Isabel Shutes\*\*

\*University of Tübingen; \*\*London School of Economics and Political Science

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**Abstract:** Over recent years, there has been increasing attention to migration in social policy research. Uniting this research has been a focus on cross-national migration, and predominantly immigration. In the meantime, the relationship between human mobility and social policy at other scales and sites has gained much less attention. This is in spite of the salience of multiple forms of mobility and measures for restricting, facilitating or promoting mobility not confined to the territorial borders of the nation-state. This article proposes an alternative mobility perspective for social policy research that moves us beyond the limitations of current migration approaches. To do so, we draw on interdisciplinary mobilities theory and research. Empirically, we apply a mobility perspective to examine how systems of social provision are shaped by and shape mobility and immobility, in restricting, facilitating or promoting the movement of people. We argue that such an approach allows us to frame and address questions that place mobility and immobility as central to the social relations of welfare, advancing understanding of how social policies can reduce or reinforce the inequalities of mobility.

**Keywords:** migration, mobility, immobility, social policy, welfare, borders

## **Introduction**

Over recent years, there has been increasing attention to migration in social policy research (e.g. Freeman and Miriliovic, 2016; Sainsbury, 2012). Uniting this research has been a focus on cross-national migration, and predominantly immigration, often marked by the assumption that migration poses a new challenge for western welfare states. Yet such a perspective ignores how the development of welfare states is bound up with the movement of people (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018). At the same time, it ignores the ongoing salience for social policy of multiple forms of mobility and measures for restricting, facilitating or promoting mobility not confined to the territorial borders of the nation-state. Indeed, ongoing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across the world have thrown into sharp relief controls on the movement of people within as well as across nation-state borders, and related impacts. The pandemic has equally highlighted that connections between social policy and mobility are not, and never were, limited to international migration, but that mobility and immobility at other scales are directly connected to inequalities and social protection.

This article proposes a mobility lens for social policy research to move us beyond the limitations of current migration approaches. This is important not only to challenge the positioning of migration as something external to the national welfare state, but also to understand how mobility within and across national borders is shaped by and shapes welfare systems. Drawing on theory and research developed as part of the ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences, we propose an alternative mobility perspective to address the relationship between mobility, immobility and welfare systems at different sites and scales. This allows us to frame and address questions that place the unequal relations of mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013) as central to the social relations of welfare. We understand and define welfare systems as the institutional and social relationships through which the recognition of needs and allocation of resources takes place (Daly, 2011; Dean, 2015). While we refer to welfare states research as a body of literature, we utilise the term welfare systems to give recognition to the ways in which welfare is never solely the domain of the state, though state actors play a critical role in those institutional and social relationships. Collective and individual strategies to access and allocate resources – the practice of welfare – entail relationships across the spheres of family, community, civil society, market and state. And they are shaped by intersectional social inequalities, of race, gender, class and other divisions.

The article is structured as follows. First, we set out the limits of current perspectives on migration in welfare states research for understanding the relationship between mobility, immobility and welfare. Second, we draw from mobilities research to elaborate a mobility perspective and its conceptual value in social policy. Third, we apply a mobility perspective to examine empirically how social provision – as one key dimension of welfare systems – is shaped by and shapes mobility and immobility, in restricting, facilitating or promoting the movement of people. Here we consider: access to social provision; the quality of provision; and social policies that directly facilitate mobility and immobility. Our analysis draws on existing research, including that of the authors, from different country contexts to demonstrate the application of a mobility perspective to social policy. We conclude by reflecting on future directions for research.

### **Migration, the migrant and welfare states analysis**

To understand the limitations of predominant framings of migration and migrants in social policy research, it is instructive to start with a brief overview of similar debates in migration studies. The development of migration as an area of multidisciplinary research has been shaped by a broader tendency in the social sciences to ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003), whereby researchers “assume that countries are the natural units for comparative studies, equate society with the nation-state, and conflate national interests with the purposes of social science” (ibid: 576). As regards what constitutes migration, the movement of people across nation-state borders has been the primary research focus. This is in spite of the continued salience of migration within those borders and the analytical limitations of the separation of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ movements of people (King and Skeldon, 2010). Such boundaries may in reality be far more blurred, and nation-state borders can and do change over time, turning internal migrants into international migrants and vice versa (King and Skeldon, 2010).

While systems for controlling international migration, including citizenship and immigration policies, distinguish and profoundly shape the movement of people across national borders (e.g. Mau et al, 2015), control over mobility is not confined to the territorial borders of the nation-state. Both past and contemporary processes of controlling mobility are evident within the borders of nation-states, including the movement of people from rural to urban areas (e.g.

Li, 2006), as well as the movement of people after crossing national borders, most graphically in terms of detention. Indeed, as will be examined later on, social policies are implicated in those processes.

With regards to who counts as a migrant, a national framing of people has resulted in a common binary distinction by researchers between the ‘migrant’ and the ‘native/citizen/non-migrant’. Such a distinction has often relied upon the use of country of birth/origin as a dividing line, and yet such markers obfuscate myriad divisions within these groupings, not least the diversity of countries of origin of the foreign-born but also the relationship of the latter to the country of destination (and other states). The migrant by country of birth may be the citizen by nationality within a nation-state’s borders, while the person born in one country may not necessarily hold citizenship of that state or may be a citizen of more than one state. Citizenship as legal status is however also problematic in marking out migrants from non-migrants because it overlooks the stratification of legal statuses and rights among people whose nationality does not map on to the nation-state in which they live, but also because of the ways in which citizenship does not equate to equality of status and belonging among citizens (cf. Gilroy, 1987; Lister, 1997).

Critically, the construction of the migrant and the native/citizen/non-migrant, and the construction of particular types of mobility as migration, cannot be separated from the construction of the nation (state). That is, it requires us to consider the ways in which these social categories differentiate people not simply by the territorial borders within which they were born or have acquired citizenship, but their relative inclusion within the nation as an ‘imagined community’ of belonging (Benedict Anderson, 1983), delineated by divisions of race and ethnicity, and by histories of colonialism and imperialism (Anderson, 2013). Therefore, it is critical that the distinction of migrants and non-migrants is not normalised in research through national indicators of difference (Dahinden, 2016). In this sense, Anderson (2019) has argued for methodological *de*-nationalism in migration studies, as an approach that ‘migrantizes’ the citizen, not only looking at the impacts of immigration policies on citizens but enabling connections to be made between the exclusions of non-citizens and citizens. As we now turn to below, the ways migration and migrants have been conceptualised and studied in social policy research results in very similar challenges to those just highlighted in migration studies.

### *Migration and welfare states*

Over recent years there has been a growth in research on migration, migrants and the welfare state. This research has been marked by a more general tendency in mainstream welfare states research to define and analyse the welfare state and the welfare subject through a lens that replicates the boundary of the nation-state. Welfare states are conceptualised as bestowing social rights on their citizens as part of nation-state building processes (Ferrera, 2005). The nation-state is in turn seen as both a precondition and source of the solidarity that allegedly underpins (national) welfare provision, as “a natural, exclusive home of a (sovereign and culturally bound) people forming a ‘flat’ community of solidarity and comradeship within a self-contained territory” (Raithelhuber et al., 2018: 3). Conversely, critical analysis in social policy has engaged with the context-specific conditions, practices, social relations and contestations around what constitutes the nation, bringing to the fore not only class-based but gendered and racialised divisions in welfare state developments (Williams, 1989). Further limitations of national framings of the welfare state have also been articulated as regards internal administrative divisions (Daigneault et al., 2021), and the ways in which welfare systems are transnationally, economically, politically and culturally interdependent, by way of how they developed and evolve (Kettunen and Petersen, 2011).

Uncritically extending a national framing of welfare states to migration is reflected in an implicit distinction between non-national ‘foreign’ subjects, for whom the experience of migration is a key determinant of relative exclusion/inclusion, versus sedentary citizens for whom movement (or the absence thereof) seemingly plays no significant role as to how they experience the welfare state. In a well-cited edited volume, the editors stress “the ‘migration problem’ in modern society did ... and still does ... refer to migration that crosses state borders.” By contrast, “internal migration... refers to just one form of social mobility among others based on freedom of movement that is both socially expected and supported” (Bommes and Geddes, 2000:1). Yet this overstates the degree to which internal migration is ‘free’ and uncontested, and disregards the connections between internal and international migration. Citizens and residents within a country are not all equally free to move (or not move) within its territorial borders and in many country contexts, such as Brazil, China and India, debates concerning the status and social protection of migrant workers relate to the movement of labour within state borders, as well as beyond them.

Early research on migration and welfare states did not consider migration across borders other than international ones politically neutral or irrelevant, but rather examined possible ‘welfare magnet effects’ at the sub-national level between states in the USA (e.g. Allard and Danzinger, 2000). Research that followed was motivated more by concerns that generous welfare states were unsustainable in the wake of international migration (cf. Sainsbury, 2012: 4) and hence shifted focus from internal to international migration and immigration. The latter strand of research has been predominantly cast in terms of the impact of immigration on western welfare states and the nationally bounded populations that they serve, as regards public attitudes to welfare states (e.g. Cappelen and Peters, 2018), welfare reforms (e.g. Careja and Emmenegger, 2012), and fiscal sustainability (Sainsbury, 2012: 1-2).

While recognising the contribution of these studies, framing internal/international migration as distinct processes and/or external to welfare systems has its limits. It is also problematic in neglecting their historical interconnections – as analyses of the relationship between capitalism, colonialism and welfare state development reveal (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018). As documented by Bhambra (2021), the extraction of resources from India as a British colony, through taxation and debt reduction strategies by the UK government, directly contributed to revenues in the UK, during an era of expansion of the UK welfare state. At the same time, this contributed to a depletion of resources available to the post-independence state of India (Bhambra, 2018). Migration within and across colonial and post-colonial territorial borders in this context have thus been very much tied to the development of welfare systems. But framing migration as a novel challenge to a European or western-centred welfare state disconnects it from those relations.

### *New perspectives*

An emerging body of social policy research has begun to transnationalise and ‘de-nationalise’ the relationship between migration and the welfare state. Research on intra-EU migration and EU citizens’ cross-border social rights has contributed insights to the ways in which social provision is determined and governed between, below and above the nation-state (Amelina et al, 2019; Bruzelius, 2020; Bruzelius et al., 2017). At the same time, research on the conditionality of social rights has shone a light on the ways in which the social rights of national, EU and non-EU citizens are differentiated by their status as a worker as opposed to

citizenship per se (Shutes, 2016). Those conditions have implications for gender as well as socio-economic inequalities among those groups as regards experiences of mobility in relation to work, care and family (Shutes and Walker, 2018).

In addition, attention to ‘South-South’ migration in social policy has pointed to the ways in which intra-national and intra-regional mobility is often problematic to distinguish, as regards the historical context of the construction of state borders (Hujo and Piper, 2010; De Lombaerde et al, 2014). Moreover, limited access to formal employment and the absence of a comprehensive welfare state in many countries in the so-called global South means that migrants and citizens share similar experiences of insecurity in this respect. Likewise, differentiating between regular and irregular migrants and citizens can often be futile e.g. where workers across those categories may not have any formal identification (Gagnon and Khoudour-Castéras, 2011).

With the development of studies of ‘transnational social protection’ (Faist et al., 2015; Boccagni, 2017; Levitt et al., 2017), the concept of ‘social space’ has been used to examine the connections between migrant and non-migrant family members across national borders in ways less constrained by the national border. Recent research has also conceptualised transnational welfare as practices that contest the social boundaries that nation-state systems produce, involving local as well as cross-national solidarity actions (Shutes and Ishkanian, 2021).

These new perspectives have begun to address different scales ranging from local to global to understand the relationship between migration and social protection, and the inequalities within and among different groups. Yet lacking is engagement with the concept of mobility, and its potential to advance understanding thereof. The remainder of this paper draws on the field of mobilities research to set out the added value of a mobility perspective for social policy.

### **Mobility and its relationship to migration**

Mobilities research emerged as a critique of the social science view of the world as one of separate and sovereign societies (Urry, 2000), of a related ‘sedentary bias’ (Sheller and Urry, 2006) and tendency to ignore past or present processes of human movement and their interconnections (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013: 185). Mobilities scholars have,

accordingly, drawn attention to the ways in which movement is embedded in people's lives in diverse forms, to the diversity of categories of human movement – e.g. tourists, students, young mobile professionals, businesspeople, asylum seekers – and to the different meanings given to those movements (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Attention has also been drawn to the diverse sites of mobility and to the connections between local, regional, national and transnational migration in those sites, e.g. in studying the relationships of and mobility connections between high-skilled professionals and their household staff in gated communities in Indian cities (Bal et al., 2017; Heil et al. 2017). The 'mobilities turn' has thus been distinguished not in terms of the novelty of movement, but by bringing together interdisciplinary approaches to study different forms of movement across different scales ranging from the micro to the macro or global (Creswell, 2010).

Hoffmeyer (2020) distinguishes between migration and mobility as two contrasting perspectives. While the migration perspective sees movement as something that happens between two separate, geographically defined places, against a norm of sedentariness, the mobility perspective sees movement in terms of flows, against a norm of mobility, of people but also ideas, capital, goods and services etc (Hoffmeyer 2020: 9). The latter perspective, it is argued, puts emphasis on how human movement is shaped, not by places of destination but "connections, opportunities, and constraints" (ibid: 10). As such, it goes some way to addressing the limitations of methodological nationalism by not taking the territorially bounded nation-state as the starting point for (re)producing the social order of human movement/non-movement.

At the same time, the mobilities framework has been criticised for neglecting the inequalities that shape mobility, and also the power relations that state regulation of movement condition (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Hoffmeyer, 2020). Some have criticised it for celebrating movement and conceptualising it as an individualised, de-socialised, neoliberal form of migration (Portes, 2010; Dahinden, 2016). Some also argue that a focus on mobility as opposed to migration neglects the centrality of national frameworks in determining opportunities and life conditions (Faist, 2013). These limitations, we would argue, do not have to follow from a mobility perspective. The concept of mobility can advance our understanding of the diversity of types of movement and of the systems shaping mobility across the world, while not necessarily lapsing into conceptions of all types of movement being equivalent.



Importantly, central to understanding the *differentiated* movement of people must be a focus on power relations, i.e. on the politics of mobility (Cresswell, 2010). While mobility is integral to human life, not everyone has an equal relationship to mobility (Cresswell, 2006, 2-3). This draws attention to how types of resources or forms of capital – economic, legal, social and cultural – can be mobilised not only to engage in the practice of mobility, but to transform mobility into benefits and advantages, to what Moret (2018) refers to as mobility capital. It also puts the study of material and immaterial infrastructures that limit or promote mobility at the heart of mobilities research (Kalir, 2013; Kaufmann et al, 2004). Thus, the focus is not simply on different types of movement, “whether people move, or how often they do so” (Moret, 2018: 107) but how mobility translates into social differentiation and (dis)advantage.

To capture the inequalities of mobility, Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) stress the importance of attending to the relationship between mobility and immobility. This shines a light not simply on who moves, but the power relations that facilitate and legitimate the differential im/mobility of people, the intersecting geographic scales in which those relations play out, and the role of the state and other actors in these processes. It also requires us to interrogate how in imaginaries as well as experiences of migration “certain kinds of mobility, or certain types of mobile individuals, become the subjects of praise or condemnation, desire, suppression or fear” (ibid: 196). Attention is thus drawn not only to the varied geography of mobility but also to the social relations of race, ethnicity, gender, class, (dis)ability etc. that shape im/mobility. A mobility approach thus conceived defines im/mobility within social and economic relationships rather than exclusively in relation to geographical borders, and hence facilitates scholarship that is neither confined by nor ignores nation and territory (ibid: 194).

Without questioning the ways in which national frameworks matter, or suggesting that we replace migration perspectives, we would argue that mobility can provide a lens that ‘de-exceptionalises’ migration (Hui 2016) and allows us to advance research that better engages with the relationship between mobility, immobility and welfare systems, and the inequalities thereof. In doing so, it has the potential to destabilise and interrogate the uncritical adoption of binary categories such as ‘natives’ vs ‘migrants’, to expose the normative assumptions underpinning those categories, and to understand how mobility and immobility is experienced by and impacts on differentiated social groups. In this sense, it does not disregard the nation-

state but theoretically engages with the structural opportunities and constraints on mobility shaped by different institutions and actors (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Heil et al., 2017).

### **Towards a mobility perspective in social policy research**

Our purpose here is to draw from the above conceptual approaches to set out the key elements of a mobility perspective in social policy and its value as a basis for initiating new directions in social policy research that are not confined by a national container model of migration. In referring to ‘mobility’ we distinguish between *sites* and *scales* (Table 1). Sites are the social and economic relationships and activities of welfare in which mobility is embedded. Those sites encompass work, care, education, housing, healthcare, and other sites of welfare, which are not mutually exclusive but intersect. People may move to engage in paid work or to access schools, and their movement may be facilitated or restricted by care relationships and activities. Scales refer to geographical localities at/between which mobility takes place, for instance within a neighbourhood, between municipalities or regions within and across countries. People may move locally or across national borders to work, access healthcare, or both, for instance. Mobility can also be distinguished in relation to *time* – it can be frequent, on a daily basis, it can be temporary or long-term. Attention to these different sites and scales of mobility can help us better understand how mobility and immobility are implicated in welfare systems, and so the impacts and outcomes of differentiated opportunities for and constraints on mobility.

**Table 1. Conceptualising im/mobility**

<b>Sites</b>	e.g. Work, care, education, housing, healthcare
<b>Scales</b>	e.g. Neighbourhood, intra-urban, intra-rural, rural-urban, transnational, trans-local
<b>Temporalities</b>	e.g. Long-term, temporary, daily, weekly

The main value of a mobility perspective for social policy is in our view three-fold. First, by drawing attention to the ways in which mobility takes place at different, and intersecting, sites and scales, a mobility perspective in social policy avoids naturalising national borders as the main dividing line. Rather, it can help us move beyond a focus solely on cross-national

migration, and a predominant focus on immigration, at least in so far as the cross-national has been treated in isolation from other types of movement, and immigration has itself been disconnected from past and ongoing movements and cross-national connections, to recognise other forms of mobility relevant to the study of social policy. Though such a perspective will often reveal processes that can be referred to as ‘internal migration’, a mobility frame helps avoid conceptualising mobility exclusively in relation to the national border, when other boundaries and bordering processes may be equally pertinent.

Second, by engaging with the relationship between mobility and immobility, we address how mobility may be advantageous or disadvantageous, and how the movement of some can depend on the mobility or immobility of others. For example, groups of people with ‘mobile livelihoods’ have been defined as those for whom mobility is central to their means of work, such as taxi drivers and food delivery riders, while the mobility of others creates demand for their work (Xiang, 2020). Mobile livelihoods often involve working under insecure conditions, moving not only between places but frequently between jobs (Xiang, 2020). These livelihoods can also depend on the immobility of others, e.g. informal care arrangements to facilitate frequent and irregular mobility in work. Attention to the relationship between mobility and immobility across these sites of work and care requires us to examine how welfare systems are implicated in shaping im/mobility and its impacts.

Third, attention to different sites of mobility directs us to how boundaries are constructed and how they demarcate movement in relation to welfare. It lends a lens for examining the construction of different types of movement, and the meanings given to those movements (Glick Shiller and Salazar, 2013) and to different ‘mobile subjects’ (Hui 2016). As we explore in the following section, social policies can position citizens as mobile users of services, e.g. as choosers of schools or healthcare providers, and even obligate some groups to be mobile e.g. as active job-seekers. At the same time, not all groups are equally free to move or stay: structural constraints on mobility will, for example, impact on whether people can freely move to access better schools or jobs. Attention to such processes illuminates the power relations bound up in the practice of mobility.

### **The relationship between im/mobility and social provision**

While research that considers the impact of social policies on mobility has thus far been limited, a recent review of the evidence regarding cash transfer programmes finds that those measures can have different mobility effects (Adhikari and Gentilini, 2018). They can facilitate mobility, by reducing the related costs (e.g. through additional income support); deter mobility, by tying support to local activities (e.g. employment programmes based in specific locations); and be conditional to mobility (e.g. subsidising transport) (ibid). How social policy shapes and is shaped by mobility has, however, lacked explicit theoretical and empirical attention. In drawing on our earlier conceptual framing of mobility, and in making connections between the insights of existing areas of research, we now turn to examine the ways in which systems of social provision shape mobility and immobility. Social provision is one dimension of welfare systems, as described in the introduction. In focusing here on social provision, we consider state provision of benefits and services, as this is especially relevant in seeking to question mobility, cross-national or otherwise, as something external to welfare states. However, a mobility lens can, and should, also be applied to other dimensions of welfare systems. We refer principally to empirical examples from North America, Europe and Australia, while recognising the significant variation within those regions, again in re-positioning mobility as something integral to western welfare states.

Understanding how social provision shapes mobility, immobility, and related access to resources, brings into focus the role of different areas of social policy, such as social security, health, housing, education. As we show, systems of provision can restrict, facilitate, and even require im/mobility. And they can mitigate or reinforce people's unequal relationship to mobility. We consider these dynamics as regards: first, access to social provision, and the conditions of access; second, the quality of provision; and third, the ways in which social policies can directly facilitate mobility and immobility.

### ***Access to social provision and im/mobility***

While national immigration policies clearly structure the rights and entitlements of people to social provision, access is determined not just by those policies but by various criteria that apply to *all* welfare subjects. One such criteria is that of local residence. Within welfare systems, sub-national governments are often responsible for various forms of social provision. Housing, education/schools, pre-school provision, long-term care, and certain social benefits

such as social assistance, are often the responsibility of local governments. For access to local services, local residence is a standard criterion. Complying with local residence criteria depends on the ability to successfully complete administrative processes of registering as resident, which often require presenting proof of local residence and the ability to reside within a given location for a certain amount of time (Bruzelius, 2019). Moreover, these criteria can vary at the sub-national level. For example, in the Spanish federal system of autonomous communities, laws and policies vary from one region to the next. Accordingly, place and length of residence *within* Spain determines both Spanish citizens' and non-citizens' eligibility for benefits (Price and Spencer, 2014: 14). Spanish citizens and legally settled EU and non-EU nationals are subject to the same requirements and have the same entitlement to non-contributory benefits: regardless of nationality, eligibility criteria require residency for a set period of time within a region (e.g. six months in Galicia and two years in Asturias). As such, residence criteria in effect require immobility as a means of entitlement and/or restrict mobility to maintain entitlement.

Policies can also promote and even require people to be mobile to meet the conditions for access to social benefits. This is evident in relation to labour market activation programmes and workfare policies, which may encourage/pressure programme participants to be spatially mobile. In the 1950-70s, as part of the Rehn-Meidner model in Sweden, active labour market policies sought to stimulate regional mobility and improve the matching capability of labour markets (Erixon, 2010). Later interventions included various subsidies to encourage the unemployed to move, either in the form of direct 'migration subsidies' or 'mobility grants', free travel to job interviews and redemption of the costs of private housing (Westerlund, 1998). With the shift to labour activation programmes, the criteria for what constitutes a 'reasonable' or 'suitable' job – and thus what jobs benefits recipients must accept – has changed such that mobility has become a new form of conditionality (Clasen et al, 2001). Altered definitions of 'suitability' can have the effect of forcing participants to accept jobs that entail long commuting hours (Ludwig-Mayerhofer and Behrend, 2015). In the Netherlands, commutes of up to three hours can be required. Other countries (Germany, Norway, Slovakia and Sweden) require relocation (when jobs could not be accessed within commuting distance) within the category of suitable jobs (ibid, 327). In Germany, those without 'family ties' (not married or with young

children) whose re-employment prospects are limited in their local labour market region can be required to move across the entire country (ibid, 331).

These conditions of access draw attention to the ways in which borders and boundaries are constructed through social provision between social groups, and how those groups are positioned as im/mobile welfare subjects. Job-seekers can be stigmatised as the immobile unemployed who must be conditioned to move to seek work or take up work, as analysis of policies and discourses of welfare conditionality in Australia reveals (Marston et al., 2019). While immobility is cast as welfare failure, the experiences of unemployed groups shows how individuals are not necessarily immobile or opposed to moving for work, but structural barriers such as a lack of affordable housing and public transportation, as well as care responsibilities, significantly constrain mobility. At the same time, enforcing mobility through job search requirements, such as attending weekly jobcentre interviews, highlights the ways in which immobility can also be a privilege removed from job-seekers who are obligated to engage in “constant and coerced localised movement” as a condition of welfare support (ibid: 606).

### *Quality of provision and mobility*

Social provision may also indirectly shape mobility decision-making, not only in terms of access to resources, such as schools, housing, healthcare, but also the (perceived) quality of provision. With regards to education, market-oriented reforms in England included the introduction of league tables, providing information on the relative performance of individual schools. Those reforms have been advocated as facilitating choice of schools as well as greater competition between schools, in principle to improve quality of provision (West and Ylönen, 2010). Following their introduction, more advantaged households with children became more likely to move to areas with better performing schools compared to less affluent households and those without children (McArthur and Reeves, 2019). Those policies and programmes can therefore reinforce inequalities in this respect – who is able to move in response to that information – in turn contributing to the concentration of advantage/disadvantage in particular locations, with implications for longer term inequalities in outcomes (McArthur and Reeves, 2019).

With regards to healthcare, cost and quality of provision have been found to affect people’s decision to move to access healthcare services, including movement from one country to

another (Laugesen and Vargas-Bustamente, 2010). Patients may move due to a lack of primary health insurance in their country of residence and the need for cheaper healthcare services (more prevalent in the USA than Europe, where universal coverage is greater) (ibid). The need and possibility to access cheaper services due to a gap in insurance coverage, or to access better quality services, also promotes mobility, such as Austrian, Swiss and German nationals going to Hungary for dental services, or from rural to urban regions (ibid). This mobility is distinct from migration as more commonly conceptualised in studies of how welfare shapes migration decisions, in that it pertains to temporally distinct, i.e. very short term, forms of mobility. Such mobility can in turn have negative impacts on those who remain immobile, as has been demonstrated in the EU context with respect to how EU citizens' right to access healthcare in another EU member state at the cost of their country of origin can shift financial resources from poorer to richer regions, and from less well-functioning and well-funded to superior health care systems (Stan et al., 2020). Again, a focus on the relationship between healthcare systems and mobility raises questions of how particular systems shape mobility, who is advantaged and disadvantaged, and in what ways.

### ***Facilitating mobility and immobility***

Social policies can directly aim to facilitate and promote mobility, which is in many ways also tied to access to provision (as in the earlier section). Mobility-based policies can be a means of redistributing access to resources to more disadvantaged groups. Housing mobility programmes, for example, have aimed at promoting the mobility of low-income groups to housing and neighbourhoods of their 'choice' via subsidised access to the private rental market, to promote access to areas with greater opportunities for upwards social mobility (Teater, 2008). Social policies can similarly enable people to be immobile, as far as residence goes, and stay in areas in which they have access to resources, such as family and community networks. For example, local governments may support interventions that facilitate access to affordable housing, by capping rents or controlling rent increases (Holm et al., 2018) or providing social housing, which may allow less advantaged groups to have greater capacity to settle, that is, not to move. Alternatively, local governments may redevelop areas in ways that improve living conditions for some but not others, thus impacting on who can choose to move in, who can stay, and who is pushed to leave.

Social policies can also directly promote international mobility, such as the use of tax benefits and other social benefits to attract the highly skilled (OECD, 2011), or to encourage their return (Williams, 2020). Such national mobility incentive schemes may or may not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens, but typically target only the most desired workers. The international mobility of lower skilled / lower paid workers may also be promoted where remittances serve as a core dimension of household and national resources. This is the case in the Philippines, where public social funds are used to provide pre-departure, overseas and returns assistance, such as training, loans and medical insurance, for migrant workers and family members (Chavez and Piper, 2015). Attention to the relationship between social provision and mobility in this respect reveals not only the intersections between mobility and welfare systems but also the inequalities of those intersections within and across nation-states, e.g. the reliance of the health and long-term care systems of rich nation-states on the international mobility of workers from poorer ones.

Social policies can also be used to promote or enforce mobility also a means of social control, including by re-locating the poor. Historically, as well as today, local governments have also used social funds to pay for the poor to move away from one local or national jurisdiction to another or made emigration a condition for receiving public support. In 19<sup>th</sup> century England, parishes were able to use poor relief to assist the emigration of poor people to colonial territories, principally in Canada and Australia, as a way of avoiding further costs (Howells, 1996). Similarly, European local governments today provide bus tickets ‘home’ for mobile EU citizens with the argument that this provides a means to resolve their homelessness (Bruzelius, 2020). In some countries, such as Sweden, using local social funds to send EU citizens ‘in need’ to their locality of origin follows the same logic that applies to national citizens who move within the country. Those who move and find themselves in need of social assistance should be assisted by the ‘host’ municipality to return to the municipality where they are registered as resident (SKL, 2014). National and local governments also often make access to social provision conditional on agreeing to return, as is the case for example for rejected asylum seekers in some European states (Rosenberger and Kopps, 2018). By the same token, Germany tried in the late 1970s and 80s to incentivise returns of no longer wanted guest workers by allowing parts of their earned pension to be paid out before retirement if accepting to leave the country (Yildiz, 2017).



Our review of how im/mobility is intertwined with systems of social provision demonstrates the relevance for social policy research to look beyond current migration-welfare frameworks. We see how the ability to be mobile, or immobile, has consequences for access to social provision, but also how access to social provision may enable or force people to be mobile. And as such, that understanding inequalities of access requires attention to mobility at different scales.

## **Conclusion**

We have set out what a mobility perspective can offer beyond a national framing of migration in welfare states research. A focus on mobility and immobility helps us see what current foci do not: it draws attention to how movement takes shape at different sites and scales, and, from a social policy perspective, to how welfare systems shape and are shaped by those processes, including the role of particular policies and programmes, in restricting, facilitating and promoting the movement and non-movement of people. It also, critically, requires us to engage with the ways in which the relationship between mobility, immobility and social provision is implicated in the construction and negotiation of (dis)advantage and inequalities. A mobility perspective allows us to investigate not simply the diverse geography of the movement of people within and between localities, but the politics of mobility, and thus the configuration of the social relations of welfare.

This is not to say that all forms of mobility are the same or equally relevant for understanding access to resources and related inequalities. Our argument is rather that mobility should be seen as an integral process and set of relations to be considered in social policy research. Qualitative and quantitative research can examine these issues by integrating or centring questions of mobility in data collection and analysis. Relevant forms of mobility may be captured by existing data sets, for example longitudinal surveys that capture ‘moving home’, the use of linked administrative data e.g. from healthcare and educational providers that capture movement, surveys that focus on or contain information about travel behaviour, but also be the subject of new methodological approaches to understand mobility in relation to social policy.

Research is needed that attends to the opportunities for and constraints on mobility and immobility in relation to welfare systems and associated inequalities. This will involve inquiring into how practices of mobility closely related to social policy at different scales and

sites is shaped by (and in turn shapes) policy and systems of social provision, institutions and actors, and how it interlinks with intersectional inequalities. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of developing a social policy research agenda that addresses mobility and immobility in ways that extend beyond international migration (as well as signalling the interconnections). In advancing understanding of the relationship between mobility, immobility and welfare, future research might consider how far the relative expansion and inclusivity of social protection measures in different countries through the pandemic has mitigated the inequalities of enforced immobility.

While questioning a national container model of mobility and welfare states, we would, however, caution against a mobility perspective that does not address the institutional context of the nation-state system and the socio-political context in which national, racialised identities, ideologies and discourses are used to justify the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups. Relatedly, it is critical that a mobility perspective attends to the global contexts of postcolonial structures of power, of neoliberal capitalism, and the vast inequalities of income and security between people based on the country in which they are located (Milanovic, 2012). In sum, there is a need for perspectives that expose the interconnections of local, national and global scales and intersectional inequalities (Williams, 2021). By reframing the migration question in social policy to address the relationship between mobility, immobility and welfare systems, we can examine those interconnections and intersections across different sites and scales. And, importantly, advance understanding of how social policies can reduce or reinforce the inequalities of mobility.

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