



At the Edges of the Welfare State: When Front-Line Bureaucrats Meet Migrant Roma Beggars in Norway

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Romanian Roma who beg and perform street work represent the most visible and acute form of poverty in today's Norway, but as EU citizens operating outside formal labour markets, they have limited access to social rights and services. Using a street-level bureaucracy perspective, we explore how front-line workers in Norway's welfare system respond to their needs, on the basis of 21 in-depth interviews with employees in non-governmental organization (NGOs), the labour and welfare services, healthcare services and municipal outreach services in Oslo and Bergen. We find that front-line workers have very limited space for discretion when interacting with this group, but when discretionary space does become available – often when interpreting the distinctions between 'acute' and 'regular' needs – many are willing to bend the rules in favour of the migrants. Their ability and willingness to do so is shaped by institutional factors, including professional ethics, administrative organization, organizational cultures and public social frames. We contribute to the literature on welfare bordering, by providing additional nuance to the understanding of the role of frontline workers in the welfare state when encountering marginalized groups such as migrant beggars.

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The post-socialist restructuring of Romanian society had devastating effects on its Roma population (Vincze et al. 2025), and after becoming EU members in 2007, many Romanian Roma used their new freedom as EU citizens to search for livelihood opportunities in Western Europe, including Norway (Friberg et al. 2025). Belonging to the most marginalized minority in Europe, many lack formal education and relevant language skills, making it almost impossible to access Norway's tightly regulated, skills-intensive, high-wage labour market. Instead, many resort to informal street work, such as bottle recycling, begging, playing music in the streets, or selling magazines and flowers – travelling back and forth between their homes in Romania and a temporary or semi-permanent residency in Norway. Although their numbers are modest, migrant Roma beggars and street workers have become a permanent and highly visible presence in towns and cities across Norway, where they often live under extremely harsh conditions, with limited access to sanitation, shelter and basic amenities (Djuve et al. 2015; Friberg et al. 2025; Tyldum & Friberg 2023). As EU citizens they have the right to free movement, but since access to social rights and residency is dependent upon formal employment, they have very limited access to social services, have no pathway to permanent residence, and will according to EU law lose their right to stay if they become a social burden to the state (Borevi 2021). Two competing 'policy frames' have dominated policy debates and public narratives about migration for begging and street work in Scandinavia: a 'social frame' that sees migration for begging as a symptom of social inequality and marginalization, with policy solutions in the realm of social and health policies (although delegated to (NGOs)), and a 'criminal frame', with policy solutions that revolve around criminalization and punishment (Ibid.). One example of the latter is Oslo's introduction of a ban on sleeping outdoors, specifically targeting migrant Roma (see Johansen 2014). Today, Roma migrants represent Norway's most visible and acute form of poverty, but there is a broad political consensus that they should not be granted access to regular social services, and that the responsibility to meet their basic needs should be relegated to the NGO sector.

Norwegian policymakers often talk about this group as 'tourists' to underline that EU citizens who are not formally employed do not have access to any social services in Norway, but the reality is somewhat more complex. A system of basic services has been set up in many larger cities to accommodate this group – organized by NGOs but funded by and delivered in close cooperation with public authorities. In some cases – especially when it comes to 'acute' needs or emergencies – migrants in this category may be entitled to assistance from public welfare providers even if they lack regular social rights. And in some cases, children, people with disabilities, potential victims of human trafficking or particularly vulnerable individuals, may be eligible for additional services that are otherwise off-limits to this group. As poverty, begging and homelessness among migrant Roma have become permanent realities in the otherwise wealthy and relatively egalitarian Norwegian welfare state, public welfare workers must grapple with their presence on a day-to-day basis.

In this article, we apply the lens of street-level bureaucracy to study these encounters, and ask 'How do front-line workers in Norway's welfare bureaucracy respond to the needs of migrant Roma beggars from new EU countries, given the constraints and limited resources available to assist these groups?'

This question is relevant for many categories of people, including ‘failed’ labour migrants from EU countries, asylum seekers with rejected applications, ‘undocumented’ immigrants, etc. However, we focus on Romanian migrant beggars and street workers for three reasons. First, as EU citizens operating outside formal labour markets, they have the right to enter and stay, but with very limited access to social rights and no pathway to permanent residence. Second, being the most marginalized minority in Europe, poverty among and discrimination towards Roma are deeply entrenched in the fabric of Romanian society, and to some extent also in Norway, making this group particularly vulnerable. Third, since 2007, public begging and street work performed by Romanian Roma have become widespread and highly visible phenomena in Norway, making ‘Roma beggars’ a salient social category in Norway – including among front-line professionals in the welfare apparatus. Whereas some have argued that using a term such as ‘Roma beggars’ may contribute to framing this group as a specific and problematic case (see for example [Tervonen & Enache 2017](#)), we argue that these features make this category particularly relevant for research purposes, due to their particular vulnerability and exposure.

So far, the interactions between migrant Roma beggars and the welfare state have mostly been studied within a growing body of literature on ‘welfare bordering’ ([Bendixsen 2018](#); [Guentner et al. 2016](#); [Misje 2020](#)). A key argument in this literature is that, when the state is no longer able to restrict unwanted migrants from entering its territory, front-line workers of the welfare bureaucracy are mobilized as ‘everyday gatekeepers’, working to exclude through more indirect bordering practices ([Persdotter, Ling & Righard 2021](#); [Tervonen & Enache 2017](#)). In this article, we argue that, although the concept of welfare bordering has been fruitful in capturing the many barriers and exclusionary practices that migrants face, the actual practices and perspectives of these everyday gatekeepers, as well as the conditions under which they perform their work, deserve further scrutiny.

To pursue this goal, we employ street-level bureaucracy theory and theories of professional discretion as a lens through which the interaction between welfare state actors and migrant Roma beggars can be examined ([Lipsky 1980/2010](#); [Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000, 2003](#); [Molander 2016](#); [Wallander & Molander 2014](#)). By placing the front-line workers of the welfare state front and centre in the analysis, we will explore the dilemmas these workers face when dealing with this group, and the factors that influence how they exercise their discretion. The aim is to provide a nuanced account of the role played by front-line bureaucrats as gatekeepers of the welfare state.

The empirical analysis is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 21 front-line workers in the Norwegian welfare state. We compare four cases: NGOs who receive public funding to provide emergency assistance to migrants; local employment and welfare administration offices [Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav)]; healthcare services, with a particular focus on emergency rooms; and municipal social outreach services. Within all four cases, we interviewed people in the capital city of Oslo and in Norway’s second largest city, Bergen, to capture local variations in understanding and implementation.

WELFARE BORDERING

‘Welfare bordering’ (sometimes called ‘everyday bordering’) has become a key concept in the growing literature describing the encounter between marginalized

migrants and welfare providers. The main argument in this literature is that the process of bordering has become increasingly decentralized and that efforts to deter the arrival of unwanted migrants have been relegated to workers in the welfare state apparatus who act as gatekeepers making sure that unwanted migrants do not get access to rights and services in the host societies (Bendixsen 2018; Guentner et al. 2016; Misje 2020, 2021; Persdotter, Ling & Righard 2021; Tervonen & Enache 2017). This means that the entirety of the state has become a zone of immigration control and enforcement (De Genova 2013). This is not least the case for intra-EU migrants; since the classical toolbox of national migration regimes no longer work, social policy is increasingly being used as a tool for controlling mobility within Europe (Riedner & Hess 2024). Persdotter (2019), for example, shows how local authorities in Malmö have responded to the presence of vulnerable EU citizens by enacting a series of programs and practices that add up to an indirect policy of exclusion. Karlsen (2015) has shown how care and control are intertwined when healthcare workers provide services to irregular migrants in Norway. Tervonen and Enache (2017) show how policies towards Roma migrants in Helsinki are not just decentralized through the mobilization of municipal workers and local police as gatekeepers; they have also become *ethnicized*, meaning that ‘migrant Roma’ is conceptualized as a special category requiring targeted measures, and ‘NGOized’, meaning that the provision of elementary social services has been relegated to the third sector.

The welfare bordering framework has been well suited to study the situation of non-regular migrants and the challenges they face in their daily lives. Several contributions also describe how frontline workers manoeuvre in different ways within the laws and regulations that guide their work, from restricting access for those deemed ‘unworthy’ to ‘going the extra mile’ to help (see for example Karlsen 2015; Misje 2021; Synnes 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, given its focus on internalization of bordering processes, most contributions within the welfare bordering framework tend to highlight front-line workers in their role as restrictive gatekeepers. Synnes (2021), for example, argues that, although formal regulations are ambiguous and open to discretion, the Nav case workers are drawn towards strict interpretations and practices, due to institutional logics and their own social position vis-à-vis the migrants. Similarly, Misje (2021) argues that Nav employees – although restricted by legal rules and guidelines – tend to see migrant Roma as less ‘deserving’ of emergency assistance based on their hierarchical conception of territorial belonging, and that they perform a type of ‘moral bordering’, thereby implementing the states’ commitment to migration control. Less attention has been given to the question of how much space for manoeuvring these front-line workers actually have, and the variation in how they use this space. As we discuss below, the literature on street-level bureaucracy contains examples of front-line workers who under certain conditions may ‘go the extra mile’ for their clients (see, for example, Belabas & Gerrits 2017), but it is uncertain how such practices would fit within the welfare bordering framework.

In this article, our purpose is to place front-line workers of the welfare state apparatus at the centre of the analyses to explore how much space for discretion they actually have in making decisions, and what kind of reasoning goes into making their decisions. Before presenting our empirical analysis, we will therefore turn to theories about street-level bureaucracy and use of professional discretion, which deals more directly with these issues.

STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY AND USE OF PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION

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The term ‘street-level bureaucrats’ was coined to describe front-line workers such as teachers, healthcare professionals and social workers, who are tasked with the day-to-day practical implementation of public policies towards clients and users (Lipsky 1980/2010). The work of street-level bureaucrats is characterized by three main features: direct, face-to-face interaction with clients; restricted time and resources; and the execution of complex tasks that cannot be reduced to strict procedural guidelines. Given these complexities, the exercise of *discretion* becomes an inevitable component of their work (Lipsky 1980/2010; Molander 2016). The fact that decision-making to a considerable extent is relegated to front-line bureaucrats is a key feature of modern bureaucracies, as they turn individuals and their unique ‘troubles’ into cases and specific types of ‘problems’ that can be dealt with by the welfare state, through the use of *discretion* (Gubrium & Järvinen 2014).

Discretion can be defined as choosing between various alternatives when addressing a specific case, such as deciding whether someone is eligible to receive emergency social assistance or how to refer patients within the healthcare system. However, discretion is not an invitation for arbitrary action; discretionary judgement is constrained by standards of reasonableness that guide these choices (Wallander & Molander 2014; Zacka 2017). These standards do not only consist of formal laws and regulations but also include professional knowledge and ethics, customary practices and general norms. Two different street-level bureaucrats may arrive at different conclusions regarding a client’s outcome, and yet each of them could have good reasons for their decision (Lipsky 1980/2010; Molander 2020).

Molander (2016) distinguishes between *discretionary space* and *discretionary reasoning*. *Discretionary space* is the freedom of choice delegated by an authority within the constraints of existing rules and regulations. A more limited discretionary space corresponds to fewer available options for decision-making. *Discretionary reasoning*, on the other hand, has to do with how professionals use this space, in terms of what informs their judgements and how they justify their decisions (Molander 2016; 2020). For discretionary judgments to be deemed trustworthy, they must appear reasonable not just to the individual exercising discretion but also to external observers. Frontline workers rely on a range of factors and considerations that they draw upon to navigate and apply their discretion in varied situations – what can be called a ‘discretionary Toolkit’ (Andresen 2021; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Understanding the mechanics of discretionary reasoning is crucial because it allows us to unpack the legal, professional, organizational and normative resources that go into front-line workers’ decision-making (Ibid.). Although analytically distinct, discretionary reasoning and discretionary space are evidently interlinked because how professionals’ reason when interpreting rules and regulations will in turn influence how much space for decision-making they have.

Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000; 2003) distinguish between two different narratives about the relationship between front-line workers, their clients and the state, which may create tension for the street-level worker because they can pull in different directions (Tier, Hermans & Potting 2022). Lipsky’s theory of street-level bureaucracy was based on a narrative of front-line workers as ‘state-agents’, which assumes that, although discretion is necessary due to the complexities of individual cases, street-level bureaucrats operate primarily within state-imposed rules,

regulations and procedures (Lipsky 1980/2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000; 2003). They may bend or ignore rules and regulations as a coping strategy to manage their demanding workload, but the main objective for street-level bureaucrats is to enact public policies as intended by policymakers.

The ‘citizen-agent’ narrative on the other hand assumes that the decisions and actions of street-level bureaucrats are primarily based on their interactions with and judgements of the individual citizen client. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000: 356) argue that discretionary judgments are ‘grounded in what is possible to achieve, given the nature of the individual citizen client and the constraints imposed by the state.’ In this perspective, street-level bureaucrats employ moral judgments based on clients’ perceived deservingness when deciding on resource allocation, suggesting that discretionary decision-making is shaped more by relational dynamics with clients than by abstract rules and regulations (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000; Zacka 2017). According to this perspective, rules and regulations should be understood as resources and opportunity structures, rather than a source of motivational guidance, and street-level bureaucrats can opt to take on additional burdens to assist clients they find morally deserving. For example, Belabas and Gerrits (2017) show that Dutch integration bureaucrats were often willing to ‘go the extra mile’ for their clients, especially if they disagreed with existing policies and their clients were in extreme personal distress and were seen as highly motivated. Following this line of reasoning, Ratzmann and Sahraoui (2021) argue that the way street-level bureaucrats treat non-nationals in social service delivery is shaped not just by the claimants’ legal status and institutional constraints but also by the demographic characteristics of the caseworkers, and their ideas about the migrant claimants’ moral deservingness.

In our empirical investigations into the relationship between front-line workers, their clients and the state, this analytical distinction between the ‘state-agent’ narrative and the ‘citizen-agent’ narrative has been central in guiding our questions and analytical focus.

DATA AND METHODS

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 21 front-line professionals in four different front-line organizations. We interviewed five individuals from the NGO sector, two hospital social workers, four emergency room (ER) health professionals, four municipal outreach workers, one from the Social and Outpatient Emergency Service (SAA) and five employees in local Labour and Welfare Administration offices (Nav). Interviews were conducted in Oslo and Bergen, the two largest cities in Norway, and informants were recruited strategically and through snowball sampling. Some were initially reluctant, citing limited capacity to assist migrant Roma beggars due to legal constraints, but once engaged, all of them provided insightful and detailed accounts. Each interview, lasting approximately 1 or 2 hours, was recorded and subsequently transcribed. We obtained ethical approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT), secured informed consent from all participants, and advised them to exercise caution when mentioning third parties in their responses. In addition to adhering to formal ethical guidelines, we have carefully considered the ethical implications of researching the interactions between street-level bureaucrats and migrant Roma beggars, a potentially politicized topic. We have taken care in our choice of terminology to avoid stigmatization and have been mindful of the potential vulnerability of our research participants, given that

the research concerns their professional practice and interactions with marginalized individuals. To ensure confidentiality, all informants have been anonymized, and all quotations have been translated from Norwegian to English. Data analyses were based on an abductive approach, characterized by its adaptability and openness to novel interpretations, which is particularly useful for deriving empirically based generalizations from observed data. Inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, our analysis began with thematic coding of the data, staying close to the empirical evidence. Subsequently, we integrated the theoretical framework, revisiting the data for recoding.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

We present the four different cases – NGOs who receive public funding to provide emergency assistance to migrants; local employment and welfare administration offices (Nav); healthcare services focusing on emergency rooms; and municipal social outreach services – separately to highlight how institutional frameworks influence the daily work of street-level bureaucrats and the dilemmas they face in their interactions with migrant Roma. We start with the role of NGOs. Although technically not part of the public welfare bureaucracy, we argue that, in today's complex landscape of welfare provision and in particular regarding migrants with limited social rights, NGOs are an integral part of the wider Norwegian welfare state apparatus. We then go on to present the three other cases. When relevant, we will highlight differences between Oslo and Bergen to capture local variation.

NGOs – BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND RELIEF

NGOs play a pivotal role in addressing the needs of migrant Roma beggars, and several NGOs receive funding from the Ministry of Justice and local municipal governments allocated for emergency housing and basic services for homeless EU/European Economic Area (EEA) citizens. The Church City Mission (Kirkens Bymisjon) represents the largest NGO interacting with migrant Roma beggars, and their role as a partially publicly funded charity gives them a discretionary space to provide emergency social services while simultaneously collaborating closely with various public agencies. In Oslo they supply 80 sleeping accommodations, laundry services, clothing distribution and provision of food at nominal or no cost, which largely caters to this group, and have hired social workers fluent in both Romanian and Romanes to enhance communication and support. This model is replicated in other Norwegian cities, including Bergen. The Church City Mission also provide healthcare services through the Health Centre for Undocumented Immigrants in Bergen and Oslo, which was initially established to serve migrants with rejected asylum applications who remain in Norway under various circumstances but is now also used by many migrant Roma. Public authorities thus play a crucial role in enabling and supporting the services provided by NGOs. In Oslo, for example, a municipal mandate requires the provision of emergency shelter to anyone who needs it when temperatures fall below –10 degrees Celsius, and when temperatures go below this threshold, the municipality procures extra emergency housing from NGOs to offer to homeless migrants. When interviewing NGO frontline workers, they all agreed that the collaboration with municipal authorities had improved considerably in recent years, and that the services they provided were effective in preventing acute social suffering. As one put it:

Yes, we get money and there is a forum and there is deliberate politics. (...) We are partly on assignment for the municipality. Even if we think they do far too little of course, they are decent and want to do something. Now it is more of a discussion where we urge them to raise the standard and do more. But we cooperate very well with municipal agencies.

Many NGO workers worried, however, that, by receiving funds to address the most basic humanitarian needs, they were inadvertently serving as a 'convenient excuse' for the public sector's limited engagement, absolving public authorities from responsibility. This aligns with Schweyher and Misjes' (2023) finding that leaders in Civil Society Organizations are aware of the dilemma of humanitarian services potentially legitimizing exclusionary welfare policies when they advocate for expanding these services rather than fighting for equal access to public welfare benefits for all EU citizens in Norway.

Many NGOs workers therefore emphasized a different role for themselves, as being a 'guard dog' towards the system, actively challenging the existing rules and guidelines to include marginalized groups in the ordinary welfare system. For example, NGOs workers sometimes escorted migrant Roma beggars to Nav or public healthcare facilities seeking help, even if they knew chances of receiving support were slim. One NGO employee described her role as 'being a fighter, knocking down doors, making big demands, and helping' to 'test the boundaries very hard'.

However, being a 'guard dog' came with its own set of frustrations. To push the system, they needed to use individual migrant Roma beggars as test cases, but most of the time, their efforts were futile. This was sometimes described as a moral dilemma: 'We have to make an individual judgement, if it is ok to drag this person to register at Nav where they'll most likely be rejected.' This dilemma of balancing their dual functions – to alleviate suffering or to act as a guard dog – was described in both Oslo and Bergen. On one hand, these organizations engage in political activism and work to integrate marginalized groups into the welfare system. On the other hand, they provide immediate relief and support, effectively channelling migrant Roma beggars away from the welfare system, allowing the public sector to avoid directly addressing a range of acute crises, for example, during cold weather. This intricate interplay between advocacy and relief, between pushing for systemic change and providing immediate aid, encapsulates the ongoing struggle to reconcile the ideals of inclusive welfare with the practical constraints of bureaucratic and systemic barriers. It also illustrates the tension between the *discretionary space* of NGOs as providers of publicly funded welfare services and their more activist form of *reasoning*.

LABOUR AND WELFARE SERVICES – EMERGENCY HELP AND THE DILEMMA OF DOCUMENTATION

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Nav) is the largest and most important agency within the Norwegian welfare state. The Social Welfare Act states that it aims to guarantee economic and social security for 'all persons residing in the realm' but allows for the exclusion of those considered to lack a significant attachment to Norway (Social Welfare Act 2009, §2). Attachment can be accrued either through employment or through established residency (*bopel*). Rules regarding benefits accrued through employment (such as unemployment benefits) are relatively clear, and EU citizens without formal employment – such as migrant beggars – are not eligible. The legal definition of 'residency', however, has traditionally been less

clear cut. A 2013 study found that many Nav case workers were uncertain whether unemployed EU citizens were eligible to receive regular social welfare assistance, and many of them were concerned that loopholes in the system would attract so-called welfare tourists from impoverished parts of Eastern Europe (Friberg et al. 2013). However, when we interviewed case workers for this study, 10 years later, they described EU migrants' access to social benefits as being 'completely black and white'. Without having been formally employed, EU citizens have no access to regular social benefits, irrespective of how long they have resided in Norway. This newfound clarity was attributed to administrative circulars and guidelines issued over the past 10 years, emphasizing that EU citizens have a right to stay 3 months as tourists and 6 months as jobseekers but lose their right to stay if they become a burden on the host state. Even if many beggars have stayed much longer, attachment based on residency longer than this is obtained *illegally* and does not qualify for social rights. Front-line Nav employees were thus clear that they had very little *discretionary space* when it came to granting access to regular benefits and services. Even if they were highly aware of the impoverished conditions facing many migrant Roma, our informants in Nav insisted that there was little they could do to assist.

Their limited space for discretion was exacerbated by the organizational structure of NAV offices in terms of limited separation between decision-making and budget control. Individual Nav caseworkers may, for instance, be inclined to assist unemployed migrant Roma beggars, but their efforts would immediately be hindered by budget controllers one step above in the chain of command.

However, if a person without legal attachment is unable to sustain themselves, they may still be eligible for emergency assistance, which may include a minimum of financial aid as well as aid in securing temporary housing until they can obtain support or return to their home country. Eligibility to receive emergency assistance requires evidence of lack of funds, usually through submission of bank statements by the applicant.¹ The limited space for discretion that Nav case workers did have in relation to migrant Roma beggars was therefore related to the interpretation of what constituted an 'emergency' and to the interpretation of how to document financial insufficiency when an applicant did not have a Norwegian bank account.

In Oslo, Nav case workers hardly ever received any applications from migrant Roma beggars regarding emergency assistance. According to them, most migrant Roma knew that there was no point seeking assistance from Nav since their applications would be denied. They argued that, since migrant Roma beggars rarely had a Norwegian bank account, they would be unable to verify their financial need, with migrants consequently losing their eligibility for emergency assistance. As one caseworker put it:

They have no bank connection in Norway, right, we don't get to check what money they have or don't have. (...) In other words, you must document that you do not have anything, and they won't be able to do it. (...) All applications will be processed. But they will be turned down because we have no information to go on.

In contrast, case workers we interviewed in Bergen had extensive experience with migrant Roma beggars; sometimes they would approach the Nav office themselves,

1 Forskrift om sosiale tjenester, Regulation on Social Services, 2012.

and sometimes they were referred by local NGOs. They described how they routinely granted emergency financial assistance to migrant Roma beggars who were in a particularly dire situation. This emergency assistance was modest – usually 70 NOK a day for two days – but could cover food expenses until they could return to Romania. In some cases, they also financed plane tickets back to Romania – although some Nav employees feared they were subsidizing circular migration between Romania and Norway. When asked how they interpreted the rules regarding documentation, one case worker explained:

We give emergency help even if we don't know if they have money or not.
It's like someone once said 'why do you think we're here? Of course, we
are in a difficult situation' So there is no point in asking for documentation
(...) We are perhaps stricter towards Norwegian citizens who we know have
online banking than the Roma migrants.

Nav case workers in Oslo and Bergen thus came to opposite conclusions regarding how to interpret rules regarding emergency assistance and documentation of lack of funds, with different practices towards this group as a result. In other words, Nav case workers did have some, although very limited, space for discretion, and some of them used this space to extend assistance.

The professional ethics of Nav employees is grounded in a delicate balance between managing a regulatory framework and taxpayer funds for public benefit while simultaneously providing guidance and support to people in social need. This dual commitment to care and control was expressed by all Nav workers. The difference between Oslo and Bergen regarding Nav workers' interpretation of the requirement to document lack of funds for receiving emergency assistance was rather linked to the different ways the Nav offices in Bergen and Oslo were organized. While the Nav workers in Oslo lacked any centralized guidelines or dedicated offices beyond the national guidelines for dealing with EU citizens, Nav Bergen had a specialized team to manage all cases concerning EU citizens, staffed by caseworkers with legal expertise. Compared with their colleagues in Oslo, case workers on this team seemed much more confident in their interpretation of the legal framework, allowing them to make more wide-ranging discretionary judgements.

HEALTHCARE SERVICES – DECIDING BETWEEN 'ACUTE' AND 'REGULAR' HEALTHCARE NEEDS

Migrant Roma beggars are often exposed to harsh living conditions, often sleeping in temporary encampments in the forest or spending their days outside on the streets even during the harsh winter months. Some are also vulnerable to violence and abuse, and many have deficiencies in nutrition. As a result, they are often in need of treatment for health problems while in Norway. Normally, the provision of healthcare services to EU/EEA citizens is governed by the European health insurance card, which ensures coverage for essential healthcare costs for treatment during the intended stay in other member countries. However, most migrant Roma beggars going to Norway lack the European health insurance card owing to corruption and systemic discrimination in Romania (see [Djuve et al. 2015](#)). Without this card or other travel insurance, treatment and follow-up of even minor health conditions in Norway may result in extensive medical bills.

However, according to the Norwegian Patient Rights Act, this does not apply to emergency treatment for acute medical needs, which everyone has the right to receive free of charge. The assessment of what constitutes 'acute' and 'regular' healthcare needs is based on the discretionary judgment of the healthcare professionals. The task of differentiating between acute and regular healthcare needs was described as relatively straightforward from a medical standpoint. However, given the social situation of many migrant Roma beggars, this nevertheless presents significant moral complexities. Previous research on healthcare professionals' dealings with irregular migrants has shown that some professionals feel that the strict differentiation between 'acute' and 'regular', and the fact that irregular migrants only have access to the former, violates their sense of professional ethics (Karlsen 2015).

Our informants among healthcare professionals reported that migrant Roma beggars frequently seek treatment for what appears to be acute illnesses, but once they have been assessed, they often proved to have serious health conditions that could be multifaceted and chronic. Emergency services therefore frequently substitute as de facto general practitioners for migrant Roma beggars. As one emergency room (ER) nurse put it:

We often see them in the emergency room, they come for different things. Usually, they have no connection to a regular GP so they often come here when they get sick (...) Often there can be other things than exactly what they come for and they have often gone untreated for a long time. They always have the right to come here because here there is immediate help, right. (...) So if they come for pneumonia and then you discover an abscess or a wound, then you make sure that they come to the injury department and get it treated.

Several healthcare professionals expressed a commitment to extending care to migrant Roma beggars, irrespective of their formal eligibility. They could, for instance, classify management of ongoing health issues as a sequence of acute interventions to provide necessary treatment. Some informants pointed out that conditions such as untreated asthma or diabetes could lead to emergency situations. By providing medication and treatment upfront, they argued that they could prevent potentially life-threatening complications later. This attitude of going the extra mile was also expressed in practices such as providing a week's supply of antibiotics rather than a single day's dose, with a corresponding prescription, as healthcare workers recognize the possibility that migrant Roma beggars may not pick up that prescription. Our informants insisted that they did not break the law, but that they would use their discretionary judgment to bend the rules in favour of migrant Roma beggars who needed care.

When asked about the rationale for such discretionary judgments, both doctors and nurses emphasized their professional ethics, and how their duty to provide care was more important than enforcing eligibility regulations or to ensure financial compensation for the hospital. As illustrated by an ER nurse who told us that 'It's our job to help people. Someone else can find out where to send the bill' or, as an ER doctor expressed, 'For me, as a doctor, it's completely irrelevant what papers and what status you have', most healthcare workers' primary objective was to treat people for their illnesses, while enforcing administrative regulations and maintaining budget control were usually seen as secondary objectives or even obstacles to be overcome.

The professional ethics of healthcare workers were thus different from that of Nav employees. Guided by the Hippocratic oath, healthcare workers were able to bend the rules in a much more brazen manner than Nav employees could. Their somewhat larger discretionary space compared with Nav was furthermore exacerbated by a greater separation between decision-making and budget control, as assistance is often provided before economic departments can assess who will reimburse the costs.

Nevertheless, many informants emphasized that there were differences between different healthcare organizations. For example, the downtown emergency room in Oslo was recognized for its long-standing work with injection drug users, and many employees there emphasized that this work had instilled a culture of 'going the extra mile' to extend care to marginalized groups, which now also benefited migrant Roma beggars. This was often described as 'a culture in the walls', significantly influencing discretionary decisions, often leading them to stretch the rules to assist migrant Roma beggars, even when the law might technically say that they would not be eligible for help.

MUNICIPAL OUTREACH SERVICES – IDENTIFYING THOSE WHO ARE 'POOR-PLUS'

Municipal outreach services traditionally play a critical role in preventing crime, drug use and social problems, with a specific mandate of engaging with young people, usually defined as being under 25 years, who spend considerable time on the streets. A key goal of outreach services is to facilitate connections with, and increasing the accessibility of, essential welfare services, such as child protection, and employment and social services. Owing to their extensive operations on the streets, these services often encounter migrant Roma beggars, and some of those they encounter are in dire social circumstances.

When working with people who have Norwegian residency or citizenship, their primary job is to connect people to different parts of the welfare system ensuring that they get help, working as a gateway into the welfare system by pulling people from the streets and into the front-line service. However, outreach workers face a dilemma when meeting migrant Roma beggars and street workers with limited rights to further help. As one employee put it:

I can take them out to eat and be a supporter who doesn't make any demands, but I can't give more than a chat, a coffee, maybe some food and examine possible rights with the person concerned. But if you don't have the right to go to school, you don't have a work permit, why should I help you make a CV or an application if you can't apply for that job? Because what we normally do leads someone to do something meaningful as a member of society. For those who are on the outside of society, it becomes more challenging.

The outreach workers' professional knowledge combined with what the welfare system could offer were quite powerful tools to help people change their life path, but when the welfare door was shut their ability to help was limited. Many outreach workers were thus frustrated from encountering people on the streets with evident needs who could not receive aid beyond what non-governmental organizations offered, despite their obvious poverty and homelessness.

When it came to resolving this dilemma, the outreach services in the two cities, Oslo and Bergen, had very different approaches. When migrant Roma beggars became a regular sight on the streets, the head of the outreach services in Oslo municipality advocated for a non-discriminatory approach, even defining migrant Roma beggars as a prioritized group. To support this approach, they temporarily received additional funding from the municipality to recruit two Romanes-speaking employees to improve communication with migrant Roma beggars. When faced with the dilemma of not being able to direct them into standard welfare services, the outreach team employed a strategy of identifying migrant Roma beggars who, beyond poverty, faced additional vulnerabilities such as being victims of human trafficking, having mental disabilities, or being extra susceptible to harm. When asked about what they were looking for, they described it as being 'poor plus', meaning that they, in addition to being poor, had some additional condition or situation that could be leveraged to advocate for rights within the system. Most of the time, however, they ended up disappointed. For example, one outreach worker told a story about the outreach services meeting a Roma woman with an undiagnosed mental disability:

She didn't know when to go to the bathroom or not. So, she ended up often sitting in her own feces. And where Nav thought that it wasn't their problem, I think it is just about pure human dignity. And she really needed quite a lot of care (...) As long as there wasn't a diagnosis for this person that they (Nav) had received, then they couldn't provide services and they believed that the person had no rights.

The outreach workers expressed their frustration at repeatedly confronting barriers within the welfare systems, experiencing their space for discretion as very limited. Within this constrained space, the outreach team's attempts to obtain assistance demanded significant motivation and often appeared futile. This uncertainty made their work particularly challenging and conflicted with their professional ethics. Occasionally, they succeeded in obtaining emergency aid from Nav for the migrant Roma beggars, although this was limited to short-term assistance. Beyond this, NGOs provided some relief by offering shelter, food and hygiene facilities, and sometimes they would help people get in contact with emergency healthcare services. However, the people we interviewed in the outreach services in Oslo felt restricted in their ability to aid, often questioning how much extra effort they should make to challenge the system. Their frustration thus echoed those of NGO workers, despite being part of the public welfare apparatus.

The relatively active approach of the outreach services in Oslo nevertheless stood in stark contrast to the outreach services in Bergen. Here, the head of outreach services had made a discretionary judgement to define migrant Roma beggars as being outside their target population. The argument, according to our informant, was that all migrant Roma beggars were over the age of 25 years. And in contrast to their colleagues in Oslo, outreach workers in Bergen described migrant Roma beggars as impossible to engage because they were either victims of human trafficking or involved in organized crime. It should be noted that many beggars and street workers are in fact younger than 25 years, and that most of them are not involved in organized crime, neither as victims nor perpetrators (see also [Tylдум & Friberg 2023](#)). However, by defining them as outside their target population, the outreach services in Bergen avoided the frustrations experienced by their colleagues in Oslo.

The contrasting approaches of the municipal outreach services in Oslo and Bergen were closely aligned with different policy frames, drawn from public and media discourse, that seemed to influence their treatment of migrant Roma beggars. Whereas the Oslo outreach service's understanding of the situation closely resembled what Borevi (2021) calls a 'social frame', centring poverty and the moral obligation to assist those in need, the way representatives of Bergen's outreach services spoke about migrant Roma beggars more closely resembled what Borevi calls a 'criminal frame', describing them as engaged in organized criminal networks as either victims or perpetrators – and thus beyond their reach as well as outside their mandate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We introduced this article by asking how front-line workers in different parts of Norway's expansive welfare bureaucracy respond to the needs of migrant Roma beggars from new EU countries, given the legal constraints and limited resources available to assist these groups. Our analytical starting point was the literature on welfare bordering, which has described front-line welfare bureaucrats as increasingly being mobilized to act as border guards, tasked with the role of making sure unwanted migrants do not access social rights. In this article, we have placed these workers front and centre in our analysis to explore the discretionary space available to frontline workers in various parts of the welfare bureaucracy, how they use this space when it becomes available to them, and the factors that influence their discretionary reasoning when dealing with migrant Roma beggars.

The empirical analyses show that frontline workers in the Norwegian welfare system face a variety of dilemmas in this regard. A common thread is that they struggle to reconcile the limitations of their professional mandates with the needs of a marginalized group, operating within a notably – and seemingly increasingly – limited space for discretion when dealing with this group. But although the individual workers cannot apply the regular tools of the welfare system to address their needs, they nevertheless have some space for extending help in certain situations. Within these arguably narrow confines, they employ a variety of forms of reasoning to navigate and make decisions, with considerable variation – at the individual level, at the agency level and between the two cities.

Our first contribution to the literature on the encounter between marginalized migrants and the welfare states is to show how this variation is shaped by several institutional factors. For example, our analysis shows how the arguably limited *discretionary space* for frontline workers was not just shaped by the particular institutions' different mandates and legal frameworks, such as the distinction between 'regular' and 'emergency' services, and the myriads of rules, documents and circulars that defined who were or were not eligible to different kinds of services. It was also shaped by differences in administrative organization, which could affect how much space for discretion the individual front-line worker would have. For example, the fact that decision-making and budget control was more separated in healthcare services, allowed healthcare workers larger space for discretion in extending help compared to those working in Nav. And the fact that Nav services to EU/EEA citizens in Bergen were delegated to a specialized team, rather than by regular case workers dealing with them as in Oslo, provided greater confidence in the interpretation and application of

rules. Other institutional factors were important sources of *discretionary reasoning* for front-line workers. One was *professional ethics* – illustrated by the difference between the healthcare workers' Hippocratic oath and the Nav bureaucrats' more explicit obligation to balance care and control. Another was the *organizational culture* at specific workplaces, as illustrated by how the long-standing work with injection drug users at Oslo's downtown emergency room had instilled a culture of 'going the extra mile' to extend care to marginalized groups. In addition, *public narratives* or 'policy frames' drawn from public debate could influence how front-line workers perceive migration for begging as a phenomenon, with implications for their ability and willingness to engage with the group, as illustrated by the difference between 'social frame' applied by the outreach services in Oslo and 'criminal frame' applied in Bergen.

Our second contribution to the literature is to apply the lens of street-level bureaucracy to the analysis of the relationship between the welfare state and migrant Roma beggars. We argued previously that the literature on welfare bordering has tended to emphasize their role as active gatekeepers vis-à-vis unwelcome migrants. The street-level bureaucracy literature, on the other hand, which usually deals with the provision of 'regular' welfare services to 'regular' citizens, provides a much more varied account of how front-line workers actually perform their work – from those overly restrictive to those who 'go the extra mile' for their clients. We find that the same pattern also applies to 'unwanted' and semi-irregular migrants such as Roma beggars and street workers. While our informants among front-line workers were sometimes concerned with enforcing public regulations, they seemed just as often to try to help people with whatever regulatory tools were available to them. Arguably, our informants had extremely limited space for discretion when interacting with this group. But in those instances where discretionary space did become available, our analyses suggested that many were willing to extend at least a minimum of help, sometimes bending the rules in favour of the migrants. Although we are not the first to describe such practices among Norwegian front-line workers, we argue that our findings provide additional nuance to our understanding of the roles and motivations of frontline workers in the welfare state when encountering marginalized groups.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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