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Access to Welfare

An Introduction to Welfare Rationing

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To my Father

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PEGGY FOSTER

Introduction

All advanced industrial societies, whatever their political or economic systems, face the problem of equating the demand for consumer goods and services with their limited supply. In Britain, most goods and services are bought and sold in the private market where supply and demand are kept in equilibrium by the price mechanism. The smaller welfare sector, however, has largely eschewed the use of price as a distributive device. Welfare providers working in the statutory social services have therefore had to devise various forms of administrative rationing to control surplus demand for limited goods and services. This book is primarily concerned with administrative rationing and the effects it has on individuals' access to welfare.

In recent years, critics of the traditional empirical approach to the analysis of social policy have emphasised that a narrow concern with administrative procedures within the social services cannot lead to a full understanding of the distribution of welfare in a capitalist society. They claim that the answers to key questions such as 'How and why do some individuals rather than others gain access to welfare benefits?' and 'How and why do some social classes gain more from certain social services than others?' lie as much outside the social services as within. Issues such as the balance of power between capital and labour, the creation and maintenance of particular ideologies of welfare and the relationship between economic and social goals are now widely recognised as key factors in the distribution of welfare in British society. Nevertheless, a recognition that what happens within the social services is not the sole determinant of individuals' access to welfare does not imply that the process of rationing within the welfare sector is in itself irrelevant or unimportant. Not only does this process play a key role in determining an individual's access to welfare services and

benefits, it may also play a significant part in perpetuating class inequalities in the welfare field. This book will therefore concentrate on the process of rationing within the social services, though it will certainly not ignore the broader context in which such rationing takes place.

Chapter 1 discusses the welfare sector's rejection of the price mechanism as a primary rationing device, examines the conflicting aims and objectives of the social services, and enumerates the various types of rationing used within them.

Chapter 2 analyses the concept of need as a key distributive principle in the welfare sector, summarises the debate on the definition and measurement of welfare needs, and discusses critical approaches to the way the concept of need is used in the social services.

Chapter 3 examines client-initiated demand for welfare services and its implications for welfare rationing. In particular it focuses on the role which client demand may play in perpetuating class inequalities in the use of statutory social services.

Chapter 4 begins to analyse the process of welfare rationing itself by examining the reception process in the social services. It focuses in particular on the role played by receptionists in regulating individuals' access to doctors and social workers.

Chapter 5 looks at the way in which professional welfare providers act as gatekeepers to certain social services by controlling clients' initial access to these services.

Chapter 6 continues to focus on the control which welfare professionals exercise over clients' access to welfare services. It examines the ways in which professionals ration both their own time and attention and a range of material benefits over which they exercise control.

Chapter 7 examines welfare rationing from the perspective of welfare rights. It illustrates this issue by focusing on claimants' formal rights to a range of social security benefits and examining the extent to which these rights are undermined by the procedures used in allocating these benefits.

Chapter 8 examines the allocation of council housing. It identifies the various forms of rationing utilised by local authority housing departments and emphasises the external constraints experienced by all those involved in allocating public housing.

Chapter 9 examines the empirical evidence on the effects of charges and means tests on individuals' access to welfare benefits, and relates this evidence to the controversial debate between selectivists and universalists over the use of charges and means tests in the social services.

Chapter 10 discusses the main criticisms levied against existing methods of welfare rationing and evaluates the strategies for reform proposed by administrative reformists, pro-marketeers and Marxists.