

'The squeezed middle': Frontline workers capability for discretion in an automated social security system

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This article looks at changes in frontline workers' roles and capabilities for discretion as a result of greater automation in UK's social security system. It uses the in-work progression policy element of the Universal Credit welfare reform as an example of policy tension and disconnect where the aim of reducing in-work poverty is implemented through a narrow goal of 'increased earnings' - leading to what has been called a 'work first then work more' policy (Jones, 2022).

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013 aimed at simplifying the benefit system and 'making work pay' (DWP, 2010). It has received much criticism for neither making people better off, nor making life any simpler for many of the 7 million people now claiming it (Summers and Young, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2020, 2022; Wright and Dwyer, 2022). Furthermore, its digital delivery has been found to increase claimant's burden and be difficult to navigate when life changes in ways not aligned with system designs (Bennett et al., 2024; Griffiths, 2021; Griffiths and Wood, 2024).

This article draws on in-depth qualitative research with policymakers, frontline workers and low-income families before, during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic (Borg, 2024). A particular focus is a disconnect between assumptions made by 'upstream policymakers' and everyday experiences on the frontline. While the upstream policymakers believed UC to be designed as a flexible digital system that gave room for frontline workers to apply discretion, frontline workers felt their capability to apply discretion eroded by the new system. They furthermore described how they felt squeezed between their role as 'gatekeepers' of automated conditionality and their own wish to be a 'door opener' for support.

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