Between Aid And Labeling:
The Perspectives Of Social Services Beneficiaries

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Abstract

This article analyzes the lived experiences of social service beneficiaries, focusing on the tension between institutional support and social labeling processes. Based on qualitative research conducted between October and November 2025, in Vâlcea County, the study explores how people accessing social canteens and a night shelter perceive and negotiate their interactions with social assistance institutions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with adult beneficiaries, using purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The results indicate that accessing social services is experienced predominantly as a last resort, rather than as an exercise of a social right. While social canteens are mainly associated with public exposure of vulnerability and tacit compliance with institutional rules, night shelters are perceived as a more intrusive environment, characterized by a high level of control, loss of privacy and more pronounced consequences on personal identity. In both contexts, beneficiaries describe persistent concerns related to stigmatization, fear of losing access to support and the need to adopt coping strategies to protect their dignity. By bringing the perspectives of beneficiaries to the fore, the study contributes to sociological debates on stigma, conditionality in social assistance and institutional interactions, highlighting the symbolic and relational dimensions of social assistance beyond its material function. The article argues that vulnerability is not only a pre-existing condition of intervention, but is also shaped by everyday institutional practices. These results highlight the importance of integrating the experiential dimension into the sociological analysis of social assistance and the provision of social protection services.

Keywords*: social labeling; vulnerability; social policies; social services; beneficiaries' experience*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, social services have become one of the main spaces of direct interaction between the state and citizens in situations of social vulnerability. Beyond their declared function of support and protection, these services play a central role in defining and administering social categories considered legitimate for public intervention. Current sociological studies show that access to social assistance

is a regulated and evaluative process, in which institutional norms and moral judgments contribute to defining the need as legitimate (Dwyer, 2010; Tyler, 2020).

Recent research on social policies shows a redefinition of the criteria by which vulnerability and individual responsibility are recognized within institutions. Social policies increasingly tend to condition access to support on the demonstration of behavioral and moral conformity of beneficiaries, which leads to a reconfiguration of the relationship between aid and social control (Wacquant, 2009; Dwyer & Patrick, 2021). In this context, social services become not only mechanisms of redistribution, but also instruments of social classification, through which individuals are evaluated, ranked, and labeled according to often opaque institutional criteria.

From a sociological perspective, vulnerability cannot be understood exclusively as an objective state generated by the lack of material resources. Recent research emphasizes the relational and institutional nature of vulnerability, which is produced and reinforced through the interaction with social protection systems (Chase & Walker, 2013; Patrick, 2014). In this sense, the status of beneficiary is the result of a social process of institutional recognition, which involves both access to resources and the assumption of a social identity marked by dependence and public exposure.

The literature on stigma provides an essential analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. From Goffman's (2009) classic analysis of discredited identity to contemporary developments in the concept of structural stigma, sociologists have shown that stigma is a complex social process, produced and maintained through institutions, public discourses, and administrative practices (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Slater, 2018). In the case of social services, stigma is not an accidental side effect, but can become a structural feature of the way support policies are organized and implemented.

Recent research on the experiences of beneficiaries indicates that interaction with social welfare institutions is frequently experienced as an ambivalent experience, in which material support is accompanied by feelings of shame, humiliation or symbolic depreciation (Baumberg, 2016; Patrick, 2017). These feelings are amplified in institutional contexts characterized by high public visibility and strict access rules, such as social canteens and night shelters. Such services, although essential for survival, are often associated with extreme forms of social exclusion and negative social representations of poverty (Cloke, May & Johnsen, 2011).

Social canteens and night shelters occupy a particular position in the architecture of social services, as they respond to immediate and fundamental needs, but at the same time imply the public exposure of vulnerability. Accessing these services implies the acceptance of institutional procedures that may include checks, rules of behavior, and repeated interactions with staff, all of which contribute to the construction of an institutional identity of the beneficiary (Johnsen, Fitzpatrick & Watts, 2018). In this sense, the experience of help is inseparable from the experience of evaluation and symbolic control.

The concept of street-level bureaucracy remains relevant for the analysis of these processes, underlining the central role of everyday interactions between beneficiaries and frontline workers in the effective production of social policies (Lipsky, 2010). Seemingly minor decisions, the language used, and the way rules are applied contribute to shaping the institutional experience and can significantly

influence how beneficiaries perceive their social status and relationship with the state. Recent studies show that these interactions can function both as sources of support and recognition, as well as as mechanisms for the reproduction of stigma (Watts, Fitzpatrick & Johnsen, 2018).

Despite the growing literature on social policy and stigma, beneficiaries' perspectives remain underexplored, particularly in terms of their experiences with basic needs services. Most studies focus on the regulatory framework or program evaluation, neglecting how individuals understand, negotiate, and internalize the institutional labels associated with beneficiary status (Patrick, 2017; Tyler, 2020).

From a sociological perspective, vulnerability should not be reduced to individual deficits or temporary circumstances, but rather understood as a multidimensional condition shaped by structural inequalities, economic transformations and institutional arrangements. Studies on the development of social economy models in Romania highlight how vulnerable groups emerge at the intersection of labor market exclusion, limited access to resources and institutional constraints, which reinforce patterns of marginalization and dependence (Otovescu, Cioacă & Calotă, 2019). In this framework, vulnerability becomes both a structural position and a socially constructed category, produced through policy design, administrative practices and broader socio-economic dynamics. Consequently, analyzing vulnerability requires moving beyond descriptive categorizations toward understanding the relational processes through which individuals are positioned within systems of support, regulation and social integration.

In this broader analytical framework, social policies must be understood not only as instruments of redistribution but also as mechanisms through which modern societies regulate risk, vulnerability, and social integration. Contemporary sociological literature emphasizes that social policy interventions reflect evolving governance models that attempt to balance protection, responsibility, and social cohesion in increasingly complex welfare contexts (Otovescu, 2021: 77-80). Rather than functioning solely as neutral responses to objective needs, social policies contribute to shaping normative expectations about deservingness, autonomy, and participation, thereby influencing how individuals navigate institutional environments and construct their social identities. From this perspective, welfare institutions operate simultaneously as systems of support and arenas of symbolic negotiation, where policy design, administrative practices, and professional discretion shape both access to resources and the meanings attached to vulnerability. Integrating the analysis of social policies into the study of social services therefore allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary welfare states mediate the relationship between structural inequalities and individual experiences, highlighting the dynamic interplay between protection, regulation, and social recognition (Otovescu, 2021: 77-80).

Starting from this gap, this article aims to analyze the perspectives of social service beneficiaries on experiences of help and labeling, with a specific focus on social canteens and night shelters. Through a qualitative approach centered on participants' narratives, the study aims to highlight how vulnerability is experienced, interpreted and negotiated in interaction with institutions, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the symbolic dimension of contemporary social protection.

2. Research design and methodology

The research had as its general objective to explore how beneficiaries of social services interpret and live experiences of help and labeling in the interaction with social assistance institutions. In this sense, the study aimed to analyze how beneficiaries describe accessing and using social services, perceived experiences of labeling or stigmatization, as well as how institutional rules and procedures are understood and lived in concrete contexts. Another objective of the research was to examine the strategies through which beneficiaries manage and negotiate beneficiary status within institutional interactions, especially in services aimed at satisfying basic needs.

Although the study is largely exploratory in nature, the analysis was guided by the general hypothesis that beneficiaries of social services perceive accessing institutional support as an ambivalent experience, in which material aid coexists with feelings of labeling or stigmatization. At the same time, it was assumed that repeated interaction with social assistance institutions contributes to the consolidation of a social identity associated with vulnerability and that beneficiaries develop discursive and behavioral strategies aimed at managing or diminishing the effects of labeling within these interactions.

The research used a qualitative approach, appropriate for investigating subjective experiences and signification processes associated with interaction with social services. The main research method was the semi-structured interview, which allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' narratives, while maintaining a common thematic framework. The interviews were oriented towards the concrete experiences of the beneficiaries, the way they perceive institutional rules and the meanings attributed to the beneficiary status.

The research was conducted between October and November 2025, in Vâlcea County, in social canteens and a night shelter. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, in spaces that ensured the confidentiality and comfort of the participants.

The sample was formed through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, an appropriate strategy for accessing social groups that are difficult to reach through probabilistic methods. Initially, participants were intentionally selected from among the beneficiaries of social canteens and night shelters in Vâlcea County, based on their direct experience of using social services. Subsequently, some of the participants facilitated the identification of other respondents in similar situations, thus contributing to the expansion of the sample.

The final sample included 20 adult beneficiaries, over 18 years of age, who were using or had recently used the mentioned services and who had had at least two interactions with the respective institutions. The selection aimed to ensure a diversity of experiences according to gender, age and type of service used, without aiming for statistical representativeness, but rather for the analytical relevance of the collected data.

The participants did not consent to audio recording of the interviews. Under these circumstances, data were collected by taking detailed notes of the responses during and immediately after the interviews, while respecting the fidelity of the wording used by the respondents. This methodological option was adopted to respect the preferences of the participants and to reduce any potential discomfort associated with the research process.

The research was conducted in compliance with the fundamental ethical principles applicable to sociological research with human participants, especially in contexts involving people in situations of social vulnerability. The research approach was based on respect for autonomy, dignity and confidentiality, as well as the avoidance of any form of coercion or harm to the participants.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, after participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the research, the nature of participation, and the use of the collected data. It was explicitly emphasized that refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study did not and could not have had consequences on access to social services.

The identity of the participants was protected by complete anonymization of the data, and in the results section, speech fragments are presented as quotes coded by initials, to prevent any possibility of identification.

The research was designed and conducted in a way that minimized the relational imbalances inherent in institutional interactions and ensured a framework for dialogue that allowed for the free expression of participants' experiences.

3. Results

The participants' speeches outline the entry into social services as a moment of biographical rupture, experienced not as access to a right, but as a form of capitulation in the face of the lack of alternatives. The beneficiaries insist on the idea that institutional help is not chosen, but accepted under duress, after exhausting all other options perceived as legitimate: *"You don't get here if you have anything else. When you come, it means you have nowhere else to go." (PS); "I pulled myself together as much as I could. When I came, it was clear that I couldn't do it alone anymore." (MO).*

These formulations suggest the existence of a moral threshold for accessing help, beyond which beneficiaries feel they have lost their autonomy. Entering the system is thus associated with a sense of personal failure and the need to justify this decision, both to oneself and to others. Help is discursively legitimized as temporary and necessary, not as an expression of assumed dependency.

In the case of social canteens, the experience of aid is marked by a constant tension between the immediate usefulness of the service and the negative social meanings associated with its use. Beneficiaries describe the canteen as an indispensable space for survival, but which makes vulnerability visible in a way that is difficult to manage: *"Food keeps you on your feet. But standing in line… that weighs you down." (ID); "It's not that someone is offending you. It's that they see you." (CP).*

Public exposure appears as a central element of the experience, even in the absence of explicit stigmatizing interactions. Beneficiaries anticipate the gaze of others and internalize social evaluation, which transforms accessing aid into an emotionally charged act. The canteen is not only a place of food distribution, but a symbolic space in which social differences are confirmed and lived bodily, through expectation, positioning and visibility:
"When you go in there, you know you're not an ordinary person anymore." (AV).

This formulation indicates a deep internalization of social hierarchies, in which beneficiary status is perceived as a deviation from social normality.

Reporting to institutional rules constitutes a central dimension of the experience in social canteens. Although the rules are rarely openly challenged, they generate a climate of caution and self-control, which shapes the behaviors of beneficiaries: *"You don't come to ask questions. You take what is there and leave." (DC); "If you make noise, people know about you. And that's not good." (LM).*

Beyond the formal rules, the discourses indicate the existence of a set of informal norms, implicitly transmitted between beneficiaries, that define "acceptable" behavior. Silence and discretion become coping strategies, designed to minimize the risk of exclusion. This compliance is not the result of explicit constraint, but of a constant anticipation of negative consequences: *"It is better to remain silent than to go without food." (RI).*

Thus, institutional aid is perceived as fragile and conditional, and beneficiaries internalize the responsibility not to disrupt the institutional order.

In the experiences of the beneficiaries of the night shelter, support is associated with a much higher level of institutional control. Participants describe the shelter as a space where not only access, but also daily life is strictly regulated: *"Here you don't do what you want anymore. Everything is according to schedule." (GP); "You don't have anything of your own. Even the bed is not sure to be the same tomorrow." (SM).*

The lack of privacy and the instability of personal space are experienced as forms of loss of autonomy, which deeply affect the sense of safety. Beneficiaries describe the shelter not only as a place to rest, but as an environment in which they are constantly exposed to the gaze and presence of others: *"I sleep with my eyes open. You don't know who is next to you." (NR).*

This everyday vulnerability suggests that shelter functions simultaneously as a protective mechanism and as a space of social insecurity.

The status of being a beneficiary of the night shelter is associated with a social label perceived as deeply derogatory. Participants describe how this label influences social relationships and self-image: *"When I hear that you are staying in the shelter, that's it, you are a nobody." (VC); "The world no longer sees you as a normal person." (TD).*

These fragments indicate a reduction of identity to institutional status, in which personal past and other social roles become irrelevant. For some participants, this labeling is internalized, affecting expectations about the future and the ability to imagine alternatives: *"You come to believe what others say about you." (MR).*

Interaction with staff is described as a decisive factor in shaping the institutional experience. Beneficiaries make clear distinctions between employees perceived as empathetic and those considered distant or authoritarian: *"There are some who greet you, ask you what you are doing. That matters." (ED); "They act as if they are scolding you." (AM).*

The unpredictability of these interactions amplifies the feeling of insecurity, as the experience of help becomes dependent on people, not on clear and predictable rules: *"It depends on who you meet. Today it's good, tomorrow it's not." (CS).*

A cross-cutting theme in all interviews is the persistent fear of losing access to services. This fear shapes behaviors and limits the expression of grievances*: "Be careful. You can be kicked out at any time." (IM); "Don't say anything, don't ask for anything. Don't let it get to you." (PD).*

Aid is perceived as reversible and conditional, which generates an asymmetrical relationship between beneficiaries and institutions, in which silence and compliance become survival strategies.

Despite the constraints, beneficiaries develop symbolic strategies to protect their dignity and personal identity. These include demarcating themselves from other beneficiaries and emphasizing a different past: *"I don't belong here. I worked, I had a house." (LR); "I don't want to stay here. Only until I get up." (DM).*

Such discourses function as mechanisms of identity resistance, allowing beneficiaries to maintain a distinction between themselves and the institutional label, even in conditions of heightened vulnerability.

4. Discussions

The results of this study highlight the deeply ambivalent nature of the experience of social service beneficiaries, confirming that institutional help is not experienced exclusively as support, but as a complex social experience, marked by symbolic vulnerability, control and identity negotiation. The qualitative analysis showed that interaction with social services generates processes that go beyond the material dimension of the intervention and affect the way individuals relate to themselves and their social position.

A first central element that emerges from the results is the way in which accessing social services is experienced as a last resort, not as the exercise of a social right. This finding is in line with the sociological literature that emphasizes the persistence of a moral dimension in social assistance policies and practices, in which beneficiaries are implicitly encouraged to perceive themselves as responsible for their own situation (Dwyer, 2010; Patrick, 2017). Accepting help thus appears as a decision loaded with moral meanings, requiring justification and identity delimitation.

Experiences in social canteens indicate that stigma is not produced exclusively through explicit interactions or hostile attitudes, but is often the result of exposure of vulnerability in institutional settings. Queuing, waiting, and public exposure function as symbolic mechanisms through which beneficiary status is made visible and, implicitly, evaluable. This type of "silent" stigmatization aligns with Goffman's (1963) analyses, which show that stigma is produced not only through discourse, but also through social contexts that mark difference.

At the same time, the results show that institutional rules and the anticipation of sanctions play a key role in shaping beneficiaries' behaviors. The tacit compliance and self-censorship observed among participants can be interpreted through the lens of the literature on frontline bureaucracy, which highlights how everyday interactions with institutions shape the concrete experience of social policies (Lipsky, 2010). Aid is perceived as fragile and reversible, which reinforces asymmetric relationships and limits beneficiaries' ability to claim their rights.

The differences between social canteens and night shelters are relevant not only in terms of intensity of experience, but also as a distinct type of institutional relationship. While in the case of canteens vulnerability is mainly exposed publicly, in the night shelter it is deeply managed and controlled. The loss of privacy, the strict regulation of daily life and constant surveillance contribute to what the literature describes as forms of social control exercised through protective services (Johnsen,

Fitzpatrick & Watts, 2018). Thus, the shelter appears as a paradoxical space, which offers material protection but intensifies symbolic and identity vulnerability.

A particularly relevant aspect is the way institutional labeling is internalized by night shelter beneficiaries. The results indicate that administrative status can become a dominant social identity, reducing the biographical complexity of individuals to a single institutional category. This process is part of contemporary approaches that conceptualize stigma as a structural phenomenon, generated and sustained through institutions and administrative practices, not just through individual attitudes (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Slater, 2018).

At the same time, the study highlights that beneficiaries are not passive actors in these processes. Strategies of demarcation, invoking a different past or emphasizing the temporary nature of the current situation can be interpreted as forms of symbolic resistance, through which individuals try to protect their dignity and limit the impact of labeling. Such strategies have also been documented in other qualitative research on poverty and social exclusion, which highlights the capacity of actors to negotiate the meanings attributed to vulnerability (Paugam, 1995; Patrick, 2017).

5. Conclusions

The present study analyzed the experiences of social service beneficiaries from the perspective of the tension between the support provided and the labeling processes associated with their use. By focusing on social canteens and night shelters, the research allowed for a detailed exploration of how vulnerability is experienced and negotiated in concrete institutional contexts, bringing to the fore the symbolic dimension of social assistance beyond its material function.

The results show that accessing social services is perceived predominantly as a last resort, not as an exercise of a right, which significantly influences the relationship of beneficiaries with institutions. The differences identified between social canteens and night shelter highlight not only variations in the intensity of support, but also distinct forms of institutional relationship, with different effects on the daily experience and on the way in which beneficiaries construct and negotiate their social identity.

From a theoretical perspective, the analysis supports approaches that conceptualize stigma as a structural phenomenon, produced and maintained through institutional practices and daily administrative interactions, and not just through individual attitudes. At the same time, the study highlights the capacity of beneficiaries to develop symbolic strategies to protect dignity and limit the impact of labeling, underlining the dynamic nature of vulnerability as a social experience.

The implications of this study are relevant for sociological research on social services, suggesting the need for increased attention to the experiential dimension of institutional interventions, especially in services aimed at satisfying basic needs. In this sense, the results indicate the importance of analyzing not only access to resources, but also how institutional rules, procedures and interactions shape the relationship of beneficiaries with social protection systems.

At the same time, the research presents limitations related to the sample size and the specificity of the analyzed context, which restrict the possibility of generalizing the results. These limitations, however, open relevant directions for

future research, which could comparatively explore the experiences of beneficiaries in other types of social services or in different geographical contexts, as well as through longitudinal approaches that capture the evolution of the relationship between individuals and social assistance institutions.

Through the approach centered on the perspective of beneficiaries and the differentiated analysis of institutional contexts, the study achieves its objective of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between aid and labeling, highlighting the complexity of the experience of vulnerability within contemporary social services.

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