

Across the world, digital welfare states are on the rise, with data-driven governance transforming the very social fabric of the welfare state. But what does that transformation look like from within?

This dissertation dives into the data-driven transformation of the Dutch welfare system, uncovering how data-driven governance reshapes the governance and delivery of welfare services. It investigates how data-driven governance reshapes the lives of benefit recipients, the work and relational dynamics of frontline bureaucrats within their frontline-screen-level network, the responsibilities of local political actors, and the institutional frameworks in which they operate.

Through a multi-sited qualitative study of Rotterdam's welfare domain, specifically in the area of work and income, the research reveals a world where transparency is elusive, trust is eroding, and power is increasingly embedded in data-driven technologies. Drawing on personal stories, political silences, and institutional blind spots, it exposes the social damage of data-driven governance. It shows how data-driven technologies amplify inequality, obscure accountability, and transform welfare encounters into bureaucratic, impersonal, and often alienating experiences. Even the most sophisticated technologies cannot replace the need for human judgment, empathy, and discretion.

The challenge ahead with data-driven governance is not merely technical, but political, social, and ethical. If the digital welfare state is to serve all citizens fairly, it must be grounded in democratic values, informed by lived experience, and subject to meaningful contestation. This requires reimagining data-driven governance, not as an end in itself, but as a means to genuinely support citizens and uphold the principles of fairness, empathy, and accountability.

This work is both a critical analysis and a call to action: to ensure that in our pursuit of data-driven governance, we do not lose sight of the human values at the heart of public service.

# The Digital Welfare State

**A multi-sited investigation into the implications of data-driven governance for benefit recipients, frontline bureaucrats, and the municipal government**



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