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The Social Division of Welfare Surveillance

Abstract

Electronic surveillance has grown rapidly in recent years, yet emerging surveillance practices are yet to receive serious attention in welfare state theory. Extending Richard Titmuss's classical articulation of the social division of welfare, this paper develops the notion of the social division of welfare surveillance to point to the way in which surveillance, compliance burdens and risk management all unevenly operate within society. The paper draws on empirical examples from Australia in the areas of social security fraud, occupational welfare and social housing to explore the hierarchy of surveillance practices and the consequences for those who bear the burden of new 'risk management' and screening technologies. In the final part of the paper the limitations of the 'privacy' paradigm for conceptualising welfare surveillance is discussed as are the implications of surveillance technologies for reinforcing entrenched social divisions and inequalities.

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