

# **Understanding the work of social work professionals with 'hard-to-reach' citizens: the meaning of a justice perspective**

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**Paper prepared for the ESPAnetNL-VL Farewell Conference prof. dr. Trudie Knijn: Justice in Social Policy and Social Work in the Low Countries, 14 May 2020.**

**Panel B1: Social work and justice**

## **Abstract:**

In The Netherlands there exists a heterogeneous group of citizens living on the fringes of society who, either according to themselves or according to others, are greatly in need of help but who do not get the assistance that they need. It concerns a group of citizens who are characterized by being in an extremely socially vulnerable position, often manifesting in multiple problems, deviating behaviour and problematic living conditions. They are consequently seen as 'hard-to-reach' by professionals, policymakers, government and society in general.

These citizens become less and less visible and less receptive to social worker professionals, they have a tendency to withdraw into themselves into their own cultural and often criminal circles. There are social work professionals who, contrary to others in their profession, do engage-in working with these marginalised citizens. Although they work in a highly complex field, these professionals are however, embedded in an existing neoliberal framework, whereby 'empowerment', 'participation' and 'self-reliance' are considered key concepts. A linear perspective and a technical instrumental approach are at the forefront of legitimizing their work.

In this paper I will discuss the way social work professionals who work with the 'hard-to-reach', see and approach these citizen from a justice perspective, and how concepts of belonging and deservingness get meaning in the way these professionals act and finally what this means in their professional interactions with other players in their field, with their team, the organization they work for and the partners that they collaborate with.