The Guardian

›igital dystopia: how algorithms ·unish the poor

In an exclusive global series, the Guardian lays bare the tech revolution transforming the welfare system worldwide – while penalising the most vulnerable

by Ed Pilkington in New York

Main image: Illustration: Francisco Navas/Guardian Design

Mon 14 Oct 2019 10.00 BST

All around the world, from small-town Illinois in the US to Rochdale in England, from Perth, Australia, to Dumka in northern India, a revolution is under way in how governments treat the poor.

You can't see it happening, and may have heard nothing about it. It's being planned by engineers and coders behind closed doors, in secure government locations far from public view.

Only mathematicians and computer scientists fully understand the sea change, powered as it is by artificial intelligence (AI), predictive algorithms, risk modeling and biometrics. But if you are one of the millions of vulnerable people at the receiving end of the radical reshaping of welfare benefits, you know it is real and that its consequences can be serious - even deadly.

The Guardian has spent the past three months investigating how billions are being poured into AI innovations that are explosively recasting how low-income people interact with the state. Together, our reporters in the US, Britain, India and Australia have explored what amounts to the birth of the digital welfare state.

Their dispatches reveal how unemployment benefits, child support, housing and food subsidies and much more are being scrambled online. Vast sums are being spent by governments across the industrialized and developing worlds on automating poverty and in the process, turning the needs of vulnerable citizens into numbers, replacing the judgment of human caseworkers with the cold, bloodless decision-making of machines.

At its most forbidding, Guardian reporters paint a picture of a 21st-century Dickensian dystopia that is taking shape with breakneck speed. The American political scientist Virginia Eubanks has a phrase for it: "The digital poorhouse."

The Australian government's Department of Human Services website. Photograph: Dave Hunt/AAP

Listen to governments, and you will hear big promises about how new technologies will transform poverty as a noble and benign enterprise. They will speed up benefits payments, increase efficiency and transparency, reduce waste, save money for taxpayers, eradicate human fallibility and prejudice, and ensure that limited resources reach those most in need. But so often, those pledges have fallen flat.

At a time when austerity dominates the political landscape, millions have had their benefits slashed or stopped by computer programs that operate in ways that few seem able to control or even comprehend. Mistakes have become endemic, with no obvious route for the victims of the errors to seek redress.

This week, the automation of poverty will be brought on to the world stage. Philip Alston, a human rights lawyer who acts as the UN's watchdog on extreme poverty, will present to the UN general assembly in New York a groundbreaking report that sounds the alarm about the human rights implications of the rush to digitalize social protection.

Alston's analysis is based partly on his official UN studies of poverty in the UK and US, and partly on submissions from governments, human rights organisations and experts from more than 34 countries. It is likely to provide the definitive snapshot of where the world lies now, and where it is going, addressing the harassment, targeting and punishment of those living in the rapidly expanding digital poorhouse.

In Illinois, the Guardian has found that state and federal governments have joined forces to demand that welfare recipients repay "overpayments" stretching back in some cases 30 years. This system of "zombie debt", weaponized through technology, is invoking fear and hardship among society's most vulnerable.

As one recipient described it: "You owe what you have eaten."

In the UK, we investigate the secure government site outside Newcastle where millions are being spent developing a new generation of welfare robots to replace humans. Private companies including a New York outfit led by the world's first bot billionaire, are supercharging a process which has spawned a whole new jargon: "virtual workforce", "augmented decision-making", "robot process automation".

The government is rushing forward with its digital mission despite the pain already being inflicted on millions of low-income Britons by the country's "digital by default" agenda. Claimants spoke of the hunger, filth, fear and panic that they are enduring.

Activists protesting against the Indian government's decision to link free lunch meals for children with the national Aadhaar biometric cards. Photograph: -/AFP/Getty Images

In Australia, where the Guardian has reported extensively on robodebt, the scheme that has been accused of wrongly clawing back historic debts through a flawed algorithm, we now disclose that the government has opened a new digital front: using automation to suspend millions of welfare payments. Recipients are finding their money cut off without notice.

The most disturbing story comes from Dumka in India. Here, we learn of the horrifying human impact that has befallen families as a result of Aadhaar, a 12-digit unique identification number that the Indian government has issued to all residents in the world's largest biometric experiment.

Motka Manjhi paid the ultimate price when the computer glitched and his thumbprint - his key into Aadhaar - went unrecognised. His subsistence rations were stopped, he was forced to skip meals and he grew thin. On 22 May, he collapsed outside his home and died. His family is convinced it was starvation.

The Guardian investigations illuminate the shared features of these new systems, whether in developing or developed countries, east or west. The most glaring similarity is that all this is happening at lightning speed, with hi-tech approaches sweeping through social services, work and pensions, disability and health, often with minimal public debate or accountability.

Within that revolution, the human element of the welfare state is being diluted. Instead of talking to a caseworker who personally assesses your needs, you now are channeled online where predictive analytics will assign you a future risk score and an algorithm decide your fate.

In the new world, inequality and discrimination can be entrenched. What happens if you are one of the five million adults in the UK without regular access to the internet and with little or no computer literacy? What if the algorithm merely bakes in existing distortions of race and class, making the gulf between rich and poor, white and black, college-educated and manual worker, even more pronounced?

There is also a chilling Kafkaesque quality that spans the globe. As Manjhi so tragically discovered, mistakes are made. Machines glitch. If there is no one within reach who sees you as a person and not as a 12-digit number to be processed, the results can be fatal.

The computer says "No payments". Now what do you do?

Automating Poverty will run all week. If you have a story to tell about being on the receiving end of the new digital dystopia, email ed.pilkington@theguardian.com