

Homeless people's experiences of benefit sanctions: The transformation of the welfare state?

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Focus of the presentation

By exploring how benefit sanctions are applied to, and experienced by homeless people we see how:

- the UK social security system, as a central tenant of the welfare state, is producing the very social problems (homelessness, poverty, hunger, destitution, exclusion) it was designed to prevent.
- a fundamental shift in the principles of welfare away from collective protection against inequality of opportunity such that the 'new' welfare state is transforming the nature of poverty in the 21st Century

The Research

- commissioned by the national homelessness charity, Crisis
- conducted in 2015
- survey of 1013 people using homelessness hostels and day centres in 22 towns and cities in England and Scotland
- in depth interviews with 42 people using homelessness services who had been sanctioned in the previous year
- tracking the experiences of around 10 sanctioned people
- stakeholder consultation
- analysis of official sanction statistics

Benefit sanctions and conditionality: the UK benefits system

- new regime introduced in 2012 as part of a wider programme of welfare reform
- increased the conditionality placed on claimants of Job Seekers Allowance markedly (JSA is the main 'out of work' benefit for people who are fit for work)
- extended conditionality to some claimants not fit for work (i.e. some claimants on Employment Support Allowance, or ESA, which is the main 'out of work' benefit for people not fit for work)
- a 'Claimant Commitment' sets out individual requirements
- failure to comply results in a sanction (withdrawal of JSA/ESA)
- the severity of sanctions has markedly increased: sanctions of up to three years can be applied

Sanctions applied to homeless people: summary of results

- homeless people disproportionately affected by sanctioning - 39% sanctioned in the past year (compared with around 11% of the total claimant population)
- conditions were typically not set fairly and failed to account for circumstances and capabilities, as the guidance stipulates
- vast majority had a good reason for failing to comply
- positive dispositions to work and widespread support for a conditionality and sanctions system - i.e. a 'compliant' population

Andy was sanctioned for failing to meet his job-search conditions. He was required to apply for 32 jobs per week and spend 35 hours a week doing so, mostly online. Andy was rough sleeping at the time

William has borderline learning difficulties, mental ill health and poor computer literacy. When on JSA he was required to apply for 15 jobs per week, mostly online

Lewis was sanctioned for failing to attend the Work Programme. Lewis did not attend because he had a job interview. He informed his Work Programme Provider of this but did not inform the Job centre and so was sanctioned

Melanie was sanctioned because she forgot to go to her appointment. She is 18 years old and was being evicted that day from the hostel where she had been living since leaving care

Douglas, Jay, David, Maggie and Priya were sanctioned for failing to attend appointments that they had received no notification of



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Sanction outcomes

- welfare exit
- destitution
- homelessness

And not because people are 'falling through the net' - these outcomes are in the design of the benefit system.

Key Q = is contemporary welfare policy designed to protect or to destitute?

Welfare exit- forced disentanglement?

- although claimants remain officially 'entitled', in practice protection is removed
- Analysis by Loopstra *et al* in 2015¹ suggests that sanctions are driving people away from social support. For every 46 sanctions, 20 claimants move off JSA but only 3.5 of these enter work
- 23% of survey respondents said conditionality was deterring them from claiming benefits at all - but not to go into work
- only a small % of survey respondents (n=99) were not claiming benefits but 6% cited the fact that they 'kept getting sanctioned' and a further 9% cited 'too much hassle' as the main reason.

¹ Loopstra, R., Reeves, A., McKee, M., Stuckler, D. (2015) *Do punitive approaches to unemployment benefit recipients increase welfare exit and employment? A cross-area analysis of UK sanctioning reforms*. Sociology Working papers 2015-01. Please do not cite without the authors' permission

Adam

Adam is a qualified and experienced commis chef. He is familiar with the industry and knows that best way to secure employment is by handing out CVs in person. Adam explained that *'a head chef is not going to look through 500 emails, but if you just go in and speak to him and he can see you face-to-face, he's got more understanding of what you're like.* Adam is also not very IT proficient. But his advisor insisted that all his job search activity was done online and this was recorded on his Claimant Commitment.

Adam continued seeking work by distributing CVs and was sanctioned, prompting him to stop claiming JSA so he could continue searching for work in the way he felt would be most effective.



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Key outcome = risk of destitution

- in most cases respondents only income was withdrawn, often for many months

Common consequences were:

- debt
- going without, particularly food and heating
- hunger (routine involuntary fasting), cold
- increased distance from the labour market, often through deteriorated mental and physical health
- homelessness
- and this is already a marginalised population group

% of sanctioned respondents reporting having done the following as a result of benefit stopping due to a sanction

	%
Gone hungry or skipped meals	77
Gone without heating	64
Borrowed from friends or family	64
Got food / essentials from a charity other than a food bank	63
Received a food parcel from a food bank	61
Stolen food, toiletries or other essentials	38
Received a hardship payment	38
Begged	28
Taken out a loan from a loan shark or pay day lender	19

n=225



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Increased distance from labour market

- being sanctioned negatively affected respondents':
 - ability to look for work (63%)
 - maintain a job (60%)
 - continue with course or training (60%)
- relationship with vol sector agencies shifted from work-related assistance to support with basic needs
- impact on health, mental health and well-being undermined capability to work:
 - 75% said being sanctioned negatively affected their mental health
 - 64% said being sanctioned negatively affected their physical health
 - examples amongst interview respondents of severe deteriorations in health resulting in hospitalisation and suicide attempts

Ja

When Ja claimed JSA 18 months ago he had been working for ten years, including during a sustained period of homelessness. He secured a housing association flat about 2 years ago. Ja was prone to bouts of depression but had always managed these well enough to maintain his work, relationships, and parenting. He had to leave his last job (a temporary job on a zero hours contract) because of an injury and claimed JSA, imagining that he would find work again as soon as he was fit. A series of sanctions for missed appointments (for which Ja received no notification) left Ja with no income for ten of the past 14 months. His housing benefit also stopped and at the time of his interview he was under threat of eviction. He sold his white goods, disconnected his gas supply, borrowed from loan sharks, and relied heavily on local food banks and day centres to meet his basic needs. He had to cease contact with his son for a period of time (Ja's son usually spent weekends with his) because he could not feed him or heat the flat. During this time Ja's mental health deteriorated significantly, particularly after he stopped his son's visits. He has been hospitalised and has attempted suicide twice.



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Homelessness

- 46% of all sanctioned claimants fell behind with housing costs
- 21% reported becoming homeless as a result of their sanction
- 16% reported sleeping rough as a result of their sanction
- 56% said being sanctioned affected their ability to look for settled housing
- Housing Benefit was often suspended (33% of those on HB when sanctioned)
- service charges and rent shortfalls (which are increasing due to various HB reforms) cannot be met so rent arrears accrue
- removed from key worker support in hostels
- reversed positive housing trajectories

Conclusions / reflections

- acknowledge that the role of the welfare state has been reshaped - no longer focused on providing collective protection against unequal distribution of resources/opportunities but a form of Neoliberal governmentality 'activating' 'failed citizens' through insecurity and anxiety (e.g. Wacquant, 2010) ,
- But, have we designed a social security system that completely undermines social security? Removes the very safety net it is still intended to provide?
- undermines the rights of citizenship (or changing expectations of citizenship)
- and cannot produce a 'compliant working class' but pushes people out of the welfare system and away from the labour market



Thank you

Research report available at:

http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/sanctions_report_FINAL.pdf

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