

Exploring the use of conditional welfare

Extending the use of conditional welfare has been central to successive UK governments' welfare reforms over the past decade. Conditional welfare arrangements combine elements of sanction and support in order to change the behaviour of welfare recipients, and are now an established part of the welfare, housing and criminal justice systems.

Sanctions are now used much more frequently than in the past within the benefits system. The duration and severity of sanctions has also increased, and conditionality is now applied to previously exempt groups such as lone parents and disabled people. Behavioural conditions tend to be enforced through penalties or 'sanctions' that reduce, suspend or end access to benefits. Welfare users may also receive support services such as employment and skills training or help to find work.

Although mainstream public and political opinion appears to support the increased use of conditionality within the social welfare benefit system the key issue of its effectiveness in changing and sustaining behaviour remains largely unanswered.

This question is central to the ongoing research project 'Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions Support and Behaviour Change', led by Professor Peter Dwyer at the University of York. The study is exploring recipients' responses to the combination of behavioural conditions, penalties, support and incentives found in modern welfare systems, and also how staff charged with administering conditional welfare interventions interpret and implement these measures.

Initial findings

- International evidence indicates that benefit sanctions substantially increase the amount of people coming off benefits, and may increase short-term job entry - but there are negative longer-term outcomes in terms of earnings, job quality and holding on to jobs.
- People with specific vulnerabilities and individuals with multiple and complex needs, such as lone parents, disabled people or homeless people, have been disproportionately affected by increased use of welfare conditionality.
- Concerns about the unintended consequences from welfare conditionality include distancing people from support; causing hardship and destitution; displacing rather than resolving issues such as long-term worklessness and substance misuse; and negative impacts on children.

Questions relating to the effectiveness of welfare conditionality remain largely unanswered, particularly in relation to changing and sustaining behaviour.

Policy relevance and implications

Research evidence to date suggests that the welfare system could be improved with some alternative approaches, such as:

- A more graduated approach to sanctions, with measures including incremental increases and a warning system
- Improving the quality and level of support available to welfare recipients to enhance access to meaningful, sustainable work
- Providing enhanced support for benefit recipients to undertake training or education alongside job search activities.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The ESRC-funded research project Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change brings together researchers working in six English and Scottish universities. Its central aim is to inform policy and practice by researching the effectiveness and ethical aspects of conditional welfare.

www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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