

Work & Pensions Committee inquiry: benefit sanctions

Written Evidence

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1 Background

1.1 Our five-year (2013-2018) project *Welfare conditionality: sanctions support and behaviour change* is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It involves researchers from six universities, and is exploring the ethics and effectiveness of welfare conditionality, including sanctions and support in the benefits system.

1.2 This submission was prepared by on behalf of the Welfare Conditionality Project.

1.3 Our qualitative research project is the largest of its kind in the UK. It involves interviews with 52 policy stakeholders, 27 focus groups conducted with practitioners and a large, repeat, qualitative longitudinal panel study conducted with nine groups of welfare service users (WSUs) subject to welfare conditionality within England and Scotland. WSUs were interviewed up to three times at on average twelve month intervals across a two year period, between 2014 and 2017. Of the 481 people interviewed at wave a, 339 were interviewed again at wave b and 262 again at wave c.

1.4 Within social security benefit systems the application of welfare conditionality links eligibility for continued receipt of work-related benefits to claimants' engagement with mandatory, work focused interviews (WFIs), training and support schemes and/or job search requirements, with failure to undertake such specified activities leading to benefit sanctions. The past two decades have seen sanctions-backed conditionality intensified and extended to encompass previously exempt groups such as disabled people, lone parents and, since 2013 under Universal Credit (UC), low paid workers and their partners (Dwyer, 2016).

Our [final findings](#) which draw directly on analyses of the original data generated in our fieldwork were published in May 2018. This submission draws on that evidence. In line with the Committee's call for evidence we focus our discussions here specifically on the impacts and effectiveness of benefit sanctions as a key component within the UK's increasingly conditional social security system. The following paragraphs follow the order of the questions in the inquiry's terms of reference.

2 To what extent is the current sanctions regime achieving its policy objectives?

2.1 Advocates of welfare conditionality assert that requiring compulsory recorded job search activity alongside mandatory engagement with work focused interviews and training (*backed by the threat of benefit sanction for non-compliance*) is an effective way to encourage or cajole claimants to look for work and move people off welfare benefits and into, or closer to, paid employment.

However, our analysis has found that welfare conditionality, and particularly the threat or experience of a benefit sanction within the social security system, is routinely ineffective in facilitating people's entry into, or progression within, the paid labour market over time.

It doesn't get people into work. Nothing in what they've done to me has assisted me in getting back into the employment market. (DISABLED WOMAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE B)

The sanctions, I think, have held me back from being able to go and look for work... I wasn't able to get out and look for work further away, but if I wasn't sanctioned I would've been able to look for work in [nearby city]. (MALE UC CLAIMANT, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

Notably, stasis – a lack of significant, sustained change in employment status – was the most common outcome among those who took part in repeat interviews. Figure 1 below offers a qualitative map of changes in employment status for the 339 WSUs interviewed on two or more occasions across the panel study. Of the 241 WSUs noted under the stasis column 205 were out of work when we initially interviewed them and on each subsequent occasion at our follow up second and (where applicable) third interviews.

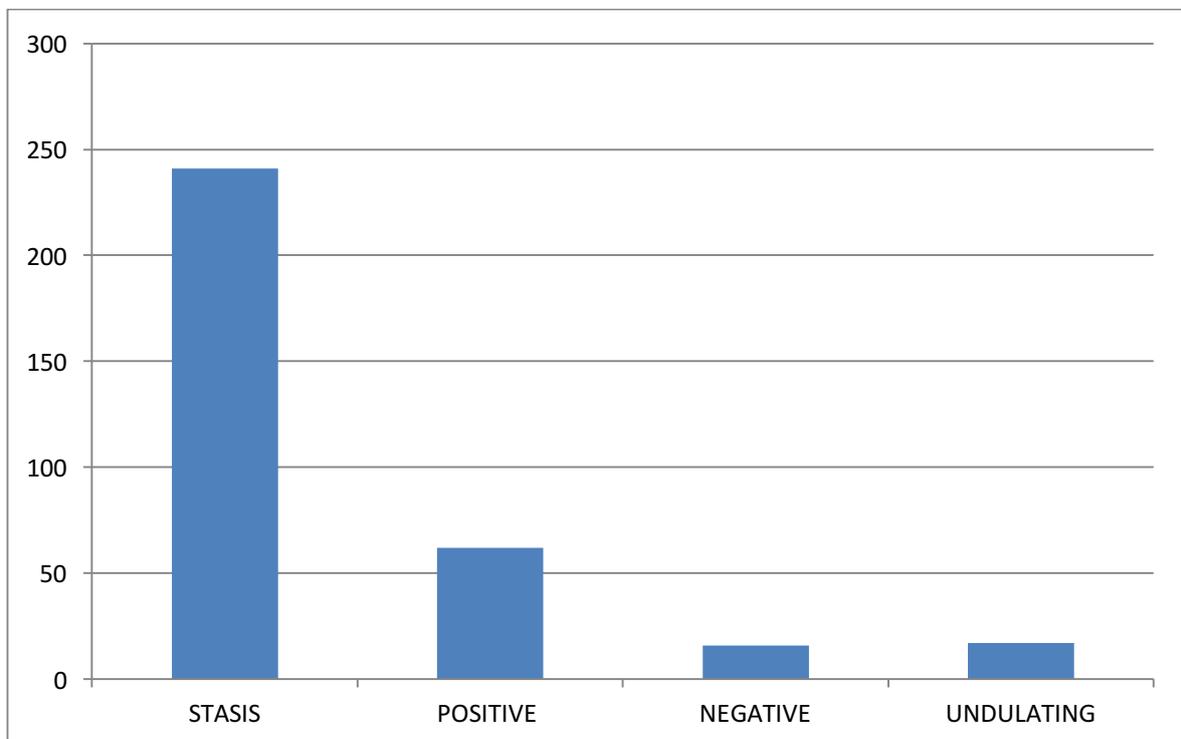


Figure 1: Qualitative mapping of change in employment status of 339 WSUs interviewed twice or three times across the two year period.

Despite ongoing and often repeated applications for work, many WSUs only managed to secure sporadic employment at various points within the two year period of the longitudinal interviews. Recurrent movements between one short-term, low-paid, insecure job and another; interspersed with periods when people returned to unemployment or incapacity benefits, as contracts ended or illness/impairment intervened, was the most typical pattern.

[At first interview]... [worked for] three weeks. It was part-time temporary work for over Christmas... I keep applying and I'm just unlucky at the moment... [At second interview]... I worked at [retailer] over the Christmas period this year... I keep looking for jobs... I've even applied to work on the bins... [At third interview]... I started work last year. I was in work for just under three months and I ended up with stress-induced blackouts... I had an interview last Thursday, although I didn't get the job. (UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVES A-C)

[At second interview] Got employment with an old friend of mine... seasonal work from April to October... [At third interview] I'm out of work right now; that's due to two things, an accident and infection, but I'm starting to look again for work on Monday. (UC RECIPIENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVES B-C)

Occasional and sustained movements off welfare and into work were evidenced within the study but are extremely rare. However, it is important to note that it was the provision of appropriate personalised support rather than benefit sanctions that was pivotal in triggering and sustaining such movements into paid work.

Being signed up with that [Work Programme provider] was a blessing in disguise... Initially, I just thought, oh, Jobcentre's just trying to get rid of me... I felt listened to, I felt assisted... in my journey to get a job, and yet the sanctions were a total opposite, so definitely the support was much appreciated, was more useful... It got me the job. (MIGRANT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Our analysis highlights the very limited value of benefit sanctions as a tool for triggering movements into paid employment. We have identified only two cases where WSUs directly referred to the benefit sanctions moving them into paid employment. One person, who was initially extremely angry and impoverished by a benefit sanction, at a subsequent interview commented about it having a positive impact in relation to his work search activity. Another man noted the effect that sanctions had on a decision to enter self-employment.

[At first interview] I got sanctioned by the Jobcentre because I didn't have a note from the hospital stating that I was in hospital after trying to take my life. They're supposed to help people get work, but they don't... [At third interview] Gave me the kick up the arse I needed to get a job... it made me more determined in finding a job working my arse off and being a better person than what the Jobcentre made me out to be. (UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVES A and C)

I hated the Jobcentre... That was one of my main motivators to really find some way away from the whole Jobcentre and Work Programme and sanctions. (OFFENDER, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

It is clear that in the overwhelming majority of cases benefit sanctions do little to enhance people's motivation to prepare for, seek, or enter paid work.

2.2 Furthermore our study found that welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions are routinely experienced as punitive and more likely to undermine the likelihood of engagement or advancement in paid work.

[Sanctions] didn't encourage me to do anything. Discouraged me... I don't think it really was positive or it's not designed to be, is it? It's a punishment, that's what it is. (DISABLED MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

Sanctioning me and cutting down on my money obviously leaves me less money to live on and if I've got less money to live on I can't go for these job interviews, I can't put credit on my phone to phone for jobs. (MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

2.3 The application of benefit sanctions triggers profoundly negative, financial, personal, health outcomes that are likely to reduce the possibility of entry into paid work.

[My gas and electric] fell into that much arrears... I was without heating for ages... I pawned everything I had... You're literally going, 'Do I eat or do I have light?' (LONE PARENT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

[The hospital] were saying, 'You've lost weight.' I said, 'Well I can't eat. I've got no food, I've got no money.' (DISABLED MAN, ENGLAND WAVE A)

Utterly humiliated... in tears when I left the building, absolutely devastated, emotional wreck. Well, I'm going to be homeless. How am I going to feed myself? It had a serious impact on my health... I'm on heavy medication now... couldn't sleep lost weight... I'm reasonably fortunate that my mum and dad are retired and they've always been supportive. (OFFENDER, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

3 Is the current evidence base adequate and if not, what further information, data and research are required?

3.1 There is a range of international evidence about the impacts and effectiveness of benefit sanctions. We summarise key findings from our review of literature on the effectiveness of benefit sanction regimes below.

3.2 Review of existing key international research indicates that evidence to support the assertion that highly conditional social security benefits backed by sanctions are effective in increasing sustained engagement with paid employment among working aged recipients of out of work benefits is contested and, *at best*, limited.

A study conducted by Abbring et al. (2005) in the Netherlands found that those who had experienced a benefit sanction were more likely to re-enter paid work. Two further studies in Switzerland and Germany have also found that in places where sanctions are applied more strictly re-employment rates are likely to be higher than in regions with more lax regimes (Lalive et al. 2005; Boockmann et al. 2014).

However, other international evidence points to benefit sanctions having a less positive effect in relation to entry into paid work. Wu et al. (2014) report that the introduction of sanctions under the Clinton administrations had limited impact in respect of individuals exiting from the TANF Temporary Assistance for Needy Families social assistance programme in Wisconsin, USA. Both Arni et al. (2013) and Fording et al. (2013) additionally found that the application of a benefit sanction is likely to result in individuals being out of work for longer periods and subsequently being more likely to enter less well paid and more insecure jobs.

Grigg and Evans' (2010) review of international evidence undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found some evidence that sanctions applied to unemployment benefits could raise unemployment benefit exit and job entry levels in the *short term*, but nonetheless concluded that there was a:

Gulf between the rhetoric of welfare reform and the evidence of the effects of sanctions... Policy makers continue to justify the extension of sanctions (and sanction backed conditionality), on moral philosophy grounds whilst taking an ambivalent attitude to evidence (Griggs and Evans, 2010:4)

A more recent review undertaken by members of the Welfare Conditionality team reiterated this thinking on short term outcomes, but found that the international evidence pointed to unfavourable longer-term outcomes ensuing from benefit sanctions in relation to, "earnings, job quality and employment retention" (Watts et al. 2014).

3.3 Much recent UK evidence challenges assertions that benefit sanctions are effective in moving people off welfare and into work. Statistical analysis by Loopstra et al. (2015) concluded that increasing use of sanctions led to a corresponding 'substantial increase' in JSA exit, but that the majority of those who left unemployment benefit did not enter paid work but rather sanctions served to distance people from collective social support (cf. Dwyer and Bright, 2016). Another quantitative study that focused on JSA claimants with self-declared mental or physical impairments draws similar conclusions "suggesting that sanctioning disabled people may be pushing people away from unemployment and towards inactivity, that is, further away from the labour market" (Reeves, 2017:142).

The National Audit Office review stated that the DWP's "use of sanctions is linked as much to management priorities and local staff discretion as it is to [changing] claimants' behaviour (NAO, 2016:9). It also noted the following. First, that whilst JSA sanctions had a large effect in getting claimants off benefit, these individuals were just as likely not to find work as they were to find employment. Second, that benefit sanctions had no positive effect on earnings. Third, that sanctions applied to ESA recipients actually reduced claimants' likelihood of working. Fourth, that the DWP had not carried out any overall cost-benefit analysis for the sanctions regime. The Public Accounts Committee (2017) noted that benefit sanctions are likely to trigger rent arrears and homelessness and accepted that whilst these negative outcomes may drive some benefit recipients to seek paid employment, sanctions are just as likely to push others further away from work.

3.4 A number of studies focused on *disabled people* have found the application of conditionality backed up by benefit sanctions to be both inappropriate and ineffective. A review of the (now closed) Pathways to Work Programme found that sanctions were deeply resented and counterproductive. The application of sanctions for non-attendance at a WFI was ineffective and did little to change disabled people's perceptions about their readiness and ability to work (Weston, 2012). The Work and Pensions Committee has also called for a fundamental redesign of ESA as it is failing in its primary purpose of helping people who could work in the short/medium term back into employment (HoC/WPC, 2014).

3.5 The Work and Pensions Committee further concluded that there was limited evidence that sanctions were effective in moving ESA claimants closer to paid work (HoC/WPC, 2015). The government is committed to halving the disability employment gap but evidence suggests that the current highly conditional approach is both unpopular and failing to deliver, with flows off benefit 'incredibly low' - just 8% of workless people with a work limiting health condition or disability move into work in any year (Oakley, 2016:44). Elsewhere, it is noted that over a two year period the Work Programme moved only 5% of disabled people from the WRAG into paid employment; against a performance target of 16.5%. Similarly, a survey of 500 WRAG members concludes:

The experience of participation into the WRAG is neither personalised nor supportive... the regime of conditionality has left participants in the WRAG fearful, demoralised and further away from achieving their work related goals or participating in society than when they started. (Hale, 2104:5)

Hale also notes that a DWP funded evaluation of the Work Programme concluded that conditionality and sanctions within ESA are largely ineffective in helping people with long-term impairments into paid work (rf. Newton et al. 2013). A more recent piece of DWP work also points to the very limited (positive) effect emerging from the use of compulsion with long-term disabled people. This evaluation of a mandated 'More Intensive Support' trial among WRAG members, who had previously completed a spell on the Work Programme but subsequently not found work, saw only a very 'marginal improvement' in work related outcomes (3.2 additional days off benefit in the next 12 months) (Moran, 2017).

Further work has found no evidence that the reassessment of ESA claimants' levels of impairment helped increase disabled people's entry into paid employment. Conversely, it may have led to adverse consequences by moving those with mental health impairments onto the JSA regime, where they "receive insufficient support and are subject to a punitive sanctioning policy which has severe consequences for their health and risk of poverty" (Barr et al. 2016b:457; 2016a).

3.6 Designed with the intention of smoothing out transitions between paid work and welfare and 'making work pay', research on the effectiveness of *Universal Credit* (UC) and whether or not it enhances claimants' entry into and advancement within the PLM is still relatively scarce due to UC's recent introduction and ongoing rollout. Wright et al. (2016) note that the behaviour change logic of UC conditionality was undermined in cases where:

sanctions were applied because of administrative errors and IT system inadequacies; claimants had good cause (for example, for being late or missing appointments); and when heavy penalties were incurred for very minor infringements by compliant claimants keen to work, including those with jobs and those already actively seeking work. This last point is significant because for the first time UC introduces in-work conditionality, with full sanctions for non-compliance, for low paid workers in receipt of wage supplements such as tax credits and housing benefit.

4 What improvements to sanctions policy could be made to achieve its objectives better?

4.1 Our research team has made a number of recommendations in the light of our analysis and findings. These include:

- As a minimum, welfare conditionality within the social security system needs to be rebalanced. The current preoccupation with sanctions backed compliance needs to be urgently reconsidered with more emphasis and resources focused on the provision of personalised employment support.
- There is a need for a widespread review of the benefit sanctions system to reduce the severity of sanctions, introduce clear and adequate warnings, improve communication with recipients, and to ensure that sanctions are not applied to vulnerable people.
- More generally, in light of the growing body of evidence on the ineffectiveness of the intensified and extended system of sanctions-backed welfare conditionality in moving people off social security benefits and into work, it is time for a comprehensive review of its continued use.
- The wider application of welfare conditionality within the benefit system for disabled people, those dealing with additional issues such as homelessness and alcohol or drug dependency, and for in-work Universal Credit recipients, should be paused forthwith pending a more fundamental enquiry into its ethicality and usefulness for these groups.

5 Could a challenge period and/or a system of warnings for a first sanctionable offence be beneficial? If so, how should they be implemented?

5.1 Both approaches could be beneficial to *some* individuals liable to sanction. A number of our respondents who had been subject to a benefit sanction endorsed the use of a warning system prior to any initial application and loss of benefit.

They should give you more warning before they sanction you. (MALE JOBSEEKER, ENGLAND, WAVE C).

Give a warning but I don't think you should go, 'Right, that's it. Your money's stopped'. (MALE, LONE PARENT, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

5.2 We also note, however, the limited success of the JSA Sanctions Early Warning Trial Pilot in Scotland in which only 13% of respondents made use of the additional 14 days to provide evidence of a good reason for not meeting the conditions of benefit entitlement (DWP, 2016). Our own research suggests that many of those sanctioned sometimes prefer to deal with any sanction by relying on charitable or familial support (when available) rather than become involved in systems or appeals that ultimately may extend the potential period of uncertainty about their benefit. The provision of evidence to challenge a recommended sanction is unlikely to be prioritised by individuals dealing with ongoing addiction issues and/or homelessness.

6 Are levels of discretion afforded to jobcentre staff appropriate?

6.1 Our research evidence suggests that benefit sanctions were often triggered for relatively minor transgressions such as being a couple of minutes late for a Jobcentre Plus appointment. On occasions benefit sanctions were clearly inappropriately applied in spite of people's best efforts to avoid them and having good reason for non-compliance.

I had an appointment with them, I phoned them saying that I've got a problem... my brother who died in [location] and I'm there it's the burial ceremony, you understand?... They said, 'No don't worry, if you come back, just call us back', and then ten days, I phoned them back... They say, no, they have to send it to the decision board to see and then they send me a letter after saying that I have to be sanctioned... that wasn't human. (FEMALE MIGRANT, ENGLAND, UC RECIPIENT, WAVE C)

I just got a sanction for that because [my daughter] had [life threatening illness] and I always went to [medical] appointments and that with her. I was late for a Jobcentre appointment, 'Why are you late?' I said I was at [the hospital, which had previously been accepted as a valid reason to be late]. They said 'Well your daughter turned 18 three weeks ago, she's all right to go herself [now]'. I said it's still my child, she's going through that; but no they sanctioned me anyway. (FEMALE, LONE PARENT JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

6.2 WSUs reported to us that the flexibilities or 'easements' designed to suspend or reduce the work search/job related conditions attached to an individual's benefit claim in recognition of particular circumstances (such as homelessness, lone parenthood, illness), are not currently being routinely implemented by work coaches.

They had an appointment for me at 3 o'clock and it was for an hour. I said 'I can't fulfil it; I've got a child'. 'Oh, well, if you don't come you won't have your benefit'. (LONE PARENT, FEMALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

6.3 Participants reported variation in how different work coaches used their discretionary powers as a strong contributory factor in whether or not they would receive a sanction. When work coaches used discretion in an empathetic and humane way it was an important factor in enabling even the most marginalised of people to take the first steps towards paid work and more fulfilling lives.

[Of the Jobcentre adviser] After I'd lost everything I had to then sign on again. My adviser this time was absolutely fantastic. I couldn't praise him up enough... I explained my situation. I said 'look I'm a drug addict and I'm doing my best to get clean. I'm in recovery' and he was just really supportive. He wasn't on my case. He was encouraging; brilliant... He hasn't just let me get away with it. He's been 'What about this training course? Go for that...' He could have sanctioned me on numerous occasions. (DISABLED MAN, JSA/ESA RECIPIENT, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

The exercise of discretion was a key factor in ensuring the key to ensuring the above respondent got his life back on track but his case is also illustrative of the wider issue of the inappropriate application of benefit sanctions. At our third and final interview the above respondent reflected on his experience of another job coach on an occasion when the more supportive colleague was away.

I was sat there for 20 minutes. Now, by the time somebody come and got my card, the woman she said, 'You're late', I said, 'Well, no, I'm not, I was downstairs 15 minutes early, the guys wouldn't let me up and when I come upstairs, nobody took my card.' She said, 'Well, I don't believe you.' I said, 'Well, come and ask the security guards.' She said, 'No, I'm sanctioning you.' (DISABLED MAN, JSA/ESA RECIPIENT, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

He refused to leave, was threatened with the police, but was adamant he would not move until he saw a manager. In time the manager appeared and apologised, said he had spoken to security who had confirmed early arrival. Nonetheless, this WSU was told: 'Unfortunately, because she sanctioned you, I can't overrule it'.

6.4 Our research indicates that wide variations exist in how discretionary powers are exercised by individual staff in relation to both recommending the application of a benefit sanction and also the exercise of support in the form of personalised easements to work search requirements based on a claimants particular circumstances. Inappropriate sanctioning practice needs to cease.

6.5 We have also recommended that variations and inconsistencies in the implementation of easements need to be addressed. The DWP needs to ensure that Work Coaches are provided with appropriate training and time with each benefit recipient to agree, and review over time, adjustments in mandatory work preparation or job search requirements appropriate to each individual's personal and changing circumstances.

7 Are adequate protections in place for vulnerable claimants?

7.1 No. Evidence from our research suggests that those with specific vulnerabilities and complex needs, such as homeless people, people with alcohol and drug addiction issues, lone parents and disabled people have been disproportionately affected by intensifying benefit sanctions and welfare conditionality.

7.2 Vulnerabilities of the kinds found in our study have brought into question key premises upon which conditional welfare interventions are based. Advocates of welfare conditionality, including government, assume that people are able to make decisions and

respond to both sanctions and support in rational and future-orientated ways. But a number of our respondents had a limited comprehension of the sanction, support or behavioural requirements placed on them. Some WSUs reported that they did not know or understand the reason why they had been sanctioned. For example, migrants with limited English language abilities sometimes struggled to understand their specified responsibilities and subsequently incurred a sanction. In such cases the rationale underpinning welfare conditionality, that its application will bring about positive behaviour change, is fundamentally undermined.

[Jobcentre adviser] said to me, 'I know, it's not my problem; it's your problem. You're late 15 minutes; your benefits stop.' It's no good... I don't speak very well English, this is a complication. (EEA MIGRANT, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

I'm her case worker, I only work term time, so throughout the summer holidays they'd put her on a Work Programme. She sort of misread the letter because her English, she's still at the early stage, she thought it was next week, but it was actually this week she had to go, so they sanctioned her. (SUPPORT WORKER FOR MIGRANT ILR, FEMALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

8 What effects does sanctions policy have on other aspects of the benefits system and public services more widely? Are consequential policy changes required?

8.1 For a substantial minority of WSUs interviewed in our study, sanctions-backed welfare conditionality within social security regularly initiated and sustained a range of negative behaviour changes and outcomes that have knock-on impacts for the benefit system and wider public services. These include:

8.2 Counterproductive compliance

WSUs commonly regarded Jobcentres and Work Programme (WP) providers as being primarily focused on ensuring compliance with the mandatory benefit claim conditions rather than on helping people into work. Pressure to achieve more demanding job application/work search requirements (up to 35 hours per week) coupled with benefit recipients' strong desire to avoid the punitive effects of a sanction resulted in people applying for jobs they had no realistic chance of getting. The threat of a benefit sanction therefore encouraged a culture of counterproductive compliance and futile behaviour that got in the way of more effective attempts to secure employment.

My job was solely to prove to that woman [referring to Work Coach] that I had applied for so many jobs, and that was it... whatever jobs were available. Whether they were suitable for me, whether I was suitable for them, whatever, it didn't matter. (UC RECIPIENT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

All they cared about was, 'Make sure you've got x amount of applications that you've applied for, that you can prove you've applied for, and that you've put it on Universal Jobmatch'. (OFFENDER, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C).

I was looking for jobs that I had no training in.... The first thing you do when you ring up is, 'Have you got any experience?' 'No' 'Well sorry'... I've been in prison. They wanted to get me a job in a care home. I'm like, 'They wouldn't give me a job in a care home'. 'Well ring up for it and I'll be checking' but the first thing I said to the woman was, 'I'm going to have to tell you the truth I'm not long out of prison' and she said, 'Well we can't employ you but thanks very much for telling me'. Basically my job adviser was saying, 'Apply for it just so I can see you're applying for jobs'. (UC CLAIMANT, MALE, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Whilst the stringent sanctions regime did help ensure compliance with conditionality requirements it led many to focus their energies on meeting the conditions of their benefit claim above and beyond job search. A minority spoke of learning the 'rules of the game' (Offender, Female, England, wave a) and altered their behaviour accordingly to become superficially compliant with compulsory work related requirements, whilst moving no closer to paid work.

8.3 Disengagement from the social security system

Others, particularly those who faced additional vulnerabilities such as homelessness and alcohol or drug dependency issues, reacted to the inherent hassle and compulsion of conditionality by withdrawing from the social security system altogether. On occasion the application of benefit sanctions triggered homelessness and destitution. For example, the disabled man cited below had accumulated rent arrears that had led to eviction from his flat. Subsequent repeat sanctions led to him disengaging completely from the social security system and relying on charitable provision. He was sleeping rough when we first interviewed him and was back of the street after a short period in accommodation when we spoke to him a second time two years later.

It's just not worth it. Every time you go in, you're on hooks, like, what's going to happen now?... What's next? Then they send you on stupid courses... I don't claim benefits at the moment. I just don't want to know. Too much of an headache. You know, you never know from one week to the next whether you're getting paid and it's just proper stress... it's pointless. 'Do it. If you don't, you're sanctioned.' Things like that. It's nuts! So, yes, I just, I don't sign on anymore... The only thing it has done is make it more difficult basically. They say, like, it encourages people to go to look for work. No, it doesn't. (DISABLED MAN, ENGLAND WAVE B)

It is also important to note that disengagement from social security benefits is not solely limited to those claimants with multiple/complex needs. Under Universal Credit part-time and low paid workers in receipt of housing related and low wage supplements are now subject to mandatory additional job search requirements and attendance at WFIs as set out in their personalized claimant commitments. These WSUs clearly resented being threatened with benefit sanctions for non-compliance and often reacted to the threat by relinquishing their right to collective support.



I rang them because I'm not going to skip out of work just to go for a bloody interview... I couldn't come in because I was working full-time. So they said that was all right. Then I got a letter saying I'd missed my interview and they've taken me off Universal Credit. So I thought, you know what, just stuff you. I can't be bothered with them anymore... So, basically, mostly I've struggled because I just can't be doing with them. (FEMALE, UC RECIPIENT, ENGLAND WAVE B)

I'm just going to leave it because I don't need it. The hassle and stress that I will have trying to get that money back would be more than what the money's worth. (FEMALE, UC RECIPIENT, ENGLAND WAVE B)

I said to him [work coach], 'I'm not going to argue with you and I'm trying my best,'... and with that I left the Jobcentre and I've not returned. (UC RECIPIENT, MALE, SCOTLAND, WAVE B)

8.4 Movements into survival crime

Others reacted to a benefit sanction by engaging in survival crime in order to meet their basic needs.

I've begged... Yes, I've had to do that. I've even had to involve myself in shoplifting and things like that, stealing from shops. I've put my hand to a lot of things to survive day by day if I haven't had the money, if they sanction me. (HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Drug dealing. That's what I did... That sanction... turned me to crime and making my money. And then after that I was making that much money I didn't need their [benefit] money. (HOMELESS MAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

'I had to go and do things I didn't want to do... because 13 weeks with no money and food vouchers... it's commercial burglaries basically.' (OFFENDER, MALE ENGLAND, WAVE C).

8.5 The application, or threat of, benefit sanctions triggering or exacerbating ill health

Respondents also frequently highlighted benefit sanctions, and their possible future application, as regularly triggering high levels of stress, anxiety and depression and/or exacerbating existing physical and mental illnesses.

The assumption that I'm trying to get something for nothing, the guilt that was laid on me when I was trying to find work and seriously mentally ill with depression and anxiety, the information from people at the Jobcentre that I should just pull myself together. I was actually blacking out two or three times a day. Yes, stress and distress. My body would simply decide it couldn't deal with this and I'd just put my head down and be away. I think if the system had been more humane I wouldn't now be quite so far away from the world of work. (DISABLED WOMAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

[Sanction] took me further down the depression route... suicidal thoughts... I'd rather starve than deal with this. (HOMELESS WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

I sunk into depression really because it felt all so stacked against me. (DISABLED WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

'Do you have any jobs? Do you have anything?'... I can't concentrate... I think like a crazy person. I can't do anything. I can't seem to quieten the madness. (FEMALE JOBSEEKER, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

8.6 Our research also found that intensive, holistic and personalised support made available through Family Intervention Programmes could directly lead to positive changes in behaviour and the circumstances of families. However, any gains achieved were often subsequently undermined by the depersonalised system of benefit sanctions now central to the social security system.

This evidence submission draws on analysis and findings presented in 10 final briefing papers (an overview and nine group specific final findings) written by the wider Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions Support and Behaviour Change project team. These papers are available at www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/final-findings-welcond-project/

For further information please contact Janis.Bright@york.ac.uk in the first instance.

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