

UK: More than a million welfare benefit sanctions imposed against disabled people

By Dennis Moore
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New data reveals the relentless attack on disabled benefit claimants in the last decade. The study found that more than 900,000 Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants, who reported a disability, have been financially sanctioned since May 2010.

Also sanctioned were 110,000 claimants of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), a benefit paid to someone who is sick, and placed in the "work related activity group" (WRAG). A further 140,000 sanctions were applied, but later cancelled.

A sanction is applied to someone's benefit when a claimant is deemed not to have met part of the stated "conditionality" for claiming that benefit. This can include missing an appointment, or not applying for enough jobs in a given time scale.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) own estimates, the state spends up to £50 million a year applying sanctions, and £200 million a year monitoring whether claimants meet the conditions for receiving payments. In 2015, the DWP withheld £132 million from claimants in the form of sanctions.

The report was a collaboration between Ben Baumberg Geiger, senior lecturer at the University of Kent, and the Demos think tank. The four-year study included polling 2,000 members of the public, front line assessors, as well as desk research and interviews with experts across nine countries.

It found that unemployed disabled people were up to 53 percent more likely to be given a sanction than other claimants. It concluded that conditionality has little or no effect on improving employment chances for disabled people.

The government intends to push a million more disabled people back into work over the next decade, leading to many more disabled people being treated unfairly and burdened with enormous hardship. It has

consistently defended the system of sanctions as a way of encouraging people to find work, and falsely claims the public supports the idea of sanctions.

Despite decades of government-led media hysteria denouncing welfare "scroungers," the public is more concerned that disabled people are being unfairly denied benefits. More, 45 percent versus 22 percent, thought it was more important to support benefit claimants than to root out fraud, and those who did support sanctions felt that they should be weaker than those the government use at present.

Mark Atkinson, chief executive at the Scope charity, said, "Punitive sanctions can be extremely harmful to disabled people, who already face the financial penalty of higher living costs. There is no clear evidence that cutting disabled people's benefits supports them to get into, and stay in work."

Conditionality and sanctions are increasingly being linked to deteriorating physical and mental health in claimants with disabilities. Many are left worrying how they will survive once sanctioned, and in some tragic cases, this has led to death.

Jodey Whiting, a 42-year-old disabled mother of nine children from Teesside, died last year after taking her own life when her benefits were stopped. When concerns were raised, police broke into her home, where she was found dead with a suicide note.

Whiting was a shop worker before ill health forced her to retire. She had problems with ongoing pain leading to her having to take up to 23 tablets a day, including the powerful painkiller morphine. She had been plagued by physical and mental health problems throughout her life, including a brain cyst and a curved spine. At times, this meant she could barely make it through the front door.

As part of meeting conditionality for ESA, Whiting

was expected to attend the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). Under the sanctions system, if a claimant does not attend, benefits stop. Jody had missed a routine ESA assessment, as she had not seen the letter informing her that she had to attend the meeting and was therefore unaware of the assessment.

Following her death, Whiting's family received another letter from the DWP confirming the benefit cut, despite the family having already told staff at the DWP that she had died. At the inquest, the family accused the DWP's actions of being the trigger that led to Whiting taking a fatal drugs overdose. The inquest heard she had overdosed before, but the "extreme stress" inflicted by the DWP pushed her over the edge. Grieving mother, Joy Dove, spoke out after her death, saying, "I blame the DWP for her death. They have blood on their hands over my Jodey".

DWP officials are being rewarded with bonus payments for meeting sanctioning targets. At a time when many welfare claimants are being sanctioned, struggling to pay for food and having to resort to the use of food banks, pay roll data published by the DWP for the years April 2016 and March 2017 showed that the department paid out performance-related bonuses to staff totalling £41.3 million. These included payments of £5.3 million on "in month bonuses" and £36 million in end of year bonuses. 240 senior DWP officials pocketed a total of £760,000.

Sanctions are now used much more frequently against welfare claimants across the board, with the severity of sanctions increasing. According to Dr. David Webster at the University of Glasgow, around 350,000 people a year are currently facing sanctions. This is expected to rocket with the introduction of the Universal Credit (UC) system nationally as one million more people in low-paid work will be on the radar for benefit sanctions. "The amounts of money people lose through sanctions are actually larger than the amounts of money people get fined in the magistrates' courts," Webster told the BBC.

An example of the extreme harshness of the sanctions regime was cited by a report on the BBC's *Victoria Derbyshire* show. Garreth Forrest, from Preston, normally receives a benefits allowance of just £705 a month. For an "offense" he disputes, he was sanctioned with his benefit slashed by £503. The sanction may last four months, and he was left with just over £200 a

month, making it impossible to cover all his outgoings, including rent, utilities and food.

Under UC, the use of conditionality is being applied to groups that were once exempt, including the disabled and lone parents. Figures released by the DWP revealed that:

- The percentage of Universal Credit (UC) claimants with a drop in payment due to a sanction was 4.7 percent.

- From August to October 2017, 38 percent of all UC decisions resulted in a sanction.

- 73 percent of UC decisions to apply a sanction in August to October 2017 occurred due to failure to attend or participate in a Work-Focused Interview.

Demos became one of the most influential New Labour think tanks under Labour prime minister Tony Blair. The 1997-2010 Blair/Gordon Brown government adopted a "work first" and "work for all" approach that included the monitoring of JSA claimants' job searches, backed up by benefit sanctions in cases of non-compliance. In 2008, Labour introduced ESA to replace Incapacity Benefit. ESA contains the Work Capability Assessment medical—a critical instrument used by successive governments for removing people from welfare entitlement.

The Geiger/Demos research is not aimed at ending the inhumane and hated system WCA, but at refurbishing it and tailoring it more towards the requirements of the economy. They propose the government "overhaul the WCA descriptors, so that they transparently reflect the British labour market..." They recommend that "government could collect data on the functional requirements of British jobs—i.e., the specific capabilities that people need to be able to do each job."

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