Revised UK welfare sanctions mean more punishment for the poor

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Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) sanctions are set to put many Britons in "dire financial conditions," according to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

From October 2012, new revised sanctions were introduced affecting Job Seekers Allowance with fixed period sanctions. These are broken down into three sections; higher level sanctions, intermediate level and lower level. Higher level affects those that leave a job voluntarily. This would mean that a claimant would lose their JSA completely for 13 weeks for what the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) term as "first failure," 26 weeks for a "second failure," and 156 weeks for a third and any subsequence failures with a 52 week period.

The intermediate sanction is put in place for claimants who are found to not actively be looking for work or are not available for work. This would mean withdrawal of allowance for 4 weeks for "first failure", rising to 13 weeks for future failures in a 52 week period.

Finally the lower sanction would affect claimants who fail to turn up to any advisor interviews. This would lead to fixed sanctions in line with the intermediate level.

From December 3, 2012 sanctions were revised and introduced affecting Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), and Work Related Activity Group (WRAG).

The changes are explained in a DWP report, published last month. It states, "Under the system prior to December 3rd 2012, claimants in the WRAG who fail to attend or participate in a work focused interview, or who fail to carry out work related activity agreed with their advisor, receive an open ended sanction. The sanction amount was 50 percent of the work related activity component, increasing to 100 percent of the component after 4 weeks."

"Under the new rules ESA claimants in the WRAG who fail to comply with the conditions for receiving benefit receive an open ended sanction, followed by a fixed period sanction when they re-comply. The fixed period sanction will be 1 week for a first failure, 2 weeks for a second failure and 4 weeks for a third and subsequent failures in a 52 week period."

The report [https://skydrive.live.com/view.aspx?resid=CB5ED957FE0B849F!350&app=WordPdf&wdo=2&authkey=!AJTbB-gzwsSCayQ], published in October 2013 by the Manchester CAB on behalf of the Greater Manchester Citizens Advice Bureaux Cluster Group, is an in-depth evaluation of the impact of the sanctions. It describes benefit sanctions as "financial penalties" that are driving people already in devastating financial crisis even further into dire conditions. They raise concerns about the increase in the number of clients they had seen in relation to these sanctions.

From July-September 2013, they conducted a survey to investigate these issues and to survey those people already on extremely restricted incomes to evaluate how they were coping with the further reductions that the sanctions created.

The results were devastating. Forty percent of respondents said they had never received a letter from the job centre informing them of the sanctions. Thirty-three percent of respondents didn't know why they had been sanctioned and 29 percent said they had been sanctioned because they hadn't done enough to find work. The report states "however, many people commented that the sanction had been applied unfairly, when in fact they had looked for work and attended interviews as required, because of a very narrow interpretation of the rules or for reasons that were

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beyond their control."

More than half the respondents said they had not received any advice or information about how to appeal against a decision to sanction. However, 62 percent had appealed. One third had been successful in their appeals, and 23 percent were still awaiting an outcome. The report also noted, "Administrative delays in receiving formal notification of the sanction meant a number of people had been refused leave to appeal because they were out of time, adding further to the perception that they had been treated unfairly."

Although the majority of the respondents were sanctioned for four weeks, one third had been given 10 week sanctions, with the average duration working out at eight weeks.

Two thirds had been left with no income. Twenty-three percent who had sanctions imposed had children, and 10 percent were lone parents.

Eighty percent of respondents borrowed money from family and friends, 8 percent borrowed from banks and 9 percent from pay day loan companies, which charge astronomical annual percentage rates.

Seventy-one percent of respondents also admitted they cut down on food, 49 percent on heating and 47 percent on travel. Twenty-four percent had applied for food parcels. Some respondents admitted they had scrounged for food from bins and skips and even had to beg to feed themselves.

"I had no income and had to borrow from my parents, who are also on benefits. It has affected me mentally and I'm seriously depressed and have anxiety attacks," one respondent said.

"Starved and lived off what I had. Scrounged food from bins and only left the house after darkness fell. Had no electricity or gas, struggled and went without for 3 days," another said.

"I'm worried my benefit won't be sorted in time to pay my rent as this could make us all homeless yet again. Last time we were homeless was fleeing domestic violence and me and my children were out in a B&B [Bed and Breakfast]," another told the team.

The survey found that the sanctions had a massive impact on the health and well-being, including physical health of many respondents, some of whom already had problems that were made worse with stress and poor diets. Some even admitted they had contemplated suicide, with some even having attempted it.

Many of those asked felt they had been unfairly treated or penalised because of job centre admin errors and had sanctions forced on them unreasonably, given their circumstances.

Concluding the results of the survey the CAB state, "The Governments Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC), in its 2012 review of conditionality and sanctions in the benefits system, conclude that for conditionality to work it was essential that there was (1) good communication, (2) personalisation and (3) fairness."

The evidence from the CAB survey is that none of these conditions are being met and that the imposition of sanctions is causing ever great hardship, not only to the claimants but to their dependants. Such hardship makes it increasingly unlikely that claimants will be in a position to find and keep paid employment.

The sanctions described in the CAB report are part of £21.8 billion in welfare cuts being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal government. Last month Prime Minister David Cameron declared that austerity cuts would be made permanent, meaning that escalating numbers of people will join the many already struggling to put food on the table, to find shelter and afford necessities like heating and lighting.

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