

UK benefits claimants victimised and driven into destitution

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The British government has greatly increased the number of sanctions against benefit claimants, resulting in their benefits being “stopped.”

The figure for jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) for the year to September 30, 2013 was 874,850, the highest since the benefit was introduced in 1996 by the Conservative government of John Major.

The sanctions figure for Employment Support Allowance (ESA), claimed by sick and disabled people, was 22,840, the highest since October 2008.

Officially, the government Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) claims there are no targets for applying sanctions to claimants. However, anecdotal evidence would suggest otherwise.

This led the Citizens Advice Bureau in the Manchester area to undertake research as they “had become concerned about the increase in the number of clients they were seeing who had sanctions against them and the duration of these sanctions ... (and) how claimants who were already on very restricted incomes coped with the further reductions made.”

CAB published the report, “Punishing Poverty” based on their research in October last year. Since 2012 claimants deemed to have broken the rules can be sanctioned for up to three years. The report found that of those sanctioned, 60 percent had been in receipt of JSA but that 33 percent had been in receipt of ESA.

Other findings were:

- The average duration of the sanction was eight weeks.
- Two-thirds had been left with no income.
- Those with children reported they only had child benefit and child tax credits.
- The sanction had a severe impact on the mental and physical health of many respondents. A number said they attempted suicide or felt suicidal.

Often JSA claimants were unsure why they had been sanctioned (23 percent). Twenty-nine percent of those aware of a reason were told it was because they had not done enough to find work. In many cases the rules were applied narrowly or unfairly. One claimant explained, “I was supposed to apply for seven jobs a week, I applied for 10 one week and five the next week, so they sanctioned me for a week.”

While claimants who are sanctioned are supposed to be informed of their right to appeal, just over half of those covered by the report said they had been given no information about how to appeal. Approximately 20 percent of those who appealed were successful, and some were awaiting the outcome of an appeal.

The CAB report concluded that sanctions targets definitely existed, stating, “Despite initial Government denials, it is clear that recently some JobCentres have been set targets for sanctioning claimants, with DWP staff creating ‘league tables’ based on the number of sanctions issued by individual JobCentres.”

Depriving claimants of their benefits is leaving them in desperate circumstances. A recent report by the think-tank Policy Exchange concluded that some 70,000 job seekers have had their benefits withdrawn unfairly. The report’s author, Guy Miscampbell, stated, “Four weeks without any money is driving people to desperate measures including a reliance on food banks.”

A public health specialist, Professor Elizabeth Dowler of Warwick University, recently stated that families in extreme poverty unable to buy sufficient food had become the most urgent public health concern—overshadowing the issue of unhealthy eating.

A recent BBC television *Panorama* documentary, “Hungry Britain?” highlighted the impact of stopping benefits for those already living in dire financial straits.

It began by stating tens of thousands of people in Britain were losing their benefit entitlement as a result of sanctions. Part of its report was filmed in the city of Bristol in southwest England, considered to be a relatively prosperous area. Yet it has 50 sites within the city providing free food to needy people. Over 8,000 people in the city had to resort to getting free food from food banks last year.

The Trussell Trust, which runs the majority of food banks nationally, told the programme that it is now feeding hundreds of thousands of people and that demand had tripled since 2012. In 2012 there were 9.8 million living in relative poverty. Relative poverty is defined as living on less than 60 percent of the average income.

Professor Dowler, interviewed for the programme, stated bluntly that there are “so many more food banks in the UK because so many more people are in need.”

She explained that food prices had risen 30 percent in the last year while wages had remained the same or had fallen.

The manager of one of the Bristol food banks told *Panorama* the biggest driver of the surge in numbers turning to food banks was the changes to the benefits system. People are going hungry because they simply have no money, and 23 percent of clients coming to his food bank had had their benefits stopped. Food banks report the same story across the country.

Claimants whose benefits are stopped can apply for hardship grants, which have to be paid back, but these can take up to two weeks to come through, leaving no money for food in the meantime.

According to government figures, in the last 11 months 133,000 sanction decisions had been overturned after appeal—400 a day. However, it can take weeks to challenge sanctions and get the money restored, and in the meantime people are left with no or little money.

Dr. David Webster, social scientist at Glasgow University, has done research on the figures of those wrongly subjected to benefit sanctions. He told the programme, “People who start poor are going to be driven into complete destitution.” *Panorama* also featured evidence of sanctions being target-driven. It showed a wall chart that had been displayed in a job centre in the town of Grantham last year. It highlighted the “savings” to be made by applying sanctions. One entry noted a savings of over £900 from a three-month

sanction period.

Panorama highlighted how food banks are becoming more and more integrated into the welfare state structure. It reported that around 140 local government authorities now provided funding direct to food banks, amounting to nearly £3 million in the last two years. Day by day the model of the British welfare state system is coming to resemble that found in Victorian Britain.



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