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## Welfare conditionality, benefit sanctions and homelessness in the UK: ending the 'something for nothing culture' or punishing the poor?

Kesia Reeve, [k.reeve@shu.ac.uk](mailto:k.reeve@shu.ac.uk)  
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

In 2012 the UK government introduced the harshest regime of conditionality and sanctions in the history of the benefits system. The government insists sanctions are not punitive, but critics call this into question. In particular, the regime has been charged with disproportionately affecting vulnerable people. Based on a survey and qualitative interviews with homeless people, this paper shows that homeless people are disproportionately sanctioned, and argues that it is difficult to see the regime as anything but punishment – punishment not for refusing to participate in the labour market, but for being unable to do so through homelessness, poverty and ill-health.

**key words** welfare reform • benefit sanctions • homelessness

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### Introduction

In 2012 the UK Coalition government introduced the harshest regime of conditionality and benefit sanctions in the history of the UK benefits system, significantly increasing the level of conditionality placed on some benefit claimants and the severity of sanctions for failing to comply. The government's justification for the policy is that sanctions promote positive behaviour change, incentivising benefit claimants to engage with a system of support that helps them into work. Underpinned by the view that rights must be balanced by responsibilities, such reforms were deemed necessary to tackle problems of benefit dependency and cultures of worklessness purported to exist among those who are out of work. But the considerable academic literature tracing, critiquing and interpreting the trend in western societies towards punitive welfare policies, deregulated labour markets and marketised employment services has argued, variously, that this is part of a neoliberal project undermining equality and reinforcing state authority, a form of governance of poverty and social marginality, or a disciplining of the poor (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2012; Wacquant, 2010; Schram et al, 2008; Chunn and Gavigan, 2004).

Based on research carried out for Crisis, a UK homelessness charity, this paper explores how benefit sanctions in the UK are applied to a particularly poor population: single homeless people. In doing so, it lends credence to the view that current welfare policy – whether by accident or design – is serving as a punitive/disciplinary measure against the socially marginalised. It adds a new dimension to the debate by focusing specifically on some of the most marginalised benefit claimants (homeless people), and on a particularly harsh aspect of the benefit system (benefit sanctions). The small UK, European and American academic literature on benefit sanctions tends to focus on the effectiveness of sanctions on producing labour market outcomes (for example, Joo Lee et al, 2004; Van den Berg et al, 2004; Lalive et al, 2005; Van der Klaauw and Van Ours, 2013) while here we seek to understand the process through which vulnerable people come to be sanctioned.

## Growing conditionality and the rise of neoliberal narratives of welfare

Conditionality, backed by sanctions, has been a feature of the British social security system since the late 1980s. However, in 2010, the incoming Coalition government pressed ahead with plans set in train by the previous Labour administration for a programme of reform that placed conditionality and responsibility at the heart of welfare policy, introducing the harshest regime of benefit sanctions in the history of the UK benefits system through the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

The principle of conditionality, in the context of welfare, is that access to, or eligibility for state support (in the form of social security benefits in this case) is dependent upon adhering to specified behavioural obligations. In contemporary welfare practice eligibility for support is not based solely on need but also on whether claimants fulfil certain obligations, in the form of stated, personalised conditions, placed on them by the state. Claimants must meet certain *behavioural* eligibility criteria, as well as *needs*-based criteria. Claimants are expected to show that they are doing everything they can (depending on their level of fitness for work) to secure work, or become ready for work. And the obligation to do so is enshrined in a series of conditions set down for each claimant which must be met to receive the next payment of benefit. This might include the obligation to apply for a specified number of jobs, to attend certain training courses, or to spend a specified number of hours searching for work. The extension of conditionality through the welfare system in the Welfare Reform Act 2012, then, signifies a deeper shift of welfare ideals away from notions of entitlement to a contractual system of responsibility and reward (Barker and Lamble, 2009). Placing conditions on claimants in return for provision of benefits undermines the concept of universal welfare *rights* that was central to the development of the British welfare state (Dwyer, 2008; Wright, 2012), rewriting ‘the terms and conditions of the welfare contract’ (Buck et al, 2006, 1). In the words of Dwyer (2004) there has been a shift from welfare *rights*, to *conditional* entitlement.

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced some key changes in relation to the extent and reach of welfare conditionally and the severity of the sanction for failing to comply. Conditionality requirements on Job Seeker Allowance (JSA) claimants increased markedly and, for the first time, some claimants deemed ‘not fit for work’ were subject to conditionality (that is, Employment Support Allowance (ESA) claimants deemed capable of taking steps towards work). The severity and the length

of sanctions that can be imposed for failing to comply were also enhanced. JSA claimants can now be sanctioned for up to three years.

The blueprint for the current regime can be traced to a series of (Labour) government reviews and Green and White Papers. With a 'rights and responsibilities' agenda prominent, the 2006 Green Paper, *A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work* (DWP, 2006) made the case for welfare reform on the basis that the existing system encouraged 'the poverty trap of benefit dependency' (p 2). In 2007 Lord Freud was tasked with reviewing the Welfare to Work programme and made recommendations to increase support for (and conditionality placed upon) those further from the labour market. In 2008 the Green Paper *No-one written off: Reforming welfare to reward responsibility* (DWP, 2008a) firmly placed conditionality and responsibility at the heart of welfare policy, unequivocal that in return for personalised support, jobseekers would be required to intensify their job search activity and that tougher sanctions would be introduced for those who failed to do so. An independent review by Professor Paul Gregg followed, setting out a vision for the new conditionality regime (Gregg, 2008), a regime consolidated in the subsequent White Paper, *Raising expectations and increasing support: Reforming welfare for the future* (DWP, 2008b). In 2010, the incoming Coalition government pressed ahead with these plans (DWP, 2010a; 2010b), setting out their 'commitment to overhaul the benefit system to promote work and personal responsibility' (DWP, 2010b, 2). The 'overhaul' included 'a strong system of conditionality...supported by a new system of financial sanctions' (p 28). The current Conservative government came to power in 2015 and continued with this programme.

Thus, although the narrative of 'responsibility' and support for increased conditionality has grown incrementally over the past decade, and there were changes of government in 2010 and 2015, the key messages have remained constant. Premised on the same underlying values – that rights must be balanced by responsibilities; that no-one should get 'something for nothing'<sup>1</sup> – successive governments have justified their programmes of welfare reform with reference to very similar policy objectives: in particular, in the words of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions between 2010 and 2015, the 'overriding intention – to get Britain working again'.<sup>2</sup>

The architects of the current system argue that work is good for physical and mental well-being (Freud, 2007) and promotes social inclusion (Gregg, 2008). However, 'getting Britain working again' is intended to do more than this: it will also, it is argued, tackle problems of benefit dependency and cultures of worklessness. As Lord Freud (by now Minister for Welfare Reform) stated in a speech in December 2011, 'That's what the welfare revolution is all about – that's the final goal – to bring an end to long-term benefit dependency and begin a cultural transformation'.<sup>3</sup>

This statement illustrates well the shift towards a narrative of welfare that casts the individual – their culture, their disposition – as the cause of the unemployment, and welfare support as encouraging rather than mitigating the problem. According to the then Secretary of State, for example, it is 'the welfare system trapping people in dependency and removing the drive to go to work' and producing 'this culture of entrenched worklessness and dependency'<sup>4</sup> rather than labour market forces and recession. Being in *need of* welfare benefits has become conflated with welfare *dependence*, and the term 'dependence' has distinct connotations in current policy discourse. In particular, welfare dependency is associated with 'cultures of worklessness' and is presented as the necessary antithesis of self-reliance, responsibility and

independence. This is despite research evidence clearly demonstrating that there is no basis for the ‘culture of worklessness’ thesis (Shildrick et al, 2012).

The punitive turn in welfare policy is frequently discussed with reference to the growth of neoliberalism, an ideology that sees the socially and economically excluded responsible for their own problems (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2012; Wacquant, 2009; Chunn and Gavigan, 2004) and which argues that it is benefit dependency and cultures of worklessness that create unemployment, poverty and social exclusion not labour market conditions, barriers to participation, and inequality (Wiggin, 2012; Wright, 2012). Of course, this is not a uniquely contemporary narrative trend, nor UK specific. Fraser and Gordon, for example, tracing the genealogy of dependency in the USA, ask why poverty and inequality have become framed in terms of welfare dependency, while Stanford and Taylor note a similar process in Australia. Chunn and Gavigan, meanwhile, point out that the ‘undeserving’ poor have always existed in the narrative of welfare in the UK, helping to distinguish those who are and who are not entitled to assistance (Chunn and Gavigan, 2004).

As Chunn and Gavigan go on to argue, however, the ideological shift to neoliberalism has served to redefine the ‘deserving’ poor such that ‘virtually no one is considered ‘deserving’ (p 231). The current discourse of welfare has unemployed people and benefit claimants choosing a ‘life on benefits’, and as responsible for their own predicament through lack of motivation, skill or aptitude rather than lack of demand for their labour (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2012; Wright, 2012; Garthwaite, 2011; Crisp, 2008) with the focus exclusively on the supply side of the Labour Market (Partick, 2014). As Hodkinson and Robbins argue:

What appears as classic ‘market failure’...is side-stepped by a blame game that resuscitates the familiar bogeymen of class war conservative politics as chief culprits, namely the planning system, state welfare, social housing and an immoral ‘underclass’ of benefit claimants, tenants, squatters and the homeless. (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2012, 65)

Through such moralising of social problems, taking punitive action against those who fail to address their ‘dependency’ is easily justified (Crisp, 2008; Chunn and Gavigan, 2004; Haworth and Manzi, 1999).

If we turn to the evidence, we see the empirical reality of this ideological shift, a shift that does, indeed, appear to have left no-one deserving of welfare. Before doing so we detail the research on which this paper is based.

## **Methods**

This paper is based on a research study exploring homeless people’s experiences of conditionality and benefit sanctions, commissioned by Crisis, a UK homelessness charity. It draws on two datasets generated for the study: a survey of more than 1,000 single<sup>5</sup> homelessness service users; and in-depth interviews with 42 homelessness service users who had been sanctioned in the past year.

### *Survey of single homeless people*

A total of 1,013 people of working age (16–65) without dependent children living in homelessness hostels or using homelessness day centres in England and Scotland were surveyed face-to-face between February and April 2015. To our knowledge this is the largest survey of single homeless people conducted in the UK. The fieldwork was undertaken by a professional survey company in day centres and hostels across 21 towns and cities in Scotland and England. The sampling frame of locations in which the survey took place was devised to cover a range of localities (although all were urban), service types and providers, to ensure the sample was not skewed unduly by specific conditions in certain types of places or types of service. People not currently homeless were eligible to participate on the basis that their use of a homelessness service indicated a recent history of homelessness or threat of homelessness. All survey respondents were given a £5 voucher to thank them for their time. The profile of the total single homeless population is unknown, so we cannot determine whether the sample is representative. However, the Census 2011 provides information on the gender and age profile of GB residents of working age in hostels and night shelters and the profile of our respondents was broadly similar.

### *In-depth interviews with homeless people*

Qualitative face-to-face interviews were conducted with 42 homelessness service-users who had been sanctioned in the past year, ten of whom we maintained contact with over a six-month period. Interviews were conducted in seven of the towns and cities in which surveying took place and respondents were recruited through the survey and through homelessness services. Interviewing took place between February and June 2015, involving 35 men and seven women. Several respondents had moved between JSA, ESA and other benefits and so the claimant profile varied but the sample was not unduly skewed towards JSA or ESA claimants. Efforts were also made to include people of different ages, with a good spread across each age group. The interviews were qualitative, making use of a flexible topic guide that asked respondents to talk through their experience of claiming benefits, about the circumstances leading to their sanction/s, their employment history and aspirations, housing situations and other life experiences, and about how they managed while they were sanctioned. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondent, fully transcribed and coded and analysed using NVivo. All interview respondents were given £15 to thank them for their time.

### **Benefit sanctions and homelessness: 'Getting Britain working again' (Iain Duncan Smith<sup>6</sup>) or 'disciplining the precarious fractions of the post-industrial working class' (Wacquant, 2010, 198)?**

The UK sanctions regime has been heavily criticised. For example, an independent (government commissioned) review of certain aspects of the sanctions regime, and a Work and Pensions Committee scrutinised the sanctions system and found it lacking (Oakley, 2014; House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2014; 2015). The evidence gathered for these enquiries raised questions about the implementation and effectiveness of sanctions, and considerable anecdote is emerging of people being

sanctioned unreasonably, of expectations that are impossible to comply with, and that the most vulnerable may be disproportionately affected by sanctions (CAB, 2014; Hough et al, 2013; Webster, 2013; Homeless Link, 2013; Cork Simon Community, 2012; Homeless Link, St Mungo's and Crisis, 2012).

The results from our study strongly support the anecdotal reports already accumulated, providing robust survey and qualitative evidence that homeless people (many of whom had other vulnerabilities) are being disproportionately sanctioned, and that some of the most marginalised people are facing punitive action for failing to comply with a system that often sets them up to fail. In the remainder of this section we present these findings and, in doing so, challenge some of the stated assumptions underpinning current UK sanctions policy.

### *Dispositions to work: 'cultures of worklessness'?*

UK sanctions policy is premised on the notion that a 'culture of worklessness' has left some benefit claimants unwilling and unmotivated to seek work (see discussion above). Sanctions, it is argued by the architects of the current system, are necessary to break this culture by incentivising claimants to re-enter the labour market (DWP, 2010b<sup>7</sup>).

Labour market participation was low among our respondents. Only 15 out of 1,013 survey respondents and no interview respondent was in regular paid work and 41 per cent of the survey sample last had a regular job more than five years ago. These figures partly reflect the prevalence of mental and physical ill health and other vulnerabilities among the sample. For example, half of all survey respondents reported having physical health problems or a disability, 55 per cent reported mental ill health and 57 per cent reported a drug or alcohol dependency. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that of those survey respondents claiming benefits (92 per cent of the full sample) more than half were in receipt of sickness benefits (that is, assessed as 'not fit for work').

Nevertheless, a strong desire to work was evident, a significant cohort had a recent employment history, and many were pursuing their own strategies for gaining skills and employment. In total, 88 per cent of survey respondents said they wanted a job now (51 per cent) or in the future (37 per cent), including many of those not currently 'fit for work', and 28 per cent had worked regularly within the past two years. Similarly, all interview respondents who were able to work, and some of those not fit for work, were willing to engage in work-related activity according to their capabilities and some had long and/or recent employment histories. Interview respondents' desire to work was reflected in their efforts to seek employment and improve their skills. Independently from requirements placed upon them by Jobcentre Plus respondents were signed up for educational and training courses, were working with voluntary sector providers to write CVs and improve their skills, and were handing out CVs and using social and familial networks to seek work. Those who could work (and some of those less able) were keen to secure employment and undertake training to improve their position in the labour market. As two respondents explained:

I just want to get a job so I can get out and pay my own rent...I go and ask people at the jobcentre, it's usually me asking if they've got something else for me to go on, a course or whatever, so I'm just doing everything I can. (Sonia)<sup>8</sup>

I would really want to do a course cos that would at least get me doing something in the day. It's stressful cos you've got so much time on your hands. (Anisa)

In addition, there was much support for a (fair) system of conditionality. Nearly all interview respondents agreed it was right to expect claimants to have conditions placed upon them in return for receiving benefits. The following comments were typical:

I think they should [have conditionality] it shouldn't be free money cos everyone else is out there working and paying tax. I used to pay tax so I know what it's like. You need to put the effort, you can't just get something for free when you're not putting something back. (Kyle)

If you're on benefits you've got to do some sort of stuff to get paid or sort yourself out, cos at the end of the day it's just easy money really, if you stay on benefits any longer you're just going to get comfortable with it, ain't you. (David)

Yes I do agree with it, cos Joe Bloggs could just go down, make a claim, do absolutely nothing looking for work and think it's free money. So in a way to have conditions put onto people is good. (Dennis)

Thus, the extent to which these homelessness service users needed 'incentivising' is questionable, and there was little evidence of the culture of worklessness UK policymakers are so keen to erode. In fact, most were already doing all they could to comply with a system with which they agreed.

### ***Sanctions: deterrent threat or punitive action?***

As discussed above, policymakers emphasise that sanctions exist to encourage compliance. In other words, they are a deterrent threat rather than a punishment, and are used only against those who wilfully refuse to comply. The following policy statements make this clear, using phrases such as '*refuse to play by the rules*':

That is why we are developing sanctions for those who *refuse* to play by the rules. (Speech by Iain Duncan Smith at the launch of 'Universal Credit, Welfare that works', 11 November 2010, London, emphasis added)

Jobseekers who repeatedly refuse to play by the rules face losing benefits for three years under tough new rules introduced today.<sup>9</sup>

We always make the rules very clear – it's only right that there is a penalty if people fail to play by them. (Esther McVey, quoted in a DWP Press release, 6 November 2013)<sup>10</sup>

If effective, deterrent threats need not be used extensively. Yet, evidence from this study suggests that significant numbers of homelessness service users are being sanctioned. Of the 548 survey respondents subject to conditionality (that is, those to whom a

sanction could be applied), 39 per cent had been sanctioned at least once in the past year. A significant proportion (40 per cent) had been sanctioned more than once during that time. For comparison, around 11 per cent of JSA and ESA claimants were sanctioned in 2014/15.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that homelessness service users may be nearly four times as likely to be sanctioned as the broader claimant population.

If we consider respondents' positive attitudes towards work and their support for the principle of conditionality discussed above, it seems incongruent that so many would actively refuse to comply with the system. But the policy narrative would insist this is the case. However, if we consider the difficulties homeless claimants reported facing meeting conditionality requirements, and the circumstances leading to their sanction(s), a very different explanation emerges. It is to this that we now turn.

### *Refusing to play by the rules?*

The majority (63 per cent) of survey respondents who were subject to conditionality reported finding the conditionality requirements placed upon them difficult to meet. These respondents were asked to specify the issues (from a list provided) that had most hindered their efforts to comply. The most common barriers faced by claimants who reported difficulties (base: 318) were as follows:

- not having enough money to travel to appointments (77 per cent)
- being asked to apply for too many jobs each week (72 per cent of JSA claimants – this is not relevant to ESA claimants as they are not required to seek work)
- having important appointments (for example to deal with their housing or health problems) that clashed with Job Centre/Work Programme appointments (72 per cent)
- difficulties getting the necessary help from the Job Centre (71 per cent)
- needing, and not having, regular access to the internet (67 per cent)
- being given the wrong information (64 per cent)
- letters not reaching the respondent/post going missing (64 per cent).

These results are, perhaps, no surprise. Homeless people often have vulnerabilities that make it difficult to navigate the bureaucracy of formal systems, have a multitude of other commitments (seeking and applying for housing, appointments with drug advisors, health workers and support workers), and do not have the resources required (internet access, suitable clothes). We have already reported above the high prevalence of mental and physical ill health and drug or alcohol dependency among the survey sample. In addition, 26 per cent reported poor literacy, 26 per cent had been in care as a child, and 18 per cent were sleeping rough.

Government guidance, however, dictates that requirements placed on claimants should be adjusted such that more vulnerable claimants do not find them more difficult to meet. The guidance states that conditions should be 'reasonable, designed to help the claimant move into work, and reflecting the claimant's particular capability and circumstances' (DWP, 2014, 6), creating a level playing field with those able to meet more stringent requirements. Exploring the detailed circumstances in which interview respondents were sanctioned calls this into question, with the conditions placed on many unrealistic, and their capabilities and circumstances not considered.

For example, it was common for interview respondents to have been required to apply for 15–20 jobs per week, including people who were rough sleeping, with no internet access, and with additional vulnerabilities such as poor literacy or mental health issues. No respondent had ready access to the internet. Without computers of their own, and with a limit of one hour or so in libraries, hostels and day centres, it proved extremely difficult for respondents to meet requirements for online job searching. Computer *proficiency* was also an issue, compounding problems of access. Many respondents were only able to do online job search/applications with help:

I've got to go to the library every day of the week, I have to do job match every day of the week. I've got to apply for 15 jobs a week, it's impossible, I can't even work a computer...I've got a computer at my mum and dad's maybe once or twice a week and I feel comfortable doing it there cos I get help with what I'm doing, but that wasn't good enough for them. (Stuart)

I can't go on computers 35 hours a week, you've only got an hour a day in the library and an hour in here [day centre]...and once I've been in the library in town I can't go in another library, I've tried, it doesn't work. (Andy)

Reflecting the difficulties respondents encountered meeting requirements, 82 per cent of survey respondents who had been sanctioned in the past year reported having a good reason for failing to meet the condition for which they were sanctioned. A similar picture emerged from in-depth interviews: respondents were either set conditions far exceeding their capabilities, or encountered practical and systemic barriers preventing them from complying. Exploring the circumstances resulting in the 42 interview respondents being sanctioned, most fell into one of five categories:

1. *Impossible to comply*: for example not receiving notification of an appointment, or through illness. Six interview respondents had not received the letter informing them of appointments they were subsequently sanctioned for missing. Most did not have a secure postal address, using correspondence addresses they had periodic access to, or having post delivered to day centres and hostels. A further three were too ill to attend an appointment or course, one of whom was in hospital.
2. *Making an impossible choice*: for example having another crucial appointment or commitment clashing with a Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme appointment. One respondent, for example, had a job interview that clashed with his appointment, and another was being evicted from the hostel in which she lived. Another had to pick up his young daughter from school at short notice. Respondents always made efforts to contact their advisor in advance or as soon as possible to explain their predicament.
3. *Oversight and misunderstanding*: for example making an honest mistake about the time or date of an appointment or misunderstanding conditions and requirements. Eight respondents could be placed in this category. Two made innocent mistakes about the time or location of their appointments while a further two simply forgot theirs. Four respondents misunderstood (or, perhaps, were misinformed about) their obligations, in two of these cases because of literacy difficulties. These 'mistakes' were often made in an otherwise unblemished record and sometimes because other distracting personal issues had arisen (family

bereavement, relationship and housing problems) or because their medication (usually for mental health issues) induced a degree of forgetfulness. Each of these respondents contacted Jobcentre Plus or the Work Programme as soon as they realised their mistake.

4. *Conditions set beyond capabilities*, for example where support needs such as mental ill health, learning disability or drug and alcohol problems significantly limit capacity to comply but are not taken into account when setting conditions. There was significant overlap between this and other categories. We have already mentioned, for example, that literacy difficulties resulted in at least two respondents misunderstanding their conditions. Other examples include one homeless man who had borderline learning difficulties, mental ill health (schizophrenia, anxiety and paranoia), poor computer literacy, and had recently served a three-year prison sentence. He was required to apply for 15 jobs per week online. He made every effort to meet this target: 'I pushed everything out of the way just to meet the target, like going and seeing my kids and everything like that, just to get to the target', but he could not apply for enough jobs and was sanctioned. Another man, a rough sleeper with a long-term amphetamine addiction, was required to apply for 32 jobs per week and spend 35 hours a week doing so, mostly online.
5. *Refusing to engage in work-related activity*: only two respondents fell into this category. One was sanctioned for failing to attend a course. He had completed the same Level 1 course six months earlier previously and had not found it useful in terms of securing employment. He was keen to do the Level 2 course and had requested this, but saw little point in repeating a basic course that did not give him additional skills. The other fully acknowledged that he had not been motivated to seek work or comply with his conditions. However, he was suffering from severe depression, a fact recognised by the benefits system a few months later when he made an application for ESA and was placed in the 'Support group' (that is, not fit for work-related activity and so with no conditionality placed upon them).

In addition, some interview respondents were sanctioned because they lacked proof of compliance or were seeking work in different ways from those specified. This applied to at least five respondents. One, for example, knew the best way to secure work in his trade was to deliver a CV in person but his Work Coach insisted he applied for jobs online. The time he spent seeking work in person was 'discounted', he fell short of his target and was sanctioned. Another was sanctioned for failing to apply for the requisite number of jobs. He had applied for enough jobs to meet his Claimant Commitment but:

You've got Universal Job match on the computer and they can tell on the computer how many jobs you've applied for and I told her I'd applied for jobs in other areas, Jobs.com, other things and she said that wasn't enough. So that's how I got sanctioned. (Graham)

And another:

It's not good enough [recording job searches] on paper for them, I'm not too good on the computer, I explained to them that, I'm not the best, I've

tried to get some help with it but to them it's not good enough, they literally sanction you, that's what it's like. (Stuart)

It is clear from this qualitative evidence that very few respondents were 'refusing to play by the rules'. Rather, they were hampered by a system that placed unrealistic demands upon them, failed to account for their circumstances and vulnerabilities, practices little discretion or flexibility and makes operational mistakes. Most sanctions occurred, not because of 'behavioural failings', but because of systemic problems and inappropriate requirements that far exceeded respondents' capabilities.

## Conclusion

In light of the evidence presented in this paper we suggest it is difficult to see the sanctions system as anything other than punitive. We have shown that the experiences of homelessness service users directly contrast with policy statements and guidance that insist sanctions are a last resort, used only against those who refuse to comply, that they are necessary to break a prevalent culture of worklessness among the unemployed, and that conditionality requirements are fair and set according to capability. Our evidence suggests that there is no culture of worklessness to break, that people do not expect 'something for nothing', that sanctions are clearly not being used only as a last resort but are imposed on people keen to work, keen to engage, but who have been set conditionality requirements they cannot meet.

This evidence supports much academic commentary on neoliberal welfare policy, suggesting this is, in the words of Schram et al, 'a system of punishment for disciplining subordinate populations for failing to integrate in low wage labour markets' (Schram et al 2008). But failing, not by *refusing* to 'play by the rules', or refusing to enter a labour market characterised by low pay and insecurity (a system of 'social insecurity', as Wacquant (2009) argues), but for being unable to do so because of poverty, homelessness and ill health. This has become acceptable because being in *need* of welfare has been conflated with 'welfare dependency' which has become, implicitly, an individualised characteristic, a behavioural failing that must be rectified. As in the USA, the UK has shifted to a position where policies premised on changing the 'conduct' of the poor seek to rectify, deter and sanction through the move from voluntary to compulsory programmes of 'assistance'. The poor are thus portrayed as in need of moral discipline, and policy and legislation the mechanism through which this can be achieved (Wright, 2012; Fischer and Reese, 2011; Wacquant, 2009). Social problems such as unemployment and homelessness, it is argued, increasingly become a moral identifier that needs rectifying (McDonald and Marston, 2005) and the welfare system effectively becomes a means of 'maintaining moral standards and disciplining perceived transgressions' (Partick and Brown, 2012). How effective this can be, however, is questionable. We have here a 'multiple-miscreant' population (homeless, unemployed, poor, many dependent on drugs or alcohol) but a policy (benefit sanctions) virtually impossible for them to comply with. It is, therefore, difficult to see how any moral rectification can flow from such a policy. It can, however, discipline or punish. Rather than producing a compliant working class, then, it pushes people out of the very system (social security) initially designed to protect them.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, a statement by Esther McVey, the Minister for Employment at the time, committing to ‘ending the something for nothing culture’, quoted in a DWP press release, 6 November 2013, [www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-sanctions-ending-the-something-for-nothing-culture](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-sanctions-ending-the-something-for-nothing-culture)

<sup>2</sup> In a speech on 7 April 2014, Hosted by Business for Britain at Pimlico Plumbers, London, [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jobs-and-welfare-reform-getting-britain-working](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jobs-and-welfare-reform-getting-britain-working)

<sup>3</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-welfare-revolution](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-welfare-revolution)

<sup>4</sup> IDS, Lecture at Cambridge University – ‘Reforming Welfare, Transforming Lives’, 25 October 2012

<sup>5</sup> In a UK context, the term ‘single homeless’ refers to homeless people without dependent children.

<sup>6</sup> Secretary of State, Ian Duncan Smith in 2014, [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jobs-and-welfare-reform-getting-britain-working](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jobs-and-welfare-reform-getting-britain-working)

<sup>7</sup> See also a speech by the then minister of welfare reform, Lord Freud, [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-welfare-revolution](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-welfare-revolution)

<sup>8</sup> All names have been changed.

<sup>9</sup> DWP press release 22 October 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/choosing-a-life-on-benefits-is-no-longer-an-option>

<sup>10</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-sanctions-ending-the-something-for-nothing-culture](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-sanctions-ending-the-something-for-nothing-culture)

<sup>11</sup> FOI (Freedom of Information) 2015–2187.

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