

France Ryan, December 2014

Yes, people can starve in benefit-sanctions Britain

Frances Ryan

Unemployed, disabled and chronically ill people are going hungry – because a sadistic government is removing the money they need to eat

“Hunger stalks this country” is [the finding of a church-funded report](#) by an all-party group of MPs and peers released today. Lady Jenkin, a Conservative, used its launch to [declare the main cause of this national crisis](#) was “poor people [who] do not know how to cook”.

Jenkin is symbolic of a climate of denial, privilege and power that dismisses food poverty as a symptom of the idiot poor. The desperation of men, women and children detailed in the report may be worth a few minutes’ pause from our leaders and officials: the unemployed woman from Birkenhead who was taken to hospital with malnutrition after not eating for five days because she had no money to buy food; the heavily pregnant woman and her partner found living, without food, in a child’s tent near a church in a wealthy Berkshire town in the middle of winter; a Wirral man crushed to death after a lorry picked up a bin in which he was scavenging for food. He had not, funnily enough, lost a recipe or failed to work an oven. The jobcentre had suspended his benefits, and he had received no money for 17 weeks.

Social security cuts – in the form, largely, of what the report terms these [“heavy-handed” benefit sanctions](#) – play a crucial role in this widespread hunger. Almost two million people [have had their benefits stopped](#) through the sanctions regime over the past two years. If it can get more grotesque, that includes [a 580% rise against chronically ill and disabled people](#) in the 12 months to March 2014. Benefit sanctions being handed out with such ease at this point, we may as well be kicking the unemployed into the gutter and removing the scraps of food from their hands.

There is no “yellow card” policy, no logic, no warning. It is being told you have broken a rule you couldn’t meet or didn’t know existed; having a learning disability and being sanctioned because you didn’t fill in a form “correctly”. Not being able to afford the bus, but having your jobseeker’s allowance stopped for three weeks because you didn’t sign in every day at the jobcentre.

The government knows the impact of what they are doing because their own research has told them. “Systematic problems” in the way benefit sanctions are administered and imposed were revealed months ago [in a report commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions](#) itself. Work Programme providers were required to send participants for sanctions when they knew they had done nothing wrong, leaving “claimants... sent from pillar to post”, and the most vulnerable claimants at a loss as to why their benefits had been stopped. Often they were not even told by the DWP about hardship payments that they were entitled to.

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We are now knee-deep in a punitive, callous system. This has never been about helping people find work, but penalising them for their poverty. It is arranging benefits and jobs like shrinking hoops for people to jump through, and blaming them when they fall on their face. Or – as today's report describes – waiting for police and charity workers to see them scavenging for food in supermarket skips or begging for leftovers before they rot in restaurant bins.

“No-one can starve in Britain” goes the familiar below-the-line response to news of hunger in this country. It is unsurprising, perhaps, considering it is the line our own government takes. Nearly [a million people received food parcels from the Trussell Trust food banks](#) alone last year, [but listening to ministers and peers](#) – both the silence and the active denials – it is as if none of it is happening.

It seems a particular level of sadism to remove the money people need to eat and act surprised when they are hungry. A new report is just another excuse for those in power to shirk responsibility, to blame the people they have already degraded once and who cannot defend themselves. A general election is coming. Its citizens are starving, and the government's priority is denial.

*** Food Poverty Opinion December 2014*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/starve-benefit-sanctions-unemployed-hungry-government>

- Frances Ryan is a Guardian columnist