

Homeless people's experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions

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Homelessness trends in England

- Statutory homelessness acceptances have stabilised in the past two years but are still 36 per cent higher than the low point experienced in 2009/10 – 54,000 in 2014/15
- When local authority homelessness prevention and relief activity is added 275,000 actions were taken in 2014/15 - whilst a slight decrease from last year this represents a 34% increase since 2009/10
- Rough sleeping has doubled across England since 2010 (an increase from 1,768 to 3,569)
- In London the number of people sleeping rough has doubled since 2009-10, the latest annual figures recorded 7,581 people in 2014/15.

Why do the research?

- harsher regime of conditionality and sanctions introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012
- part of a wider programme of welfare reform, overhaul of the welfare system
- targeted at working age population
- reduced eligibility, reduced entitlement and increased conditionality
- **Concerns about the sanctions regime, and about the impact on vulnerable groups**
- Oakley Review
- Work and Pensions Committee
- anecdotal evidence of a disproportionate impact on homeless people

The research

- Crisis commissioned CRESR to undertake research to explore the prevalence and experience of sanctions amongst homelessness service users
- face-to-face survey of 1013 single people aged 16-64 using homelessness hostels and day centres in England and Scotland:
 - 89 service providers, across 22 districts, in 10 regions
 - a mix of different types of service
- in depth interviews with 42 people in homelessness services who have been sanctioned in the past year
- stakeholder consultation

Research Findings (1)

Experience of welfare conditionality: prevalence and reasons for sanctions

Labour market participation

- only 15 respondents were currently in paid employment (n=1013)
- 92% currently claiming benefits and additional 2% in past year
 - 35% JSA
 - 22% ESA WRAG
 - 32% ESA Support Group or assessment phase
- high levels of labour market detachment:
 - 58% of survey respondents were in receipt of sickness benefits (ESA, IB)
 - 41% last worked more than 5 years ago
 - 10% had never had a regular job
- but, significant minority with recent work history - 28% worked regularly in the past two years

Prevalence of sanctioning

- annual sanction rate for JSA claimants in 2013/14 = 18%. ESA claimants much less likely to be sanctioned in 2013/14 so sanction rate for all claimants will be lower
- 39% of survey respondents subject to conditionality (n=548) in our study had been sanctioned in the past year
- sanction rate was higher amongst more vulnerable sub-groups e.g. 49% of care leavers, 45% of those reporting mental ill health
- 10% reported currently being sanctioned
- 40% of sanctioned respondents reported having been sanctioned more than once in the past year

Key conclusion: homelessness service users are disproportionately affected by sanctions

'conditions must be 'reasonable... reflecting the claimant's particular capability and circumstances' and '...any work related requirements placed on claimants should be personalised according to their needs and circumstances, taking into account any restrictions' (DWP, 2014)

Yet

- 63% found the conditionality requirements difficult to meet
- Claimant Commitment generally thought to be non-negotiable
- not taking sufficient account of circumstances (e.g. internet access), vulnerabilities or respondents' work history/knowledge of their industry
- conditionality requirements sometimes, but not always considered reasonable - e.g. 72% of JSA claimants who found compliance difficult felt they were asked to apply for too many jobs each week

The logo for Crisis, featuring the word "Crisis" in a bold, white, sans-serif font with a stylized, rounded appearance. The letters are set against a red background that forms a diagonal shape at the bottom of the slide.

Why such a high sanction rate?

Stated reasons for difficulty complying	%	Circumstances and vulnerabilities make compliance difficult?
<i>no money to travel to appointment</i>	77	
<i>important appointments that clash</i>	72	• 52% reported drug or alcohol issues
<i>no regular access to the internet</i>	67	• 45% reported mental ill health
<i>letters not arriving/going missing</i>	64	• 25% reported literacy difficulties
<i>no suitable clothes</i>	57	• 16% were sleeping rough
<i>too busy finding somewhere to stay</i>	44	• insecure postal address
<i>difficulty remembering appointments</i>	48	• no interview respondent had ready access to the internet
<i>Total (n=340)</i>	100	• limited computer/internet proficiency

Reasons for sanctions

Five categories, based on the in-depth interviews:

- **impossible to comply** - e.g. no notification, illness
- **making difficult choices** - e.g. having other crucial commitments
- **oversight and misunderstanding** - e.g. honest mistakes, forgetfulness, misunderstanding/misinformation
- **support needs limiting capacity** / conditions set beyond capabilities
- **refusing to comply**

Only two respondents fell into the last of these categories

Key conclusion: It is personal and systemic barriers that explain the high sanction rate, not unwillingness to comply.

Research Findings (2)

Impacts and consequences of sanctions

Intended consequences - increased compliance?

Yes, only a minority (16%) were not influenced in some way by the *threat* of sanction (n=512). e.g. they were more likely to

- Turn up on time (72%)
- Apply for jobs (60%)
- Attend courses/training they were told to attend (53%)
- Take more notice of what they were meant to do (63%)

and by the *experience* of being sanctioned (n=225), e.g. those sanctioned said it had made them more likely to:

- Turn up on time (60%)
- Apply for jobs (45%)
- Attend courses / training they were told to attend (42%)
- Take more notice of what they were meant to do (56%)

Unintended Consequences - coping with sanctions

% of respondents reporting having done the following as a result of benefit stopping due to a sanction

%

<i>Gone hungry or skipped meals</i>	77
<i>Gone without heating</i>	64
<i>Borrowed from friends or family</i>	64
<i>Got food / essentials from a charity other than a food bank</i>	63
<i>Received a food parcel from a food bank</i>	61
<i>Stolen food, toiletries or other essentials</i>	38
<i>Received a hardship payment</i>	38
<i>Begged</i>	28
<i>Taken out a loan from a loan shark or payday lender</i>	19

- sanctions withdraw what is often claimants' only income
- heavy reliance on friends, family and the VCS

"Sanctions are just the icing on the cake. That's when you're homeless and you're penniless, you're homeless, you're on the bottom of the bread line then they punish you for being on the bottom of the bread line and being homeless by taking your money off you. Therefore you can't better yourself, you can't get no further and your health starts going down the drain." (Ross)

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Final reflections

In policy terms, the conditionality and sanctions regime is not working well for homeless people

- sanctions are meant to be a last resort and a 'deterrent threat' - yet 39% have been sanctioned
- sanctions are not being imposed only on those who *will not* 'play by the rules' but on those who *cannot* play by the rules
- conditions are not always set according to circumstances and capabilities
- a sanction should only be imposed if the claimant fails to comply *without good reason* - what constitutes a good reason?
- people are being pushed further from, rather than closer to the labour market - not 'getting Britain working again'

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Recommendations

- DWP must ensure sanctions do not result in claimants' Housing Benefit being stopped, and report on progress in resolving this issue
- Conditionality requirements should be suspended until housing issues are resolved
- Work Coaches and contracted providers should exercise greater leniency when financial sanctions are likely to put an individual at risk of homelessness or destitution
- Employment support and conditionality requirements should be better tailored for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- DWP must fully evaluate the effectiveness of conditionality and sanctions in moving people into the labour market

Thanks

Report available at:

http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/sanctions_report_FINAL.pdf

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