

## "There's nothing": unemployment, attitudes to work and punitive welfare reform in post-crash Salford

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# 'There's nothing': Unemployment, Attitudes to Work and Punitive Welfare Reform in Post-Crash Salford

## Abstract

This article explores attitudes and barriers to work and the impact of punitive welfare reform in the city of Salford (Greater Manchester). Contextualising our discussion in relation to the contemporary landscape of inequality and social class in the UK, we draw attention to the trends towards the expansion of low paid work, precarity and stigmatisation, and highlight the need for more qualitative, geographically sensitive, studies of how these phenomena are being played out. Describing the economic context of the City of Salford and the current state of its labour market, we then present the findings from qualitative interviews with a sample of low income, mostly working-class participants, who describe their orientations towards employment, perceptions of the labour market, barriers to employment and interactions with punitive welfare reform. Ultimately, we conclude by noting that both strategies of neoliberal statecraft aimed at the reduction of the charitable state described by Wacquant are at play in Salford and that their result is a discouragement from claiming welfare and a recommodification of labour.

Key words: unemployment, punitive welfare reform, benefits sanctions, precarity, neoliberal statecraft

## Introduction

This article explores perceptions of the labour market, attitudes to work and experiences of the recent 'post-crash' welfare reforms in the UK upon a sample of low income, largely working-class residents in the specific geographical setting of the City of Salford (part of the Greater Manchester conurbation). It seeks to add to the growing critical literature on the causes and consequences of poverty in the UK, and the ways in which poverty has been exacerbated by what Wacquant (2009) would characterise as 'punitive' welfare reform. We begin by exploring the contemporary landscape of inequality and probing the rise of disciplinary or punitive welfare reform in this context. In the second part, we explore the local context of the City of Salford, noting Salford's worsening economic and employment position post-recession, and describing the methods used in this study. Finally, we present data from our small scale qualitative research project conducted in two neighbourhoods in Salford, organised around the themes of: work histories and attitudes to work; challenging labour

markets; barriers to work; navigating the welfare system (with particular reference to unemployment benefit); and the consequences of sanctions.

#### Rising Inequality, Cultural Offensives and Punishing the Poor

Over the course of the last decade, there has been a resurgence of interest, both popular and academic, in issues of social inequality and class in the UK. This followed the closing years of twentieth century when 'class' was deemed to be increasingly irrelevant to social thought (Atkinson, 2010), in turn concomitant with its effacement from political discourse (Fairclough, 2000). Clearly, the financial crisis of 2008 and the sustained period of austerity and welfare retrenchment that followed, have led to a renewal in questions of distribution, stratification and class. This has been fuelled by a growing recognition of the historically significant levels of inequality (also relative to other 'developed' nations) and stalling levels of social mobility - cf. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), the increasing 'precarity' of employment (Standing, 2010), inequities in the welfare system (Hills, 2015) and a profusion of cultural forms of class denigration (Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2013; McKenzie, 2015) that have been used to justify (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) what we, following Wacquant (2009) would describe as 'punitive welfare reform'.

Before seeking to elaborate upon this question of 'punitive welfare' reform, it is necessary to explore some of this context further. Firstly, the UK experienced absolute and relative increases in low-paid jobs during the last thirty years (Gregg and Gardiner, 2015). Moreover, Standing (2011: 8) has drawn attention to the increasing levels of explicit contractual insecurity, represented by the proliferation of employment intermediaries, temporary and 'zero-hour' contracts, and has noted that the emerging *precariat* class increasingly enjoy neither the trust relationships of the salariat nor the compensatory social contract of an earlier proletariat. While the trends towards (neo)liberalisation - that place the UK bottom of the European rankings for employment protection (Heyes, 2011: 646) - can be considered a generic societal feature impacting upon all occupational classes, it is known that in reality this insecurity disproportionately impacts upon the working-class (Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2004).

Nonetheless, it is known that throughout this period societal attitudes towards those at the bottom of the class structure have continued to *harden*, perhaps best evidenced by responses to the British Social Attitudes Survey over a near thirty-year period (Clery et al, 2013). Indeed there has been a growing recognition of the significance of class denigration within sociology for some time (Skeggs, 2004). This goes some way to explaining the rejection or dis-identification from class labels, readily apparent in the refusal of Savage et al's (2015) 'precariat' to engage in the largest survey of social class in Britain (which had purported to demonstrate their existence). Further, it is argued that the contemporary period marks an intensification of such cultural offensives. This can be seen in the 'weaponising' of specific symbolic representations of the 'feckless' and deviant poor allied to the false assertion that more generous welfare systems erode commitment to work, in order to articulate an 'anti-welfare commonsense' that justifies a political programme of increasing welfare conditionality (Jensen and Tyler, 2015).

Such constructions of the deficiencies of the working class have not gone uncontested. In particular, Tracy Shildrick, Rob McDonald and colleagues have conducted important work that seeks to challenge dominant stereotypes through a foregrounding of the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle (Shildrick et al, 2012). Arising from a dynamic understanding of poverty, this concept is attuned to explore the relationships between 'trigger events' and poverty transitions longitudinally, as well as capturing the realities of contemporary poverty far better than the right-wing mythologizing of 'cultures of dependency' and 'intergenerational worklessness' (MacDonald et al, 2013; see also Crisp et al, 2009). What their research crucially revealed is that even amidst geographically concentrated post-industrial decline and the proliferation of poor quality jobs, working-class participants remained firmly committed to work and their economic problems were primarily related not to finding jobs, but to keeping them - due to contractual instability, funding, caring commitments, occupational illness and accidents, and conflicts with employers (Shildrick et al, 2012: 127-136). Nevertheless, the failure of such research to make an impact on the most recent articulations of public policy is starkly apparent (Lehtonen, 2018).

It is our contention that this is the context within which we must understand recent trends in welfare reform and especially those that have taken place since 2010. From the 1980s onward the neoliberal turn sought to place greater onus on citizens rather than the state as attention focused on (changing) behavioural aspects of the unemployed themselves. Whilst the New Labour governments (1997-2010) did recognise area disadvantage through New Deal for Communities policies, they also made behavioural welfare conditionality, under the banner of balancing 'rights with responsibilities' (Etherington and Daguere, 2015), a significant plank of their welfare reform (Dwyer and Wright, 2014). This included enforcing labour market participation by closing down alternatives, largely through reducing benefit levels (Heyes, 2011: 649) and increasing benefit 'conditionality' – including mandatory participation in 'workfare' type schemes - and associated sanctions (Watts et al, 2014).

The recent welfare reforms of the Conservative - Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-15) can be seen as an expansion and intensification of behavioural conditionality. For example Universal Credit, introduced as a key element of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and due to be fully rolled-out in 2018, can apply conditions to claimants already in work (Dwyer and Wright, 2014: 30). We also argue these reforms - that include the strengthening of the system of 'claimant commitments' jobseekers must adhere to, and greater financial sanctions for those deemed to be failing in their mandated commitments (Loopstra et al, 2015) - represent a ratcheting-up of the level of punitiveness. Indeed we concur with Wiggan (2015: 372) that: 'The Coalition's employment schemes are positioned as part of a broad strategic intervention by the state to erode labour power autonomy in response to "refusals" of poor quality jobs' or what Greer (2016) refers to as the 'recommodification of labour'. All of this would fall under the rubric of what Wacquant (2009: 213-214) has termed 'neoliberal statecraft', a set of technologies aimed at the disciplining of labour and reducing the 'charitable state' through stigmatisation, shrinking of budgets and multiplication of bureaucratic obstacles (Wacquant, 2009: 50). We contend that these have been particularly significant in shaping the opportunities for employment and experiences of welfare for our participants in Salford.

Much of the research that has explored Coalition welfare reform and its ideological underpinnings (in terms of motivations to work) in post-crash UK contexts, has done so in terms of the analysis of large-scale quantitative data - for example, Dunn et al's (2014) supposed exposé of voluntary unemployment or Carter and Whitworth's (2017) analysis of the detrimental impact of contemporary 'work activation' policies on wellbeing. Hills (2015: 229) reproduces analysis from the Institute of Fiscal Studies that notes the broadly regressive distributional impacts of net changes to taxes and benefits, while also noting the likely scale of benefit erosion (2015: 238-239). Clearly, the greatest impact will be on low income households and communities disproportionately reliant upon welfare, and the reforms will therefore have distinct geographical impacts (Hamnett, 2011). This is evidenced in Beatty and Fothergill's work (2013) and has long been argued to be the result of the legacy of deindustrialisation and its consequences, rather than differing motivations in the desire for employment. This latter point has been explored quantitatively by Baumberg, whose study on the stigma of claiming benefits contradicts 'dependency culture' predictions that residents of high density claimant areas will exhibit low levels of stigma (Baumberg, 2016).

While there has been some qualitative work exploring attitudes to work in the post-crash context (Crisp et al, 2009; Shildrick et al, 2012) and the impact of punitive welfare reform (Patrick, 2014), we want to attempt to answer Hamnett's (2011) call for greater engagement with particular geographies of (un)employment and welfare. Particularly given our case-study site's history of far-reaching deindustrialisation, its location in the heart of one of the UK's largest conurbations, its worsening economic and employment position post-2008 recession, and the evidence of the sheer scale of certain forms of conditionality in operation (with between 15 and 23 per cent of all Job Seekers Allowance claimants being referred for a sanction between April 2013 and March 2014 - Connors, 2016: 25). That our interview data was produced immediately following the national peak in the use of benefits sanctions in early 2014 (Webster, 2016) only increases its relevance.

Case Study Site and Methods

Salford is a city in the North-West of England nestled within the Greater Manchester conurbation. It has endured protracted deindustrialisation from the early twentieth century onwards. Recent restructuring in response to the decline of the local economy has been premised upon emerging notions of an 'entrepreneurial city', with Salford City Council embracing business and culture-led regeneration through the transformation of the former docklands into Salford Quays. Despite the much feted 'post-industrial transformation', the city remains one of the most deprived local authorities in the UK (Roy, 2010), and Salford's employment landscape has worsened since the 2008 recession. Official labour market data indicates that job density in Salford has declined since the 2008 recession. In 2000, Salford's job density was 0.87, well above the UK average of 0.79. By 2016 this had fallen to 0.80, below the UK average of 0.84. A broad polarisation at the top and bottom of the occupational structure at the expense of intermediate occupations is also evident. Examining SOC10 occupational categories (categories 1-9), 'managerial, professional, technical' sectors (categories 1-3) reveal the largest sectoral increase, accounting for 37.3 percent of all jobs in Salford in 2016 (within these categorisations the trend for high-end category 1 professional occupations associated with the new economy has remained static). The lowest ranked occupations - 'elementary jobs' (category 9) - have risen from 12.6 percent in 2004 to 17.1 percent in 2016. This runs counter to the national trend (11.2 percent in 2004 to 10.7 percent in 2016). The post-recession period has also given rise to a marked increase in precarious employment. This is evident in increases in part-time working and a reduction in over-time. Furthermore, although the Office for National Statistics has only included an official measure of non-permanent employment since 2011 and the measure is beset by definitional problems (being based on self-assessment), it has nonetheless also recorded steady increases, from 3.3 per cent in 2011 to 5.8 per cent by 2015.

In terms of one of the two key vectors of austerity, there have been large reductions in the levels of public sector employment (which in its recent history Salford has been disproportionately dependent upon – Roy, 2010), and this has included over 1200 posts lost from the local authority

(Fitzgerald, 2016). These cuts, combined with private-sector jobs losses at large scale employers, including major banking and insurance firms, supermarkets, wholesalers and the local university, led to the city topping the list of 'toughest places' to find a job by late 2013 (Begum, 2013). In 2015 the unemployment rate (at 8.6 percent) was almost double 2004 levels, and yet the number of JSA claims fell towards the end of this period. The other key vector of austerity, the reductions in national welfare spending, has also had a pronounced impact on Salford. As Beatty and Fothergill (2013) note, in general, the more deprived a local authority the worse it is affected by these reforms. Of 379 local authorities Salford is the 24th worst affected, with an estimated net loss of £640 per working age adult per year. The cumulative impact of these changes, alongside the economic context outlined above, has led to a rise in the number of social housing tenants in arrears (9,500 or 37 percent by 2014) and landlord repossessions (FIPG, 2015).

To explore these issues further the authors conducted a small scale qualitative research project<sup>i</sup> in two neighbourhoods in Salford during the first six months of 2014. One of these neighbourhoods was in east Salford and the other was in one of the subsidiary towns further to the west. These locations were thought to be important due to the high-level of 'adverse decisions' recorded in relation to benefits sanction referrals in Salford (each neighbourhood being in the vicinity of a major Job Centre Plus site), over and above the rising national trend (9 percent in Salford, compared to 6 percent nationally) - as revealed by an FOI request in 2013<sup>ii</sup>. The key research method used in this study were in-depth qualitative interviews, with 28 interviews being undertaken with residents, who were sampled on a part opportunity basis, part theoretical basis. In terms of the former, the majority were recruited either through the personal networks of one of the authors or because they had some association with two community centres (one in each neighbourhood) that helped serve as gatekeepers. These associations ranged from utilising debt and welfare support services, 'job clubs' for accessing information on employment opportunities and working on their CVs, offender resettlement services for those coming out of prison, or simply as a mechanism for socialising and 'getting out of the house'. In terms of the more theoretical basis for the sampling,



participants were selected because they were either unemployed, claiming some form of benefit at the time of the interview or because they had recent experience of unemployment or undertaking low paid work.

Ultimately the sample was skewed towards men (17, compared to 11 women), those of middle age (the modal age range was 40-50 and three quarters of the sample were above 40) and was overwhelmingly 'White' (except for one Black Caribbean and two Black Africans). The sample was also overwhelmingly working-class. Of the 24 participants we have income data for, the modal income category was £0-5,000 per annum (14 responses) and only two reported an income of £25,000-30,000 p.a. (our highest income bracket). Of the 25 we have educational data for, almost half left school with no qualifications, but only five still had that status at the time of the interview. The modal level of attainment was secondary or equivalent (14), only three were educated to degree level and two to postgraduate level.

A further 7 interviews were undertaken with 'key informants', which included advice workers from the two community centres, a senior Citizens Advice Bureau official, a 'work coach' at a subcontractor delivering 'welfare-to-work' services on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions and a local trade union official. Interviews were semi-structured and covered a list of topics including: employment history, job-search practices, perceptions of education and training, travel-to-work, meanings of work, perceptions of opportunities, caring commitments and experience of claiming benefits. Some further questions at the end enquired into collective identifications and perceptions of societal fairness, which will be discussed in a future article. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with the majority lasting 50-60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, including the two community centres, cafes and participants homes and all were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were initially read by the research team to identify themes, and then entered into NVivo where upon initial codes were reduced into a small number of overarching themes. Standing's work on precarity (2011), Shildrick et al on the 'low pay, no pay'

cycle (2012) and Wacquant's understanding of a 'punitive turn' (2009) informed the analysis, and the qualitative interviews were also supplemented by secondary statistical and documentary sources. Given the small sample frame and part opportunity basis on which participants were recruited, we make no claims as regards representativeness. Yet we do argue that the material is illustrative of experiences of labour markets and welfare, and point to sources that allow for triangulation, where appropriate. All names of participants have been replaced with pseudonyms and locational data (beyond the most general within the city of Salford) has been removed. The research was conducted in line the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice and was authorised by a Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University.

#### Cultures of Work, Not Worklessness

Our first theme, echoing Shildrick et al's work in Teeside (2012: 79-100) and contesting the pathologising constructions of the working class that continue to hold such purchase in public policy (Lehtonen, 2018), was that the residents we interviewed evidenced a strong commitment to work. Most interviewees had been in employment for most their adult lives, with a modal average of 4-6 jobs and a maximum of 12. Only one participant, Dominic (43, community centre sample – discussed below), had never worked, due to a lifelong disability. While the necessity of earning money was clearly key, when asked about the attitudes towards work the most common refrain related to self-esteem and the need to keep oneself occupied, as noted by *Emma*, 67, an unemployed ICT tutor (income = £0-5k; community centre) and *Rebecca*, a 35-year-old stay at home mum (personal networks). But work was also more than just keeping busy. Jobs were meaningful to some participants because they provided them with knowledge that was useful and valued in their community (such as *Megan*, 19, personal networks and *Alice*, 50, community support worker), and because people (particularly men with histories of abuse, drug and alcohol dependency and imprisonment) felt they were 'paying back' into the system (i.e. *Billy*, 31, and *Jamie*, 24, offender resettlement group).

What was also particularly striking was the example of someone like *Alec* (43, job-club) who was too ill to work, but still expressed a desire to return to employment. Having not worked in three years and suffering sufficient recurrent health problems for his Job Centre Plus advisor to recommend that he would be better off on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), he nonetheless refused to give up hope that he can secure a job:

*Alec*: Hospital again, and that's why everyone is trying to get me on the sick. At the moment I'm unemployable but I don't care about that, [...] if someone is willing to give me that chance, that's all I want. That chance, because a[s a] carer, now I've got the qualifications for that; first aid, health and safety, I've got my food awareness, I've got level 1,2 and 3 NVQ, do you know what I mean?

*Alec* conceded that his likelihood of finding employment is low, but also refers to the increasing levels of conditionality around ESA in justifying his decision to remain on Job Seekers Allowance: 'The other side of that is, I'm not going to go on the sick just to be told three weeks later, "We're bringing you off it"'.

#### Challenging Labour Markets

Perceptions of the opportunities provided by the local labour market in Salford were overwhelmingly negative, with a majority of participants referring both to the lack of jobs and/or the poor quality of jobs that were on offer. *Jamie* (resettlement group) noted that it had taken him seven months of applying to secure a minimum wage, zero-hour contract with a building supplies outlet. *Jenny*, an advice worker who runs a 'job club' at a community centre in east Salford simply commented 'there's nothing'. When pressed on what kind of positions she was getting to hear of she remarked 'It's cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, factory. I get a lot of stuff coming through for CSCS [Construction Skills Certification Scheme] cards'.

Participants also noted that following the recession many more highly qualified individuals were competing for low skilled, low paid employment, with *Jack* (personal networks) referring to people with degrees working alongside him as a hospital porter. *Shell*, the highest paid (£25-30k) participant in this research and manager of a local care home (personal networks), commented that

since the recession she had seen an increasing number of applications from people 'who're very qualified in whatever field they've got, but they can't get jobs'. She noted that the impact of austerity on the local public sector meant that the national minimum wage was now the only possible going rate, given the squeeze on public finances and the diminishing margins of the private providers. Due to the levels of job competition locally, older residents such as *Harriet* and *Emma* felt that their age placed them at a disadvantage.

Beyond the simple competition for jobs, key informants also believed that the weak labour market had strengthened the hand of employers vis-à-vis employees and encouraged poor (and in some cases illegal) employment practices. *Karim*, a solicitor working for a community centre in the town to the west of 'old Salford', explained that many of the employment rights cases he was now dealing with related to staff not being paid: 'they've been employed for one, two months, two weeks, three weeks, and never been paid. They've been told to go away; there is no more job for them'. While he felt that this was related to the competition for jobs in the city, it was also crucially related to the introduction in 2013 by the Coalition government of a £1200 fee to access employment tribunals. This is a dimension of neoliberal state-crafting aimed at the re-commodification of labour that has been relatively underexplored by academics (but see Busby and McDermont, 2016).

Furthermore, as noted above, there has been a significant increase in part-time and insecure working since the onset of recession, with *Ben*, the branch secretary of a large union branch, noting that underemployment was a 'massive issue'. As with Shildrick et al (2012: 116), we also found that leaving benefits to take up insecure work constituted a major risk for participants. *Elizabeth*, a welfare rights advisor at a community centre in the west of the city, explains:

If you work for an agency and they give you three hours' work one week you might still be entitled to your Job Seekers. The minute you go over the sixteen hours they cut everything which means you have to rapidly reclaim, which means you are without money, which means there are gaps in your housing benefit, which puts your tenancy at risk.

## Barriers to work

This next section considers barriers to employment. One such major barrier is ill-health, and this also extends to issues of mental health and depression (and this affected in some way *Alec, Dominic, Eugene, Marta, Zoe, Harriet, Billy, John, Emma* and *Lucy*). At the same time, mental health issues can also be a consequence as well as cause of unemployment, as Charlie (48), a youth worker in the city comments 'It's not easy for people who are unemployed. I think it's really, really difficult. It can be really, really demoralising'. Again mirroring the findings of Shildrick et al (2012: 147-151), we also found that work could be a major cause of ill-health, which could then have consequences for finding employment further down the line. For *Marta*, this meant having to give up a zero-hour cleaning job at a hotel 'because my body couldn't manage the work I was doing over there', *Lucy* (45, personal networks) injured her back picking up children while working as a teaching assistant, and *Kevin* (32, personal networks) spoke at length about the detrimental impact his work as a mechanic was having on his body. Furthermore, *Karim* noted that the state of the labour market encouraged employers to 'get rid' of older workers with health problems to employ younger and 'cheaper' staff. In some other instances, unemployment was clearly a result of complex inter-related factors, including issues with drug and alcohol dependency, (youth) offending and prison. The stigma of a criminal record could be a major barrier to securing employment, with six participants (from the offender resettlement and job club groups) reporting that this had been a problem for them. Lack of education, whilst not always a barrier to low-end occupations, was a major source of insecurity for some such as *Eugene* (25, resettlement group): 'It kills your self-esteem. Do you know what I mean?'

The gendered division of unpaid and paid work, compounded by faulty assumptions of 'gender sameness' within contemporary welfare policies of 'activation' and conditionality (Ingold and Etherington, 2013), created further barriers to work for several female participants. As well as women's propensity to work part-time, a paid job's spatio-temporal proximity to the home was a significant additional consideration for mothers. Two of the eleven women we interviewed were

stay-at-home mums, while several others, including Marta (33), Katie (38) and Rebecca (33) reported difficulties in fitting work around childcare and other household chores.

Finally, transport and mobility were clearly problematic, given the spatio-temporal rhythms of our samples lives, their reliance on public transport, as well as more specific issues such as the fact that most employment agencies are located in Manchester city-centre (2 or 4 miles from the two neighbourhoods in question).

### Navigating the Welfare Regime

Participants reported overwhelmingly negative experiences of the Coalition government's increased use of bureaucratic obstacles, particularly the intensified sanctioning and surveillance via the Claimant Commitment and Universal Jobmatch (Fletcher and Wright, 2017: 8). While only 12 of the 28 participants were unemployed at the time of the interview, others had recent experience of unemployment, or reported on the interactions of friends and family with the unemployment benefit regime.

As part of the reforms inaugurated by the Coalition government in 2010, job seekers are now required to sign a claimant commitment (a marked intensification in terms of conditionality on the Job Seeker's Agreement that was first introduced in 1995), which includes details of their availability for work and work-seeking activity (Etherington and Daguerre, 2015: 19). There is a good deal of evidence, both from the key informants interviewed for this research, and in other research conducted in Salford (Connors, 2016) that claimants are often asked to sign agreements that place unrealistic expectations upon them, with little understanding of their legal rights. Stay-at-home mum Amy (35) explained the problems she encountered in navigating the paperwork for her benefits claims for Income Support: 'It's a nightmare. The forms are really hard to understand. I can understand why some people just don't even bother filling them in, just give up and think, "I'm not even going to claim for it," they make it virtually impossible'.

The breaking of these agreements will result in sanctions and are occurring at a point at which Legal Aid has been substantially cut. Key informant *Martin*, a senior CAB official, suggests this is a deliberate government strategy:

[...] people have got access to us in terms of preparing legal arguments, etc, which many people won't have now because they've withdrawn legal aid funding. So, that's no accident. I think that's probably a key factor: the correlation between sanctions increasing nationally, the lack of challenges nationally, and the withdrawal of legal aid funding. It's almost as though it is a pre-conceived [...]

Participants also frequently reported negative interactions with Job Centre staff, with *Jamie* (24) reporting that they felt staff looked down upon them and were seeking excuses to sanction them. Indeed, one Job Centre worker was named across multiple interviews: 'I believe he's been threatened a few times, I think he's been hit a couple of times as well by people [for] talking to them like shit' (*Reggie*, job club). Nonetheless, there was also an understanding by a key informant (*Elizabeth*) that staff are also under a great deal of pressure, which led to them exercising discretion in particular ways.

In terms of the claimant commitment, for those subject to it, work search requirements tend to range between 10 and 25 jobs per week, which must be logged through the Universal Jobmatch website - a site which allows staff to monitor all claimants' online job search. *Jimmy* (51, community centre) was towards the top end and he estimated that he had to spend upwards of five hours a day looking and applying for jobs. *Some* participants, including Alec and advice worker Jenny, did not believe Universal Jobmatch contained viable jobs on its site and was primarily utilised as a panoptic tool of state surveillance (cf. Fletcher and Wright, 2017). Alec surmises:

It's like that Universal Jobmatch site, that's not even a real site, anyone will tell you that. That's just put up there for the job centre to see that, "Oh well, at least he does apply for it." [...] I don't think one person in this country has ever got a reply back from one of them, never. It's a load of rubbish that.

These anecdotal suspicions chime with evidence submitted to Parliament that was unable to identify any job outcomes from Universal Jobmatch (cited in Fletcher and Wright, 2017: 9-10).

The requirements of the claimant commitment created several problems for participants, which were mainly centred on issues of computer literacy and access. Salford has relatively low levels of ICT ownership and literacy, creating a significant barrier to accessing Job Centre services that have migrated online<sup>iii</sup> (see Green et al, 2012). As *Mikey* (48) notes: '[...] So, everything is on computer. So if you are not good on the computer or you don't have one, you're really knackered really, because you have got to go to the café, if there is one, and go from there'.

Indeed, most of the unemployed we interviewed were reliant upon cafes, libraries, and community centre-based 'job clubs' to complete their required job search activity. This created further problems for in terms of transport to access such facilities, as well as financial consequences in the form of sanctions when such facilities were unavailable. One example of this scenario was provided by *Martin*:

One client immediately springs to mind who used a couple of different centres, and over the Christmas and New Year period, they were his only access to a computer in order to do his Universal Jobmatch. Of course, over the Christmas and New Year period, they weren't available. They were closed for two and a half weeks. He got sanctioned because he hadn't [completed enough job searches].

While in this instance the sanction was overturned on appeal, surging demand for CAB services coupled with cuts to services and more widespread reliance on volunteers increases the likelihood that others will not be so fortunate.

*Martin* at the CAB also relayed that he had encountered a significant number of complaints in relation to individuals who did not have English as a first language and did not have their claimant commitments explained to them clearly, or were not provided with an appropriate interpreter. Most astonishingly, *Sofia*, who worked for a large regional contractor delivering services on behalf of the DWP, reported that she was frequently forced to converse with clients by sitting in front of a computer screen and using Google Translate.

The overall impression we gained from our interviews was that individuals were being sanctioned for the most trivial of reasons, with *Elizabeth* reporting the case of a man who had been



unable to attend a 'work focused interview' because his advisor was at a funeral and *Martin* a case where an individual was sanctioned for being late for a Job Centre meeting when he was actually waiting in the queue. Our contention, in line with other research in the same locality (Connors, 2016) is that this is indicative of the pressure that is being placed on Job Centre staff to sanction individuals, regardless of official denials in relation to 'targets' (see PCS, 2014).

#### Sanctions: Destitution, Despair, 'Discouragement' and Discipline

The ultimate consequences of these experiences upon our sample were four-fold: significant increases in the hardships faced by our participants; leading to heightened levels of stress, depression and anxiety; discouragement from claiming welfare; and discipline for those in low paid work. In terms of increasing hardship this was most evident in an inability to purchase basic household provisions as result of the impact of benefits sanctions, forcing several of our participants onto temporary reliance upon food banks to survive during the periods in which they had been sanctioned. *Dominic*, for example, who due to his disability has spent a *lifetime* on Incapacity Benefit, has *never* worked, has a serious dependency on amphetamine, was nonetheless found fit to work following a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) in 2012, transferred to JSA and has subsequently been sanctioned twice for failing to comply with his claimant commitment, leaving him dependent upon food parcels. Such destitution is compounded by the failure of Job Centre staff to automatically notify claimants of access to hardship payments, an issue raised by every advice worker we interviewed (also noted by the Oakley Review, 2014).

As a result of being sanctioned, participants understandably reported a psychological impact. *Dominic* and *Eugene* simply described the experience as 'hard', with the latter referring to having to borrow money commercially. Others reported an increased reliance on friends and family, which could place strain on relationships. Advice workers like *Jenny* reported individuals breaking down, 'crying' and 'shaking' during support meetings, and *Joe* (57, job club) and *Sofia* described the

police being called to Job Centre offices more frequently due to people 'kicking off'. *Sofia* went on to say: 'I think it's a state now where sanctions is where someone presses a button and destroys a life and families' lives. That's what it is'. She noted that some clients of the Work Programme provider she was employed by had reported suicidal feelings, but felt their 'work coaches' to be insensitive to the stresses they were under.

The result of all of this is that increasing numbers of people are being discouraged from presenting themselves as unemployed (see also Connors, 2016):

*Ferdinand*: [F]riends have told me this is their situation, because of this that they've stopped. The amount of jobs they have given them now to search is too much, they don't want to do anymore. (48, unemployed)

*Jimmy*: I would tell them to fucking sling it. So I wouldn't get that [treatment] in a court of law [...] They wouldn't charge me for something like being late. (51, unemployed)

Such anecdotal evidence is borne out at a national level where Loopstra et al (2015) have found only a small proportion of those exiting welfare due to sanctions have gained entry into employment. *Jenny* argued discouragement was a conscious strategy to 'massage' the unemployment figures: 'It was like a deliberate thing to get the numbers down, if you understand what I mean [...] Because it's classed [as if] they've got jobs if they come off it'.

What our study provides is some evidence on how these individuals may be surviving loss of basic income and destitution. Repeating the claim made by many of our participants that Job Centre staff were working to targets, *Peter* argued:

[...] they [the government] are saying there are several hundred thousand people in the north-west back in work. No they're not; you're simply not giving them benefits. [...] They're living on the street. They're living hand to mouth. They're borrowing, begging and stealing. They're not in work. They're just not being paid any money.

Indeed, a notable minority of participants referred to the ways in which sanctions were forcing people towards offending (in some cases re-offending), such as *Jamie, Jenny, Zoe, Mikey and Billy*:

*Mikey* (job club): I mean we knew that during that period they would just go out stealing [...] because they had no choice.

*Billy* (resettlement group): [...] missed one appointment and then they are getting sanctioned [...] so you can't even eat, so then it turns you back to crime.

At the same-time, for others, perceptions of the increasing punitiveness of the welfare system strengthened their commitment to keep or acquire *any* job, as noted by *Shell* in reference to the increasing numbers applying for low-paid care sector work. This is also evident in *Jack* feeling trapped in his current occupation (as a zero-hour subcontracted hospital porter), *Joe* contrasting the period of unemployment he was facing at the time of the interview with the experience he faced in the late 1980s: 'It was hard, but it didn't seem as hard as it is now' and *Kevin* noting: 'I know it's getting harder and harder to do it now, to just sign on'. Beyond more explicit references this was also hinted at in more general discussions of financial struggles and in the awareness by some participants of the heightened levels of cultural denigration to which the unemployed are now subject.

#### Conclusion: Punishing the Poor in Salford

We have shown in this article that the sample of mostly working-class people we interviewed in a city that has a significant history of unemployment, underemployment and deprivation, are being greatly affected by the recent welfare reforms inaugurated under the Coalition government and continued by the Conservative government elected in 2015 (echoing the findings of Connors' – 2016 – local study). We have also discussed the limited opportunities for social inclusion through work, given the polarised nature of occupational growth in the city and compounded by increases in unemployment, and precarious work. Nonetheless, echoing the findings of Shildrick et al (2012), we have shown that our participants remained committed to work, even given health and other personal problems. At the same time, participants were also keenly aware of the tough labour market that exists in Salford, particularly since the onset of the 2008 recession, and faced various barriers to accessing employment, centred on domestic responsibilities, lack of qualifications, (ill)health, drug and alcohol dependency and possession of a criminal record.

Finally, we have shown the ways in which recent post-crash welfare reforms have led to perverse decisions on the ground that deepen poverty and provoke feelings of insecurity, stress and despondency. Against the backdrop, it is worth noting that Salford, at the time of the research, was witnessing rapid increases in the use of foodbanks (Glendinning, 2014) and rough-sleeping (Ottwell and Fitzgerald, 2015).

Given what we have found in this research, it seems clear that the conditional welfare policies that have been rolled out in the last six years have sought to re-commodify labour (Greer, 2016), by significantly impinging on the capacity of workers to refuse the offer of low skilled, low paid employment. Responsibilities for finding employment have been drastically shifted onto benefits recipients, irrespective of localised areas of precarity and unemployment. In Salford two potent techniques of neoliberal statecraft used to reduce the charitable state - shrinking budgets and multiplying bureaucratic obstacles (Wacquant, 2009: 50) – have been particularly evidenced, through public sector jobs losses and reductions in welfare spending, and in the increasingly Kafkaesque operation of the official benefits regime. The major effect has been in reducing the claimant count and disciplining those in work, rather than ‘encouraging’ people into employment (see Loopstra et al, 2015). With the full roll-out of Universal Credit scheduled for the end of 2018 and estimates already suggesting that 3.2 million working families will be on average £48 a week worse off, with 600,000 people no longer entitled to *any* support (Brewer et al, 2017), further research on the government’s unquestioning advancement of behavioural conditionality will be necessary to evaluate the impact of a growing population unable to find work and cast adrift by the disappearing welfare state.

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<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/no\\_of\\_sanctions\\_imposed\\_per\\_mont#incoming-383497](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/no_of_sanctions_imposed_per_mont#incoming-383497) – accessed 22/09/2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Initial benefits claims are made online and the 6,000 or so terminals available in UK Job Centres are woefully inadequate to meet demand.