

Review Protocol

Labour market and wider impacts of benefit sanctions: A scoping review

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The purpose of this protocol is to describe the rationale, aims, research questions and planned methodology of the scoping review. Broadly in line with Tricco et al. (2018) we have developed a detailed plan of action with a view to follow a clear, consistent and transparent process. The scoping review is envisaged as an exploratory exercise aimed at identifying and mapping existing national and international quantitative evidence on the labour market and wider impacts of benefit sanctions for people on unemployment and related benefits. This review is intended to identify the nature of the evidence base and key characteristics of studies which investigate the impacts of benefit sanctions. Furthermore, this review aims to investigate features of the research designs and methodological approaches adopted by the selected studies.

Rationale

In recent decades, as part of an increasing shift towards active labour market and social policies, benefit sanctions have become a widespread intervention tool across advanced societies for those on unemployment benefits. Governments have increased both the intensity and scope of welfare benefit sanctions with the aim of encouraging working-age individuals to move off unemployment benefits and return to work. Entailing a temporary reduction or interruption of benefit payments, sanctions are imposed on claimants who fail to meet specific conditions related to job search or work preparation. While initially aimed at people unemployed, more recently benefit sanctions have been extended to cover a wider range of population groups, including some of those inactive and/or with long-term sickness or disability. Existing reviews assessing the effects of sanctions have found some positive impacts on benefit exits and labour market outcomes, but also suggest that job quality is often poor and earnings are lower for sanctioned claimants. Evidence from qualitative research has drawn attention to a range of negative consequences for individual health and other social outcomes but, to our knowledge, the quantitative studies on such wider impacts have not been rigorously reviewed.

Aims

The present study sets out to systematically search for, identify and extract data from the existing national and international quantitative literature on the labour market and wider impacts of benefits sanctions. It does this by conducting a scoping review, a methodology which is intended to capture relevant studies on this topic by developing a systematic search strategy, study selection and data extraction process. The working-age population in receipt of unemployment related benefits is the primary focus for this study. We do not apply any restrictions on the outcomes as the main purpose of this study is to offer a comprehensive review of the outcomes reported by relevant studies.

Research questions

We aim to address the following research questions:

- What is the nature of the evidence base on the impacts of benefit sanctions?
- What outcomes have been reported by studies investigating the impacts of benefit sanctions, and over what time frames?
- What study designs have been used in studies of benefit sanctions?
- What information is available on the specific nature of the interventions involved (e.g. level of welfare provision, duration and severity of sanctioning)?
- Can we identify any patterns in the characteristics of benefit sanctions studies in relation to outcomes, study designs, national/regional contexts or targeted populations?

We will seek to use any such patterns identified to develop a typology of benefit sanctions studies which may then inform more refined research questions suitable for a full systematic review.

Methods

We draw on the seminal framework by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and more recent advancements (Levac et al. 2010; Peters et al. 2015) to develop and conduct the scoping review proposed by this study. When possible, we follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines developed for scoping reviews (Tricco et al. 2018) to ensure that a rigorous, consistent and transparent process is followed. Scoping reviews aim to answer broad questions and map the existing body of the literature on a particular topic. Scoping reviews can be used to inform subsequent systematic reviews, as they provide the baseline knowledge which enables researchers to establish the need to conduct a full systematic review and meta-analysis on a specific research question.

Search strategy

A search strategy has been developed iteratively in collaboration with the information scientist who is a member of the research team. The search strategy is based on an extended list of subject headings, keywords, terms and synonyms for benefit sanctions. We combine a search of major bibliographic databases used across the social and health sciences (e.g. ASSIA, SocINDEX, Scopus, EconLit, ERIC, British Education Index, MEDLINE, PsycINFO) with a hand search of key websites of relevant authors, research and policy

organisations (e.g. IZA, NBER, RePEc, SSRN, OECD). The results of the searches will be imported into Endnote and deduplicated.

Study selection: inclusion criteria

We have identified a preliminary list of inclusion criteria which may be subject to some modification in the course of study screening. Studies included must satisfy the following criteria:

- Focus on working-age recipients of unemployment related benefits in high income countries
- Sanctions applied to unemployment benefits and disability benefits for failure to comply with work search or other requirements for receiving benefits
- Quantitative analysis based on either experimental, quasi-experimental or observational design
- In English language
- Published between January 1990 and February 2019

Search results will be screened by one reviewer and a 20% sample will be checked by a second reviewer.

Critical appraisal

As this is not a systematic review, we will not conduct a full critical appraisal of each study. However, we will comment on the capacity of the study designs employed to support causal inference.

Data extraction

The research team will develop a data extraction form on an Excel spreadsheet which will be used to record the extracted data. The form will be tested and revised before being applied to ensure it captures all relevant information. To aid transparency and accuracy, a sample of study data extractions will then be checked by a second reviewer. The information extracted will be compared and discrepancies will be discussed. In case of divergent views, we will seek feedback from a third reviewer in order to reach consensus. Information to be extracted will include, but not be limited to:

- Publication details (e.g. publication year, publication type)
- Type of welfare benefits claimed (e.g. unemployment, disability)
- Features of the national or regional context for the benefit system and other contextual information such as political and economic conditions
- Characteristics of participant groups (age groups, gender, employment status, duration of unemployment, income groups)
- Type of outcome measures used (e.g. welfare exit, employment status, duration of employment, earnings, deprivation, health status, crime participation, household income, educational attainment measures) and whether outcomes are measured in the short- or longer-term

- Type of sanctions (e.g. whether interruption or reduction of welfare benefit payments, level of reduction, duration, reason for sanctioning). Other information about the prevailing welfare and sanction system (e.g. warnings prior to sanctions).
- Characteristics of research design (e.g. experimental, quasi-experimental, observational design) and methodologies applied (e.g. randomized controlled trials, time-to-event models, fixed and random effects models, propensity score matching, instrumental variables, regression discontinuity designs, differences-in-differences models) and characteristics of control groups if recorded.

Presentation of the results

Since the aim of the scoping review undertaken for this study is to identify and map existing international quantitative evidence on the impacts of benefit sanctions, we plan to conduct a descriptive analysis of the evidence base by exploring how this varies by study characteristics. We will tabulate the study characteristics and seek relevant patterns in the data to inform the development of a typology of benefit sanctions studies based on study characteristics such as population, outcome and/or study design.

Dissemination outcomes

We plan to disseminate the results of the review through one or more academic articles in the fields of social policy and public health. Target journals include *Journal of Social Policy* and *Social Science & Medicine*. We also aim to submit abstracts for conferences of both national and international academic associations such as Social Policy Association (SPA) and European Network for Social Policy Analysis (ESPAnet). We will also disseminate the results among relevant policy audiences, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, the Work and Health Unit, and the new Scottish Social Security Agency.

References

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