

The realities of living on welfare are significantly different from government and media characterisations

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Ruth Patrick considers the extent to which there is a (mis)match between government and media rhetoric and the lived experiences of those directly affected by welfare reform. Her research demonstrates the very hard 'work' which 'getting by' on benefits entails, 'work' which serves to counter characterisations of claimants as passive and inactive. She argues that attending to the lived experiences of welfare reform is critical in helping us to understand the day-to-day realities of 'getting by' in contemporary Britain.



2014 has been a year in which 'welfare', welfare reform, and critical analyses of the lives of those who rely on benefits for most or all of their income have consistently demanded media, political and public attention in the UK. Whether it's the explosion of what some describe as '[Poverty Porn](#)', debates over the merits of the latest proposals to finally 'cure' '[welfare dependency](#)', or, most recently, discussions about [explanations for the growing demand](#) for food banks, 'welfare' has consistently been big news. In the popular media and political discussions which accompany these debates, there is often an emphasis on ideas of benefits as a 'lifestyle choice' and characterisations of benefits reliance as an inactive and inherently negative state.

Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne has spoken of claimants '[sleeping off a life on benefits](#)', while Secretary of State for the Department of Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, repeatedly describes out-of-work claimants '[languishing on welfare](#)'. These characterisations draw heavily on binary distinctions between 'hardworking families' and those relying on benefits, with the 'strivers' and 'shirkers' dichotomy, one strand of a contemporary re-working of very old distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' populations.

What is often missing from these characterisations is the lived experiences of those who rely on benefits for all or most of their income. Admittedly, the explosion of 'Poverty Porn' does purport to provide such firsthand accounts. However, these are mediated by editing processes aimed at generating watchable, controversial content; processes which perhaps do not lend themselves to detailed pictures of the [lived realities](#) of 'getting by' on benefits during times of welfare reform.

Since 2010, I've been [conducting small-scale research](#) which has sought to explore these lived realities, with an explicit aim of considering the extent of (mis)match between Government and media rhetoric and lived experiences for those directly affected by welfare reform. By speaking to single parents and young jobseekers affected by the extended welfare conditionality and sanctions regime, as well as disabled people being moved off Incapacity Benefit and onto Employment and Support Allowance, I have been able to explore experiences of both welfare reform and the day-to-day realities of reliance on benefits in Britain today. Over a two year period, I interviewed participants three times, enabling me to explore both the absence and presence of change in people's accounts as the welfare reforms took effect and individuals negotiated complex relationships with benefits and paid employment.

What this [research has demonstrated](#) is the very hard 'work' which 'getting by' on benefits entails, 'work' which is not represented in government and media characterisations of claimants as passive and inactive. This 'work' includes very tight budgeting practices, frequently having to make tough choices (such as to heat or eat), as well as creative ways of trying to eke out a little extra income, for example by scavenging for scrap in nearby streets. People repeatedly spoke of shopping daily so as to take advantage of the reduced shelves, and going to several shops in order to get the best deals. Parents often went without in order to ensure their children were well looked after. As single parent Chloe explained:

“I go without my meals sometimes. I have to save meals for me kids. So I’ll have a slice of toast and they’ll have a full meal.”

There was also substantial evidence of participants engaging in other forms of socially valuable contribution such as volunteering and caring. Adrian, a young Jobseeker, described why he valued the voluntary work he did at the homeless hostel where he used to live:

“I proper love it. You feel satisfaction as well if someone’s coming in really hungry. Give them some food, at least they’ve eaten for the night.”

With the Government’s endless emphasis on paid work as the primary responsibility of the dutiful citizen, these important forms of contribution often go unrecognised and under-valued. Importantly, too, the whole thrust of the Government’s welfare reform approach, like New Labour’s before it, places policy emphasis on moving people from ‘welfare dependency’ into paid employment, which can cause significant problems for those who want to prioritise these other forms of contribution.

The welfare reform policy agenda, with its sustained emphasis on welfare conditions and sanctions also suggests that people need the threat of sanctions to encourage – even compel them – to make the transition from benefits reliance to paid employment. The emphasis is placed firmly on the supply-side of the labour market, on the steps individual claimants need to be compelled to take to become employable, and to move into paid work. Repeatedly, a contrast is drawn between ‘hard working families’ and ‘welfare dependents’, with the latter needing these tough interventions to be ‘responsibilized’ into hard working citizens.

But, this research, like so much of the literature in this field (see, for example, [recent articles](#) on this blog) questioned the salience of such static groupings, instead finding participants with strong aspirations to work, where this was a realistic goal. It also found individuals who typically had worked in the past, with several moving in and out of work, during the time of the research, characteristic of the [low-pay, no-pay cycle](#). Those who were not currently in paid employment had often internalised negative characterisations of claimants, with inevitable consequences for their self-confidence, self-esteem, and ironically future job prospects. Sam, a young jobseeker and recent care leaver explained why she wanted a job:

“I need a job; because I’m sick of scrounging. That’s how I think of it anyway, I’m sick of scrounging.”

When asked about the idea of benefits as a lifestyle choice, participants in this study were angry, even disbelieving, of the notion that they would ‘choose’ to rely on out-of-work benefits, instead emphasising the various factors, often linked to impairments, caring responsibilities and demand-side barriers to paid employment, which had led to their current situation. As single parent, Sophie put it:

“People don’t choose to live on benefits – it’s not our choice. It’s just the way that things have happened. We don’t choose to live on benefits, we don’t want to live on benefits.”

Young jobseeker James described why, for him, being on benefits would never be a choice

“[benefits] is enough for you to live off o’, but you haven’t got one bit of luxury left in your life. You’re

| *not living, you're existing. And that's how it feels.*"

Attending to the lived experiences of welfare reform is critical in helping us to understand the day-to-day realities of 'getting by' in contemporary Britain. These realities are significantly different from the government and media characterisations, with inevitable consequences for the likely success of the ongoing programme of welfare reforms. In particular, these realities undermine the logic for a pervasive emphasis on welfare conditionality, while also hinting at the very real financial hardship, and emotional and relational damage caused by welfare reform. If we want to understand more about benefits, and how processes of welfare reform are impacting on people, it is essential that we place far more emphasis on *listening* to what those directly affected have to say.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [BurnAway](#) CC BY 2.0

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