

Inaccurate, exploitative, and very popular: the problem with ‘Poverty Porn’

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With politicians, media, and much of public opinion already framing welfare as a problem, what is the impact of television shows that claim to ‘expose’ the daily lives of claimants? [Ruth Patrick](#) draws on her [latest book](#) to explain the mismatch between such portrayals and claimants’ realities. She writes that while some of Britain’s poorest are being exploited for entertainment, the impact of those portrayals is anything but entertaining.



Ongoing [cuts to social security provision](#) take place against a context in which ‘welfare’ is continually derided. The use of the Americanisation welfare rather than social security is itself a [linguistic device](#) that operates to narrow our analytical attention (and critique) onto a small proportion of beneficiaries: those in receipt of out-of-work state support. Focusing on the ‘problem’ with ‘welfare’ neglects the extent to which the majority of us receive and rely on various forms of social welfare, with the social security system – properly understood – a system that [benefits and supports us all](#).

Today, it is possible to speak of a framing consensus on ‘welfare’ that sees mainstream politicians, media coverage, and much of public opinion united in a view of ‘welfare’ as necessarily and inevitably problematic. This consensus creates a climate in which those who receive out-of-work benefits are assumed to belong to a deficit population. Claimants are then judged to require tough new measures to activate them from a passive state of ‘welfare dependency’ into paid employment, where they might enter the ranks of the much-lauded ‘hard working majority’.

As [Tracey Jensen has argued](#), this characterisation of ‘welfare’ is bolstered and sustained by a ‘machine of welfare commonsense’. This machine – which can be visualised as a military tank careering determinedly forward and flattening alternative portrayals in its wake – is driven by mainstream politicians and the majority of the media. For example, we have seen David Cameron [describe benefit claimants](#) ‘sitting on their sofas waiting for their benefit cheques to arrive’ and tabloid headlines screaming: ‘[Party is over for benefits skivers](#)’.

The recent explosion in ‘Poverty Porn’ – reality television shows that promise to shed light on the day-to-day lives of Britain’s benefit claimants and those living in poverty – is another important ingredient in the machine of [welfare commonsense](#). Television shows such as *Benefits Street*, *Skint*, *On Benefits and Proud*, and even *The Great Big Benefits Wedding* and *Benefits: Too Fat to Work* invite the viewer into benefit claimants’ homes and day-to-day lives to watch how ‘they’ live. The observation of ‘them’ by ‘us’ immediately sets up and works with existing divisions between ‘strivers’ and ‘shirkers’. As the ‘hard working majority’ watch these very popular shows, they are able to see for themselves the lives and choices made by ‘welfare dependents’, the ‘other’, the ‘shirkers’.

While television executives [defend their shows](#) as providing a realistic account of life on benefits in Britain today, it is in fact a highly edited and sensationalised account, and one which mobilises stereotypical ‘images of welfare’. This is perhaps best characterised by the opening captions for the first series of *Benefits Street*, which featured sofas on the pavement, men on streets drinking cans of lager, and women smoking cigarettes on their doorsteps. This imagery neatly fits with a narrative that seeks to ‘other’ and problematise those who receive out-of-work benefits, but it is an



imagery not necessarily aligned with the [day-to-day realities](#) of many claimants' lives.

Over the past six years, I have been [exploring the lived experiences](#) of poverty and welfare reform, through repeat interviews with a small group of out-of-work benefits recipients. Following individuals over time, it has been possible to explore the extent of the (mis)match between the popular imagining of 'welfare' and everyday realities. The individuals I spoke to dismissed the notion of benefits as a lifestyle choice, and instead pointed to the very hard 'work' that being on benefits and getting by in poverty demands. Many of the individuals I spoke to watched shows such as Benefits Street, and were concerned about the dominant characterisation presented. As Kane* put it:

I watched Benefits Street, I think it were like 'Poverty Porn', that's what you call it isn't it. Basically trying to make them look like dickheads...I think people definitely thought they're all scrounging bastards after that. I think that's the reason they did it really.

Sam also felt uneasy after watching these shows:

I don't like how [people on benefits] are portrayed. Sometimes I think the government leans on the media to show people in a negative light... [These shows] feed people's negativity...[People] like their negativity to be fed because they need something to hate...it gives the rich and the upper and middle classes...something to hate.

Sam argued that 'Poverty Porn' serves a particular function by giving people "something to hate". She felt that politicians are perhaps deliberately using such programmes to promote negative attitudes towards 'welfare', something also [suggested](#) in academic commentaries.

The [research](#) also found widespread experiences of benefits stigma, with individuals often feeling and talking very negatively about their own benefits receipt. Indeed, Sam self-described as a 'scrounger' even though she was a young care leaver actively seeking paid employment at the same time as setting up her first independent home. Benefits stigma included the experience of [claims stigma](#), where the process of claiming and receiving benefits is itself imbued with stigma and shame. Here, Poverty Porn was also seen to be playing a role. Adrian described its impact:

Even the job centre advisers, they watch the shows. That's how they view us, or that's how they get told to view us...[They treat me] like I'm one of them people on one of them shows. 'So, what have you been doing? Watching telly?', they act like that's what you do.

With the seemingly endless growth in 'Poverty Porn', the behaviours and lives of some of Britain's poorest are being very successfully and profitably repackaged into light entertainment. However, its impact on those who receive out-of-work benefits support is anything but entertaining. By perpetuating a popular – if inaccurate – imaging of 'welfare', such shows undermine support for social security and enable politicians to continue their programme of 'welfare reform'. A divisive climate of 'us' and 'them' is sustained, with members of the 'hard working majority' invited to judge and critique the lives of a 'welfare dependent' 'other'. It may be an imagining that the research evidence contradicts, but it is one with far-reaching purchase and power.

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity

Note: the above draws on the author's latest book *For Whose Benefit? The Everyday Realities of Welfare Reform* published by Policy Press.

About the Author

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