

While benefits stigma is undoubtedly pervasive across society, its nature and origins tend to be profoundly misconstrued

Ben Baumberg, Kate Bell and Declan Gaffney argue that there is widespread misunderstanding of public opinion on the welfare system. While benefits stigma is undoubtedly pervasive across society, its nature and origins tend to be profoundly misconstrued.



If you don't pay much attention to these issues – hell, even if you do – you probably think that the public has entirely lost its support for benefits claimants. That the perception is that most claimants are scroungers or even fraudulent. That we are embarrassed by the benefits system, and think that all benefits should be cut. And that people think claiming benefits is something you *should* be ashamed of.



But if you thought this, then you would be wrong. Most people do not think that that most claimants are fraudulent, false or scroungers – indeed, even most *Conservative* voters don't think this. Last time anyone checked (in 2003), a majority of people said they were proud of Britain's social security system. Even in 2011, a majority are in favour of *more* spending on benefits disabled people, carers, low earners and retired people, as one of us shows [here](#). And really very few people agree that claiming benefits is something you should be ashamed of: only 10-12% people agree (for each one of five benefits), while 78-80% disagree.

The reality of stigma

Yet this doesn't mean that attitudes haven't hardened or that benefits stigma in Britain doesn't exist – instead it shows that it takes a different form to what we might think. We detail all of this and more in our new report for Turn2us, [Benefits Stigma in Britain](#), based on a new IpsosMORI survey, a re-analysis of existing data, some focus groups, and an analysis of all newspaper articles on benefits since 1995. (The various findings below are taken from the report unless otherwise specified).

From these analyses, we find that benefits stigma is less about the shame you yourself attach to claiming; instead it's primarily about what we think *others* might think, and the way we'd be treated if we actually went to claim. And while part of this is about feelings of entitlement (which we return to below), at heart this is about whether people see us as 'deserving' or not – whether you would be seen as truly needy, as morally acceptable, and whether your claim seems your own fault or out of your hands.

And it's here that the problems lie. While most people don't think the majority of out-of-work claimants are outright fraudulent, our survey found that the average view was that one-in-four claimants were cheating the system – an order of magnitude higher than the officially, painstakingly checked figure. And it's this feeling that claimants are deserving that seems to have been falling in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The roots of stigma

So where is this perception of undeservingness coming from? One answer could be that it's driven by personal experience – but actually, it's very difficult for us to know how deserving the people we meet are. We included a novel question to test this out among those claiming disability-related benefits. Only one in five of them said that their disability is usually 'obvious to anyone when they see me in the street', while nearly twice as many said that people usually 'only know if I tell them'. Disability is more often hidden than easily visible.

Yet the [Sun's 'Beat the Cheat' campaign](#) earlier this year asked for whistleblowers to contact them if they see their neighbour “*who claim[s] to be too sick for work but enjoy sports and nights out down the pub*”. No wonder the overwhelming majority of calls to the [benefit fraud hotline](#) are wrong, instead accusing people who are fully entitled to their benefit.

So is it the media's fault? We've [written elsewhere](#) on coverage of benefits has changed since 1995, and how the media disproportionately focus on fraud (something that research shows just doesn't happen in Sweden and Denmark). Alongside our Turn2us report, we also produced a '[mythbuster](#)' that tries to correct some of the most common claims about benefits that are simply untrue.

We also found that negative coverage and personal experience can form a toxic combination – the highest perceptions of fraud were among those who live in a neighbourhood with many benefits claimants AND read a paper that represents claimants negatively. Given that deservingness is so difficult to literally 'see' in front of us, our view is that the newspapers we read influence how we see the deservingness of the people we meet.

Yet it's too easy just to blame newspapers for this. In fact, the biggest driver of newspaper coverage was the policy process – ministerial speeches, the passage of legislation, think-tank reports and the like. Tony Blair sought to 'make the welfare state popular again' through talking tough on benefits, but this seemed entirely counterproductive, making us *more* likely to think that the people around us were not genuine claimants (see [this](#)). A better alternative might be to talk about the [positive achievements](#) of the welfare state, and the enduring popularity of the contributory principle (as two of us discuss [here](#)).

For any party that did break from the mould – and if they did this in a way that chimes with the support for the benefits system that remains, as we started with – then they may even find a groundswell of support for it too.

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.

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