



**WE ALL DO.**

## **“Second class citizens”?**

### **The personal impact of the public debate on benefits**

**Kayleigh, 23** - *The worst part is, I feel I have to justify myself to people. What they don't realise is it isn't a choice, but it's something I rely on whilst I'm struggling with a debilitating condition and on a waiting list for treatment. I've worked in the past, and fully intend to again. I've never judged somebody for claiming and receiving a benefit - instead I've felt grateful that I don't need to claim.*

#### **1. Introduction**

There is a wealth of existing evidence about British public attitudes towards working age benefits and those who receive them. These data show that strong support for the principle of benefits<sup>1</sup> is tempered by cynicism about many of those who are supported by benefits; attitudes which have hardened over recent decades. NatCen's long-running British Social Attitudes survey, for example, found that the percentage of those agreeing that "most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one" rose from less than a third in the early 1990s to around two thirds for much of the 2000s. These more negative public attitudes coincided with a period during which there was intense media and political debate about benefits, much of which was highly negative.<sup>2</sup>

But although public attitudes on issues around benefits are relatively well understood, less is known about how these attitudes and the broader public debate impact on the lives of those who are supported by benefits. It is this personal impact resulting from the negative public rhetoric surrounding benefit claimants which this short piece of research aims to explore.

#### **2. Methodology**

*Who Benefits?* commissioned YouGov to survey people supported by any of the following benefits:

- Housing Benefit
- Employment and Support Allowance
- Incapacity Benefit
- Jobseeker's Allowance
- Tax credits
- Carer's Allowance
- Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payment

<sup>1</sup> YouGov polling for *Who Benefits?* in 2013 showed that eighty-one percent agree 'benefits are an important safety net to support people in need when they need help'

<sup>2</sup> Turn 2 Us (2012) *Benefits Stigma in Britain*

The polling took place on 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> July 2014, surveying 980 people who currently receive working age benefits or have done so in the past five years. This report focuses on the 461 respondents who currently receive benefits.

Benefits as defined in this paper are the range of working age benefits, available to people between school leaving age and state retirement age. Specifically, it does not include pension or pensioner benefits or Child Benefit. While those in receipt of these benefits clearly form a large and varied group, the working age population was chosen to reflect those commonly considered to be “on benefits” when the issue is debated.

Further important information about the group we surveyed can be found in the answers that people gave as to why they personally need support from benefits. While the results themselves may not be particularly unexpected, it is remarkable how rarely it is acknowledged in public debate about benefits that the reason most people need benefits are the fundamental issues of low pay, insufficient available work, disability and high housing costs.

**Table 1**

"You said that you are currently receiving/ have received working age benefits... Which, if any, of the following are reasons for this?"	
Not being able to work because of personal illness or disability	26%
Being unable to pay housing costs	20%
Not being able to find a job	18%
Having a low hourly wage	17%
Not being able to get enough hours of work	13%
Being unable to pay for living costs associated with having children	12%
Additional costs resulting from having an illness or disability	10%
Having caring responsibilities which meant that I couldn't work	9%
Being unable to pay for childcare responsibilities	4%

### 3. Summary of results

The survey found that a number of people supported by benefits:

- face verbal abuse;
- are turned away by landlords, employers and banks, and;
- say their confidence and self-esteem are harmed by worrying about what others think of them because they are supported by benefits
- say their mental health is harmed by worrying about what others think of them because they are supported by benefits

All of these impacts are the consequence of negative attitudes towards people receiving working age benefits<sup>3</sup>. It is important also to consider that many of those supported by benefits may also face negative public attitudes because they have a disability.<sup>4</sup>

The people we spoke to were also asked what would help them to need less support from working age benefits (*Table 3, below*). Again, it is important to see these in relation to the

<sup>3</sup> These attitudes are exemplified in the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey: NatCen (2014) 31<sup>st</sup> *British Social Attitudes Survey*

<sup>4</sup> Hardeep Aiden and Andrea McCarthy (2014) *Current attitudes towards disabled people*

discrimination people supported by benefits face. Taking the example of more affordable housing, 18% of respondents believed this to be key in needing less support; yet our poll also shows the discrimination people on benefits receive from landlords and letting agents. These problems are only worsened by the negative rhetoric surrounding benefits.

The following chapters look more closely at the poll's key findings.

## 4. Facing abuse

**Nicholas, 40** - *I get a lot of verbal abuse for being unemployed, being unemployed negatively impacts one's mental health, and has a negative effect on one's confidence and self-esteem.*

**Gary, 62** - *I have been verbally abused for not working although I am 62 years old and have lung and cardiac diseases.*

### Key Findings

- 15% of respondents had experienced verbal abuse because they claim benefits. Looking at all of those supported by working age benefits, this would be the equivalent of nearly 800,000 people.<sup>5</sup>
- 4% of respondents had experienced physical abuse because they claim benefits. Looking at all of those supported by working age benefits, this would be the equivalent of over 200,000 people.<sup>6</sup>

### Analysis

The polling found that 15% of respondents had experienced verbal abuse and 4% physical abuse because they received benefits. Disturbingly, the verbal and physical abuse is also experienced by the children of those who receive benefits. 10% of respondents thought their child/children had experienced verbal bullying because they were in receipt of benefits, and 6% physical bullying. This is clearly unacceptable and indicates that negative attitudes towards benefit recipients go beyond the individuals who claim, to affect their families and children.

As *Table 1* shows, people need support from benefits for reasons we can all understand: low pay, ill health, caring for someone. The relative lack of acknowledgement of these reasons in the public discussion about benefits, combined with the extreme stereotypes used by some politicians and some media outlets about those who are supported by benefits, offers an explanation as to why physical and verbal abuse of people for claiming benefits is so prevalent.

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<sup>5</sup> According to DWP statistics ([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/344650/stats-summary-aug14.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/344650/stats-summary-aug14.pdf)) as of February 2014, there were 5.3 million people on working age benefits. 15% of respondents had experienced verbal abuse. 15% of 5.3m is 795,000

<sup>6</sup> 4% of respondents had experienced physical abuse. 4% of 5.3m is 212,000

## 5. Affecting confidence, self-esteem and mental health

**Lynsay** - *Telling people that you're on benefits is embarrassing as it is. To tell them it's because you're too ill to work is worse. To then be asked why, and to say it's because you're mentally ill is even more negative. This caused much embarrassment and dented my self-confidence.*

*The image of people on benefits portrayed to people is grossly unrealistic - hardly any benefits claims are fraudulent, most people on benefits are living in poverty and the majority of people either want to work or are too ill to: the complete opposite of what most people believe. When everyone looks down on you as the dredges of society, you begin to internalise it and in turn this affects how you view yourself. Knowing you're too ill to work is a detriment to your confidence and faith in yourself anyway, but when people give you a look of pity or disgust when you say this, you feel even more worthless.*

### Key Findings

- 38% of people currently supported by benefits say their confidence and self-esteem is affected because they worry that the general public think negatively of them being on benefits
- 31% of people currently supported by benefits say their mental health is affected because they worry that the general public think negatively of them being on benefits

### Analysis

The emotional impact experienced by people supported by benefits, as a result of the way benefits are talked about, is so severe that it's damaging their confidence, self-esteem and mental health. These are all key factors that can play a part in helping people get back on their feet and needing less support from benefits.

Confidence, self-esteem and good mental health are all intrinsically linked with a person's ability to live a fulfilling life, especially in gaining and maintaining employment.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the emotional impact people are experiencing because of negative attitudes towards people supported by benefits further impairs many people's ability to address some of the reasons why they need support from benefits, creating a vicious cycle and making a positive outcome less likely.

The way this undermines people's progress towards recovering their health and finding employment results not only in a potential financial cost implication for both individuals and society, but also creates a clear moral imperative to tackle the damage being done by negative attitudes towards benefits.

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<sup>7</sup> See Coleman, N, W. Sykes and C. Grom (2013) *Barriers to employment and unfair treat at work: a quantitative analysis of disable people's experiences*

## 6. Turned away by landlords, employers and banks; excluded by friends, family and the community

**Anonymous, 28** - *I had countless experiences of calling letting agents to enquire only to be told that the landlords did not accept tenants on benefits, whilst other adverts on Rightmove, Zoopla etc simply stated in the advert text 'NO DSS'. This is incredibly demoralising to be completely excluded and in my opinion discriminated against without any knowledge of me personally and my circumstances. I was told by various letting agents that the reasons range from the diplomatically put 'insurance purposes' to the less diplomatic 'DSS tenants are viewed as more of a risk'. I found myself desperately pleading with letting agent staff that I am not a bad person, I will look after the house, etc. All trying to justify my request to be housed. I felt very judged and it was possibly the hardest and most desperate time of my life. I was viewed as a second class citizen because I am dependent on the benefits system.*

### Key Findings

Many people supported by benefits experience discrimination which counts against them when trying to access bank accounts, jobs and housing.

- 16% have been refused by landlords or letting agents to rent a property
- 18% have been treated less favourably by potential employers when seeking work
- 18% have had difficulty opening a bank account or accessing financial services

### Analysis

Help should be there for people when they fall on difficult times, and should support them to get by and live with dignity. But instead, the evidence shows that many people who need support from benefits are being isolated and excluded from society.

Having a roof over your head, paid employment and secure finances would be considered a foundation of everyday life for most. Yet for those supported by benefits, because of the difficult situation they find themselves in, this foundation is weakened by the discrimination they face, leaving them increasingly vulnerable.

The key findings above highlight the difficulties that some of those approaching landlords and letting agents, potential employers and financial services face because of being in receipt of benefits.

It could be argued that these difficulties, as experienced by some of those who receive benefits are likely to be inter-related. For example 23% of respondents stated that more job opportunities would most help to reduce their need for benefits, but it is harder to gain work when some claimants are being treated less favourably by potential employers. This is a further barrier to work, added to those already faced by people on benefits (such as the 26% of respondents who received benefits because of personal illness or a disability). This suggests that tackling public attitudes in order to remove this further barrier could actually make the transition from out of work benefits to work easier.

As well as limiting access to key services and jobs, negative attitudes can also affect important personal relationships, potentially having a further negative impact on their mental health. As Table 2 indicates, some people are being excluded or isolated by their family, friends and community for receiving benefits.

**Table 2**

“Which, if any, of the following situations have you EVER personally experienced as a result of being on working age benefits?”	
<i>Have felt excluded or isolated by friends</i>	<i>18%</i>
<i>Have felt excluded or isolated from their community</i>	<i>17%</i>
<i>Have felt excluded or isolated by members of their family</i>	<i>11%</i>

Instead of helping people get back on their feet by addressing the real reasons they need support, the debate about benefits is creating prejudice which isolates and excludes those who need support.

## 7. What help do people really need?

**Table 3**

" Which one, if any, of the following would most help you in needing less support from working age benefits"	
Receiving higher pay from my job	28%
More affordable essential items (e.g. food and utilities)	25%
More job opportunities	23%
More affordable housing	18%
Receiving more help overcoming issues caused by having an illness or disability	12%

Too often, these reasons which show why people need support from benefits and the factors that would help them need less support are absent from the debate about benefits. Instead, people are often portrayed as having made a choice to be on benefits, and lacking the motivation and independence to improve their situation. This ‘frame’ for understanding why people need support from benefits not only has an impact on individuals (as this report demonstrates) but also colours the way in which the public perceives the need for benefits.

The 31<sup>st</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey shows how changing this frame in which people look at benefits changes their support for it.<sup>8</sup> Whilst only 36% of respondents stated they agree that “Government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if this means higher taxes” in 2013, this figure changes when the focus is put on the reasons people need support. For instance 73% of respondents wanted to see more government spending on benefits for people who care for those who are sick or disabled, or for parents who work on very low incomes.

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<sup>8</sup> NatCen (2014) 31<sup>st</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey

## 8. Recommendations

This report has shown the damaging effects of the negative attitudes in society towards people who are supported by benefits, which can lead to discrimination that is both personally damaging and can adversely affect people's ability to improve their situation. Tackling these negative attitudes is therefore both an issue of fundamental fairness and decency, and a public policy imperative for those who wish to support people to reduce their need for benefits in future.

*Who Benefits?* believes that the following actions should be taken to address this issue:

1. Politicians and policymakers should do far more to listen to and understand all those who have been supported by benefits at some point in their lives and use this understanding to inform the decisions they take.
2. Politicians and the media should commit to being accurate and respectful when they discuss benefits and people supported by them.
3. Politicians of all parties should focus on addressing the real reasons that people are struggling, such as low wages, the high cost of living and the housing shortage.

## 9. Who we are

Launched in October 2013, *Who Benefits?* is a coalition campaign founded by five charities – The Children's Society, Crisis, Gingerbread, Mind and Macmillan Cancer Support. Our aim is to give a voice to people who need support from benefits, to share the reality of why they need or needed benefits, and the difference the support made or makes to their lives.

We hope that politicians of all parties and the public will see the reality of those who are helped by benefits, such as people affected by cancer, homelessness or mental health problems; and struggling parents and families.

*Who Benefits?* is a growing campaign, bringing together charities, community groups and faith organisations. We now have the support of over 100 charities, professional networks and community groups. Almost 2,000 people have shared with the campaign their personal stories of why they have needed support from benefits.

Visit [www.whobenefits.org.uk](http://www.whobenefits.org.uk) for more information and to share your story.