

Inequalities in the application of welfare sanctions in Britain

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Unemployed people in Britain who are in receipt of government welfare benefits can have these benefits stopped if they fail to comply with certain conditions – such as attending meetings at the Job Centre, showing evidence that they have been applying for jobs, and attending mandatory training or work placements. Such a stoppage is known as a ‘benefit sanction’. In this study, we examined how referrals and sanctions varied between men and women, between younger and older people, and between different ethnic groups (this analysis focused on the most commonly received unemployment benefit at the time of the study – Job Seeker’s Allowance. It did not cover recipients of Universal Credit).

We found substantial differences in sanction rates between different groups. The most pronounced were based on age. From 2012 to 2016, 18 to 24 year-old claimants were almost twice as likely to be referred for a sanction as claimants aged 25 to 49, and almost three times as likely as claimants in their 50s or 60s. We also found significant gender differences. At all ages, and for almost all ethnic groups, men were considerably more likely to be sanctioned than women. There were also consistent ethnic differences, with White claimants being the least likely to be sanctioned and Black claimants and those of Mixed ethnicity generally being the most likely. These ethnic differences have narrowed over time, but were still present at the end of the study period, particularly among young men.

There are a number of potential reasons why some groups are more likely to receive a sanction than others. First, claimants in different groups might behave differently, with some groups being less likely, on average, to follow benefits rules. This may be for attitudinal reasons, or it may be because members of some groups find it more difficult to comply (for example, due to English language ability, caring responsibilities, mental health, or difficulty finding work).

Second, members of some groups may be subject to discrimination at the hands of caseworkers (Job Centre Staff or staff at companies hosting work placements). For example, following a violation of the rules, a young, Black, male claimant may be treated more harshly by a caseworker than an older white female claimant would have been. As it stands, our study cannot distinguish between these different explanations. It therefore remains for future work to determine the cause of the inequalities we identify here.

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