

People cycling between benefits and insecure jobs require support rather than condemnation

The language of 'shirkers' and 'strivers' has attracted much attention in recent weeks. [Jane Mansour](#) argues that it is founded on a misconception, suggesting two distinct groups within the labour market whereas in actuality there is a widespread cycle between work and worklessness.



The shirkers/strivers debate is founded in misconception – assuming there are two static groups in opposition to each other misunderstands and misrepresents the dynamism of the labour market. Even at times of high unemployment there is considerable flux as people cycle between work and worklessness, low pay and no pay.

Last week's publication of the [TUC survey](#) on people's attitudes to welfare are reflective of the anecdotal experience of many who work in the field. They can be most readily summarised in terms of a correlation between ignorance about benefits and enthusiasm for cutting and capping. More nuanced and empathetic responses result from a combination of accurate information and case studies that people can identify with. This correlation has been [commented on](#) before both in terms of welfare and other public policy spheres. Research conducted by the [Fabian Society](#) in 2010 led authors Tim Horton and James Gregory to conclude that despite considerable levels of negativity towards welfare in general, people were supportive of more progressive policies providing 'the right conditions were in place':

Ultimately, successful welfare strategies will be the ones which harness such public attitudes to work for poverty prevention rather than against it.

More recently Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney have written about [benefit stigma](#), the role of the media and its wider implications for benefit take up.

George Osborne's soundbite-friendly categories of 'strivers' and 'shirkers' are not original, but his choice of language has given them a new lease of life. More than simple labels they are framing the current debate. See, for example, Ed Balls on Labour's work guarantee scheme, which was described in terms of being 'tough' on those gaming the system.

The belief that there are people who work and are paid wages, and people who are unemployed and claim benefits, and that they are both different and separate, is not only wrong, but completely misunderstands one of the biggest challenges facing unemployed people and those in low paid jobs. The inaccuracy of the terminology, particularly as it applies to those who receive in-work benefits, has rightly been making headlines recently. However, even this critique promulgates the idea of two separate and discrete groups of people – workers and non-workers. Engaging with the strivers vs shirkers rhetoric ignores a substantial group of people who have been and are repeatedly failed by the current system. They are sometimes on benefits and sometimes in work. When they are in work, they may continue to claim benefits because they are likely to be in low paid work.

I wrote about people cycling between low paid work and unemployment in 2005, questioning how the welfare-to-work and adult skills sectors could combine better to support more sustainable employment outcomes. One of the recommendations was to identify people who make multiple unemployment claims within a specified period and enable them to access more focused early intervention.

The Social Market Foundation published [Vicious Cycles](#) in 2009, which looked at how the 'revolving door' between work and unemployment could be addressed through focusing on sustainability. Their research

documented 'millions of people each year' making repeat claims for benefits as they move in and out of insecure work.

Data on this is hard to access; JSA administrative data suggests 40% of those moving off JSA make a new claim within 6 months – and, importantly, this figure remains constant whether the economy is strong or jobs are scarce. DWP's own [2011 analysis](#) on the November 2010 caseload shows that many long-term unemployed people also have periods in which they are working within a bleak personal landscape of unemployment.

In very different economic circumstances to those providing the context for my 2005 paper, Stephen Evans at Working Links published a [paper](#) this December focusing on the need to improve sustainable employment outcomes and opportunities for progression for people entering the labour market.

December also saw publication of [Poverty and Insecurity](#), which provides in-depth qualitative analysis of the impact on people's lives of cycling between work and unemployment. Its conclusion is that 'striving' is an accurate description for those who move in and out of insecure work, desperate to remain in employment, requiring an effective safety net for when that is not possible.

Indeed, the Work Programme, has always been described by the Government as 'finally' addressing the problem of sustainability:

We have to make sure people stay in work over the long term – Iain Duncan Smith, June 2010

...instead we have long term in work support to make sure people don't just get into work – they stay there. – Chris Grayling, May 2012

Labels have an instant appeal, but when wrong they distort the discussion and distract focus away from the real problems. Work is central to policy on economic growth, poverty, childcare, education, skills, health – the list goes on. People cycling between benefits and insecure jobs and those in long-term unemployment require support to find sustainable work rather than condemnation. To leverage the clear benefits that can come from employment we need to work with, and add to, the evidence base we have, not confound it by creating unhelpful, unnecessary and incorrect divisions.

This article was originally posted on [Buying Quality Performance](#).

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