

## The 'scrounger' myth is causing real suffering to many in society

*Negative portrayals of benefits recipients can be widely seen in the media, yet new research carried out at Teesside University and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation calls these into question. [Kayleigh Garthwaite](#) argues that the 'scrounger' myth is leading to great suffering for increasing numbers of people.*



Every single day in the media we are fed crude headlines that lament the lazy, workshy and scrounging benefits recipients who do not work because they prefer to live a life courtesy of all of the hard working taxpayers. Apparently, they make a decision to avoid employment, instead choosing to watch *The Jeremy Kyle Show* on their vast plasma screen televisions, accompanied by plenty of cigarettes and alcohol, of course. This narrative of 'undeserving' benefit scroungers has been firmly cemented in the public mind, with opinion polls such as the British Social Attitudes survey revealing that a considerable section of the public clearly does view welfare recipients, and people receiving unemployment benefits in particular, as undeserving. More than a third (35 per cent) currently think that many getting social security "don't really deserve any help" – while the proportion has fluctuated between just above 20 per cent and 40 per cent over time. A perception that most people on the dole are "fiddling" is also quite widespread and has more or less tracked the proportion who believe that many people receiving social security "don't really deserve any help"; in 2011, 37 per cent of the public believes that [most people on the dole are "fiddling"](#).

Yet such mythology does not tally with the findings of research carried out at Teesside University funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Refuting these widely held beliefs, our research, [published yesterday by Policy Press](#), clearly highlights that unemployment was not 'a lifestyle choice'. Based upon the detailed life stories of men and women aged 30-65 who live and work in Middlesbrough, the main town of Teesside in North East England, the research reveals stories of repeated labour with little progress, of recurrent engagement with hard work but constant returns to unemployment. The people in the study were all living in recurrent poverty but often were unable to assign this label to their own situation, given that being poor is now so tainted with stigma that they refused it for themselves.

Drawing on their experiences of juggling precarious work and meagre benefits, the book shows that cycling between poor work and welfare kept them in, or near, poverty. Our overall findings show that while participants moved in and out of unemployment and low-paid jobs stretching over years, most expressed an enduring commitment to work. However, this repeated engagement in jobs failed to provide routes away from poverty, largely because of there being insufficient decent job opportunities available in the local job market. A strong motivation to work coupled with the insecurity of the low-paid and low-quality jobs on offer was the main reason why shuttling between benefits and jobs had been the interviewees' predominant experience of working life. Dependency culture myths are also challenged in a [recent blog](#) from some of the research team.

Such a narrative is having a direct impact upon the lives of people on benefits. Recent evidence shows how hundreds of thousands of poor people are missing out on vital benefits they're entitled to as a result of the [perceived stigma generated by these false media depictions of "scroungers"](#) – leading many to forgo essentials such as food and fuel. Indeed, such stigma along with hassles and failures of the benefit system meant that some people even avoided claiming benefits during periods of unemployment, a group we term 'the missing workless': they are not counted in figures of the unemployed and do not claim welfare benefits while unemployed. What's more, the stigma and fear caused by such negative representations alongside ongoing welfare reform is represented in research which looks into the [lived experience of receiving long-term sickness benefits](#). These examples show the reach and power that these myths hold. Such myths distract attention, cover up realities and justify actions. Frankly, such

myths are unsubstantiated and only serve to punish the poor and do nothing to tackle the low-pay, no-pay cycle.

All of the stories of the people who took part in the research act as a cautionary tale about the meaning and implication of poor, insecure and low-waged work for an increasing number of people caught up in this low-pay, no-pay cycle in Britain. Living on benefits meant poverty and insecurity. It was to be avoided if possible, not embraced in a culture of dependency. Ongoing welfare reform will bring with it further discussions surrounding the myth of the workless. Therefore, exposing these myths and challenging such representations is an integral first step towards better-informed debate and policy.

*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.*

### **About the author**

**Kayleigh Garthwaite** is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Geography, Durham University. She is currently working on various projects related to health inequalities, health and wellbeing and employment for County Durham and Darlington Primary Care Trust. Her research interests focus on the relationship between health and disability, welfare-to-work policies, and self-identity, with a particular interest in spatial disadvantage in terms of worklessness. Kayleigh recently submitted her PhD in Human Geography (2012) from Durham University entitled 'Incapacitated? Exploring the health and illness narratives of Incapacity Benefit recipients'. Kayleigh previously worked at Teesside University as a Research Assistant on a project for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which sought to understand the dynamics of poverty and marginal work across the life-course.

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