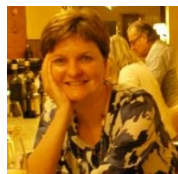


How benefit sanctions push single parents further from work



Benefit sanctions encourage job-seeking behaviour, successive governments have claimed. Yet in the case of single parents, sanctions actually move parents further from work, write [Sumi Rabindrakumar](#) and [Laura Dewar](#). They draw on Gingerbread's research to show how parents are often penalised despite seeking work, caught out by unrealistic expectations from jobcentres and poor administration.

The government argues that benefit sanctions serve a purpose. Under job-seeking benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance or Universal Credit, penalising those who claim benefits but do not comply with conditions is said to provide fairness for the taxpayer and change behaviour to help people into work.

In some ways, these principles are intuitive. Indeed, when benefit sanctions are criticised, defenders point to the fact that claimants themselves often agree that penalties should be in place for those who 'don't do the right thing'. However, this still raises significant questions as to whether this is actually how sanctions are being used and whether they achieve the impact the government intends.

[New research](#) from Gingerbread sheds light on some answers. We already know that the [growth in single parent sanctions](#) indicates they are far from the 'last resort' that policymakers claim. These findings, based on single parent case studies, show just how far-reaching the impact of sanctions is on families – whether as a result of warnings or actual penalties imposed. Sanctioned single parents describe the severe financial and emotional toll of the sanctions regime; and how they were pushed into debt as a result. Even when sanctions are overturned and benefits repaid, the length of the appeal process means the financial burden is still heavy. The worry and stress caused by even warnings over sanctions was made clear – as the main carer for their children, this caused particular concern for single parents.

Total and utter fear, shock and worry. Panic about how to manage.

The impact of sanctions is not limited to claimants. When benefits are cut, other support must pick up the pieces. This includes friends and family, as well as local services. Housing providers and the voluntary sector were typically relied upon for further assistance – particularly local advice services and foodbanks, as [others have found](#). It also highlights the precarious nature of support for those affected by benefit sanctions. Single parents reported the finite amount of support that already-stretched family and friends can provide; local advice services are increasingly underfunded and not an option for all sanctioned claimants.

Perhaps the government sees this is an unfortunate but necessary result of ensuring people are doing what they can to seek work. Yet the evidence suggests that sanctions actually move single parents further from work. There are practical considerations – parents said they could not afford to travel to the jobcentre or interviews while sanctioned; others have been caught between sanctions and a desire to find more sustainable work. For example, one parent could no longer meet the shift patterns required by an employer alongside caring for her child and was forced to leave her job. She was sanctioned as a result and the financial pressures meant she had to take the first available (and insecure) job rather than wait to apply for a more senior and flexible job as suggested by her work coach. Finally, sanctions – particularly unfair sanctions – fundamentally damage parents' relationship with their jobcentre and advisers. This chimes with evidence suggesting that some claimants [leave the benefit system altogether](#) after being sanctioned.

The government may regard these effects as fair consequences for 'non-compliance'. Yet as the report shows, single parents are in fact job-seeking, but are impeded by external factors. The lack of part-time or flexible work can mean some do not meet the strict criteria for the number of job applications made in a week. The lack of local affordable childcare can mean single parents need to give up work. Yet, despite the intention to seek and remain in work, single parents are penalised.

This approach to sanctioning is clearly not focused simply on wilful non-compliance. It is the result of a tick-box approach to policing job-seeking activity. Moreover, claimant commitments and Universal Credit were supposed to address individual circumstances to avoid just this rigid approach. However, there is little evidence of this working for single parents. In fact, there are signs that Universal Credit is making things worse. More single parents are now subject to job-seeking conditions (parents of three and four years must seek work and there are conditions to encourage working claimants to increase their pay or hours being piloted) and therefore at risk of being caught out by rigid rules. Worse, the chaotic delivery of support for childcare costs has meant some single parents have had to give up work – and been sanctioned as a result.

The findings add to a growing weight of evidence asking [serious questions](#) of the sanctions regime – not just about how sanctions are administered, but their purpose as a whole. Arguably, the experience to date indicates that benefit sanctions poorly serve those with additional support needs and barriers to work and begs the question as to whether they should be used at all – particularly given the impact on claimants with children.

I don't think the children should be punished...[they] still need to be fed and clothed and live in a warm home...sanctions undermine the purpose of the benefit system in our country to protect the poorest and most vulnerable from poverty.

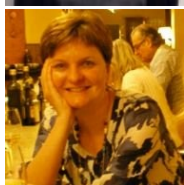
Notwithstanding an in-depth review of the use of sanctions, the government can limit the financial impact of sanctions in the short term. Instead of [dragging its heels](#), it can introduce a proper 'yellow card' system where warnings are used in the first instance, instead of sanctions. The government can also reduce the financial penalty of a sanction – it cannot be right to withdraw an element of state support in its entirety. Alongside this, the government can do more to target sanctions on genuine non-compliance. The government must make conditions realistic for groups like single parents, where they face barriers to work rather than lack the motivation to comply with conditions, and ensure claimant commitments reflect the flexibility needed to accommodate claimants' needs.

Single parents overwhelmingly want to work – around [seven in ten already do](#). There is little evidence which suggests the sevenfold increase in the number of benefit sanctions for single parents between 2005/06 and 2016/17 (the latter taking Jobseeker's Allowance and Universal Credit sanctions together) is warranted as a result of single parent job-seeking behaviour. The government has a chance with the new system of Universal Credit to put in place a system that genuinely encourages people to find work, and supports them to sustain and progress in work. While it is politically unlikely that sanctions will be halted, there are choices the government can make to ensure they are not wasting resources on an ineffective and inappropriate policy.

About the Authors



Sumi Rabindrakumar is Research Officer at Gingerbread.



Laura Dewar is Policy Officer at Gingerbread.

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