Department of Work and Pension Sanctions: how does this effect marginalised groups and do such sanctions increase poor health outcomes?

This paper aims to consider the use of benefit sanctions imposed on the general population and will discuss whether or not such sanctions contribute to self-neglect and possible associated deaths. Furthermore, this paper will appraise and critique six research papers that debate the impact on UK populations and whether or not marginalised groups can become more affected as a result. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to understand that benefits are banded into the following groups: Universal credit (UC), Job seekers allowance (JSA), and Employment support allowance (ESA). It is salient to make the distinction that universal credits replaced the six “legacy benefits” as part of policy reform in 2012 (Williams, 2020). A pivotal moment in UK social policy reform, promoted by the Welfare Reform Act (2012), that caused a ‘great sanctions drive’ (Webster, 2016). However, this is not a new phenomenon and is possibly preceded by Thatcherite politics that shone a light on neoliberalism, contemplated to be the ‘the root of all our problems’ (Monbiot, 2016). The paper attempts to think beyond behavioural conditionality that sanctions imposed by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) draw focus to, by seeking to understand the burdening consequences of social policy reform, and how such thinking can impact overall wellbeing, in contrast to equality laws and other legislative frameworks that strive to promote individual wellbeing in social work practice. In a parliament debate titled Errol Graham: DWP and Safeguarding Adults Board Inquiry (2023), MP Debbie Abrahams (Lab) refers that;

*“The death of any person as a result of Government policy is nothing less than a scandal. It is clear that from the cases that I have talked about, and from the NAO report and others, that this is just the tip of the iceberg. We do not know what is going on. For too long, the Department has failed to address the effects of its policies. It must now act. Enough is enough”.*

Such emotive language reflects ever-increasing contemporary concerns and comes at a pivotal moment in the UK’s social conscience - embedded further by an unprecedented cost of living crisis (Meadows et al., 2024). In 2022 The Office of National Statistics (ONS) reported that 1.84 million adults in the United Kingdom were claimants of unemployment related benefits, therefore it is imperative to challenge the possible stigma of unemployment and whether social policy, and state sanctioned benefit sanctions are a contributing factor for such stigma that may fail to recognise other complex factors that affect individuals lives. Here, Brouwers (2020) cites that stigma can lead to increased unemployment for those with mental health diagnoses caused by the negative view of prospective employers and self-stigma, exacerbated further by health inequality leading to poor access to support. Such contemporary ideas may help support evidence-based practice in social work interventions when faced with managerialist advances at a local level, led by social policy. Leading practitioners to question what is right or wrong, Banks (2018) reasons though that professional ethics can be seen as both a singular topic, or part of other differing moral philosophies that seeks to use ethical theories to consider what is right and good.

The research approaches for this paper have considered accessing multiple online platforms such as the world wide web, google scholar, Staffordshire University online Library and community care inform. To support the research strategy for the paper, search terms such as ‘department of working pensions sanction impact’ were used; however, this term located 128,000 results. Therefore, to ensure a targeted approach consideration was given to dates and search terms such as ‘benefit sanctions welfare conditionality’ and changing the date to a ten-year period between 2014 and 2024. This significantly lowered the search results to 15,000, although this appears to be a significant time frame that may not appear consistent with contemporary literature, this is required for the purposes of this topic given that the Welfare Reform Act 2012 appears to have accelerated benefit sanctions and for longer periods of time.

It is essential to note this paper contemplates research articles and journals that use a combination of quantitive and qualitative research methods to capture the research aims, and in doing so will draw focus to positivism and interpretivism paradigms by way of philosophy, this approach will seek to promote a balanced ideology in seeking objective and subjective view points of the research outcomes, thus enhancing practice and informing future interventions, cited by Sanchez, Bonache, Paz-Aparicio and Oberty (2023) noting that positivism seeks to form ideas from models independent of the observer, whilst interpretivism asserts that single social realties do not exist.

To promote non-bias and ethical consistency, the paper highlights the use of PICO framework (population, intervention, control, and outcomes) to develop the research question (Aveyard et al., 2016). In relation to PICO it is important to note how the question type must be carefully considered in its application. As such this review has sought to pose an etiological question. However, the reader should also consider that PICO can be criticised when using the framework to formulate a qualitative research approach, as often it is considered as a clinical tool to systematically gather evidence for medicine-based interventions when utilising search terms such as “control group” and “intervention”, thus not being deemed appropriate to locate qualitative research design methods (Methley et al., 2014). For clarity, using population (P) supported in being able to determine possible marginalised groups mentioned when locating specific literature and considering control / comparison (C) has assisted in being able to make comparisons against marginalised groups, such as black males in comparison to the general population.

The research papers that have been located and contemplated for this essay are; Stewart (2018), Williams (2020), Redman and Fletcher (2022), Stewart (2023), Wright, Fletcher and Stuart (2020), Mills (2023), Williams, Webb and Gale (2024).

To promote quality once literature was successfully located the TAPUPAS model (Pawson et al., 2003) has been utilised to further appraise and critically evaluate the findings. Porter (2007) refer that in using TAPUPAS it can not only be used to judge individual pieces of research but also when assessing Meta-synthesis reviews such as this text. The paper by Mills (2023) demonstrates ‘transparency’ in keeping with the TAPUPAS model, Mills highlights that there should not be an overwhelming emphasis on outcomes for those facing benefit sanctions, rather processes themselves must also considered to understand the burdening impact on those seeking state sanctioned support. In practice this is crucial to ensure individuals do not become invisible, furthermore, the methodology also cited by Mills, sets out clear intentions about how participants raised their concerns relational to confidentiality, this was overcome by ensuring that all personalised information such as names, gender, age and ethnicity was identified under pseudonyms and ethical approval was also sought from Sheffield Hallam University.

‘Purposivity’ is demonstrated well within the research by Williams, Webb and Gale (2024). It is noted that research methods are successful in meeting the objectives set out within the paper, an example of which is documented in the quantitative study that finds disproportionality between 9% of white claimants in comparison to 17% of black benefit claimants being sanctioned; further, the paper highlights the need for a qualitative approach moving forward. When considering other chosen methods within the paper, Williams, Webb and Gale considered Office of National Statistics (ONS) data that looked at JSA claimants by ethnicity between 2012 and 2019, the data was then calculated in two sets, the referral rate and sanctions rate. This successfully ensured the aims of the research were successfully met, which were to consider if marginalised groups are more affected by their geographic location.

To further highlight findings, the use of the TAPUPAS model allowed for some articles to be omitted from this paper. An example of which, is the paper by Stewart (2020), when considering ‘accuracy’, the paper claims that Department of Working Pensions does not always use ethical approaches when completing work capability assessments (WCA); however, this is not captured within the findings or substantiated by other notable academics or researchers, and therefore demonstrates possible bias. Deeks, Bossuyt, Leeflang, and Takwoingi (2023) explore this further by discussing how test accuracy within research should be considered to minimise bias, thus prompting increased reliability.

As forementioned the cost of living crisis in 2021 triggered deprivation across all vulnerable sectors of society and continues to do so. This juxtaposed against more than a decade of austerity may have saturated frontline government departments, thus impacting both users of services and frontline workers, here noting the importance of this contemporary issue. A research article published in the Critical Policy Journal by Redman and Fletcher (2022), refers that DWP benefit sanctions caused a deleterious affair for out of work claimants, and disproportionality affected those with a mental health diagnoses and substance use dependency, triggering an exacerbation of poor mental health outcomes and an increase in the use of food banks, raising the importance of research led practice and how user led research can promote ‘contradictions with government policy’ (Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2009 Pg. 23). This has major implications for social work practice, as benefit claimants who have care and support needs have the right to access an adult needs assessment as per Sec.9 of the Care Act 2014. Additionally, for practice, this can lead to doubt over the way in which services are distributed, and can leave practitioners feeling as though they cannot question how local polices hold lawfully, and may often be left feeling an inexorable force weighing down on them (Preston-Shoot, 2019, pg. 115). Yet, the Care Act 2014 cites further that those with care and support needs and thought to be at risk of, or experiencing harm are to be protected under the legislative protective measure of a Sec.42 enquiry, here highlighting professional, moral and ethical dilemmas When trying to balance individual rights (ECHR, 1998), local policy and legislation.

To truly understand the benefits system, it would be naïve not to consider how such a system came to be, as this will stimulate a comprehensive and in-depth debate relational to considering cross sections of society, and in doing so will support an understanding relational to whether marginalised groups face increased oppressions. It is no surprise that the benefits system was introduced by a socialist in 1948 and saw the launch of the comprehensive system of social security recommended by the Beveridge report (1942). It may be relevant to refer how Beveridge’s ideas of socialism challenge a conservativism utopia. Although this is a contemporary text, it would be impolitic to overlook such contrasting ideas.

It seems proportionate to consider possible themes by considering whether state sanctioned assistance may offer support or hindrance to those who face themselves in crisis, this is emphasised by Wright and Dwyer (2020) who discuss the introduction of UC and how mandatory job searches can lead to a coercive worker vs claimant situation, and how noncompliance can trigger a cutting off of vital income for a period of up to three years, whilst deliberating deaths as a potential consequence, casting a lens on how such polices may be counterproductive. Understanding social policy at a macro, meso and exosystem level and complex interrelations between the levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), could assist practitioners by drawing possible links between social norms, professional views, and social policy, steering how such forces combined can steer a stigmatised view of those on the receiving end of the benefits system - causing a potential inadvertent society of ‘them and us’, here Lister, Patrick and Brown (2024) discuss how social theories often inform welfare ideologies, thus centring on how values within different groups influence their ‘conduct’; however, this very notion hints towards a discriminatory societal view that social work practitioners must strive to fight against when recommending interventions, ensuring social justice is at the fore when assisting individuals to uphold their rights.

All government departments have a duty to safeguard individuals from harm (Health and Social Care Act 2012: regulation 13) yet, we can consider Errol Graham’s case as a reference point in reminding all those responsible for safeguarding and government departments how sanctions must always be considered with the person at the heart of all decisions. For ease, The Care Act 2014, The Equality Act 2010 and the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR, 1998) contradict the very idea of neoliberalism and responsibilisation, this is noted by Barnett and Bagshaw (2020) who discuss how neoliberalism causes social care and health systems to be underfunded, triggering the most in need to be further marginalised. Here we can assess how social work practitioners are not only ethically and morally responsible to uphold rights, but duty bound by the law, but often face barriers in accessing vital services that may underpin their interventions.

Stewart (2023) discusses this further and how labour market outcomes are promoted by conservative neoliberal idealism through reducing access to ESA, moreover, noting that Blairite policies also led to lessening access to legitimate benefit claimants. Supposedly dispelling the myth that such cut-throat sanctions are developed from right wing existence only. Here Stewart is promoting balance by leaning on the agenda of how party politics can fiercely impact social policy politics at a local level, that may affect public perception further by right wing press coverage and scaffolded by policy makers. Combined, this is thought to be a ‘catastrophic political attack on the welfare state’. Crucially for this paper, Stewart discusses the pre-cost of living crisis – noting further links with Errol Graham and how sanctions combined with disability can lead to people starving to death as a result of not being able to honour state sanctioned meetings, and the harsh sanctions that force chronically unwell individuals into seeking employment, that are restricted in how they can access appointments. This has direct consequences for driving anti-discriminative values in practice, the person protected further by their protected characteristics (Equality Act, 2010) and equity in practice, pushed further by strength-based working and wellbeing (Care Act, 2014).

Williams (2020) also reports how policy makers consider benefit sanctions as having a positive causative effective on labour market outcomes; however, this thinking appears to be ignorant towards the impact on individuals lives. Nonetheless the paper does include a quantitive study that considers how mental health may have been exacerbated for those seeking JSA, reinforced by considering whether higher rates and longer durations of department of working pension sanctions may have increased adversity faced by those with mental health diagnoses, accelerated further by the coalition government and the subsequent Welfare Reform Act 2012 that came into force by the development of central government movement. Furthermore, the paper by Williams highlights how every 10 additional sanctions applied per 100,000 associated with 4.57% increase in the prescription of anti-depressants, and that for every 10 in every 100,000 of the population in the UK there was an 8.09% increase in individuals suffering from or experiencing anxiety and depression. Importantly the paper refers that UK benefit sanctions are ‘overly harsh’. This paper recognises implications for social work practice and the barriers that can arise when faced with top-down governmental forces. It is wise to acknowledge how conflict can arise when working with other statutory departments, and in doing so remain conscious of how to challenge and diffuse oppressive factors that may challenge people’s needs on an individual basis. Contrarily Redman and Fletcher (2022) inform how frontline DWP workers were guided to deliver services in a way that led to harmful outcomes that may have promoted ‘institutional violence’. This thinking can be associated with the death of Errol Graham who is referenced throughout this text. This is documented further by Williams, who maintains that benefit sanctions were ‘harsher’ on those who did not attend agency interviews, magnified by the rate in which such sanctions were issued, the findings of which are considered to be associated with adverse mental health experiences and wellbeing, it would be unwise though at this stage to consider the reliability of the data set within this research when considering marginalised groups, as this paper only recognises a generalised view of society and focuses only of those seeking JSA as opposed to considering other benefit applicants, therefore not capturing a diverse intersectional view of the population. This thinking is also perhaps considered by Tedam (2022) who discusses how social work supports a diverse population in the UK, yet race takes up less discussion in current social work learning.

Wright, Fletcher and Stuart (2020) used a qualitative longitudinal method; however, it is noted that there is disproportionality in regards to that data when considering male and female participants. And an even higher disproportionality in regards to ethnicity, noting that 59 participants in the research identified as being from the UK in comparison to only 2 identifying as African, 1 as Indian, 1 as Pakistani and 1 as mixed other, the research; however, does capture the voices of the participants. Hawkes et al., (2022) ask the reader to carefully consider how using lived experience within research may trigger inclusive cultural shifts, yet it can call for higher critical thinking that is not impacted by historical context. Furthermore, as the research used a longitudinal approach and the lived experience of those facing the benefits system whilst facing DWP sanctions, it is essential as it focuses on contemporary concerns for social work practice to remain at the fore. The research cites how individuals were being asked to apply for jobs up to 100 miles away and after refusing to apply for such jobs because of the impact of facing current poverty, it highlights how one participant was sanctioned for four weeks, as they would not have been able to afford public transport, leading to further poverty and poor mental health outcomes stating “It was the hardest part of my life”. Although the research by Wright, Fletcher and Stuart is critical in understanding how harsh sanctions can lead to complex social inequalities, it does precede the current cost of living crisis in the UK. It is however noted that 59 males were used within the data in comparison to only 41 in

contrast to 24 females as part of this study. In reference to demographic specifics though, male disability may be captured and classified as “general disability” (Wain, French, Barnes and Thomas 2014), failing to recognise an intersectional approach in practice, such thinking could call into question a true ethical stance relational to how research drives social policy and interventions. For social work practice this is profound when considering that males from different cultural backgrounds may view the effects of mental health very differently and could be considered a taboo subject, exacerbated by a view of weakness within the black male community and driven further by possible self-stigma (Doornbos, Zandee and Bjelland, 2024).

Stewart (2023) highlights the introduction of the work capability assessment (WCA), citing that such assessment for benefits claimants receiving ESA are at risk of death owing to a lack of consideration for diagnosis and prognosis that leans toward an ignorant view of proper clinical diagnostics, furthermore the article associates increased death for ESA claimants. It is noted; however, that the article cites the author themselves from previous articles they have written, that may indicate a bias attitude aimed at the reader, noted further by Helgesson, Radun, Radun and Nilsonne (2022) who debate how this can risk favouritism and conflict of interest. Nonetheless, Stewart does highlight stark figures relational to DWP sanctions associated deaths and this is directly linked to Errol Graham who was himself was a claimant of ESA, causing direct associations with what Stewart highlights as an ignorant view that WCAs and associated sanctions can trigger increased vulnerability relational to poor mental health outcomes. Importantly Stewart tells of how the DWP still refuse to publish figures relational to death rates for “fit for work” claimants, risking a lack of transparency for what should be in the public interest. It would be unwise not to consider how marginalised groups may become more affected as a result of social policy and DWP sanctions, this paper has considered the impact on mental health; however, this has so far been a generalised view on the population. Williams, Webb and Gale (2024) assist in supporting how there is disproportionality relational to how benefit sanctions affect both black and white communities within rural areas, it should be noted that the paper draws focus to its own limitations as the data used only considers England data as per the ONS, and not that of devolved nations, owing to how rural areas may contain pockets of urban areas that may skew the data. Positively though, the paper does mention that consideration needs to be given for future research that captures the whole of the UK. Nonetheless the paper shows there are differences in how sanctions affect black people more so in rural areas. Raising further concerns of rural racism in the UK. This is noted further by Dominelli (2018, pg 200), who discusses how ‘inter-community tensions over scarce social resources’ lead to “insufficient progress on eradicating racism”. Hopeful though, are movements such as the Black life matters movement that has assisted in raising awareness in rural areas, and has increased positive change in social work practice (Mohdin & Campbell, 2020).

It would be misguided not to consider the polices and review procedures competed by the DWP, the paper by Mills (2023) offers some insight to this by mentioning how the government department have been completing Internal process reviews (IPR) for over a decade; however, the DWP continue not to publish any such records, and families who have lost loved ones are either refused access to such reviews or do not know that such reviews have taken place. Drawing focus to how such reviews should focus on its own polices that may have contributed to death. Yet, they are a way of ‘invisibilising’ accountability’. Notably this is raised over a decade earlier by Nixon (2011) who uses a similar term ‘distancing strategy’, referring that such delay with policy changes and distance this creates with previous concerns may diminish blame.

Such thinking can be considered in relation The SAR titled “Errol” (Nottingham Adults Safeguarding board, 2023), Errol died in 2018 and the SAR was not completed until 2023. The SAR has been revised as part of informing this work, the research does highlight an increase in poor outcomes for those who need to access the UK benefits system and in particular, those from minority backgrounds such as the black community or other indigenous groups when thinking on a global scale, highlighting systemic racism (Braverman et al., 2022). DWP benefit sanctions are noted to have increased the risk of self-neglect that should lead to a Sec.42 enquiry, as written in law, as per the definitions of forms of ‘abuse’ in the Act. It needs to be mentioned that self-neglect can be caused by unintentional forces, such as self-neglect caused by not being able to access food, because of sanctions that continue to place a tight grip on those like Errol Graham, who have a genuine claim and right to be supported and protected. There are clear lacks of partnership working that remind us all that such thinking must remain as a primary feature across all front facing government agencies. This is a major recommendation noted in the SAR, in the thoughts relational to how non-engagement, may be a sign of increased vulnerability – noting how the GP and the DWP failed to consider this when making their life limiting decisions or lack of action.

Beyond the SAR recommendation cited here, a commonality noted within the conclusions of the research papers do consider how sanctions do make it increasingly difficult to access state support by creating ever increasing unrealistic sanctions via the justification of social policy reforms. Driving future social work practice, it is essential that disengagement and withdrawal noted by individuals should peak the interests of practitioners by way of using professional curiosity that seeks to understand why there may be changes in a person’s presentation, such as Mr Graham. Such thinking is noted further by Ife, Soldatić, and Briskmanwho (2022) noting how social work practice should not just be based on a need’s deficit, but should strive to promote human rights and equity, backed by article 2 (ECHR, 1998), which is essential when considering the research topic within this paper. There are very clear reasons to sign post when recognising complex reasons for why people do what they do. This thinking may of course only develop over time for social practitioners, but lawfully there is a duty as per sec. 4 of the Act to provide information and advice. Encouraged further by how using theories, such as systems and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989 and 1991) may assist practitioners in their early practice by considering a complex interplay of race, gender and self-stigma, and by adopting this alongside critical reflection it allows for central power relations to remain at the centre of practice (Mattsson, 2013). Sec.42 enquires are also very intrusive, although causing an enquiry may secure access to vital resources for people at risk, it may lead to loss of self-control, agency and privacy for the person. Power must always be considered when faced with such situations in practice, noted by Pease and Fook (2016) who refers how power can be a determinant of divide. This thinking raises awareness for how trauma may impact how a person responds to their own power dynamics when faced against social policy sanctions that are exercised by front facing public bodies. Here noting further how skilful social workers must be to navigate such a complex system – bolstering emotional intelligence in practice. For balance, the reader needs to be made aware that Errol died in 2018, this raises increased concern for how benefit sanctions have continued, alongside a cost of living crisis that shows a limited downward trajectory at this time. Additionally, for future social worker practice, the perceptions of mental health by the black male community may need to be considered on a case by case basis, especially when trying to understand how personal views in conjunction with state sanctions may increase individual vulnerabilities that can lead to harm as noted with the case of Mr Graham. It is imperative that social workers continue to understand unique oppressions faced by individuals and how this can lead to very complex social dilemmas in an age where spiralling costs of living concerns are badged alongside health inequalities. To overcome such adversity, it is essential that the person remains the expert in their own life and this will ensure an individualised approach in seeking out the correct support, timely to avoid future tragedies, however, this can only be achieved with transparency and good information sharing to safeguard individuals.

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