

## Fear of the 'brown envelope': welfare reform and recipients of long-term sickness benefits

Stigmatising and dehumanising language directed at people receiving benefits might be good politics but it is bad policy. Research shows that the circumstances of welfare recipients are far different than what government rhetoric and mass media portrayals suggest.

The health and illness accounts of people receiving Incapacity Benefit (IB) have remained largely hidden in qualitative\* research. Previous studies have focused upon employability; work motivations and the employment trajectories of recipients, with less attention paid to the health or life experiences of this vulnerable, marginalized and under-researched group.

The accounts of long-term sickness benefits are not unusual or out of the ordinary, yet they are often not heard - instead, they are kept out of sight in favour of tales of 'undeserving' benefits scroungers. Despite the increased moral panic over the amount of people receiving sickness benefits, evidence from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) (2011) suggests that fraud levels are, in fact, very low. The latest available figures from the DWP state that the fraud rate for sickness benefits is just 0.5 per cent, meaning that 99.5 per cent of claimants are not fraudulent, with figures for official error (1.7 per cent) actually higher than the level of fraud.

The research presented here attempts to provide a voice for long-term sickness benefits recipients to share their experiences of welfare reform in the UK, drawing on data

collected during a qualitative study of long-term sickness benefits recipients in the north-east of England.

Sampling was used to recruit 25 chronically ill and disabled people who were then interviewed between March 2011 and August 2011. Only two participants reported growing up with health problems which were muscular and skeletal in nature. Diagnoses most frequently reported included arthritis, rheumatism, fibromyalgia, cardiovascular disease, multiple sclerosis and mental health problems including depression and bipolar disorder.

\*Qualitative research is about exploring issues, understanding phenomena and answering questions by analysing & making sense of unstructured data.

### Key Findings

- The findings illustrate how stigma associated with claiming benefits can deter people from accessing the support they need, leading to under-claiming and the risk of amplified financial strain and hardship.
- Increased awareness over entitlement to benefits and additional help is required to avoid a blurring of the distinctions between sickness benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and other benefits that are not out-of-work benefits, such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA).
- The importance of research which focuses upon the life experiences of those receiving sickness benefits to provide evidence in the framing of disability and welfare policy is crucial.
- A key theme emerging from the research is the importance of listening to the narratives of long-term sick and disabled benefits recipients, particularly in relation to the formation of policy responses and in terms of practice.

## Policy relevance and Implications

- Fear of receiving an official-looking 'brown envelope' was a key feature within the narratives of people in this study. This fear can have a profound impact upon the health and wellbeing of long-term sick and disabled benefits recipients, in certain instances leading to suicidal feelings.
- The importance of language should not be dismissed when considering the way sick and disabled benefits recipients are discussed. Rhetoric of 'scroungers' and 'benefit cheats' is not conducive to encouraging potential employers to employ someone who has a history of Incapacity Benefit receipt, which in turn can have distinct implications for sick and disabled people.
- The financial implications of welfare reform are far reaching. The findings of this study show that financial strain and hardship is being further exacerbated by welfare reform. The proposed changes to the welfare state have significant implications for sick and disabled people given disabled people's greater reliance on out-of-work benefits and housing benefits than nondisabled people. This is significant as welfare reform has been shown to affect certain areas more adversely than others.

*"Receiving sickness benefits was characterised by high levels of stigma and shame for the majority of participants in the study"*

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

The research explored the views and experiences of people in receipt of long-term sickness benefits in the north-east of England, UK. Participants experienced high levels of stigma and shame related to receiving sickness benefits, contrary to populist opinions that suggest benefits receipt is a lifestyle choice. Fear over ongoing welfare reform influenced the daily lives of those receiving sickness benefits.

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