



On the rise

Single parent sanctions in numbers: Executive summary

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Sumi Rabindrakumar

Executive summary

The benefit sanctions system has come under increased scrutiny in recent years – particularly since the introduction of a new system of rules for the key unemployment benefit, jobseeker’s allowance (JSA), in October 2012. The government maintains sanctions are used as a last resort for a very small minority of benefit claimants and that improvements have been made to processes to ensure the system is fair. Nevertheless, there has been a steady stream of questions about the policy raised by the public, campaigners, academics, an independent review, the National Audit Office (NAO) and parliament.

Criticisms of benefit sanctions range from procedural complaints to questioning the need for any sanctions system. One particular concern is that sanctions continue to penalise claimants for genuine mistakes or for failings in administration by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), rather than claimants intentionally contravening rules or avoiding job-seeking duties. This is especially pertinent for single parents. From Gingerbread’s advice and research experience, late arrival for an appointment a childcare emergency or DWP advisers’ lack of understanding of how single parents’ caring responsibilities can limit job-seeking too often results in sanctions.

The prospect of sanctions is worrying given the implications of losing financial support when caring for children – even more so when they are deemed unfair. Moreover, there is a concern that pushing families with limited means into further deprivation will impede, rather than enhance, job-seeking – for example, by putting housing at risk through rent arrears.

These concerns go to the heart of the purpose of the sanctions system. Given their significance, Gingerbread has begun examining how sanctions affect single parents in more detail, looking at whether sanctions really are a very minor part of the benefit system, the extent of unfair single parent sanctions and the broader impact of sanction decision-making.

This report presents the first stage of this assessment, looking at the quantitative data held on JSA sanctions. This process has been frustrated by the lack of fundamental data – particularly annual estimates of JSA recipients, which are needed to undertake a robust analysis of the risk of being sanctioned faced by claimants. This is an issue that points to broader disquiet about the ability to scrutinise sanctions policy, as highlighted most recently by the NAO and Public Accounts Committee. For accountable and transparent government policy, proper access to data is needed. While the DWP may not intentionally withhold or suppress data, it is nonetheless concerning and discouraging that basic data to assess the sanctions system is still not published – particularly in light of a period of heightened tensions over the policy.

Data limitations aside, this analysis presents sober reading. The data shows how the intensification of conditionality rules over the past decade has been accompanied by stricter sanctioning for single parents. Once referred, single parents are now more likely to end up with a sanction than in the past. Single parents continue to be sanctioned unfairly. While high level sanctions have become less frequent in recent months, single parents are now more likely to face multiple low level sanctions. Most worryingly, single parents continue to be particularly at risk of being sanctioned unfairly.

These findings suggest further investigation of how sanctions are used and implemented is needed to avoid unnecessary risks to families. With significant changes to conditionality on the horizon for those on low incomes, both in and out of work, there is an urgent need for the government to take action. More single parents will be expected to look for work under universal credit from April 2017.

Instead of full job-seeking requirements starting once their youngest child turns five, they will begin once their youngest child turns three. Further down the line, the DWP is set to implement 'in-work conditionality' in universal credit, where claimants will be expected to increase hours or wages to earn the equivalent of 35 hours at the minimum wage. When the data suggests unfair and inappropriate use of sanctions still persists, it begs the question as to whether now is the time to extend their reach.

Key findings

- **The sanction regime is a significant part of the benefit system and cannot be dismissed as a minor element of welfare**

In the last decade, over 209,000 single parents claiming JSA were referred for a sanction; with some referred more than once, there were nearly 436,000 referrals in total – this is around one in seven single parent JSA claimants a year brought into the sanctions process, peaking at one in five single parents in recent years

- **Sanctions have affected a large number of single parent families**

In the last decade, around 160,000 single parents have had a sanction imposed on them – ie their referral has not been dismissed – meaning around 250,000 children of single parents have been affected by sanctions

- **An overall monthly sanction rate, the DWP's preferred measure, of 6 per cent underestimates the risk of sanctioning for single parents – in the last five years, the estimated annual sanction rate was double this figure**

In recent years, after reforms moved many more single parents onto JSA from income support and the instigation of a stricter sanctions regime in October 2012, the estimated annual single parent sanction rate peaked at around one in seven (14-15 per cent)

- **Single parents who are referred for a sanction are more likely to end up with a sanction imposed than a decade ago**

Single parents are more likely to be referred for a sanction than they were ten years ago; once referred, they are also more likely to end up with a sanction – in April 2005, 40 per cent of single parent referrals reached a sanction, compared to 65 per cent in June 2016

- **Single parents are still particularly at risk of being unfairly sanctioned**

Since the new rules were introduced in October 2012, 62 per cent of formal challenges to single parent sanctions have been successful, compared with 53 per cent of challenges to other sanctions, indicating single parents are more likely to have been unfairly sanctioned than other claimants

- **Sanctions have had a significant financial cost for single parents**

Under the new regime alone, sanctions have stopped around £40 million in JSA payments to single parents – or around £31 million once hardship payments are taken into account

- **Many more single parents are at risk from the extension of conditionality**

If the rate of sanctioning remains the same, a further 16,500 single parents with pre-school children will be sanctioned due to the April 2017 changes to job-seeking conditions; even more will be affected once in-work conditions are also introduced.

Visit www.gingerbread.org.uk/sanctions for the full report.

Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families

Gingerbread

520 Highgate Studios
53-79 Highgate Road
London, NW5 1TL
Tel: 020 7428 5420

www.gingerbread.org.uk

Single Parent Helpline

0808 802 0925

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