



Are people on disability benefits swinging the lead?

TUC Poverty Conference 2011

£33,000 benefits cheat who had SEVEN jobs while claiming he was wheelchair-bound

Daily Mail, 24 August¹

500,000 on sick are fit to work

Daily Express, 3 April²

Two in three benefit claimants are fit for work

Daily Telegraph, 11 February³

A benefits cheat who claimed she needed crutches to walk framed herself with her holiday snaps - zooming down a WATER SLIDE in a bikini

The Sun, 23 August⁴

A full-time lorry driver who falsely claimed disability benefits has been ordered to pay back more than £22,000 or face prison

Yorkshire Evening Post, 12 September⁵

Reading the newspaper, you might imagine that disabled people are malingerers, cheats and fraudsters, out to get over-generous benefits that really they are not entitled to.

In fact, fraud is comparatively rare for disability benefits; it is much less common than the media suggest across all benefits but particularly low for disability benefits. Statistics published by the DWP⁶ show that overpayments due to fraud accounted for no more than 1.1 per cent of all benefit spending in 2010 – 11. (The statisticians responsible for the report estimated that between 0.7 and 1.1 per cent of spending goes to fraud; their best estimate was 0.8 per cent.)

For disability benefits, the figures are even lower: fraud accounted for a smaller proportion of spending on Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit than Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Pension Credit, Housing Benefit, Carer's Allowance or Council Tax Benefit. Fraud accounted for just **0.5 per cent** of DLA spending and **0.3 per cent** of IB spending.

All fraud is wrong and any amount is too much but focusing on this issue as if it were one of the most important features of the system is unbalanced and it gives a completely wrong impression of disabled people.

Recent research by Richard Berthoud⁷ provides a convincing rebuttal of two common arguments: that the number of disabled people “can't” have risen in recent years and that increasing numbers are due to the availability of benefits like DLA. Using General Household Survey data for the numbers who say they have a “limiting long-term illness” his calculations show that the prevalence of disability “rose gradually between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, before falling gradually over the following ten years.” The employment penalty faced by disabled people, however, “followed a different pattern. It rose very slowly at first, increased rapidly between 1987 and 2000, and then steadied.”

Contrary to saloon bar wisdom, “most of the growth in the prevalence of limiting long-standing illness, and most of the rise in the disability employment penalty, has affected people at the more severe, rather than the less severe, end of the spectrum. This suggests that the underlying trend is a true one, not simply associated with people's reports of, or responses to, trivial conditions.”

Some people are concerned that the number of DLA claimants has risen faster than the number of disabled people and some commentators have taken this to mean that the increased expenditure on the benefit is fraudulent or unnecessary. Berthoud's research provides an authoritative response: changes in the social security system cannot explain the patterns of changes in the prevalence of disability or the extent of disabled people's employment disadvantage; the gap between the two opened up in the mid-1990s, a period when the social security system did not change much.⁸

There is a risk that the reforms might actually reduce the number of disabled people in paid work. A survey by the Disability Alliance found that 25 per cent of respondents were in employment but half of them feared that they would have to give up their jobs if they lost the support for independence that DLA offers.⁹

There may be an even greater problem: the focus on fraud in disability benefits could be partly responsible for the growth of hate crimes against disabled people. Opinion polling for the charity Scope¹⁰ carried out in September found that 47 per cent of disabled people believe that public attitudes towards them have got worse over the past year. Two-thirds of disabled people say that they have experienced aggression, hostility or name calling. Two statistics in the poll suggest that the growing emphasis on fraudulent claims for disability benefits may have something to do with this:

- 65% thought others did not believe that they were disabled;
- 73% said they felt others presumed they did not work.

Both figures had risen significantly from the previous poll, in May. Some of the remarks by individual disabled people in Scope's report on these results provide even stronger connections back to the narrative used by politicians and journalists:

"I have had people shouting abuse in the street, like 'scrounger'. I have been attacked by a group of teenagers, who attempted to kick my stick away and knock me down. This happened in a busy shopping area and no one offered to help me afterwards..."

"I have been called scrounger, parasite, and a waste of space. My personal assistant was spat at for helping me recently in a local shop."

"I've been called names in the street and told to "stop faking and get a f***ing job" while struggling to transfer to my wheelchair from the car."

"I can walk although it is always with great pain and difficulty. I take a wheelchair with me most places and I am treated so much differently in a wheelchair. When I do get out of the wheelchair and walk a little way, I have been accused of faking it and being lazy. Because on the outside I look healthy and 'normal' people expect me to be healthy and normal."

Notes

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2029445/Jail-33k-benefit-cheat-Gary-Walker-seven-jobs.html>

² <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/238460>

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/8317141/Two-in-three-benefit-claimants-are-fit-to-work.html>

⁴ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3767600/Benefits-cheat-rumbled-on-slide.html>

⁵ <http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/latest-news/central-leeds/pontefract-benefits-cheat-must-pay-back-22-000-1-3762201>

⁶ *Fraud and Error in the Benefit System: Preliminary 2010/11 Estimates*, DWP, 2011, http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fem/fem_oct09_sep10.pdf

⁷ *Trends in the Employment of Disabled People in Britain*, R Berthoud, 2011, http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/iser_working_papers/2011-03.pdf

⁸ Berthoud, 2011, pp. 47 – 8.

⁹ *Disabled people fear cuts will make life 'not worth living'*, DA, 2011, <http://www.disabilityalliance.org/dlareformpress.htm>

¹⁰ *Attitudes towards disabled people are getting worse – but survey shows support for Paralympics*, Scope website, 8 September 2011, <http://www.scope.org.uk/news/paralympics-attitudes-survey>