

# **Thousands of young people forced to go without food after benefits wrongly stopped under 'draconian' new sanctions regime**

The under-24s are bearing the brunt of a punitive new system that stops payments without warning

(Abridged from) *The Independent*, Sunday, 2 March 2014

Thousands of young people have been forced to go without food or other essentials after their benefits were wrongly stopped under a “draconian” new sanctions regime, research suggests.

Since the Coalition introduced more punitive benefit sanctions in October 2012, more than 45,000 young people have been hit with an incorrect penalty, according to IoS analysis of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) figures.

A sanction can mean having welfare payments cut off entirely for a minimum of a month and as much as three years for “repeat offenders”. The hardline system, which means people can end up cast adrift for accidentally missing an appointment, is thought to be one of the reasons behind the vast numbers turning to food banks.

Experts say young people are being unfairly singled out by the strict new system of penalties.

Despite making up only 27 per cent of Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants, 18- to 24-year-olds have accounted for 42 per cent of all sanctions handed out.

In total, 343,744 young people have had their benefits stopped because a job centre decided they have not abided by strict rules. About one in five cases results from someone failing to attend an interview with an employment adviser, though there have been examples of people being sanctioned for this despite never receiving an interview time.

YMCA England is publishing a report this week into the damaging impact of sanctions on the young people it works with. Denise Hatton, its chief executive, said: “The level of incorrect decisions being made by Jobcentre Plus is frankly scandalous. Benefits are supposed to be a lifeline and safety net for those most in need. When these benefits are taken away, it can be disastrous. When this is done without due cause, it is reprehensible.

Sally Copley, head of UK campaigns at Oxfam, said that getting sanctions overturned is 'really painful' process that can drag on for months. Oxfam is pushing for more intensive one-to-one support for unemployed people as a more effective way of tackling poverty.

Shadow Employment minister, Stephen Timms, said: “David Cameron’s out-of-touch government is letting young people down, and the number of young people on Jobseeker’s Allowance for over a year has doubled since the election.”

The Department for Work and Pensions has been dogged by claims that job-centre staff are given weekly or monthly targets for the number of benefits sanction decisions to take. The department strenuously denies this, describing the numbers as management information, not a target.

More than four-fifths of the vulnerable young people who were sanctioned reported being forced to go without essential items. The most common areas where they were forced to cut back or go without were: food, 84 per cent; housing costs, 81 per cent; and toiletries, 75 per cent.

505 words