

# 'Benefits Street' and the Myth of Workless Communities

by Robert MacDonald, Tracy Shildrick and Andy Furlong

Teesside University; University of Glasgow; University of Leeds

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## Abstract

This paper critically engages with a pervasive myth about welfare in the UK which is commonly spread by politicians, think tanks and the media. This is the myth that there are areas of the country which are so affected by entrenched cultures of 'welfare dependency' that the majority of residents are unemployed. In undertaking research that sought to investigate a different idea - that there are families where no-one has worked over several generations - we simultaneously gathered evidence about the likelihood that there are localities where virtually no-one is in employment. The rationale for Channel 4's *Benefits Street* was exactly this; that whole streets and neighbourhoods are of out of work and living on welfare benefits. We draw on research evidence gathered in Middlesbrough and Glasgow to investigate this idea. Thus, the aim of our paper is simple and empirical: is the central idea of 'Benefits Street' true? Are there streets and neighbourhoods in the UK where virtually no-one works?

**Keywords:** *Worklessness, Welfare, Benefits, Neighbourhoods*

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## Introduction: Two popular myths

...there are two pervasive myths about welfare in the UK which are routinely retailed by politicians and the media. The first is the myth of the family where 'nobody has worked for generations'. The second is the myth of the area where 'nobody works around here' (Declan Gaffney 2014).

- 1.1 In undertaking research that sought to investigate the first of these ideas (i.e. that there are families where no-one has worked over several generations), we simultaneously gathered evidence about the likelihood of the second (i.e. that there are localities where no-one is in employment). A full discussion of what we found in relation to the first issue can be found elsewhere (Shildrick et al 2012; MacDonald et al 2013). It is the second one that concerns us here. It is this idea, that whole streets and neighbourhoods are of out of work and living on welfare benefits, that was the rationale for Channel 4's *Benefits Street* and which became the target of tabloid newspaper disapproval (see Gaffney 2014):

'Benefits Street exposed; the street where 9 out of 10 households are on welfare' (The Express);

'...where 90 per cent of residents are on handouts' (The Sun);

'...90 per cent of residents are on benefits' (The Daily Mail).

- 1.2 As we will show, this is a powerful and important idea that is shared by leading politicians and think tanks. It is a belief that carries with it implicit and sometimes explicitly stated theories of contemporary worklessness in the UK which in turn can be used to justify the ramping up of more punitive policy measures (e.g. increased benefit conditionality or cuts in benefit levels). Yet, as Gaffney suggests, this powerful idea might be mythical in the sense that it is 'a mode of thinking that has no relation to facts whatsoever'. Thus, the aim of our paper is simple and empirical: is the central idea of 'Benefits Street' true? Are there streets and neighbourhoods in the UK where virtually no-one works?

## Researching 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness'

- 2.1 The research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>[1]</sup>. It investigated the claim that *cultures* of worklessness are passed down the generations, from parents to children, and that this helps explain the concentrations of worklessness that can be found in some parts of the UK. We also aimed to test a particular, strong version of this thesis; that there are families in the UK 'where no-one in three generations has ever worked'.
- 2.2 We used a critical case study method, selecting white, working-class neighbourhoods with relatively stable populations and high rates of worklessness and social deprivation in two urban centres - Glasgow and Middlesbrough - that had experienced long-term economic decline. We called these neighbourhoods 'Parkhill' and 'East Kelby'. The varied strategies we used to find 20 families (ten in each locality) where at least one family member in each generation had never been in employment, the problems we faced in finding them, and how we had to progressively relax our sample recruitment criteria, are discussed in detail elsewhere (MacDonald et al 2013). It is important to stress, however, that it was extremely difficult to locate families of this sort, even in areas of severe and multiple deprivation and even using recruitment methods explicitly designed to find families where 'three generations have never worked'.
- 2.3 The achieved sample was as follows. 47 people across 20 families took part. 28 were women and 19 were men. We interviewed at least two members of each family; typically, a long-term (i.e. at least five years) workless parent (usually aged over 40 years) and his or her working-age, but unemployed son or daughter (most of who were aged 21 years or under and most of who had never had a job). This 'younger generation' were not required to be living in the same household as their parents (several were now living independently). In all but one case we were unable to interview three generations (i.e. the grandparents in these families), because these older family members were deceased or too ill to take part. Participants reported claiming a range of 'out of work benefits' as their main benefit (e.g. Job Seeker's Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Income Support, and Employment Support Allowance). Notably, nine interviewees, all but one in the younger generation, reported receiving no benefits or other income.
- 2.4 Methodological details, and indeed the results of the study (see Shildrick et al 2012), need not overly concern us here apart from saying that we were unable to locate any family where 'three generations had never worked' and the research emphatically dismissed a 'cultures of worklessness' thesis as useful in explaining the situations of these families. That said, one further finding is very relevant to our discussion here. Aping the common tendency, we have used the phrases 'workless households' and families where generations have 'never worked'. These are misnomers. A mass of unpaid domestic work was carried out in these households and, in addition, many participants were heavily committed to the informal care of family members and friends. Many also undertook regular, unpaid voluntary work and some engaged in criminal work (specifically at the lower rungs of the illegal drugs market) (see Shildrick et al 2012). The critical focus of this paper is, however, upon the alleged disconnection of unemployed people from those in paid employment because it is this idea that is central to the idea of 'communities where no-one works'.

## 'Entire communities' as 'benefit ghettos': space, culture and networks

- 3.1 One central facet of the thesis about 'cultures of worklessness' (see Ritchie et al 2005) is that entrenched *sub-cultures* of unemployment have emerged in some of the UK's urban centres. As students of the history of underclass ideas will quickly recognise, this is a version of a very long-standing thesis, stretching back to the Victorian period and earlier, that posits that impoverishment and unemployment can be accounted for by failures of personal morality and behaviour (see Welshman 2013). Worklessness is understood to be cultural, learned and largely voluntary, reflecting a preference for idleness and a life on welfare benefits. To use the Chancellor of the Exchequer's phrase, people regard 'welfare benefits as a life-style choice' (Osborn 2010).
- 3.2 Space is important here (see Hancock and Mooney 2013, for an excellent dissection of the ideology involved in the recent stigmatisation of 'welfare ghettos'). These processes are not evenly spread geographically but have become concentrated, it is argued. Even if the initial causes of high unemployment in their localities were *structural* in nature (e.g. economic de-industrialisation), people have now become *culturally* accommodated to a life without work. There is an implicit and rarely elaborated version of 'social learning theory' at play here. Thus, in places of high unemployment *social learning* from others serves to *entrench* worklessness and welfare dependency. The family and social networks of unemployed people are imagined to be culturally homogeneous, stable and rooted in these deprived urban spaces. People who are out of work predominate in these networks. Values and practices that diminish the importance of employment and which encourage long-term dependency

on welfare benefits are *socially learned* - from others in the community and via processes of family socialisation. 'Benefit ghettos' (Centre for Social Justice 2013a) emerge where living on welfare benefits becomes the norm and seen as normal<sup>[2]</sup>. Few alternatives - of people working for a living - are visible and available as role models. This is how 'Benefits Street' was presented. A good example of this same thesis - and evidence that it is not restricted to popular media or to the current UK Coalition government - can be found in New Labour's *HM Treasury Pre-budget Report* (2002, emphasis added):

Rising concentrations of worklessness - particularly within inner cities, former coalfield communities and seaside towns - have led to the emergence of communities in which *worklessness is no longer the exception, but the norm*. Households that have experienced generations of unemployment often develop a cultural expectation of worklessness.

3.3 A very clear statement of this line of thinking has more recently been given by Iain Duncan Smith (UK Minister for Work and Pensions). He asserts that some young adults have 'destructive lifestyles' and 'no interest in work' because 'they have seen their parents, their neighbours and *their entire community sit on benefits for life*' (2011: 11, emphasis added)<sup>[3]</sup>. Thus, in one short clause we have the two enduring myths of welfare identified by Declan Gaffney and with which we opened this paper: 'nobody works round here' and families are 'unemployed over generations'. As Adrian Sinfield (2011) points out, this is no careless slip of the tongue. In the same speech Duncan Smith goes on to describe people 'who have been *out of work all their lives*. . . and have *never seen a family or even a community member in work*' (ibid: 12, emphasis added). Views like these have been fed directly into policy documents, with the Coalition government's flagship *Universal Credit* welfare reforms seeking to tackle the problem of 'children growing up in homes where no one works' and worklessness being repeated 'through the generations' (DWP 2010: 3).

3.4 Sinfield (2011) quite rightly asks, 'what evidence did he have for this?' going on to pursue Duncan Smith's assertions about 'entire communities... on benefits for life' directly with the DWP. The letter he received in response acknowledged that Duncan Smith had 'nowhere specific in mind' and that 'community' indicated 'circle' (see Sinfield 2013). This slipperiness clearly does not help to substantiate the thesis about people becoming completely cut off from others in jobs<sup>[4]</sup>. Iain Duncan Smith repeated a very similar claim in 2014. Speaking at the *Centre for Social Justice*, he emphasised the urgency of welfare reforms to 'stop Benefits Street Britain' (as the headline of *The Telegraph*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January proclaimed). Referring to his earlier visits to 'Britain's most deprived areas', he talked of how 'those living' in 'neighbourhoods blighted by worklessness... had one thing in common; *they were for the most part dependent on the state* for their daily needs' (Duncan Smith 2014; emphasis added).

### Talking to 'Benefits Street' in Middlesbrough and Glasgow

4.1 Certainly at first glance it might appear that the families we talked to in Middlesbrough's 'East Kelby' and Glasgow's 'Parkhill' lived on the local equivalent of 'Benefits Street'. Official data from the Office for National Statistics (see Shildrick et al 2012 for a fuller discussion) showed that these were neighbourhoods with high rates of 'worklessness' (and were selected for research because of that). All families had known extensive unemployment. All the parents in the mid-generation that we interviewed had been out of work and on social welfare benefits for a long time (i.e. at least five years). Unemployment was just one of many problems that affected the families to whom we talked. For members of the middle-aged, parent generation the reasons for long-term worklessness were usually complex and intertwined with a range of other, often severe hardships they had faced in their lives.

4.2 The young people in these families that we talked to were also unemployed and most had never had a job. If we were not careful, the impression could be given of people isolated in a 'culture of worklessness' or resident in a 'benefit ghetto'.

4.3 In seeking neighbourhoods in which to undertake qualitative research, it needs to be reiterated that we sought out localities *most likely* to demonstrate 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness. Because ours was a critical case study, we therefore selected neighbourhoods with *very high* levels of worklessness (compared with the respective cities). Perhaps like the makers of 'Benefits Street', for this study we sought out the extreme case. So, how many people were 'workless' in Parkhill and East Kelby? At the time of the research (e.g. February, 2010), the rates were as follows (see Shildrick et al 2012): 38.1% *Parkhill* (compared to a worklessness rate of 21.8% in Glasgow, and 14.6% in Scotland) and 30.6% *East Kelby* (compared to 20.9% in Middlesbrough, 12.4% England). Even with these extreme cases, less than four out of ten people of working age were on out of work benefits. This is a far cry from the situation where 'an entire community sits on benefits for life', as Iain Duncan Smith says is the case. The same story applies to James Turner Street; the street in Birmingham used for

'Benefits Street'. Declan Gaffney (2014) undertook some relatively simple analysis of available social statistics to lay bare the outlandishness of the claims made about James Turner Street and its residents. Thus, once retired and student households are discounted (so as to get a better estimate of the working age population), somewhere between '62 per cent and 65 per cent of households had someone in employment' (ibid.)<sup>[5]</sup>. In other words, (only) somewhere between 38% and 35% of households might be regarded as 'workless' on 'Benefits Street', compared with the 90% broadcast by tabloid newspapers as being on 'welfare handouts' (a figure presumably suggested by programme makers). In this sense James Turner Street/ 'Benefits Street' in Birmingham is very similar to the neighbourhoods we researched in Glasgow and Middlesbrough.

4.4 Thus, even in the extreme cases of the places we researched, most residents were not workless and most households contained people in jobs. This was evident amongst the families we interviewed<sup>[6]</sup>. For instance, although Linda White (51, Glasgow) and her daughter Kerry (31) had each been out of work for several years this was not the case for the whole family. Of Kerry's five siblings one had never worked and been in and out of prison. One sister was not in a job but bringing up her young daughter. Another sister worked in a betting office and another was currently unemployed but previously worked in nursing homes and in a pizza factory. Finally, one brother was a head chef in a Glasgow restaurant. This variation in employment activity amongst siblings brought up in the same household was not unusual in the sample. It is a finding that runs counter to the idea both that cultures of worklessness are transmitted from parents to children and that workless individuals are disconnected from those in jobs.

4.5 We found this same mixed pattern in interviewees' extended families and in their wider social networks as well. Many were unemployed but many were employed. The subjective reality of this is important for how we understand the causes of worklessness. It throws into doubt theories that rely on the idea that individuals are so swamped by negative role models and so bereft of positive examples of people in jobs that they learn that worklessness is the norm and to be preferred. When asked, interviewees, the younger generation in particular, reeled off the names of people they knew who had jobs. These were other family members (siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins or, in years previously, grandparents) and friends and neighbours. For example, Pamela Fraser (21, Glasgow) had done voluntary work and jobs since leaving school but was currently unemployed, after some serious health problems. Speaking of her friends, she said: 'it's mixed. A few have got jobs. One of the boys is in the army. One's a chef and one's a roofer but there's a few of them cannot get a job and it's a shame...'. From the generation above, Patrick Richards (49, Middlesbrough) said something similar. He too was currently out of work, chiefly because of ill-health, but amongst his network of friends many were in jobs:

a lot of my friends, some of them are unemployed but some of them are doing ok. One of my best friends is a welding inspector. I have another one who is doing some sort of operative in ICI. They work hard but there is always the fear of unemployment hanging over them... I'm trying to think... yes, most of my friends do work.

4.6 For younger interviewees, people they knew who were in jobs were often cited as people they might emulate (often in direct contrast to their parents). For example, Diane Duncan (23, Middlesbrough) felt that that her mother had 'not really set a good example of working - she's only worked twice in twenty-three years!' She contrasted this with one of her sisters who had:

...worked since she was 16, always had a job - in a cafe, then in a factory, then the club, and then going to Uni . . . now she's a Probation Officer... she's a bit of a better example. They've always had a nice house . . . not no money for owt [anything]. She's shown a different way of life.

4.7 Thus, interviewees would directly connect their own aspirations for employment to the examples set by others they knew. Both parents of Leanne Martin (17, Glasgow) had suffered serious health effects from long-term intravenous heroin use. Neither had worked in several years. Leanne commented on her own aspirations:

And I want to work, aye . . . My Granny worked and my great Granny. I've seen my Granny's family, my uncles, aunties and that all working. My pals' families - I know loads of people that work.

## Conclusion

5.1 That there are localities where virtually no-one has employment has become an important myth of our time. It is asserted by senior politicians and it provided the underlying rationale for the TV programme 'Benefits Street'. Leading think tanks write reports about it and it provides the impetus for government welfare reforms. The idea of 'benefit ghettos' where unemployment is a 'lifestyle choice' is a powerful one that helps justify the government's cuts to welfare budgets. Yet with this short discussion we hope to have demonstrated that this is a myth, in the sense that it does not reflect the facts of the matter.

- 5.2 In conclusion, then: if politicians, policy makers, and those who work professionally with unemployed people are seriously interested in understanding the problem of worklessness in deprived communities they should *first* abandon theories - and policies and practices that follow from them - that positions unemployment as primarily the product of a culture of worklessness, held in families, passed down the generations, circulated in deviant subcultures and concentrated in welfare ghettos. If a culture of worklessness cannot be found in the extremely deprived neighbourhoods we studied, then they are unlikely to explain more general patterns of worklessness in the UK. *Second*, however, this does not mean that there is no problem to be explained. Clearly there is something going on when such high - and persistently high - rates of worklessness can be found concentrated in some localities and affecting some of the same families over decades.
- 5.3 Let's take Middlesbrough as the example (similar things could be said about Glasgow). For the most of the years since the 1980s, Middlesbrough has had more or less twice the national average level of unemployment. It is now regularly described as one of the poorest and least economically resilient towns in England. Yet in the early 1970s, because of its *low* rates of unemployment and high skilled and well-paying jobs, Teesside was estimated to be the third most prosperous local economy in the UK (after London and Aberdeen) ([Tees Valley Unlimited 2010](#)). Rather than a 'strange sociology' that theorises these changes in terms of a new 'epidemic of laziness' ([Toynbee 2012](#)) and inherited idleness, for us a proper explanation of unemployment in Middlesbrough, or Glasgow, would have to start with the question '*what has happened here?*' A suitable answer, in our view, would necessarily seek to unravel how global forces and national policies combined to spell the rapid deindustrialisation of places and how this has meant the economic dispossession of the working-class of Britain's old industrial centres over the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. One result has been that the lives of some of the most disadvantaged members of this class - for families, across generations - have been constantly shadowed by unemployment, insecurity and poverty (see [MacDonald et al 2013](#)). This to us seems the start of a more persuasive story than one that pretends that there are places where no-one works; 'Benefits Streets' where families have never worked for generations and where unemployment is a preferred way of life.
- 5.4 *Postscript:* after completing this essay, we learned that the producers of Benefits Street are actively researching impoverished neighbourhoods of Middlesbrough, and nearby Stockton, as the location for a second series of the programme ([Cain 2014](#)).
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## Notes

- 1 The research team also involved Johann Roden (Glasgow University) and Robert Crow (Teesside University)
  - 2 Preferring to refer to unemployment as 'out of work dependency', the Centre for Social Justice ([2013a](#)) claims to have exposed a small number of 'benefit ghettos' where the *majority* of working age residents are on out of work benefits. It is unclear from the report, however, whether the figures cited are adjusted to discount pensioner and student households (see later).
  - 3 Although community has different meanings it is clear that ideas about 'communities that never work' are ones based on the notion of a geographic community; of physical neighbourhoods with, in this case, a shared sub-culture of anti-social and anti-work values.
  - 4 Duncan Smith has also been challenged, under a Freedom of Information request, to provide evidence for his assertions about 'three generations of families that have never worked'. His response was that 'statistical information on the number of UK families that never work is not available' and that his statements were, therefore, based on 'personal observations' (see [Macmillan 2013](#)).
  - 5 Of course, this does not mean that these households were not claiming *any* benefits. Many households do, even when they contain employees. It does, though, dispel the idea that virtually all residents are unemployed and claiming out of work benefits.
  - 6 All participants have been given pseudonyms.
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