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article

British public employment service reform: activating and civilising the precariat?

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A post-industrial 'precariat' has emerged characterised by social insecurity to which the state's response has been to secure habituation to insecure labour. This article provides new empirical evidence regarding how the precariat encounter and experience the reformed welfare delivery system. It seeks to explore theoretically whether the precariat is being 'activated' and/or 'civilised'. The author finds that the primary role of Jobcentre Plus is to assess whether the unemployed are 'active'. This has been interpreted by Marxist scholars as a class disciplinary project which renders labour more dependent upon precarious work. However, the evidence presented here suggests that an inappropriate white-collar model of support combined with sanctions frequently results in ill-discipline and disengagement from benefits. Furthermore, support cannot be conceptualised as a 'civilising offensive' because it is not a deliberate and targeted attempt at inculcating 'civilised' behaviour. Moreover, rather than enforcing the norms of civilised behaviour it drives many into destitution and crime.

Key words precariat • jobcentre • paternalism • civilising • activation

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Introduction

A post-industrial 'precariat' has emerged (Wacquant, 2009; Standing 2011) characterised by social insecurity, to which the state's response has been to re-assert class discipline by rendering labour more dependent on insecure work (Wacquant, 2009; Wiggan, 2015; Umney et al, 2018). This has been accompanied by far-reaching reforms of the welfare delivery system. The creation of Jobcentre Plus promised a revolution in the way the workless would be supported by merging the Employment Service and Benefits Agency. However, the relationship between the reformed UK public employment service and emerging forms of social marginality is under-researched. Moreover, recent studies have focused on the compulsive aspects of welfare delivery (see Wiggan 2007; Fletcher and Wright, 2018) and have paid scant attention to the

support provided. There is also a need to enhance our understanding of the experiences and perceptions of those being supported and explore theoretically whether the precariat is being ‘activated’ and/or ‘civilised’.

The article begins by considering the emergence of the precariat and outlines its relation to the benefits system. It continues by outlining two variants of the new paternalism (‘activating’ and ‘civilising’) which seek to direct the lives of the poor in return for supporting them. The author outlines the role played by Jobcentre Plus in the transformation of welfare delivery. The findings from a study examining how the precariat encounter and experience such support are articulated. The author argues that although the primary role of Jobcentre Plus is to assess whether those claiming benefits are ‘active’ it has imposed a residual white-collar model of support combined with harsh sanctions which drive many into destitution and crime rather than exerting class discipline. The author argues that Jobcentre Plus support cannot be conceptualised as part of a ‘civilising offensive’ since it is not a deliberate attempt at inculcating ‘civilised’ behaviour and it results in de-civilising effects.

The precariat

A post-industrial precariat (Wacquant, 2009; Standing 2011) has emerged characterised by chronic insecurity. The end of the Fordist–Keynesian compromise and welfare state retrenchment has been accompanied by the degradation of employment conditions, shortening of job tenure, falls in real wages, and shrinking of collective protections for the working class which have been brought about and accompanied by a surge in precarious work (Wacquant, 2009). This stems from: ‘a new employer strategy of externalization of the workforce and its costs – a strategy encouraged by public authorities and powerfully reinforced by the active marketing of temporary employment agencies’ (Wacquant, 2009: 55). This has been facilitated by the shift from welfare to contractual workfare which operates in the manner of a labour parole programme designed to push its beneficiaries into poor jobs (Wacquant, 2009). The state presents a ‘fearsome and frowning face’ to the working class which leaves a ‘heavy imprint’ of discipline on welfare recipients and transforms their mentalities through the routine experience of threat and coercion (Wacquant, 2009: 312).

Standing (2011) views the precariat as a ‘class in the making’ comprising youth, migrants, criminals and disabled minorities. All aspects of work (employer, wage, time and conditions of work and workplace) are subject to change according to contingencies beyond the individuals’ control. The precariat’s relation to the labour market is highly opportunistic since work tends to be temporary which makes for a nomadic pattern of drifting. The rise of precarious forms of employment is due to the way in which employers have managed uneven labour demand. The risks of labour underutilisation have been placed on workers who can be hired and fired. The precariat are increasingly denied rights accorded to previous generations. ‘Its essential character is being a supplicant, a beggar, pushed to rely on discretionary and conditional hand-outs from the state and by privatised agencies and charities operating on its behalf’ (Standing, 2014: 4).

Savage (2015) argues that the precariat describes those at the bottom of the emerging British landscape of social class and is estimated to consist of about 15 per cent of the British population. ‘This class has by far the lowest household income, has little if any savings, and is likely to rent property. And it also has the smallest number of

social ties, with few associates in higher-status occupations, and its cultural capital is more limited than that of any of the other classes' (Savage, 2015: 171). The concept draws attention to way that vulnerability is structurally determined and situates this group within the wider processes of contemporary labour markets rather than fixing on them as being outside employment altogether (Savage, 2015).

The precariat is more accurately conceived as a re-emerging form of social marginality since historical analysis reveals that precarious forms of employment have been a recurrent feature of working-class experience. During the late nineteenth century, for example, the pool of casual workers lay at the heart of the unemployment problem: 'The problem was really one of underemployment among many rather than unemployment among few' (Whiteside, 1991: 21). The casual labourer had little employment security and competed in a large pool of unskilled and semi-skilled labour which, even in peaks of demand, was surplus to requirements and in times of depression grossly so (Burnett, 1994). 'On some building sites a foreman might find fifty labourers pleading for a mere half-dozen jobs. It was not unknown for him to place six spades against a wall at one hundred yards distance. A wild, humiliating race followed; work went to those who succeeded in grabbing a spade' (Roberts in Burnett, 1994: 171).

A key motivation for the introduction of a national system of labour exchanges in 1910 was the need to eliminate the use of casual labour which was condemned as 'expensive, inefficient and a source of social and moral degeneration' (Whiteside, 2015: 155). Beveridge declared to the Royal Commission on Poor Laws in 1907: 'For the man who wants to get a casual job now and again, the exchange will make that wish impossible... The result of the exchange is the direct opposite from that of assisting the lazy or the incapable; it makes it harder for them to and compels them to be regular' (quoted in Whiteside, 1991: 62). A century later the triumph of neoliberalism and the promotion of flexible labour markets have fostered employment practices reminiscent of the Victorian age with casual employment and part-time work proliferating. It is in this context that welfare reform has changed the way in which work is perceived; all jobs are good jobs (Wacquant, 2009). Consequently, policymakers are now keen to promote the acceptance of casual work. The launch of the Universal Credit sought to force claimants to take even small amounts of work and has been likened to 'pimping the precariat' (Dean, 2012).

The new paternalism

Economic transformation has been accompanied by the ascent of a new paternalism which seeks to supervise and direct the lives of the poor in return for supporting them (compare Mead, 1992). Paternalistic policies enforce behavioural requirements through close supervision. Mead has played a key role in promoting the idea of 'welfare dependency' in the post cold-war world (Garrett, 2015). His principal concern is the attitudes and behaviour of the poor who, it is alleged, lack ambition and competence because they are 'passive' and 'do little to help themselves' (Mead, 1992: 213). This passivity is especially marked in the labour market. 'The poverty of today's underclass differs appreciably from poverty in the past: underclass poverty stems less from the absence of opportunity than from the inability or reluctance to take advantage of opportunity' (Mead, 1992: 3). A refusal to work, reflecting the development of an 'entitlement mentality', is viewed as the major cause of 'welfare dependency'.

From this perspective a curtailment of citizenship may be necessary because the question now becomes ‘how passive you can be and remain a citizen in full standing’ (Mead, 1992: 213). The task for the state is to inculcate the capacities for agency in the poor (‘activate’) by imposing adequate disciplinary controls. Making benefits conditional on the behaviour of claimants can be viewed in this context. Consequently, policymaking is paternalistic in that it consciously assumes a protective or ‘tutelary’ role in order to instil the desirable individual qualities that will produce socially acceptable behaviour.

The concept of the ‘civilising offensive’ developed by Eliasian scholars focuses on the deliberate and targeted attempts at inculcating ‘civilised’ habits. The term was first coined by de Rooy (1979) and describes the conscious attempts of the paternalistic state to alter the behaviour of sections of the population by inculcating ‘civilised’ habits. A perceived lack of work ethic among the poor has been a key focus of modern ‘civilising offensives’ conducted by a paternalistic state (Mitzman, 1987). Rodger (2012) argues that civilising offensives sponsored by the welfare state include actions aimed at integrating marginal groups into work. More recently, Van den Berg and Arts (2018) argue that Dutch legislation that allows welfare office staff to sanction clients deemed to ‘obstruct employment’ by their appearance is part of a long history of welfare state civilising offensives (Van den Berg and Duyvendak, 2012; Van den Berg, 2016). The implementation of the Dutch Participation Act means that the unemployed are required to perform aesthetic labour as an explicit condition for the right to welfare.

This article considers whether the support pioneered by Jobcentre Plus can be conceptualised as a ‘civilising offensive’. The growing focus on the activation of the unemployed means that benefit claimants have had to engage in various forms of labour to prepare for re-entering the labour market. This includes regular mandatory contact with Jobcentre work advisers, undertaking voluntary work, active job search and aesthetic labour. In terms of the latter, UK Jobcentre advisers can instruct the unemployed, with legal authority, to take specific action they deemed necessary for finding work including altering personal appearance (Blackmore, 2001). The conditions that individuals need to fulfil to remain eligible for benefits including the number of job applications that must be completed every week are set out in individual ‘claimant commitments’. At the same time Jobcentre Plus has implemented a job search model that requires the use of the internet to search for work and the adoption of *curricula vitae*. Disciplining the precariat to use such job search methods and making their use a condition for receipt of benefit has the hallmarks of a civilising offensive. This is because such methods are not used for the recruitment to precarious work which privileges personal social contacts (Sassen, 1996).

Jobcentre Plus: a vanguard of welfare reform

Policy reforms have been accompanied by far-reaching changes to the welfare delivery system (Meyers et al, 1998; Van Berkel, 2007; Wiggan, 2007; Fletcher, 2011). Jobcentre Plus was established in the UK following the merger of the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency which meant that it was given a remit to both help people into work and ‘police’ benefit entitlement where it applies benefit sanctions. It currently serves around 700,000 unemployed claimants through its network of 713 Jobcentres

Box 1: The Work Coach role

Work Coaches are front-line staff based in Jobcentres with the following responsibilities:

- agreeing 'Claimant Commitments' with new claimants setting out the conditions that they need to fulfil to remain eligible for benefits, and making sanction referrals if claimants fail to fulfil these;
- supporting claimants into work by motivating, providing advice, and using their knowledge of labour markets; and
- supporting employed claimants in the pilot in-work service.

Source: [WPC, 2016](#)

across England, Scotland and Wales ([NAO, 2016](#)). Regular mandatory contact with advisers was a core element of the new approach. Work coaches were introduced in 2013 and are responsible for providing frontline support to individuals and implementing welfare conditionality (see Box 1). This is supplemented by a number of voluntary schemes (see Table 1). Jobcentre Plus districts can also access the Flexible Support Fund to help work coaches provide additional support to help claimants move into work including funding travel to job interviews and clothing for interviews. However, only a little over half of the available £136 million in 2014–15 was spent ([HoC WPC, 2016](#)).

The type and level of support provided by Jobcentre Plus has been constrained by very low levels of funding; the hegemony of work-first approaches; and a preoccupation with performance measures principally moving people off benefits. The UK devotes fewer resources to labour market programmes for unemployed people than most other OECD countries. From 1995 to 2005 the UK spent less than 0.5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per annum on active labour market policies compared to around 1.5 per cent in countries such as Sweden and Denmark ([Bonoli, 2010](#)). Furthermore, persistent cost-cutting leaves the British system as one of Europe's most frugally funded public employment services ([Bonoli, 2010](#)). From this comparatively under-funded starting point, Jobcentre Plus has been subject to several rounds of hard-hitting cuts losing at least 28,850 posts and 22 Benefit Delivery/Contact Centres between 2008 and 2012 ([PSCU 2011](#); [Wintour, 2011](#)). Furthermore, between 2016 and 2018 over 100 jobcentres – about 15 per cent of the network – has been closed

Table 1: Jobcentre Plus support

<i>Scheme</i>	<i>Description</i>
Work Clubs	Provides a place for jobseekers to meet, share experiences and receive help in the search for work
Enterprise Clubs	Provides a place for jobseekers to meet, share experiences and receive support with business ideas
New Enterprise Allowance	Access to a business mentor and financial support (for up to six months) for jobseekers with a business idea
Work Together	Encourages jobseekers to consider volunteering as a way of improving their employment prospects
Work Experience	Work placements for young people
Sector-based Work Academies	Pre-employment training and guaranteed job interviews

which has led to protests and strike action (Finn, 2018). The creation of Jobcentre Plus reinforced a move away from training and public employment programmes towards low-cost measures for immediate job preparation (Fletcher, 2000). Benefit off-flow performance measures have been found to incentivise some Jobcentres Plus offices to discourage people from claiming benefits. Plaistow Jobcentre managers, for example, encouraged aggressive approaches to improve benefit off-flow including falsely signing claimants off benefits and misusing the Flexible Support Fund to cover gaps in benefit payments (WPC, 2016).

The present research

The findings presented here emanate from a study which was independent of any governmental agency although researchers were dependent on local community and voluntary organisations (some receiving state funding) to access some participants. In addition to key informant interviews and focus groups, the study comprised qualitative longitudinal research in 10 case study towns and cities in England and Scotland with 481 Wave A welfare participants drawn from nine groups including ex-offenders. Individuals were interviewed on three separate occasions over a two-year period, focusing on their experiences of support and sanctions within the welfare system. This article is based on the first wave of 57 interviews with people with a criminal record conducted in 2015 and a focus group of six welfare practitioners including two Jobcentre Plus staff. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of interview techniques and, specifically, how individuals in stigmatised social positions often articulate their views and experiences in response to such stigmatisation (Goffman, 1974; Dean and Taylor Gooby, 1992).

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. QSR NVivo 10 was used to manage the data. The complex multi-site and multi-team research design offered challenges for data management and analysis. All researchers who conducted interviews assigned attributes for those transcripts. A two-tier approach to coding was used, with a team of coding officers applying the first tier of framework matrix coding across the offender sample. The matrix coding was assembled inductively by a working group of the project Principal Investigator, a co-investigator and researchers drawn from the range of institutional teams involved. The second tier of coding was conducted by the authors on the offender sub-set. Key themes were identified from a close reading of a selection of transcripts, which were then coded across the sample. This was supplemented by text searches to verify the representativeness of findings and to identify data that did not fit the main trends.

Criminals have been explicitly identified as a key constituent of the precariat (Standing, 2001). The possession of a criminal record and residence in a selected geographical case study area were essential sampling criteria. More than three-quarters of interviewees (79%) were male and three quarters (74%) aged between 25 and 49 years. Virtually all (93%) described themselves as 'white'. Many had worked in low-skilled, manual jobs in manufacturing and construction. Most were seeking similar work. All were claiming benefits at the time of the first interview. A third of interviewees were receiving JSA with the remainder in receipt of ESA (Support) (44%) and ESA (WRAG) (9%). This pattern reflects the widespread prevalence of barriers to work such as mental health problems, and drug/alcohol addictions, literacy and numeracy difficulties and poor vocational skills.

Findings

This section provides empirical evidence of the precariat's experiences of the reformed welfare delivery system. It shows how this system drives people into destitution and crime rather than enforcing the norms of civilised behaviour. The present research has identified the importance of three key contributory factors:

- the imposition of a white-collar model of support;
- linking the receipt of benefits to inappropriate measures of activation;
- the tying of ineffective support to benefit sanctions.

The imposition of a white-collar model of support

Jobcentre Plus advice

'To make sure you keep up with the latest vacancies, you will need to: find ways of having access to the internet; have your own email address and know how to find vacancies and fill in applications online.' (Jobcentre Plus, 2010: 12)

'A CV is a short list of facts about you and your work history, skills, qualifications and experience. A good CV is essential when looking for work and it is worth spending time getting it right so it sells you to an employer.' (Jobcentre Plus, 2010: 27)

Jobcentre Plus has developed a white-collar model of job search that is irrelevant to the needs of the precariat in the contemporary labour market. Using the internet to search for jobs and the adoption of curricula vitae are two key components. Yet Sassen (1996) has shown that economic restructuring has led to a shift of labour market functions such as recruitment for low-skilled work to the household or community. Respondents often reported that they found work through personal contacts or temporary employment agencies. The former has two key attractions. Individuals can personally vouch for the reliability of prospective employees; and it can restrict competition for available jobs which is highly prized for those that suffer employer discrimination. Moreover, CVs were often not used for gaining work:

'People are giving up, and people are giving up because they don't understand it in the first place. You've got to bring a CV in, and people are saying to me "What the fuck is a CV? I've never had a CV in my life." But if you don't want a CV you get sanctions.' (Glasgow man, 27 years)

This focus reflects the trend evident from the late 1980s away from training programmes towards low-cost measures for immediate job preparation. The development of labour market pilots such as the Jobseeker Mandatory Activity, which provided extra support to the long-term unemployed, is an exemplar. The pilot comprised a three-day motivational course and three follow-up Jobcentre Plus personal adviser interviews. The official evaluation found:

Many working class males, particularly those with a history of manual work, found it extremely difficult to relate to cognitive behavioural approaches and frequently complained about American jargon such as 'positive affirmation' in

course materials. They often disliked exercises which were designed to reveal personal information such as their ten most admirable qualities. Furthermore, many felt embarrassed by a ‘guided fantasy’ exercise where individuals were encouraged to sit in front of their peers and relate a positive life experience. (Fletcher et al, 2008)

Respondents frequently complained that inappropriate support had been imposed on them, as described by an Edinburgh man aged 31 years: ‘One thing I hate about being on the dole is when you get put on some course and one of the first things they want to do is mess about with your CV. He had been repeatedly required to revise the CV in contradictory ways: ‘Well they called it tweaking it. It was about two and a half pages long. Somebody decided they wanted to make it smaller and then someone wanted to make it longer. Somebody wanted me to add this, that and the next thing. I said “Oh give it a rest”’. A chronic lack of opportunities to improve human capital through vocational training was articulated by many: ‘You need more different support, and proper training in like bricklaying or something...not like what they do, like go in a room and you do a CV’ (Peterborough man aged 29 years). Consequently, a senior policy stakeholder reported: ‘Some of them get hugely pissed off because it’s the eighth time they’ve been shown how to write a CV, and they still haven’t got anything to put on it.’

The self-directed use of the Universal Jobmatch website is the mainstay of back-to-work support. Most jobseekers are required to use the site and claims for JSA and Universal Credit usually cannot be made without first satisfying digital requirements (NAO, 2016). This has built a digital barrier that obstructs access to their entitlements (UN Special Rapporteur, 2018). The introduction of new technology was not accompanied with relevant training or guidance. ‘They used to have job point machines which they took out and didn’t replace them with computers for months and months. They give very little direction. It’s just a question of oh, just try this, just try that’ (Edinburgh man, aged 43 years). Some had incurred sanctions because of their inability to comply with their online obligations. An Edinburgh man aged 34 years had received a four-week sanction ostensibly because he was unable to cut and paste job search information. He complained: ‘Well they’ve got all the computers and they want you to use computers and that, but yet if you ask for assistance there’s nobody to help you.’ This was contested by Jobcentre Plus staff who reported: ‘We did a huge amount of work with the digital agenda’. Nevertheless, they went on to recall two cases that underlined the problem: ‘One of my first persons that got sanctioned was living in a car, so they said it was really difficult for them to prove on a computer that they’d done 35 hours job search. We had to sanction a parent of a child that had just gone back to school but they had no computer skills at all.’

Linking the receipt of benefits to inappropriate measures of activation

A key goal of Jobcentre Plus is to assess whether benefit claimants are ‘active’ thus fulfilling the tutelary goals of paternalistic reformers. Consequently, official guidance is: ‘If you are receiving Jobseeker’s Allowance while you’re out of work, then you have to prove that you are “actively seeking work”. Keeping a record of what you’ve done to find work will help you show your adviser that you are doing all you can to find work’ (Jobcentre Plus, 2010: 17).

The present research, however, suggests that the Agency's white-collar model of support means that it uses inappropriate measures of 'activation' for those engaged in precarious labour. This has meant that many are compelled to take part in a charade that not only fails to improve their employment prospects but entails the very real risk that they may lose benefits upon which they depend. There are three key aspects of this particular issue.

First, many do not understand the job search expectations placed upon them. An Edinburgh man aged 37 years was asked whether he knew what was on his Jobseeker's Agreement replied: 'Not really, no. I just signed it... I'm not sure what my agreement is. All I know is I've got to search for jobs.' He explained his behaviour in the following way: 'I was a bit nervous, and I didn't want to question them too much. I just wanted to go in there [Jobcentre] and get out to be honest with you.' Some agreed to anything because they felt it was a condition for getting their benefit. Others were so concerned to get their benefit that they signed regardless of its appropriateness. There was also widespread uncertainty and confusion about the number of jobs that individuals were required to apply for each week.

Second, the Universal Jobmatch site is the primary vehicle for gathering evidence of 'activation' and has been likened to a 'virtual panopticon' (Fletcher and Wright, 2018). Several interviewees explicitly viewed it as a source of surveillance of their job seeking activities. This is a very unappealing prospect for those previously deprived of their liberty. 'They'll be so many jobs that I have to look for and you do it through their government website so they can check it' (Peterborough man, aged 24 years). Moreover, this gives a misleading picture of job search activity because online methods are often not used to find work. A London man, aged 38 years, was required to make 35 on-line job applications a week even though he usually secured work through his personal contacts. He spent up to 25 hours a week in a fruitless online search for jobs. Reflecting on these requirements he argued: 'It's got to be productive, it's got to actually mean something rather than just an exercise in filling your time.'

Finally, this frequently brings them into conflict with work coaches and results in benefit sanctions. Some were superficially compliant with the directions of work coaches: 'You just do what they tell you to do otherwise you're not going to get any money' (London man, 27 years). However, some had lied about the extent of their job search: 'I just had to lie and say I've applied for all these jobs, because otherwise I would not have got the money' (Bristol man, 27 years). A few had become frustrated and angry at the way they had been treated. 'All he [personal adviser] was interested in was job search, job search, job search, that's all he done. I mean shut up man, you know what I mean, you're like a broken record. In fact I was even covering my hand saying "I'll beak your jaw when I get you outside, you're getting it"' (Edinburgh man, 29 years).

Punitive support and sanctions

Many of those interviewed explicitly likened the support provided by Jobcentre Plus to punishment. There were two dimensions. First, some forms of support such as attendance at work clubs or participation in the Work Programme were regarded as diversionary activity. The primary purpose of which was not to prepare them for the labour market but to divert them from informal work or criminal activities: 'It was just like a holding pen...if all these guys are in here, sitting in here, reading papers,

blah, blah, for nine o'clock in the morning until half four in the afternoon then they're not out working on the fly' (Glasgow man, aged 37 years). It should be borne in mind that policymakers have consistently highlighted the supposed fraudulent behaviour of claimants.

More commonly, the minimal support provided by the Agency was so tightly bound to sanctioning activities that it is experienced as punitive because it increases exposure to sanctioning. This is exemplified by the much lower than expected number of prison leavers taking advantage of 'day one' access to the Work Programme (see [DWP, 2014](#)). From March 2012, all prison leavers who claim JSA including those claiming within 13 weeks of leaving custody, were supposed to enter the Programme from 'day one'. The rationale being that early intervention was the key to overcoming significant barriers to work and preventing re-offending. The indications from the present study are that poor previous experiences of training programmes and the programme's strong association with sanctioning has stymied participation. A Sheffield woman aged 38 years reported that in the first few weeks following release: 'Your head is still inside.'

Consequently, Jobcentre Plus was primarily viewed as a benefits agency; many offenders find work (formal and informal) through their own social networks. A Glasgow man aged 39 years reported: 'The only thing they're [Jobcentre Plus] good for is your benefit. I've never had a job off them.' Respondents frequently complained that the agency was too focused on ensuring compliance with mandatory benefit claim conditions rather than helping people into work: 'All they cared about was, "Make sure you've got x amount of applications that you've applied for, and that you've put it on Universal Jobmatch"' (London man, 29 years).

Access to unemployment benefits has traditionally been made conditional on unemployment being involuntary, with an expectation of active job search. Nevertheless, there have been a series of welfare reforms since the mid-1980s that have tightened eligibility criteria for benefits and introduced a system of sanctions for non-compliance. There has also been a dramatic increase in the severity of sanctions imposed for failure to satisfy work-related activity requirements. The original penalty of six weeks' loss of benefit, which had existed from 1911 was increased to 28 weeks in 1988 and to three years in 2012. Moreover, sanctions have increasingly become the lived experience of benefit claimants with almost a quarter (24%) of all JSA claimants between 2010 and 2015 receiving at least one sanction ([NAO, 2016](#)).

The imposition of a white-collar model of support, the linking the receipt of benefits to inappropriate measures of activation combined with the multiple and complex needs of many claimants makes the precariat more susceptible to benefit sanctions. Over half (56%) of the offender sample had experienced a benefit sanction with 21 per cent being sanctioned between two and five times and 5 per cent more than five times. Some had gone without benefits for periods of up to six months. Failure to attend interviews and the provision of insufficient evidence of job search were the principal reasons given. Drug addictions, mental health problems and literacy and numeracy problems underpinned the inability of many to meet their obligations and behave in the required fashion. A Sheffield man aged 26 years had been sanctioned within three weeks of his release from prison for not providing an adequate written record of job search. He explained: 'Because I didn't fill in my book properly, they didn't really explain to me properly how to do it. I am a bit dyslexic; I can't read or write practically.' A sense of powerlessness often pervaded experiences of sanctioning. A Bristol man aged 38 years expressed his frustration at being unable to explain his

inability to meet the terms of his benefit claim due to an undisclosed drug addiction: 'I never had the mental faculties to tell them, to explain it to them.'

Sanctioning failed to recognise barriers to employment or the specific circumstances of individuals. At one end of the spectrum sanctions were experienced as life threatening because they sparked suicidal thoughts. More commonly they worsened mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression with many reporting that they had been prescribed anti-depressants. Some had become more socially isolated: 'Some days I would even stay in my house, I wasn't coming out of it...I just felt worthless' (London man, 38 years). Sanctions frequently resulted in life-changing crises, like eviction and homelessness, deep poverty, hunger leading to begging, foodbank use and destitution. 'That [sanction] led to a period of homelessness' (Sheffield man, 46 years). They were decisive in initiating or worsening debt and rent arrears, for some, to the point of where daily financial management was no longer possible. In the short term, immediate emotional reactions to being sanctioned included confusion (particularly for those who believed that they had been compliant), anger, defiance and escapism: 'I just found myself taking drugs and burying my head in the sand' (Edinburgh man, 34 years).

A single JSA claimant aged 25 years or over loses £300 for a four-week sanction (NAO, 2016). Benefit sanctions differ from other financial penalties such as court fines in that they take immediate effect and individuals lose their only or main source of income causing disproportionate hardship (Adler, 2016). Some were able to prevail upon family and friends in order to cope with the financial loss. A London man aged 27 years had been sanctioned twice for missing Jobcentre appointments and continued to receive financial support from his partner on both occasions. It was in this context that he declared: 'They can take the dole money off me because the dole money's not much. So I can go without the money.' Another man had incurred a three-month sanction for failing to undertake sufficient job search. He responded by visiting soup kitchens and charities: 'I can eat for seven days a week for nothing' (London man, aged 37 years). More generally, those using foodbanks are more likely to be unemployed and have experienced a benefit sanction (Perry et al, 2014). Furthermore, the rise in foodbank use is concentrated in communities where more people are experiencing benefit sanctions (Loopstra et al, 2015).

There are, however, practical limits on the extent to which individuals could rely on this support because of the impoverishment of their social networks. A London man aged 29 years reported: 'I had to scrimp, save, flipping borrow and beg, everything just to survive...I didn't really like asking my nan or any other of my friends because they're all in the same predicament as me.' Similarly, drug and alcohol problems experienced by many often meant that they were alienated from family members. 'I've got no one I can ask for help, all my family are here, there and everywhere and hardly speak to me because I'm the black sheep of the family' (Edinburgh man, aged 27 years).

Many reported that they undertook cash-in-hand work which was often secured through word-of-mouth or engaged in survival crime. A London man aged 35 years reported: 'My brother-in-law's a painter and decorator, so I get a lot of work with him. So he gives me like, £70 a day.' A Bristol man aged 43 years had responded by 'doing little jobs'. Survival crime was a more lucrative, albeit risky, response by some. Shoplifting, burglary and drug dealing were frequently mentioned as financial coping strategies. A Sheffield man aged 24 years reported: 'I stole food because I was hungry.' Similarly, a Peterborough woman aged 36 years indicated: 'I was shoplifting

because we had no money. Otherwise we wouldn't have had any food or anything.' The engagement of some in criminal activities was reported to be the main reason why some individuals were unconcerned about receiving multiple sanctions: 'I need my money, but some people don't care. They will take that £56 because they've got other things on the backburner...so they would get sanctioned every week' (London man, 39 years).

Conclusions

In this article, we have identified how the precariat encounter and experience the support provided by Jobcentre Plus. Our evidence demonstrates that the imposition of an inappropriate white-collar model of support combined with punitive benefit sanctions drives many people out of the benefit system and into destitution and crime. We argue that a century after the introduction of the labour exchange the primary role of its successor is to assess whether the unemployed are 'active'. This has been interpreted by Marxist scholars as a class disciplinary project which renders labour more dependent upon low-wage and precarious work and imposes the disciplines of work on prospective workers (see [Wacquant, 2009](#); [Wiggan, 2015](#); [Umney et al, 2018](#)). However, our evidence is that 'support' when combined with sanctions frequently results in ill-discipline and disentanglement from benefits among the most marginalised fractions of the working class. Disentanglement may not necessarily reinforce low paid work because some respond by engaging in the informal economy or criminal endeavours. Consequently, [Fox-Piven \(2010: 115\)](#) argues that 'a prison record hardly equips those released for wage labour, desocialized or otherwise'.

Some have argued that welfare reforms are a deliberate and targeted attempt at inculcating 'civilised' habits (see [Rodger, 2012](#); [Van den Berg and Arts, 2018](#)). The normalisation of a middle-class (white-collar) support system that inculcates the 'civilised' habits of digital skills and the use of curricula vitae could be seen as part of a 'civilising offensive'. However, the support model has been brought about by very low funding levels, the hegemony of the work-first approach combined with a misunderstanding of the impact of economic change on working-class people. Lawler's (2005) notion of the 'public bourgeoisie' which views the working class as foundationally 'other' to a middle-class existence that is silently marked as normal may be useful. 'Narratives of lack' which is not primarily a lack of material resources but a lack of 'taste', knowledge and the 'right ways of being and doing' ([Bourdieu, 1986: 511](#)) and 'narratives of decline' define the public bourgeoisie's representations of the working class. Deficit narratives were frequently evident in the focus group discussions with welfare practitioners (lack of punctuality, manners and self-control) and official guidance to the unemployed which intones: 'Don't sit down until the interviewer asks you to. [Don't] Fidget, slouch in the chair or fold your arms. [Don't] Swear (even mildly). [Don't] Criticise your past employers. [Don't] Interrupt... [Don't] Lie or be too enthusiastic' ([Jobcentre Plus, 2010: 38](#)).

Jobcentre Plus support cannot be conceptualised as a part of a 'civilising offensive' because it is not a deliberate and targeted attempt at inculcating 'civilised' behaviour. Moreover, the present research has underlined its de-civilising effects which have deprived individuals of their benefits and led to devastating effects such as increased poverty and destitution, homelessness, worsening mental health and movements into informal work and survival crime. A Peterborough man aged 28 years admitted: 'I had

to go out and steal and it didn't feel wrong because I just thought if I get caught it would be doing me a favour. I would have gone to the court and said: "Look don't let me back out because I've no option and I'm going to do it again." Some indicated that their experiences had made them discontinue benefit claims. A Bristol man aged 27 years reported: 'I just gave it up [the benefit claim] and didn't bother with it again. Carried on just going out every day thieving.' The irony is that this will have been recorded as a positive outcome by the Agency's performance management system.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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