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Welfare recipients, public opinion and 'deservingness'.

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Introduction

Welfare has become one of the most contentious issues in British politics. In our previous [SPERI Brief](#) we demonstrated how the word ‘welfare’ impacts upon public support for state spending. In a follow-up [blog post](#) we argued that the word is being used with greater frequency at a time when welfare has become increasingly demonised. But key questions remain unanswered: who is considered a welfare recipient? And how is welfare defined? We conducted a survey of around 2,000 members of the public to find out. The results demonstrate that although many different groups of people receive state-funded help, members of the public instead focus on certain groups in society: the less stereotypically ‘deserving’ a group is considered, the more likely they are to be deemed as welfare recipients.

Background

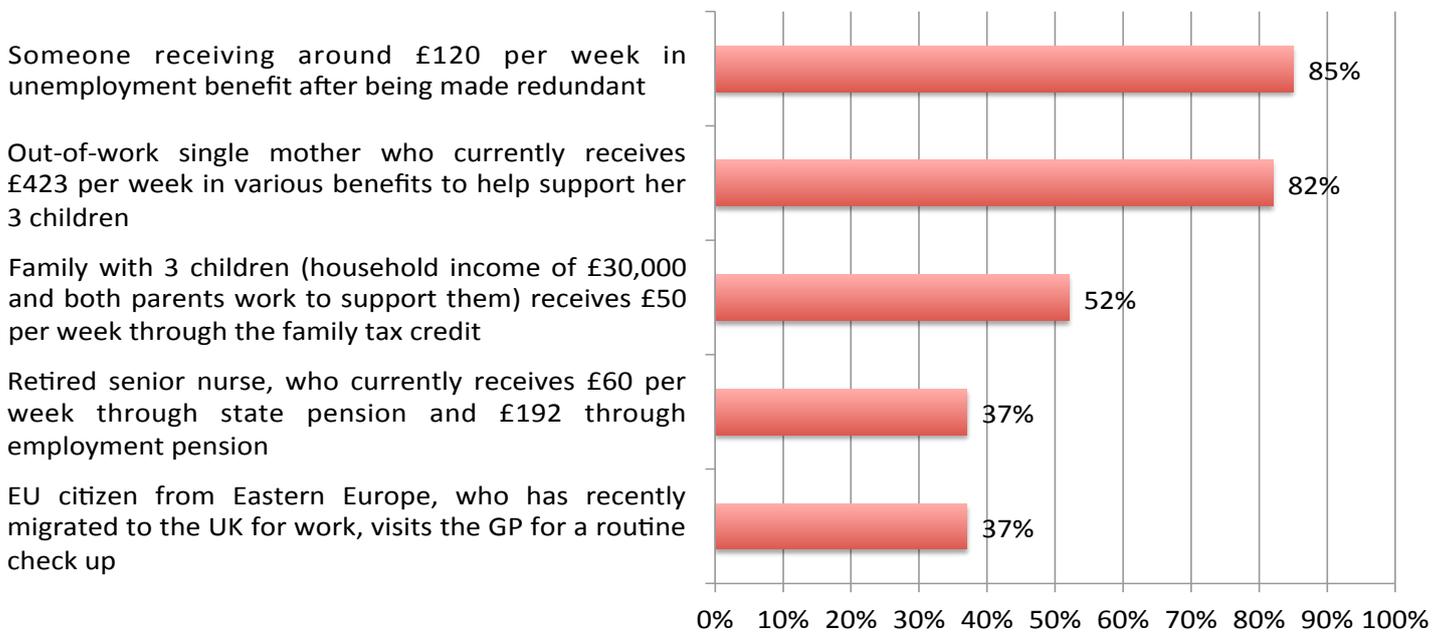
- Welfare cuts have been a central part of the Conservative government’s austerity plans. Stoked by an increasingly antagonist and questionable public debate, ‘welfare’ has become a dirty word. Those opposed to Conservative plans may well call for greater support for the poor or for widening inequality to be halted and reversed. But for opponents to call for ‘more welfare’ is inconceivable. It would be political suicide. Why is this?
- There is nothing inherently negative about the idea of welfare. Dictionary definitions point to the health and happiness of a person or group. In contemporary politics, welfare sometimes refers to public-funded social protection of some sort. For others, it refers to the services and benefits that political scientists would normally identify as encapsulating the ‘welfare state’ (e.g. health, education, etc).
- For some, welfare has become increasingly associated with recipients who are deemed undeserving of so-called ‘taxpayers’ money’ because they do not work hard enough. This is part of the reason why politicians claim to represent the interests of ‘hardworking families’, which is a subtle way of reinstating a distinction between the deserving and undeserving.
- This notion of the ‘undeserving poor’ has a long and complicated history. Political scientists have observed a link between support for welfare and perceptions of ‘deservingness’. Simply put, if welfare recipients are seen as lazy, then they are perceived as undeserving; but, if welfare recipients are simply seen as unlucky, then they are perceived as deserving and welfare is supported.
- In so-called liberal welfare states such as the UK, welfare recipients are often considered undeserving because success in life is attributed to hard-work, self-reliance and other traits related to individualism.
- There is a consistent pattern regarding the ‘deservingness’ of different social groups: the elderly are seen as the most deserving, and the unemployed and immigrants as the least deserving, with other social groups somewhere between.

- Given the association between welfare and ‘deservingness’, we explored whether there is a link between the perceived ‘deservingness’ of a person and the extent to which they would be categorised as a welfare recipient. If so, then those typically considered undeserving (e.g. the long-term unemployed) would be categorised as welfare recipients, while those who are considered deserving of help (e.g. pensioners) would be spared the derogatory label.

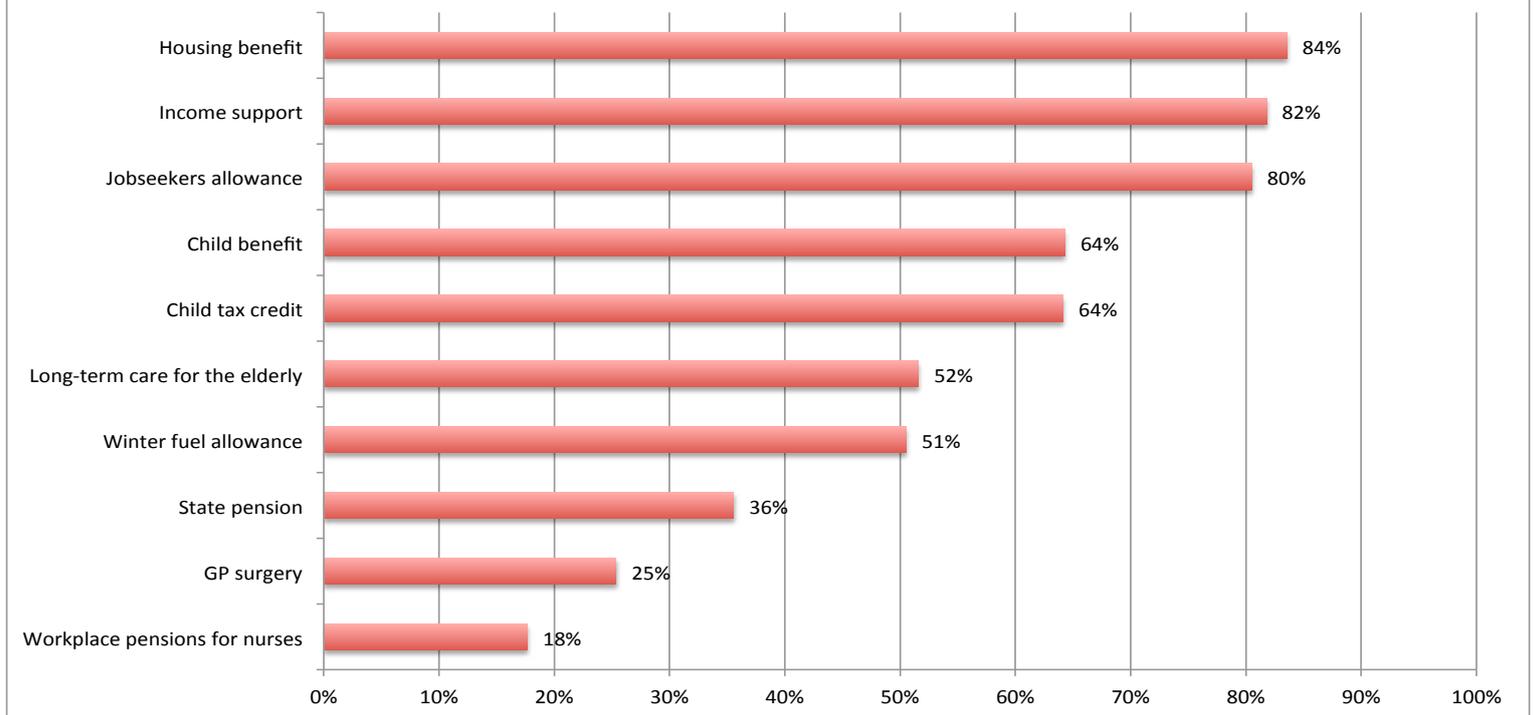
Evidence

- To test who would be categorised as a welfare recipient, we devised a simple survey which was completed by roughly 2,000 members of the public.¹ We asked participants about welfare in two ways.
- First, we provided participants with a number of different scenarios that detailed situations in which people received benefits from the state, and then asked whether these people should be considered welfare recipients.
- One example scenario reads: ‘*Imagine an out-of-work single mother who currently receives £423 per week in various benefits to help support her three children. Should this person be considered a welfare recipient?*’ The results are shown in Figure 1.
- Second, we then provided participants with a list of different types of state-provided social protection and asked participants to judge whether each type should be considered welfare. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Should be Considered as a Welfare Recipient



¹ 1,932 participants, recruited by Toluna from the UK, completed the survey between July 8th and 14th 2015.

Figure 2. Should Be Categorised as Welfare? (% Yes)

Analysis

- The results demonstrate the uneven way in which people who receive benefits or protection from the state are categorised as ‘welfare recipients’ (or not). Figure 1 highlights how the vast majority think that the single mother and the recently unemployed person are welfare recipients. The family receiving tax credits are somewhere in the middle. The retired nurse and the Eastern European visiting the doctor are generally not considered welfare recipients. Figure 2 clearly demonstrates this pattern.
- As expected, these results highlight a link between the perceived ‘deservingness’ of a group and the extent to which they are considered a welfare recipient. To an extent, the results also highlight how certain areas of social protection, such as unemployment benefits, are more likely to be considered as welfare than others, such as tax credits, and especially pensions. This suggests that the label of a welfare recipient is not applied based upon the quantity of state support received; rather, some sort of value judgement is a more important determinant.
- This is especially clear when it comes to pensioners. The state spends around 20 times more on state pensions than it does on unemployment benefits. However, since pensioners are typically deemed the most deserving recipients of state help, unemployment benefit recipients receive much more public vitriol. This is reflected in our results, in which pensioners are not typically considered as welfare recipients.

- We probed participants on whether visiting a GP is considered welfare in both parts of the survey – but we did so differently. In Figure 1 we asked specifically about a working Eastern European, but in Figure 2 we did not specify any detail: 37% of people consider the Eastern European visiting a GP as welfare, whereas only 25% consider this as welfare more generally. This, again, would suggest that some sort of value judgement – possibly related to the perceived ‘deservingness’ of the recipient – plays a part in the popular understanding of welfare.
- The results may also help explain well-documented inconsistencies in public opinion. For instance, the public typically vastly over-estimates the proportion of the welfare budget that is spent on unemployment benefit (estimating 41 per cent, when the actual figure is 3 per cent). This could result, in part, from the ambiguity about the meaning of welfare itself.
- This ambiguity can clearly be used for political ends. Given that the public makes an implicit link between welfare and ‘deservingness’, the Conservative government understands that welfare retrenchment is likely to win public support – so long as both the rhetoric and practice of cuts are focused on those considered undeserving. Those considered both deserving of help and as constituting an important base of electoral support, such as pensioners who are supported by a [‘triple lock’ deal](#), are otherwise spared the pain. This type of politics has real distributional impact. The ambiguity over the meaning of welfare is a small but important part of this politics.

Conclusion

Welfare has become increasingly stigmatised since the global financial crisis. Our results highlight that not all recipients of state help are equally considered as welfare recipients. This suggests that a shift has taken place in the meaning of welfare. Whereas welfare used to have positive connotations – think of the rise of the NHS, the post-war period, and so on – it is increasingly seen in a negative light as a way of supporting those who do not deserve to be helped. This has real political implications.

Further reading

Stanley, Liam. 2016. ‘Legitimacy Gaps, Taxpayer Conflict, and the Politics of Austerity in the UK’. *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*. DOI: 10.1177/1369148115615031



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