





Living on benefits from one generation to the next

By Christina Patterson | Portraits by Andrew Testa

'I'd have liked to be an air hostess, or maybe in the army' Samantha

It was one detail that hooked me in. When I read it, in an article on unemployment in *The Sunday Times* in May, I knew I'd have to find out more. The article, based on a report released by a think tank called the Centre for Social Justice, talked about "unemployment hot spots". Then, in passing, it said that some children, when they were asked what they wanted to do when they grew up, didn't understand the question.

One in five of the children in this country live in a house where no one works. That's nearly 2m children, and the highest level, after Ireland, in Europe. (That's higher than Italy, higher than Spain, higher even than "basket case" Greece. In some parts of the country, according to the report, more than 50% of the population is on out-of-work benefits. In one or two neighbourhoods, the figure is more like 60%.

We've been in a recession, and many of the things that happen during a recession are shocking. But these figures, and the trends they represent, didn't start then. It was during the boom years that the number of households where no one had ever worked nearly doubled.

You don't have to be a clairvoyant to see that it really doesn't bode well. Children who come from households where nobody works have a 64% chance of being in "financial poverty", which is defined as less than 60% of the average income. In households where there are two adults in full time work, the figure is 1%.

Nobody plans to start big new industries in areas where the old ones have died. Nobody can stop the flow of cheap labour from eastern Europe. Mostly, what politicians can do is tinker. They can think, as the Labour party did, that the best way to tackle "child poverty" is to increase benefits. Or they can, as this government is doing, reduce benefits in the hope that this will encourage, or force, people back to work. This is a very popular policy. In a YouGov poll for *Prospect* magazine, 74% of people thought welfare benefits were too generous — including, as I was to discover, some of the recipients.

Mark Simms, deputy CEO of a charity called P3, knows first hand about the problems unemployment can bring. When his father lost his job, his family ended up living in a hostel, six to one room. Now he helps to run a charity with 500 employees. P3 helps people with homelessness, mental-health issues, education and employment. "We've got people growing up with no work ethic," he said. "The trick is about raising aspiration. A lot of the reason people don't work is because they don't think they can."

He still lives near the estate where he grew up. The people he grew up with live on "basic benefits and fiddles". A few have been caught working while "on the sick". One family on the estate, he told me, manage — on benefits — to go on two foreign holidays a year. He would try to persuade them to talk to me. His mum still lived on the estate, and he would ask her to take me on a tour. "It's a myth that people choose this life," he said. "I know some people really know how to work the system, but there are others who are getting up, and every day is a drudge."

He wanted me to see the reality of it, accompanied by someone who knows. A week later, I phoned to arrange the trip. His mum had asked around, but everyone had said no. And what, I asked, about the bloke with the foreign holidays? Would he speak to me, if I promised not to give his name? "I phoned him," said Simms, "and do you know what he said to me? He said, 'Are you smoking f***ing crack?'"

Carole Damper, head of the EC Roberts Centre, a "child-focused" charity in Portsmouth, told me that she had found a young woman who had agreed to talk. Samantha Sherrard had grown up in a workless household. A single mother of 26, she was expecting her fifth child. "My mum didn't work," said Samantha, settled on the big beige sofa in her front room. Her 11-month old, Holly, was wriggling around on a rug in front of a giant TV. Her four-year-old, Lacey, was putting on lip gloss. The eight-year-old, Sasha, and the five-year-old, Bailey, were at school. On the mantelpiece, there were photos of all four children as babies.

Samantha's mother had worked for a while, at Butlins, but had "a drink problem" and "mental-health issues", and hasn't worked for years. Her father was "a smack addict" who "didn't work at all". He died when he was 38, two months after leaving jail. Samantha left school at 14 and was "kicked out of the house" when she was 16. She worked, for a few weeks, at Butlins, then got pregnant, and hasn't worked since. She has two sisters, neither of whom work. One has four children. The other has five.

So did she, I asked carefully, always want to have quite a few children? Samantha smiled, lighting up her very pretty, and slightly hard, face. "No," she said. "I didn't want none." So what happened? She shrugged. "I don't know. I just fell pregnant with Sasha, and I had all the others, and kept them." And what about contraception? "I was on the pill," she said. (I tried not to look surprised). What about work? Did she ever think about work? "I'd have liked," she said, "to be an air hostess, or maybe in the

army. That," she said, patting her bump, "is out of the window now."

When you are in a position to work, I asked, what would you like to do? "I think I'd do anything. I can't read a lot, or spell a lot. I've got no qualifications, I'd just take anything." Even, I said, thinking of the very nice three-bedroom house she's recently moved into, if it meant a slightly lower standard of living? Samantha looked surprised. "No," she said. "Probably not."

And does she think her benefits have been enough? "I think," she said, with the level-headed coolness that made me like her as soon as we met, "they've been more than enough." Really? Why did she think that? She shrugged again. "I just do. I think it's quite good they give you money for not doing anything." But isn't having children a perfectly sensible economic decision to make? "No," she said firmly. "It isn't. I think it's totally wrong. After this one, I'm hoping to get the chop. I think it's right what the government's doing with the benefit cuts, even though it will affect me a lot more than other people. But I had the kids, so it's my own fault."

So, what does she want for her children? Samantha gazed at Lacey, wriggling around next to her. "Bailey wants to be a pilot," she said. "Sasha wants to be a vet. I always say to Sasha, 'Don't be like mummy, get yourself a job.' She's so brainy. She'll go far, Sasha, really far."

I hope she does. I hope all Samantha's children do. With the start she's had in life, as the daughter of a heroin addict and an alcoholic, I think she deserves it. I left her house feeling sad that this smart and extremely self-contained woman hadn't had the chance to "go far", too.

It took me a while to sort out my next trip, to see a family in Wales. As before, the people I'd spoken to, who worked with locals who were unemployed, wanted to help. As before, nobody would talk. Until, finally, a woman called Emma, who works for the Welsh government but also runs community projects in the area where she grew up, told me she had found a family who were happy to meet me.

The sun was shining as I arrived at the little village of Abercynon. I'd expected it to look grim. Photos of small towns in South Wales, used to illustrate articles about unemployment, or a life on benefits, usually make it look grim. But the sun was shining, the hills were green, and the sky was blue. The estate I was visiting wasn't exactly beautiful, but the houses looked in pretty good shape, and the pebble dash was clean. Many of them had solar panels. "Oh, you get them for free," Emma explained as she parked the car, "if you're on benefits." >>>



A lot of people on the estate, it was clear from the number of panels, were on benefits.

Inside, the house was *not* clean. The carpets were littered with cigarette butts and rubbish. The wallpaper was peeling off, and the walls and doors were encrusted with grime. And the toilet. Let's just say I wish I'd gone on the train. But the family sitting inside, in a fug of smoke, were cheerful. It was, apart from two-year-old Harley, who suffers from lung disease, and four-year-old Bobby Lee, all women. There was Fay Lewis, 75, whose house this is (kind of, because it's rented from the council). There was her daughter, Tracy, who's 48, Tracy's sister Deborah, who's 50, and Tracy's daughter, Zoe, who's 23. Zoe got married to her boyfriend, Chris, on Saturday. How, I asked her, was the wedding? Did it all go as planned? Zoe pulled a face. "No," she said. "The wedding planner ripped me off good and proper."

Fay, who had what looked like a serious skin condition, has lived in the area all her life. She worked from the age of 15 to 18, in the tin mines and the bakery, then got married in 1958 and never worked again. Fay has five children, 12 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. So what, I asked, did she want her children to do? Fay looked surprised. "Well," she said, "whatever they wanted to do. It was up to them."

And what, I asked Tracy, were her thoughts about working when she was growing up. She, too, looked surprised. "I didn't think about it," she said. She worked at the local cake factory for a while before she had her children, but hasn't worked since. Does she have a partner? "Yes." Does he work? "No." Why not? "He had knee trouble." And what about her? "I've had two heart attacks. I have to take insulin. I've got angina. I've got asthma, panic attacks, anxiety." So what was it like, managing on benefits? Has she, for example, ever been on a foreign holiday? "No." Has she been to London? "No." Has she been outside Wales? "No." Fay looked cross. "You have," she said, in her growly Welsh valley voice. "You've been to Hereford."

Tracy is registered as a carer for her mother, which gives her an extra £60 a week, but she has had other benefits cut. "I was on the sick," she said, "I was on incapacity, but then they took me off it." Did it bother her, I asked, that she didn't work? Tracy coughed. She coughs — a terrible, hacking cough — all the time. "Not really, because I enjoyed my kids." And now they're grown up? "I enjoy my grandchildren." What would she say to people who worked, who would love to see more of their children, or their grandchildren? Tracy looked surprised. "Well, I could work, but it's... My paranoia, it is. I'm afraid to go places on my own."

Tracy has, she says, lost £60 a week. What does she think of the benefit cuts? She took a drag of her cigarette. "Well," she said, "it's not very good, is it? It's making it harder for people, instead of better. And what would she say, I asked, to people who have less money to spend, who do work?" Another drag. "Well, yes, sometimes you're better off on social, because you get paid more. I'd like to be able to do things, but there's nothing suitable for me." What would she like to have done? "Oh, I don't know, I've never thought about it, really."

Tracy's sister, Deborah, was also "on the sick", with back pain, but she too has had her benefits cut. She is now registered as a carer for her older sister, who has diabetes and has, she said matter-of-factly, "had to have a leg cut off". (In February 2010, 976,000 people were claiming carer's allowance. In February 2013, the figure was 1,062,000. This, clearly, is one area where benefit claims are going up.)

Zoe's new husband, Chris, was "on the sick", too. What was wrong with him? "His back," said Zoe. Where did he work before? Zoe looked confused. "I don't know. He's gone to work because he was found ineligible for being on the sick any more. They stopped our benefits, so then you have to go out and find a job." So what's he doing now? "He's a builder."

Did many of Zoe's friends grow up in families where the parents didn't work? "Yes," she said. Was it more unusual to have parents who worked than parents who didn't? "Yes." Did she want to work? Zoe looked down at Bobby Lee. "I wanted to work with children, but when I left sixth form I fell pregnant with Bobby Lee, and being around my child all day put me off working with others. Then I had my son, Harley. He had chronic lung disease and ADD, so I had to be around." Does she want more children? Zoe smiled down at Bobby Lee again. "I'd like another two," she said.

"I do want a job, but it's hard, because my mother can't get down to the school to pick the kids up. And when you go to the job centre for advice, they're not really helping you. They're like, 'The machine's over there.'" I had, I told her, been surprised by how many organisations there seem to be that try to help. "I don't think there's any round here." Five minutes later, Chris turned up. How was he finding being at work? Chris cuddled Bobby Lee and Harley, who had rushed to give him a kiss. "It's better," he said, "than not being at work."

I'd been hoping to go to Newcastle, but the family who had agreed to talk got into trouble with their new neighbours and the police, and changed their minds. So I went to the Aylesbury estate, near Elephant and Castle ➤➤➤

WORK IN PROGRESS Zoe, 23, and her husband, Chris, with their children Harley, 2, and four-year-old Bobby Lee. Zoe is on benefits but Chris is off 'the sick' and back in employment



'I wanted to work with children, but when I left sixth form I fell pregnant' Zoe



in London. Unemployment on the Aylesbury estate is nothing like the levels in the Welsh valleys, or parts of the northeast, but for London, at about 35%, it's still pretty high.

Wandering towards one block on this estate — one of the biggest in Europe — I spoke to a group of children. They all had parents who worked, but many of their classmates didn't. What did their friends whose parents didn't work want to do for a living? Crystal, whose mother works in Asda, paused. "They want to be like their mums".

Walking towards another block, I spoke to an obese man on a mobility scooter. He wanted to talk about immigration (68% of Aylesbury residents are non-white). He had done a long stretch in prison, come out 14 years ago and hadn't worked since. His son, who was with him, had been brought up by working grandparents and had got a job as a security guard. But only about three out of 20 of his friends worked.

"People on the estate suffer a lot from depression and anxiety," said Charlotte Benstead, director of the Creation Trust, which aims to give Aylesbury residents "a better future". "They don't live in the best

environment, and this has a massive impact on their mental health." The barriers to work, she says, range from family breakdown to substance abuse. "I don't think that the government's Work Programme can deal with this kind of complexity."

Certainly, it doesn't look as though it can. Just 10% of people who have been on the Work Programme have actually been helped in to work. In half the areas it covers, people were more likely to get a job if they didn't take part in it than if they did. It isn't hard to see why so many people on benefits think that the easier route to a slightly higher income is what Mark Simms calls "fiddles". Some people, said a senior adviser at a housing and benefits advice centre, "sustain their lifestyles by shoplifting or moving goods around". Quite a few grow cannabis. Quite a few do cash-in-hand work on the side. And quite a few have quite a few children. "They're very savvy women," he said. "It's like Google or Starbucks on tax. They're using the rules for their benefit."

I think he's right. Most of us use "the rules" for our benefit. People on high incomes employ accountants to minimise their tax. People on

low incomes claim the benefits they were told they were entitled to. And now, many of them are reeling because the rules have changed.

I agree with Simms that government agencies need to work in a way that makes it easier for people to get the advice and support they need at a much earlier stage, and that "shorter interventions" earlier on will prevent the need for bigger ones later. I agree with Lynne Lund Regan, who works for a Welsh employment programme called Get the Worx, that people without work experience need at least 12 weeks of pre-employment skills training, and probably more.

And I agree with nearly all the people I spoke to that you can't have the same person cutting your benefits and trying to get you into a job. Sometimes, people do need a nudge into work — it seems to have helped Chris — but work shouldn't be a punishment. People who have never worked haven't done anything wrong. What they need, to get them into work, is proper, targeted, thoughtful help from people they know they can trust. What they also need is a bit of patience. None of us changes the habits of a lifetime overnight ■