

Christina Beatty (with Steve Fothergill)

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

C.Beatty@shu.ac.uk

Incapacity benefits in the UK: an issue of health or jobs?

The UK has 2.6m incapacity benefit claimants of working age – far more than the number on unemployment benefits even at a time of recession. The large numbers on incapacity benefits in the UK have typically been characterised as an employment problem, or more specifically a problem of low skills, low motivation and disengagement from the labour market. The underpinning assumption of the UK government's recent welfare reforms, for example, has been that if incapacity claimants look for work, and equip themselves for work, they will find work. Yet ill health and disability have clearly always been part of the mix. In order to qualify for incapacity benefits a degree of ill health or disability is mandatory, and there are checks to make sure that claimants meet this criteria. So where exactly does ill health and disability fit into an understanding of the UK's benefit numbers – and how might health-based approaches fit in to bringing the numbers down? This paper draws upon a recently completed research project looking at Britain's incapacity claimants, including the results of a face-to-face survey of more than 3,600 claimants and contextual data on national and local trends in employment and incapacity benefit numbers. For the first time, the data is interrogated from a specifically health perspective. Just how much are Britain's benefit numbers a problem of 'hidden unemployment' or of 'health' – or indeed of the interaction between poor health and a weak labour market?