

# “To what extent are key socio-demographic associated with perceptions of social security recipients' deservingness in the UK?”

## Introduction

Throughout the past century, social welfare has remained a dominant issue in the UK political sphere. Much of the debate revolves around the concept of the “deserving poor”, those who are described by Celeste Watkins-Hayes and Elyse Kovalsky as those “unable to work due to no fault of their own and have a legitimate claim to resources”.<sup>1</sup> This concept has caused political tension, as it has come into question if the majority of social security recipients actually match this description. Are they truly deserving of aid? In previous analyses on the opinions of benefit deservingness, levels of support have been witnessed to have radically polarized since the 2008 financial crisis due to the stigmatisation of benefit recipients by successive conservative governments.<sup>2</sup> This stigmatization is reinforced by political discourse, as social security recipients have been generalised as “undeserving” and ascribed an identity characterised by laziness and greed.<sup>3</sup> The conservatives in the UK have remained consistent in generalising most recipients as ‘undeserving poor’, and the longevity of their time in office has solidified this ideology in the eyes of many.<sup>4</sup> The analysis will investigate how key sociodemographic characteristics, such as age, education level, political party support and employment status, are associated with individuals’ beliefs regarding if those who typically receive social security do not deserve help. Through this contemporary research, I intend to determine if this polarization of opinion continues to exist today and thus has remained a significant societal belief since the 2008 financial crisis under almost 15 years of conservative government in the UK.

---

<sup>1</sup> Celeste Watkins-Hayes and Elyse Kovalsky, “The Discourse of Deservingness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*, vol. 1 (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Pier-Luc Dupont, Bridget Anderson, and Dora-Olivia Vicol, “Working for Benefits: Deservingness and Discrimination in the British Social Security System,” ETHOS Country Report for ETHOS Report D5 (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky, “The Discourse of Deservingness,” 193

<sup>4</sup> Gijs Schumacher, Barbara Vis, and Kees Van Kersbergen, “Political Parties’ Welfare Image, Electoral Punishment and Welfare State Retrenchment,” *Comparative European Politics* 11 (2013): 1–21.

## Data and Variables

This study uses the 2022 British Social Attitudes Survey (National Centre for Social Research, 2025).<sup>5</sup> The survey has been conducted every year since 1983 using a random probability sampling method, with postcode sectors forming part of the sampling frame. Data is collected through both telephone and web interviews, with responses gathered from up to two adults aged 18 or over per household. Each year, around 6,000 British citizens are asked up to 300 questions to monitor community and political attitude changes.

The outcome variable for this research is respondents' opinion on social security deservingness. Respondents were asked their belief on the question, "Many people who get social security don't deserve any help". Respondents could select from the options: 'Agree strongly', 'Agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Disagree', 'Disagree strongly'. 12 respondents refused to answer this question, and 34 responded that they 'Don't know'; these responses were recorded as missing since few people selected them and these responses were not relevant to the research question. This protocol was followed for all response variables; every variable was recoded, and missing values were fully excluded from the analysis. The descriptive statistics show that 4.8% of respondents agree strongly with the statement, 14.5% agree, and 31.4% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement fully (see table 1). The largest response was "Disagree" at 33%, this combined with "Disagree strongly" at 16.3%, shows that around half of the respondents disagreed to some degree with the statement. This distribution prompts further investigation into what characteristics might predict agreement with the statement among this minority group of respondents.

---

<sup>5</sup> National Centre for Social Research, "British Social Attitudes Survey, 2022," [data collection], UK Data Service, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9283-1>.

The response variables initially included in this report will be explored by looking at Table 1:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	n (%)
<b>“Many people who get social security don't deserve any help”</b>	
1. Agree strongly	195 (4.8%)
2. Agree	725 (14.5%)
3. Neither agree nor disagree	1,622 (31.4%)
4. Disagree	1,920 (33.0%)
5. Disagree strongly	939 (16.3%)
<b>What is the total monthly income of your household from all sources before tax?</b>	
1. Less than £1,410	786 (16.4%)
2. £1,411 - £2,560	1,343 (26.0%)
3. £2,561 - £4,350	1,627 (29.8%)
4. £4,351 or more	1,645 (27.8%)
<b>Highest educational qualification attained</b>	
1. Degree or equivalent, and above	2,733 (37.2%)
2. Other Higher Education, including Di	754 (10.6%)
3. A-levels/SCE Highers including vocat	756 (22.0%)
4. Qualifications below A-levels	882 (22.9%)
5. No qualifications	276 (7.3%)
<b>Respondent's political party identification (party support/closest to/likely vote)</b>	
1. Conservative	1,469 (25.2%)
2. Labour	2,038 (38.6%)
3. Liberal Democrat	562 (9.3%)
4. Scottish National Party	184 (3.5%)
5. Green Party	384 (6.0%)
6. Other	145 (3.3%)
7. None	619 (14.2%)
<b>In you (main) job are you employee or self-employed?</b>	
1. Currently employee	3,029 (59.0%)
2. Currently self-employed with employee	64 (1.2%)
3. Currently self-employed/freelance without employees	334 (6.9%)
4. Not currently in paid work	1,974 (32.9%)
Total	5,401
<b>2022 British Social Attitudes Survey final</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
<b>Age of respondent</b>	<b>49.73 (47.75)</b>

Note: Percentages, means and standard errors are adjusted for survey design and non-response.

For monthly household income, descriptive statistics show that 16.4% of respondents earn less than £1,450 per month, 26.0% earn between £1,451 and £2,560, 29.8% earn between £2,561 and £4,350, and 27.8% earn £4,351 or more. These figures suggest few respondents are in the lowest income bracket, indicating

the sample is limited as there are few respondents fully dependent on social security in the sample.

Regarding educational attainment, 37.2% of respondents hold a degree or higher qualification, 10.6% have another form of higher education (such as a diploma), 22.0% have A-levels or SCE Highers, and 7.3% report having no formal qualifications. This is of interest, as a large percentage of respondents have a degree; this is not representative of the typical UK citizen and suggests response bias. Those with a degree may be more likely to respond to the British Social Attitudes Survey.

Party support was categorized into seven groups: Conservative (25.2%), Labour (38.6%), Liberal Democrat (9.3%), Scottish National Party (3.5%), Green Party (6.0%), Other (3.3%), and None (14.2%). The "Other" category was created by combining smaller parties, such as Plaid Cymru and UKIP, due to low frequencies.

A majority of respondents (59.0%) are employed, 1.2% are self-employed with employees, 6.9% are self-employed or freelance without employees, and 32.9% are not in paid employment. Given that public animosity toward social security recipients is often associated with perceptions of unwillingness to work, employment status is expected to be an important variable influencing attitudes toward social security.

Respondents' age is the only continuous variable in the table, descriptive statistics of this show that the mean age of respondents is 49.73 years old with a standard deviation of 47.75.

## Analysis

I chose to treat my outcome variable as multinomial because it initially violated the proportional odds assumption, as indicated by the Brant test. This made ordinal logistic regression inappropriate. Multinomial logistic regression was then appropriate due to respondents' opinion on social security deservingness (the outcome variable) having multiple categories. This approach allows for greater flexibility in modelling relationships between the explanatory variables and each category of the outcome variable, as it does not assume that the effects are consistent across categories or thresholds.

*Table 2: Model Fit Statistics for Unadjusted Multinomial Logistic Regression Model of Opinion on Benefit Deservingness*

<b>Models</b>	<b>Mc Fadden's Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>AIC</b>	<b>BIC</b>
<b>Social security opinion</b>	0.00	15374.61	15400.99
<b>Social security opinion + Household income + Education level</b>	0.021	15104.22	15315.24
<b>Social security opinion + Household income + Education level + Party support</b>	0.069	14430.27	14825.93
<b>Social security opinion + Household income + Education level + Party support + Employment level</b>	0.072	14398.35	14873.14

Looking at alternative measures of model fit, after running 4 models with a variety of variables, I chose model 3. This model has the explanatory variables of monthly household income, educational attainment, party support and age. Throughout model fit testing stages, the AIC and BIC of the model continued to decrease with the R<sup>2</sup> value rising, suggesting that the model was increasingly explaining more variation in the data and indicating a better fit. However, after adding employment level in model 4, the BIC increased, with the pseudo-R-squared value only increasing by 0.0037 (a marginal improvement). This meant that the third model offered the best balance between goodness-of-fit and parsimony. As shown in the table 2, model 3 has an AIC and BIC value of 14398.35 and 14873.14 with an R-squared value of 0.0687. The R-squared value shows that the explanatory variables chosen only to explain 6.87% of the variance in the dependent variable. This is quite low but is a common result within social science.

Table 3: Average Marginal Effects for Multinomial Logistic Regression Model of Opinion on Benefit Deservingness

	<b>Agree strongly AME</b>	<b>Agree AME</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree AME</b>	<b>Disagree AME</b>	<b>Disagree strongly AME</b>
<b>Age (Years)</b>	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
<b>Highest educational qualification attained</b>					
Degree or equivalent, and above	-0.062	-0.062	-0.062	-0.062	-0.062
Other Higher Education	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043
A-levels/SCE	-0.052	-0.052	-0.052	-0.052	-0.052
Highers	-0.034	-0.034	-0.034	-0.034	-0.034
Qualifications below A-levels	-0.034	-0.034	-0.034	-0.034	-0.034
No qualifications	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
<b>Political party identification</b>					
Conservative	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Labour	-0.035	-0.035	-0.035	-0.035	-0.035
Liberal Democrat	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043
Scottish National Party	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043	-0.043
Green Party	-0.039	-0.039	-0.039	-0.039	-0.039
Other	-0.020	-0.020	-0.020	-0.020	-0.020
None	0.014	0.014	0.014	0.014	0.014
<b>In you (main) job are you employee or self-employed?</b>					
Currently employee	0.023	0.023	0.023	0.023	0.023
Currently self- employed with employee	0.030	0.030	0.030	0.030	0.030
Currently self- employed/freelance without employee	0.052	0.052	0.052	0.052	0.052
Not currently in paid work	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.

Note: Full model presented in Table 4, Model is adjusted for survey design and non-response.

Regarding table 3, I have chosen to use average marginal effects (AMEs) as they provide an intuitive way to understand how changes in one variable affect the

outcome. I chose to calculate the probability of 'disagree strongly' because the 'agree strongly' category contained expected outliers which would likely affect the p-value and potentially distort the statistical significance of the results.

*Table 3: Multinomial Logistic Regression Model of Opinion on Benefit Deservingness (Base = Neither agree nor disagree)*

	<b>Agree Strongly</b> Log Odds (SE)	<b>Agree</b> Log Odds (SE)	<b>Disagree</b> Log Odds (SE)	<b>Disagree Strongly</b> Log Odds (SE)
<b>What is the total monthly income of your household from all sources before tax?</b>				
Less than £1,410	-0.29 (0.32)	0.07 (0.20)	-0.12 (0.15)	0.18 (0.19)
£1,411 - £2,561	0.23 (0.27)	0.17 (0.15)	-0.31** (0.12)	-0.23 (0.15)
£2,561 - £4,350	-0.35 (0.25)	0.19 (0.14)	-0.28** (0.11)	-0.12 (0.14)
More than £4,350	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
<b>Highest educational qualification attained</b>				
Degree or equivalent	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Other Higher Education	0.24 (0.28)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.47*** (0.12)	-0.85*** (0.17)
A-levels/SCE Highers	-0.02 (0.29)	-0.00 (0.16)	-0.57*** (0.12)	-0.76*** (0.16)
Qualifications below A-levels	0.37 (0.28)	0.01 (0.15)	-0.52*** (0.12)	-0.98*** (0.17)
No qualifications	0.62 (0.38)	-0.25 (0.24)	-0.91 (0.20)	-0.70* (0.00)
<b>Age (Years)</b>	-0.01* (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)
<b>Respondent's political party identification</b>				
Conservative	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Labour	-0.25 (0.24)	-0.34* (0.14)	0.76*** (0.11)	2.20*** (0.21)
Liberal Democrat	-0.98* (0.43)	-0.50* (0.22)	0.29* (0.14)	0.91*** (0.27)
Scottish National Party	-0.70 (0.75)	-0.44 (0.35)	0.60* (0.24)	1.91*** (0.31)
Green Party	-0.52 (0.50)	-0.76** (0.29)	0.47* (0.19)	2.26*** (0.26)
Other	-0.15 (0.60)	0.01 (0.29)	0.27 (0.31)	1.38*** (0.37)

None	0.17 (0.24)	-0.19 (0.16)	-0.14 (0.15)	0.20 (0.31)
Constant	-1.15** (0.40)	-0.66* (0.14)	0.31** (0.11)	-1.21*** (0.32)
n	5,401			
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.07			

---

*Note: \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001, Model is adjusted for survey design and non-response, McFadden's Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> is estimated from a non-adjusted model.*

When holding all other variables constant, Age has a log odds of -0.012 when agreeing strongly with the statement. This indicates that for every one-year increase in age, there is a 1.2% decrease in the odds of agreeing strongly with the statement. This may seem small, but this can have large implications as age scales. AMEs show that for every additional year in age, the probability of strongly disagreeing reduces by 0.07 percentage points. I infer that this is due to the elderly typically being recipients of a state pension, which is classified as social security; their dependence on it and familiarity with it lead to their support.

When holding all other variables constant, a significant association is observed between support for the Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green Party and disagreeing strongly with the statement, “Many people who get social security don't deserve any help” ( $p<0.05$ ). The Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP and Green parties (in the same order) have an increase in log odds of 2.26, 0.92, 1.95 and 2.30 respectively, of saying they disagree strongly with the statement when compared to Conservatives. AMEs show that these groups are on average 21, 6, 18, 26 percentage points (same order as prior) more likely to disagree strongly with the statement than Conservatives (the base category). This is relative to the ‘neither agree nor disagree category’ (the base outcome). Thus, we can infer that if an individual supports Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens or SNP, they are more likely to believe most social security recipients are deserving (compared to Conservatives).

When holding all other variables constant, a significant association is observed between education level and strongly disagreeing with the statement, “Many people who get social security don't deserve any help” ( $p<0.05$ ). Respondents who have another form of higher education that isn't a degree, e.g. diploma (-0.85), A-levels or SCE Highers (-0.76), qualifications below A-levels (0.98) or no formal qualification (-0.70) have lower log odds than those with a degree or higher. AMEs show that these groups are on average 8, 6, 9, 4 percentage points (same order as prior) less likely to disagree strongly with the statement than the base category. This is relative to the “neither agree nor disagree category” (the base outcome). It is therefore evident that higher levels of education typically lead to believing most social security recipients are deserving.



When holding all other variables constant, a significant association is observed between household income and disagreeing with the statement, “Many people who get social security don't deserve any help” ( $p < 0.05$ ). When compared to those who earn £4,351 or more, those who earn less earn between £1,451 and £2,560 (-0.30) and those who earn between £2,561 and £4,350 (-0.28) have lower log odds of saying they disagree with the statement. AMEs show earners for £1,451 and £2,560 have a 1 percentage point decrease and for £2,561 and £4,350, a 0.1 percentage point increase in disagreeing strongly with the statement than those who earn £4,351 or more (the base category). This is relative to the “neither agree nor disagree” category (the base outcome). While I did not formally test for mediation, I believe that the reduced likelihood of disagreement within these categories is caused by education being a possible mediating variable. As those who have been better educated may be more likely to make more money and simultaneously support social security. This may help explain why monthly household income results were typically insignificant.

## Conclusion

This report has demonstrated that sociodemographic factors such as age, support for party, education level, and household income are associated with individuals' beliefs about social security deservingness. Most notably, as age increases, individuals tend to be more likely to believe social security recipients deserve aid, possibly caused by familiarity with the state pension. Similarly, those with higher levels of education are more likely to disagree with the notion that many social security recipients are undeserving. I believe this study indicates that familiarity with the social security system, through education or personal experience, is a key contributor in shaping beliefs on if recipients of social security are deserving of help. This study could have benefitted from additional explanatory variables, e.g. race or sex, to better control for confounding factors. If I were to repeat this study, I would include these additional variables and test for mediation. Regardless, based on the results found, I would advise that individuals engage deeper with research on the social security system, how it is funded (in relation to taxation), and how individuals qualify for the scheme. Greater public understanding could help counteract the misinformation and the identity politics surrounding the topic, especially regarding the narrative of the “undeserving poor”, which has been abused by political parties and the media.

## Bibliography

Dupont, Pier-Luc, Bridget Anderson, and Dora-Olivia Vicol. *Working for Benefits: Deservingness and Discrimination in the British Social Security System*. ETHOS Country Report for ETHOS Report D5, 2019.

National Centre for Social Research. *British Social Attitudes Survey, 2022* [data collection]. UK Data Service. Accessed April 20, 2025.  
<https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9283-1>.

Schumacher, Gijs, Barbara Vis, and Kees Van Kersbergen. "Political Parties' Welfare Image, Electoral Punishment and Welfare State Retrenchment." *Comparative European Politics* 11 (2013): 1–21.

Watkins-Hayes, Celeste, and Elyse Kovalsky. "The Discourse of Deservingness." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*, edited by David Brady and Linda M. Burton, 1–26. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.