

UK couple driven to suicide by poverty and neglect

Robert Stevens
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Last week, the bodies of Mark and Helen Mullins were discovered in their home in the small market town of Bedworth, Warwickshire. The married couple had made a suicide pact. They were found lying together side by side.

They may have died up to three weeks before their bodies were discovered.

When the couple died, they were living in a wretched and appalling state. They had been living on £57.50 a week for the last 18 months. This tiny sum, just £4.10 each per day, was the unemployment benefit that was claimed by Mark.

For months, the couple had been unable to afford food or heating and did not have the means to buy basic household items.

Helen suffered from learning difficulties, and last year, social services took her 12-year-old daughter away from her.

It has been reported that Helen had her Child Benefits stopped, but was unable to claim Jobseeker's Allowance, as she was not deemed fit to work. She was then informed that she also did not qualify for incapacity benefit, due to her not being officially diagnosed with a medical condition.

Mark had found life hard since leaving the army and had been unable to find regular work. He was Helen's full-time carer but he was unable to claim Carer's Allowance (£53.10 a week), as he was told he was ineligible until she had been diagnosed with a disorder.

In December of last year, Mark and Helen, who had recently married, appeared in a short documentary about people living below the poverty line in Warwickshire.

Mark gave an interview to the Salvation Army, whom the couple relied on for food parcels. He detailed their daily struggle for existence. They were interviewed at a soup kitchen in Coventry, where they came each Sunday for a "soup and food handout". Unable to afford travel

costs, the couple had to walk the 12-mile round trip. Mark told the interviewer at the time that they had been doing this for nearly a year.

He said that social services had taken Helen's youngest daughter away from her, "because she was looking after Helen and doing everything for her".

"My Helen is learning disabled, but it took her a very long time to get any kind of benefits or social security," he said. "The job centre decided that she couldn't sign on because she had no brain function, no numeracy, literacy skill, any mobile abilities. But the Incapacity [Benefit] and disability people wouldn't recognise her until she had been fully diagnosed. We are caught in Catch-22 situation. We couldn't sign on the dole. Couldn't get the Incapacity established. Couldn't get the disability established, so basically we are living on very little, hand to mouth."

They could no longer afford food, he added, saying, "We've basically survived on a lot of your food handouts. We live in the one room of our property. Obviously we can't afford all this heating in minus 10 and 15. We can't afford to run the heating.... The food we gather here we basically put into a big pot and I keep one broth going continuously because your household bags gives us lots of fruit and veg, potatoes and there's a lot of bread here. And we really have from week to week at times survived on what you have given us."

They had to put the food parcels they got from the soup kitchen "out in the shed, because it's cooler in the shed. We don't have a fridge or a freezer. We bring it [the food] in piecemeal and add to the big broth pot as we go along."

Commenting on their inability to claim the benefits they were entitled to, Mark said, "I think the system is very unkind. We have lost count of how many appeals we have had. We've had to fight tooth and nail every step of the way to get benefits."

“They have no problem in suspending benefits. It’s not an issue for them. They just put a tick in a box and a stroke across a piece of paper and they alter your lives, which is fundamentally unfair. You have those who have the power to do this to you and those of us who don’t have the power to resist it.”

One neighbour who knew Mark and Helen told the *Daily Mail*, “The authorities turned their back on them. They obviously couldn’t face another freezing winter and felt they had no other choice but to kill themselves.”

The denial of social benefits and assistance to the Mullins and thousands of people in similar situations is not the result of bureaucratic oversight, but a systematic policy to drive millions of people off benefits under conditions of already escalating levels of unemployment nationally.

Hundreds of thousands of people are to be removed from benefits, including Incapacity Benefit. In order to carry this out, over the next five years, 500 doctors will carry out up to 10,000 assessments each week of people who are on Incapacity Benefit. Using the pretext of transferring those incapable of work onto the new Employment Support Allowance (ESA), claimants will be driven off sickness benefit.

Fully aware of the social consequences of more than £100 billion in public spending cuts, it was revealed earlier this year that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has issued official guidance on how to deal with a claimant who threatens suicide. The DWP has also instituted policies in which job centre staff are given targets of three people a week to refer for sanctions, through which benefits are removed for up to six months.

If, as is almost certainly the case, Mark and Helen did commit suicide in despair at the situation they found themselves in, they are only the latest casualties of the economic and social crisis that is reaping a terrible human cost.

In February, the *Guardian* reported the case of a man protesting against disability benefits cuts. He explained that his uncle, who had severe mental health problems, committed suicide after work capability assessment tests gave him zero points and found him fit to work. After appealing the decision and winning his case, he was called in for another assessment. Again he scored zero points and was told he did not qualify for disability benefits. He committed suicide a few days before another tribunal date was set to hear yet another appeal.

This situation is set to worsen. Figures released this week reveal, according to the *Independent*, that “after

falling for years, the suicide rate began increasing as the credit crunch hit Britain.”

It reported, “The number of people committing suicide rose by 329 to 5,706 in 2008—the first increase since 1998.”

Following the meltdown of the global economy in 2008, David Cameron, before becoming prime minister, stated that Britain had now entered “the age of austerity”. In the aftermath of the crash, billions have been slashed in social spending, first by the previous Labour government and from May last year by the incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat government.

These policies have resulted in millions of people being deprived of decent paying jobs and vital social services. Like Helen, many thousands have been denied access to basic social benefits.

In the face of this, Warwickshire Police have gone on record to insist that the deaths are “unexplained”. Detective Inspector Bob Jamieson stated that he was aware of reports that the couple lived in poverty and that this may have contributed to their death, but flatly denied this. “Our inquiries so far have revealed that this was not the case and that the lack of finances was not an issue in their lives, nor was the alleged lack of any social care support an apparent factor either,” he claimed without substantiation.

The deaths have barely been reported in the national media. Aside from Channel 4 News, a few brief articles have appeared in the national press and two articles in the local *Coventry Telegraph*. The nominally liberal *Guardian* and *Independent* have not reported the tragedy.



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