

A reader responds on the suicide deaths of UK couple

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A reader sent this letter in response to the article “UK couple driven to suicide by poverty and neglect,” published November 15, 2011.

People can be killed instantly, directly and spectacularly by gunshots, as happened in the case of Mark Duggan in August 2011. But people can also be killed by neglect, killed quietly, silently, surreptitiously, through systematic failure to help and support them.

Such happened in the case of Baby P in 2009, which hit the headlines and has shockwaves still reverberating through the UK media and the national consciousness (for example, leading to an increase in the number of children taken into care; see “Rise in number of children in care leads to budget overspend”).

Like Baby P, Mark and Helen Mullins were in effect killed by the failures of the system. Whether or not they took their own lives, or whether they died from “natural causes”—which begs the question: will starvation be considered a “natural cause” by the investigating police force?—is almost beside the point. The fact is, this quiet, unassuming, modest couple were failed by the system, precisely because they were quiet, made no fuss beyond lodging appeals over their right to benefits (if such can be considered making a fuss) and were therefore not noticed by the system.

It is with the most bitter irony that one must observe the contrast of this tragedy with the shooting of Mark Duggan, whose death sparked the August riots in London, then quickly led to further reaction, and the ensuing riots in other major cities in the UK. The disaffected, mainly young people, who felt the system had been failing them, even alienating them, took to the streets to vent their long pent-up anger. No such reaction is happening in the wake of the deaths of Mark and Helen Mullins. The deaths of quiet, unassuming, modest people just don’t spark riots. But if anything,

the case of the Mullinses should arouse even more anger: anger at the cynicism of a system that fails to protect its most vulnerable and needy members.

Had the Mullinses become homeless, or begged “aggressively” on the streets, they would have been noticed by the authorities and measures would have been taken, measures not necessarily in the Mullins’ interest, but certainly such that the full machinery of social services’ “intervention” would have cranked into action. (Adding insult to injury is the fact that the Mullins’ 12-year-old daughter was taken into care, but further intervention appears to have stopped there.) People who don’t shout, who don’t make a fuss, who quietly struggle along are simply not noticed enough by the system, and with the growing dismantling of what is left of the welfare state, the fate of such quiet people will get even worse.

What made the Mullinses especially vulnerable was that Mrs. Helen Mullins had learning disabilities. Disabled people are, as recent demonstrations in the UK highlighted, among the “hardest hit” by the spate of cuts (see “Disabled people hold nationwide protests against cuts”).

According to Stuart Thompson, a campaign manager for the charity Mencap: “Disabled people are already one of the most disenfranchised people in society.”

Imagine trying to claim your “rights” when you are visually, hearing or speech impaired, or as in the case of Helen Mullins, have to rely on a carer to help you through your everyday life because learning difficulties mean you have no chance of reading your benefit claim, never mind being able, as an individual, to fight for your rights. Quite the opposite.

According to one news report, Mark and Helen Mullins “were terrified that she was about to be sectioned, having long suffered from learning disabilities.”

This fear may have also influenced the couple's approach to the benefit agencies and the wider social services system of knuckling down, keeping quiet and unassuming, especially after Helen had her daughter taken away from her because the system deemed Helen was "unfit to look after her."

I wish people would get as angry about the fate of our most vulnerable members of society, such as disabled people, as they did when fit young men are shot at by police, but I resign myself to the fact that the killing by neglect, in effect the systemic murder, of disabled people is just too quiet and not sensational enough to incite action.

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