

Thousands die after being told they are fit for work

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Thousands of people claiming benefit for long-term illness or disability died within two weeks of being ruled "fit for work", according to figures released yesterday.

Over a two-year period, 2,380 people claiming employment and support allowance (ESA) died within a fortnight of being told they were deemed able to work and so would lose the benefit.

Campaigners have claimed that many ill and disabled people have been left distressed after the rulings, made by private contractors carrying out the assessments for the government.

Officials said the overall mortality rate for people on out-of-work benefits, including those on sickness and disability handouts, had fallen over the decade.

The figures, released under Freedom of Information laws, showed that an average of 88 ESA claimants died each month between December 2011 and February 2014 within a fortnight of being ruled fit for work.

A further 270 died within six weeks of being taken off incapacity or severe disablement allowance in the same period.

Labour MPs demanded an inquiry,

saying the government needed to focus on sorting out the assessment process.

Frank Field, chairman of the work and pensions select committee, described the figures as "distressing". He said: "The key factor is whether the number of deaths are above what would normally be expected from claimants not deemed fit for work."

Andy Burnham, the Labour leadership candidate, said: "These are shocking figures that for the first time show the human cost of this government's punishing benefits regime."

The Department of Work and Pensions said the figures were "isolated" and "provide limited scope for analysis". It insisted that they did not prove any causal link between being declared fit for work and an individual's death.

The document also states that none of the statistics "allows the reader to form any judgment as to the effects or impacts of the work capability assessment."

A DWP spokesman said: "The mortality rate for people who have died while claiming an out-of-work benefit has fallen over 10 years. The government continues to support millions of people on benefits with an £80 billion working-age welfare safety net in place."

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