HEALING JUSTICE LDN

Deaths by Design

Interrogating the welfare system's design, and imagining otherwise, as a key site of power building

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DEATHS BY
WELFARE TIMELINE
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Deaths by Welfare Project

Intro to resources

What if the violence that the state inflicts on disabled people through the welfare system is harmful by design - a feature not a bug?

This resource is part of a series from the Deaths by Welfare project, based on the creation of a publicly available timeline charting welfare state violence (co-created with John Pring); interviews with more than 50 disabled activists and bereaved family members; a podcast series; and a month long exhibition - Defiant and Life-Affirming: Resisting State Violence - in 2023. The resources are indebted to and oriented towards movement organising, activism and justice as a way to imagine welfare justice and create more life-affirming systems beyond the State.

This resource has been written by China Mills, with vital input from John Pring (Disability News Service), the Healing Justice Ldn team, and is made up of some of the many things we have learned from people whose loved ones have been killed by, and from disabled people resisting the violence of, the welfare state. We would especially like to honour and thank: Rick Burgess, Ellen Clifford, Imogen Day, Tumu Johnson, Vince Laws, Paula Peters, John Pring, Dolly Sen, and anonymous contributors. To find out more listen to our podcasts.

Summary

In this resource we discuss:

- Rather than being a system of 'mistakes' and 'flaws', what happens to our understanding and our organising if we recognise that the welfare system is deadly by design?
- The welfare system's history of harm, and what we can learn from different groups over time who the government have told us are a 'burden'
- What kind of changes can we make that get at the roots of harmful systems and don't make those systems stronger?
- How can we resource ourselves and each other towards a bigger transformation of welfare?

"Flaws" and "mistakes"

We sometimes talk about the "flaws", "mistakes" and "problems" in the welfare system – like the 28 "problems" with the DWP and private sector contractor Capita (paid to carry out disability assessments), found by the coroner to have been "the predominant factor and the only acute factor" that led Philippa Day to take her own life in 2019 after her disability benefits were stopped.



The coroner (after a nine day inquest) concluded that these problems were not individual errors but systemic flaws. Philippa's sister Imogen told us that Philippa knew what was happening to her was "systemic" - she knew "the DWP weren't treating disabled claimants with respect and people were losing their lives".

Before she died, she told her sister that she knew the assessment system was going to kill her: "She felt that they were pressuring her to kill herself, she felt that she didn't matter because she was disabled". Exhaustive campaigning from Philippa's family and many disabled activists, exposed these problems with the DWP and Capita, locating them as part of wider systemic neglect.

Or Stephen Carré, who died by suicide in 2010, after finding that DWP had confirmed its decision to find him ineligible for Employment and Support Allowance, following a Work Capability Assessment. In the prevention of future deaths (PFD) report (made when, in the opinion of the coroner, there are actions that an individual or organisation should take to prevent future deaths), and at Stephen's inquest, a coroner ruled that his death was linked to 'flaws' in the Work Capability Assessment system, and that the rejection of his appeal that he was not fit for work was a 'trigger' in Stephen's death.

This is clear evidence of the potentially fatal impact of the assessment process, yet the report, available but buried in the recesses of the Ministry of Justice website, would only come to be publicly known about in 2015.

It takes so much labour and is a huge win by disabled people and bereaved families to get coroners to name the role of the DWP in harming and killing people.

And naming these deadly decisions and policies as “mistakes” and “flaws” can make it seem like the government doesn’t know what’s happening and if only they knew then they would change what they do.



‘By design and deadly’

“They created a system that’s deliberately designed to push people into poverty because our lives are worth less to them than other people’s”. (Ellen Clifford, Podcast 1)

The idea that disabled people’s lives are “worth less” to the government underlies much welfare policy. Imogen, whose sister Philippa died in 2019, says “It feels like it’s state-sanctioned eugenics of disabled people, because of the amounts of people that have died. We’re not just talking about a handful of cases that have gone wrong due to human-error or systems; there’s hundreds” (Imogen Day, podcast 3).

Tumu Johnson (co-director at the feminist disabled women’s collective, Sisters of Frida) shared that:

“There are ways in which the welfare state inflicts violence onto us, that is obvious and undeniable. We see spectrum of control exerted by the welfare state appointment at the job centre with no leniency, dictating where you have to be and when…

“Care schedules that dictate what time you’ll go to bed and what time we can get up in the morning. Fear that if we are seeing attending events or having fun, that will be reported and held against us.

"Control of disabled people is present in all areas of the welfare state. Sites of health care continue to be used as a tool to inflict violence.

"The connections between the different sites of violence are compounding in nature: there is a repetition, a pattern, a relentlessness present, which is designed to wear people down.""

According to Tumu, this wearing people down by design is a form of "violence that is by design and is deadly." Rick Burgess (co-founder of the War on Welfare Petition and Manchester Disabled People Against Cuts, amongst many other things), explains:

"The first death: that could be a mistake.
The tenth death: okay, some unfortunate mistakes; there's a big system!
A hundred deaths: okay, they didn't have time to get ahead of it.
The 303rd death: that's getting a bit weird.
The 407th death: They've had reports back! They're keeping doing this!
The one-thousand-two-hundred-and-forty-seventh death: Well. They know what they're doing."

Rick calls this democide - "not so much killing people, but taking away the necessary elements a human needs to survive in a society, and subjecting them to absolutely inhumane conditions cumulatively; so when you take away their benefits, when you subject them to oppressive assessments, when you have them demonised in the press. And you do that repeatedly for years, and years, and years.

We're now fourteen years into this process; that's not an accident, that's not a passing fad—that's a cultural democide against a demographic, that demographic being disabled people benefit claimants". (Rick Burgess)

Both Tumu and Rick emphasise part of welfare state violence's deadly design is evident in its constant, cumulative, relentless repetition - it wears people down and tires them out. Ellen Clifford says she's noticed a shift as the years of austerity and welfare reform roll on, where people are exhausted with fighting the government just to survive. If spoons (as a unit of energy) are limited, then it matters where we put our energy.

Focusing on 'flaws' in a system, then risks channelling our energy into correcting and reforming a system designed to harm disabled (and many other) people. Tweaks and reforms in parts of the system might never be enough because the underlying logic and profitability of these systems create conditions that devlue people and make certain lives unlivable.



Reflection Point

(Please write, draw)

What kind of tactics and strategies have you witnessed and/or been part of in relation to ending welfare state violence/anti-austerity campaigning?

How do these tactics relate to the State? For example, do they try to make small changes in policy by appealing to the Government? Or do they mobilise beyond the State - practising and imagining alternatives?

What do you think are some of the impacts of these tactics? For example, do they allow us to tinker at the edges of harmful policy? Can we use them for affirming, and mobilising, people?

Might these tactics change if we recognise that the welfare system is harmful by design, not mistake?



Histories of harm

Saying the welfare system is designed to harm people means looking at how it was created. This means exploring histories of the welfare state from the perspectives of those who feel its sharp edges - a different history from the glorified one we are often told.

European colonialism was an important part of the development of the welfare state: from the extraction of resources used to fund the welfare state, to the building and staffing of the NHS by people from independent former British colonies. But, although healthcare and welfare were built by these folks, it was not built for them.

"Black people and people of colour, and disabled people were deliberately left out of the welfare settlement. And this isn't to take away from the value that the welfare state did bring in terms of bringing in free education, as it was then, and the NHS. However, it was deliberately exclusionary. And for disabled people, that was because there was a fear that giving money to disabled people, and disability benefits, would encourage malingering". (Ellen Clifford, podcast 1).

This idea of malingering lingers on and on - reproduced by the Government to fuel claims of 'benefit fraud' and to outsource disability assessments to private contractors (companies such as Serco, Capita, and Maximus).



It was around the idea of so-called 'malingering' that the DWP and the private insurance industry came together in the 1990s/2000s - part of a history of corporate interests involved in the design of welfare (see Mo Stewart's work on Preventable Harm).

Over two decades before the financial crash, in their 1985 book Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain, Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe show that Black women have long questioned the power of the welfare state:

> 'there is no single area of our lives which better exposes our experience of institutionalised racism than our relationship with the various welfare services. Here we deal regularly with people who are vested with the power to control, disrupt and intervene in our lives on behalf of the State' (1985, p.109).

These histories show us that disproportionately distributed harm and premature death, targeting racialized, low-income, and disabled populations, is a feature of the (welfare) state, not a bug.

Facing up to these histories is hard. Some of us know it well and feel like we've been saying it for a long time and not been listened to.

And some of us are just learning it, and it hurts because it feels contrary to what we might have long believed.

Histories are also important in understanding how welfare is designed to be extractive, for example through private companies who make huge profits from government outsourced disability assessments.

In 2023, Serco was one of five companies given government contracts to carry out assessments for disability-related benefits - worth over £2 billion - from 2024 to 2029. As well as making money from assessing if disabled people should get benefits, Serco also profit from border control, including running immigration detention centres, and from occupation and war, including providing services for Israeli naval projects. This is why cross movement solidarities campaigning for Welfare not Warfare are so important.

This goes way back - at least to the 1800s and England's New Poor Laws. The Poor Laws introduced the building of workhouses and the Workhouse Test - a regime designed to be so awful that it would deter people from seeking relief in the first place.

Fear was written into the infrastructure of workhouses and policy, where basically the only way of proving you were destitute was if you were desperate enough to enter the workhouse.

If this sounds all too familiar, that's because the New Poor Laws laid the foundations of the ideas about poverty and undeservingness that continue to shape policy today. These laws instituted



the idea of paid work as the measure of human worth, where those who can't or won't work and therefore need state support are called 'burdensome'.

This idea of some people as burdensome - the so-called "benefits scrounger" - has for so long been used to extract public resources from poor people, especially racialized and disabled people. And such stigmatisation provides the perfect cover story for the government to neglect and kill people - because if you frame certain groups of people as disposable, as burdensome, then you can act with almost complete impunity. (See HJL blog on 'understanding welfare state violence'.)

So why might it be useful to recognise the harmful design of welfare?

First to hold that it can be heartbreaking to realise that people's deaths are by design, not mistake:

> "And that's what breaks my heart: is how preventable all of this was. Every single death was preventable. And not preventable by the families, not preventable by peer-support, or anything like that; it was preventable by the system" (Imogen Day, podcast 3).

And it can be useful to our campaigning and organising in a number of ways:

- Seeing systems as harmful by design might pivot our activism from focussing solely on showing the Government evidence of the harms they cause (as if they don't know already), into different kinds of organising. [See Evidence resource].

- There are many other systems that are violent and deadly by design - for example the UK's hostile environment and its important to understand their connections to the welfare state.

- It can also help us understand, tend to and build connections (cross movement solidarities) with others who have been or are framed by the State as a 'burden' and as disposable, and see the ways that policies are often tested on one group and then expanded to others. For example, policies tested on migrants in the 1980s/90s, were very similar to those imposed on disabled people post 2008.

- These histories hurt but they matter because they are not past - they continue today. It can be hard to tell long histories in a way that mobilises people and makes us want to do something, rather than resign us to not being able to change something that has been awful for a long time. But saying something has deep roots, doesn't mean we just have accept it - instead can help us see there's nothing 'natural' about the way things are and that there are alternatives.

Reflection Point

(Please write, draw)

How does it feel for you if you think of the way the welfare system harms us as being part of its design?

Might that change anything about your own understanding and organising? And what wouldn't change?



Non-reformist reforms

We can learn from activism around how immigration policies and policing increasingly move away from the passive language of 'deaths' and name these instead as killings (People's Tribunal on Police Killings, 2025).

If systems are harmful by design then we need to campaign beyond 'cuts'. If we only mobilise around "cuts" to welfare, we might overlook how harmful the foundation of welfare can be.

We can use this as an organising tactic that allows us to get at the roots, rather than tinkering at the edges. E.g. If we focus only on the DWP killing people by mistake, it might help the DWP to tinker at the edges of harmful policies and make small reforms that ultimately reinforce the power and violence of the system?

Now, more than ever, we need a collective idea of what kind of welfare we want to move towards.

"Without a strategic long-term vision for change, today's reforms may be tomorrow's tools of repression." Rachel Herzing (2015) Big Dreams and Bold Steps towards a police free future

We can learn a lot from people trying to abolish policing, and prisons and all forms of incarceration, especially the idea of non-reformist reforms - small changes that are consistent with our collective transformational demands. (Critical Resistance offers much guidance on this).

These help us move beyond feeling like "we can't do anything until we overthrow the state" (Mariame Kaba).



Reflection Point

(Please write, draw)

What changes (reforms) could we make to the welfare system that meet people's needs right now and keep them alive in the here and now, and that don't inadvertently make the system that harms us stronger?

What changes could we make to the welfare system that we wouldn't need to undo in a few years?

What reforms could we make that don't reinforce ideas of deservingness, ie that some people deserve welfare more than others? What changes could benefit everyone, rather than a select group?

Understanding the system is harmful by design also explains why its incredibly hard to imagine and design anything different from the welfare system we have now.

This is especially true in current conditions continual attacks by the State, where disabled people, and many other demonised groups, are exhausted and enormously under-resourced.

People want to build a different welfare system but its hard to get specific about what we want (our big long term demands) when all we've known is a violent bureaucratic system.

As someone who wanted to remain anonymous explains, "we have to think of welfare differently than the way the nation state does".

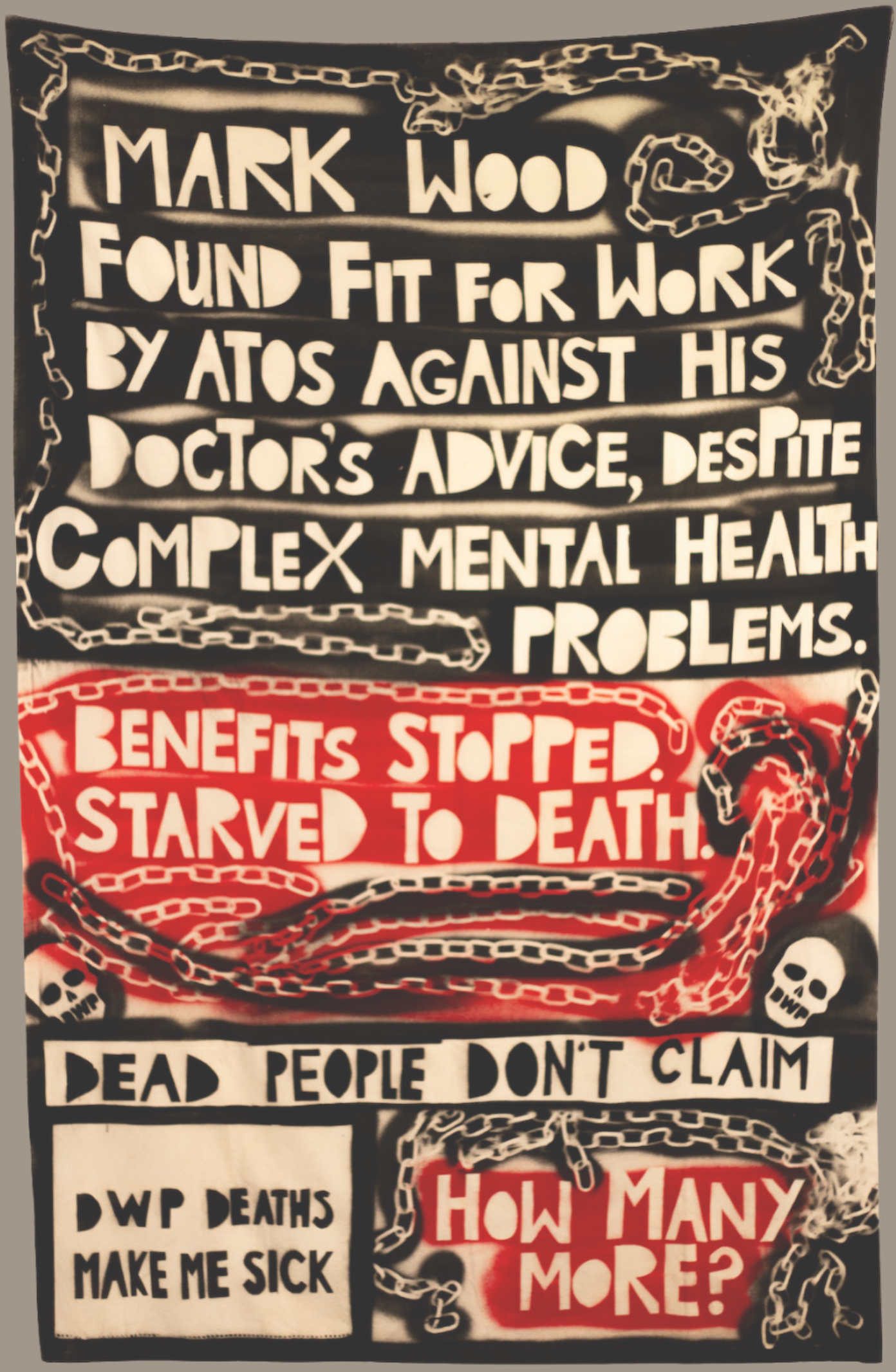
But how can we imagine welfare without deservingness and burden, borders and sanctions, when they have been part of our welfare system for so long - can we imagine welfare without them?

So, let's give ourselves some grace, and in the short-term work out how can we resource ourselves and each other towards this bigger transformational work.

We also need to think globally - because the companies profiting from our welfare systems are global and also because the ideas shaping punitive welfare systems (those ideas that we're told all the time, about scarcity and deservingness) are also global, and used to manufacture scarcity and justify austerity all over the world.

And we have to keep practising everyday - telling ourselves and each other that work doesn't equal worth and that no one is a burden or undeserving.

And using this to collectively design and build life-affirming infrastructures grounded in interdependence, our non-negotiable dignity and the value of all of our body-minds.


MARK WOOD
FOUND FIT FOR WORK
BY ATOS AGAINST HIS
DOCTOR'S ADVICE, DESPITE
COMPLEX MENTAL HEALTH
PROBLEMS.
BENEFITS STOPPED.
STARVED TO DEATH.
DWP
DWP
DEAD PEOPLE DON'T CLAIM
DWP DEATHS
MAKE ME SICK
HOW MANY
MORE?

Resources

Caring for ourselves and each other when the state tells us that we don't matter is a radical act. We hope you find these resources and links useful.

- Caring for ourselves
  HJL aftercare menu and resources https://healingjusticeldn.org/methodology/hjl-aftercare-menu/

- Grief toolkit (by Camille Barton)
  www.global-diversity.org/grief-toolkit

- Deaths by Welfare
  Deaths by Welfare Project podcast (including BSL interpretation and captions):
  www.healingjusticeldn.org

- 'Welfare State violence: a feature, not a bug' with Stella Dadzie, Tumu Johnson, Derica Shields & China Mills:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nJNJzm53pg

- Welfare state violence https://healingjusticeldn.org/methodology/calling-some-people-a-burden-provides-a-cover-story-for-welfare-state-violence/

Readings

- Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain (Verso, 1985).

- Ellen Clifford. The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare and the Making of a Human Catastrophe (Bloomsbury, 2022).

- John Pring. The Department How a Violent Government Bureaucracy Killed Hundreds and Hid the Evidence.
(Pluto Press, 2024: https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745349909/the-department/)

- China Mills and John Pring. "Weaponising Time in the War on Welfare: Slow Violence and Deaths of Disabled People within the UK's Social Security System,"
Critical Social Policy 44:1 (2024), pp. 129-149. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02610183231187588

- Institute of Race Relations 'Public tribunal finds hostile environment policies foster racism, institutional cruelty and violence by design' https://irr.org.uk/article/violence-by-design-the-ppt-delivers-its-verdict-on-the-hostile-environment/

- Mariame Kaba, 'Towards the horizon of abolition' https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/towards-horizon-abolition-conversation-mariame-kaba

Readings cont.

- Rachel Herzing, 'Big Dreams and Bold Steps towards a police free future' https://truthout.org/articles/big-dreams-and-bold-steps-toward-a-police-free-future/
- Mo Stewart 'Preventable Harm' https://www.mostewartresearch.co.uk/preventable-harm-project/

Other resources, groups, orgs to connect with & learn alongside

- Disability News Service: www.disabilitynewsservice.com
- DPAC (Disabled People Against Cuts): www.dpac.uk.net
- Critical Resistance 'Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end imprisonment' https://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CR_abolitioniststeps_antiexpansion_2021_eng.pdf
- Sisters of Frida https://www.sisofrida.org/

Thank you

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