

Report exposes a dangerous lack of official oversight

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The deadly consequences of workplace sectors without inspectors are the subject of a new study by Stirling's Professor of Occupational Health Policy Research, Rory O'Neill.

Using a series of Freedom of Information requests and an analysis of over 20 [Health](#) and Safety Executive (HSE) reports, Professor O'Neill has compiled the first ever consolidated list of sectors excluded from unannounced HSE inspections in his report "Low life: How the government has put a low price on your life."

Professor O'Neill says: "Whether your job is making people better or making plastics, don't expect a government safety inspector to call. The majority of workplace deaths now occur in sectors officially excused from unannounced inspections by the safety regulator.

"On UK government orders the HSE has designated most industrial sectors, from farms to footwear, either too safe for them to bother, or just not worth the effort even if they are shockingly dangerous."

The online report reveals there are now at least 37 designated 'sectors without inspectors', employing the majority of the workforce. Exempted sectors include agriculture, quarries, plastics, [electricity generation](#) and supply and other industries acknowledged by HSE to be 'higher risk'.

"Britain's biggest employer, the health service, is also out-of-bounds," says Professor O'Neill. "But the country's 1.4million [health workers](#) can

be confronted by many of the safety risks encountered in heavy industry, as well as all manner of potentially terminal health risks from [blood borne diseases](#) to carcinogenic, cytotoxic and other drugs."

The no-go policy is a result of an inspection directive laid out in the government's March 2011 "Good health and safety, good for everyone strategy."

"It is a policy driven by ideology, not evidence," says Professor O'Neill. "Despite several months of questions to HSE, they failed to provide any health and safety case for exempting sometimes deadly industries from official policing. HSE was told by the government to get off employers' backs, and the watchdog tamely obliged."

Professor O'Neill's analysis of official fatality data shows that since the government strategy was introduced more than half of all fatalities in HSE-enforced workplaces have occurred in sectors excluded from HSE's unannounced inspection programme.

From 1 April 2011 to 31 October 2012, there were 258 fatalities in HSE-enforced workplaces, with 137 deaths - 53 per cent - occurring in uninspected sectors. In sectors still subject to unannounced preventive inspections there were 104 deaths - 40 per cent.

"The situation in Scotland – which experienced a sharp hike in workplace deaths last year – is considerably worse," says Professor O'Neill. "Of 33 worker fatalities in the same period, 20 - a full 60 per cent - were in uninspected sectors. Policy changes imposed by Westminster could be having particularly deadly consequences for Scotland's workforce."

The remaining deaths occurred in jobs where the enforcement situation is unclear. There were 78 construction deaths in this period - 30 per cent

of the total. Deaths in sectors not subject to preventive HSE inspections make up over three quarters - 76 per cent - of the 180 non-construction sector deaths.

According to the research, reactive inspections after reported injuries have also plummeted, with only 5 per cent of 'major injuries' now investigated by HSE.

"You could be scalped, lose a limb or be blinded at work and HSE would not care to look," says Professor O'Neill. "The situation could worsen as a result of Business Secretary Vince Cable's plan to introduce a binding legal code outlawing proactive inspections by UK government regulators in all but high risk areas.

"Inspections at work protect the health and safety of working people and stop responsible businesses being undermined by the rogues. There's an unanswerable business, health and moral case for comprehensive inspection programmes.

"The current government strategy is making life easier for irresponsible businesses but risks making it just a bit shorter for the rest of us."

Read the report "[Low life: How the government has put a low price on your life.](https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-01-exposes-dangerous-lack-oversight.html)"

Provided by University of Stirling

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