

Rising longevity masks growing life expectancy inequalities in Britain

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Whenever objections are raised in the media to the demand for workers to work longer, harder and pay even more for their pension's before they can finally retire, the refrain goes, "Get used to it, we are all living longer!".

Well yes, but to paraphrase George Orwell, we are all living longer, *but* some are living longer than others.

Life expectancy is still largely dependent upon social class and most of the recent increases in longevity, much like contemporary patterns of wealth distribution, have been accrued by the upper and middle classes.

The richest are living longest, sometimes much longer than others further down the social spectrum—sometimes eleven years more than workers. The working class, while experiencing a recent rise in life expectancy, has seen much smaller gains.

The latest research by the government's Office of National Statistics reveals what the media call a "postcode lottery", alluding to disparities between postal districts and especially between the north and south of the UK. But navigating the town or city where they live every observant child learns how it is divided, often starkly, along social line.

The online *Guardian* makes a fetish out of geography with a headline reading, "Life expectancy by UK health areas: what's it like near you?"

The reality is that where you live is largely a function of wealth. If you live among the wealthy, you too share a similar bank balance and will, hopefully, live to a ripe old age. On the other hand, if you live among workers, you are more than likely working class and will struggle to make ends meet. You will not, by and large, live as long as those who reside within up-market postcodes.

Conflating social class into urban geography, rather than examine their intimate relationship, detracts from

the decisive chasm in society. It is conducive for the media to promulgate regional stereotypes, which are usually little more than class stereotypes, and muddy the waters of discussion.

It is easier to call health disparities a "North-South divide" if you ignore the fact that the majority of the British upper middle classes are concentrated, much like their business interests and investment portfolios, within London and the surrounding counties. Moreover, that the decisive factor in calculations regarding life expectancy is class rather than geography is born-out by the knowledge that many of the very poorest districts in the British Isles are located within inner city London.

The data from the Office for National Statistics shows that life expectancy for men in the south-east of England it is 79.4 years, while in Scotland the figure is 75.4. For women the gap is slightly less: 83.3 in south-east and south-west England against 80.1 in Scotland.

Life expectancy at birth rose from 76.5 years to 77.9 for men between 2003-05 and 2007-09 and from 80.9 to 82 for women. Life expectancy at 65 also rose. Men of that age could expect to live another 17.9 years instead of 16.7 years and women another 20.4 years, compared with 19.4 previously.

The average figure can cloak more than it reveals. Kensington and Chelsea in west London, probably the wealthiest borough in the capital, has the highest life expectancy at birth over the 2003-05 and 2007-09 time period. Among London's high flyers life expectancy increased from 81.7 to 84.4 years for men and from 86.1 to 89 years for women.

The super rich have never lived before in the incredible wealth to which they have become accustomed and their increased longevity underlines this status.

In the Greater Glasgow and Clyde district the increase in longevity is more modest. Men's life expectancy has increased from 71.9 to 73.1 years, while women's life expectancy has improved from 77.9 to 78.9 years. These are the lowest life expectancies in the UK, except for Hartlepool in the northeast where, between 2005 and 2007 the lowest female life expectancy was just 78.1 years.

By way of rough comparison, because class disparities are hidden within national figures, Albania, which labored beneath a Stalinist state for decades and has suffered just as badly since the restoration of capitalism, life expectancy for men is 73.4 years and for women 80.4 years. In the Palestinian territories, where everyday life is insufferable and living standards are greatly retarded by the Israeli occupation, life expectancies are respectively 70.6 for men and 74.8 for women.

The life expectancy gap between Glasgow and the London district of Kensington and Chelsea increased from just short of ten years, at 9.8 years, to 11.3 years for men and for women from 8.2 years to 10.1 years. Both genders residing in west London will live on average an entire decade longer than their Glasgow contemporaries.

Next door to Kensington and Chelsea is Westminster, which recorded the greatest improvements. Men's life expectancy rose by 4.7 years, from 78.7 to 83.4. Women enjoyed a considerable growth from 83 to 86.5, a 3.5 years increase.

Danny Dorling, a professor in Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, noted how in theory if the recent growth in longevity witnessed by districts like Westminster continued then no one would die. He told the *Guardian*, "So either Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea have become Mount Olympus or we have just lived through a growth in inequalities between areas than cannot be repeated, other than by real falls in life expectancies in the poorest areas."

Under conditions of austerity, where working class people and communities are under savage attack and the National Health Service and other social provisions are being gutted, it is entirely possible that life expectancy will begin to fall, especially in the economically devastated "North".



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