

UK: Gap in life expectancy between rich and poor widens for first time since 1870

Trevor Johnson
18 May 2016

The gap in life expectancy between the rich and the poorest in the UK has increased for the first time since the 1870s.

A recent report by the Cass Business School (part of London's City University) and the International Longevity Centre-UK shows that after a long period in which the effect of social inequality on life expectancy had fallen, this trend has been thrown into reverse. While the population as a whole has a longer life expectancy, the extent to which people have benefited from this is highly dependent on their social class.

Based on a survey of the Human Mortality Database, professor of statistics Les Mayhew and Doctor David Smith measured the differences in age of death between the 10 percent of adults who died youngest and the longest-lived 5 percent. The report concentrates on adults who survive past the age of 30.

Mayhew said, "We found that since the 1990s lifespan inequalities in men have actually worsened in England and Wales. This is partly due to some men now living to exceptionally old ages and in many cases equalling women, but at the other end of the distribution there has been a lack of progress."

In the first half of the last century, life expectancy grew and the gap between the richest and poorest narrowed as the majority of the UK population benefited from improvements in clean drinking water, better housing, higher incomes and better health. Following that was a long period in which the differences of life expectancy between rich and poor remained constant.

This continued until 1993. Between 1993 and 2009, however, differences between men in the top 5 percent and bottom 10 percent have increased to a staggering 33.3 years—with the gap in life expectancy between rich and poor growing by 1.7 years.

The growing discrepancy in life expectancy between the rich and poor is the result of decades of attacks on jobs, wages and living standards, as well as cuts in the National Health Service and the benefits of low-income households. Successive Labour and Conservative governments carried these out. While the rich have access to the best healthcare money can buy, the majority rely on a health service that has been the object of a feeding frenzy by profit-making concerns, causing standards of care to plummet.

The report tries to blame the growing gap in life expectancies on the "lifestyle choices" of the poorest men. The introduction berates the poorest men for putting "themselves in harm's way on average more than women do... they smoke more, drink more and there are periods in their lives when they partake in riskier activities." Nowhere do they consider what it is about the lives of men "in lower socio-economic groups" that causes them to do these things.

Millions of people in the UK suffer from food insecurity. Oxfam reported in 2014 that more than two million people in the UK are malnourished and three million were at risk of becoming malnourished. One in five people live below the official poverty line. Nearly 13 million people do not have enough money to live on because of unemployment or wages that are not sufficient to provide for necessities. More than a million people relied on food parcels from charities in the year to April 2015. One in six parents has gone without food in order to feed their children.

Save the Children reports that in 2012, there were 3.5 million children living in poverty in the UK, with the number expected to rise to almost four million.

These processes were accelerated by the 2008 financial crisis, as first Labour and then Conservative governments gave billion to the banks that caused the

crisis, and paid for the bailout by raiding the services and benefits of millions of the most vulnerable people. Central and local government slashed a million jobs, while private firms responded by destroying millions of fulltime, better paid jobs and replacing them with low paid temporary and zero-hour contract jobs in which workers are forced to work only when required. Private companies have also been put in charge of reducing the bill for disability and other welfare benefits. Their profits come directly from their persecution of the most vulnerable—in some cases driving them into an early grave.

A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation revealed that in 2015, 1.25 million people in the UK could be categorized as destitute, “the most extreme form of poverty in the UK,” leaving them unable to afford essentials such as food, toiletries or heating.

Another report by Glasgow University’s Institute of Cancer Sciences revealed the shocking statistic that in the most deprived parts of Scotland’s largest city, men have a life expectancy of 54 compared to richer areas just a few miles away where people live well into their 80s.

Professor Paul Shields, who authored the report, said people living in poverty have bad diets because their poverty prevents them from eating healthier foods. “It’s poverty, it’s not a personal choice,” he said. “Addressing poverty is the route to tackling this properly. You need to be able to afford to buy good-quality food.”

While Glasgow is often picked out as the worst case of the rich and poor areas being so different in their life expectancies, this is only an example of a wider trend. Most cities in the UK today have poor neighborhoods a few miles away from areas of luxury, and would – if studied – yield similar statistics.

Proving that this tendency in the UK to greater class polarisation is part of a global phenomenon, a recent report published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* states that US men in the poorest one percent have life expectancies similar to those of men in developing countries such as Sudan and Pakistan. The top one percent, men outlived those in the bottom one percent by 14.6 years, while for women it was 10.1 years. The average lifespan of both men and women in the top 5 percent went up by more than two years between 2001 and 2014, while for those in the

poorest 5 percent life expectancy hardly improved at all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact