

Almost a million excess deaths in Britain due to decades of social inequality

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Several reports published in Britain over the last few years attest to the fact that staggering levels of social inequality, fuelled by austerity policies, have claimed the lives of around a *million people*.

Earlier this month a paper led by the University of Glasgow and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH), found as a “a conservative estimate” that there were 334,327 excess deaths beyond the expected number in England, Wales and Scotland over the eight-year period from 2012 and 2019. GCPH is a partnership between NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow City Council and the University of Glasgow.

The report by authors David Walsh, Ruth Dundas, Gerry McCartney, Marcia Gibson and Rosie Seaman, published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, notes, “Mortality rates across the UK stopped improving in the early 2010s, largely attributable to the “UK Government’s austerity policies which have cut both the income of the poorest and a range of important public services.”

It states, “Such policies—introduced from 2010 onwards, and following ‘the great recession’ of 2008—have removed billions of pounds from both social security and vital services, and have thus particularly impacted on poorer, more vulnerable, populations. Similar adverse effects of austerity measures on population health have been seen in other high-income countries.”

The study presents important information but is weakened by several factors. Its identity politics slant is expressed in the title of the report, “Bearing the burden of austerity: how do changing mortality rates in the UK compare between men and women?” The word “class” is not mentioned once.

Even on this question, the report’s “overall findings and implications” state that “Compared with what previous trends predicted, an additional c.335,000 deaths were observed across Scotland, England and Wales between

2012 and 2019.” The majority of these deaths were for men and “analyses of trends showed very few differences in break points between men and women.” Only among “those living in the most deprived 20% of areas in Scotland and England” did “mortality rates between 2010 and 2019 increased to a greater degree among women compared with men.”

Summarizing their findings, the GCPH states, “Without support, people have been swept up by a rising tide of poverty and dragged under by decreased income, poor housing, poor nutrition, poor health and social isolation—ultimately leading to premature death, now quantified by this new study.”

Prof Ruth Dundas, Professor of Social Epidemiology at the University of Glasgow, said, “This study shows that in the UK a great many more deaths are likely to have been caused by UK Government economic policy than by the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to reverse the austerity policies and protect the income, and therefore the health, of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.”

There is no genuine separation between the policies enacted by the ruling class in the years preceding the pandemic, leading to such a vast loss of life, and the social murder carried out during three years of the pandemic since. In its assessment of the mass deaths inflicted globally as the result of the almost completely unhindered spread of COVID-19, the International Committee of the Fourth International explained from its outset, “The response to the pandemic would be determined by pre-existing social conditions.”

These were “decades of unending war, financial parasitism, deindustrialization, the corporatist degeneration of the unions, the evisceration of democratic rights, and the cultivation of far-right politics...”

In 2010, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron ushered in the “age of austerity.” His agenda had already been set by the Brown Labour government, which set in

place a trillion-pound bailout of the banks and corporations following the 2008 global financial crash.

This brutal policy of profits before lives was deepened during the pandemic, as the ruling elite declared that nothing could be done to stop the spread of COVID. “It’s not possible to stop everybody getting it and it’s also actually not desirable because you want some immunity in the population,” said Chief Scientific Officer Sir Patrick Valance, with then Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson declaring that everyone “could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population.”

This has resulted so far in the deaths of over 200,000 people, with hundreds of thousands more suffering from the debilitating impact of Long COVID. Those hardest hit were the working class and poorest, with the most deprived communities more than twice as likely to die as those in the wealthiest districts, and males in manual jobs four times more likely to die than those in professional occupations.

The Glasgow research builds on a body of work proving the link between entrenched social inequality and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In 2019, a study by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) revealed that the reversal of public health initiatives since 2012 led to 130,000 preventable deaths.

In 2021, the *BMJ Open* journal published findings from the largest study yet of its kind into the cost in human lives of the savage austerity spending cuts. Researchers from the Centre for Health Economics at the University of York found that a combined impact of cuts to healthcare, public health and social care in the four years between 2010 and 2014 resulted in 57,550 more deaths than would have been expected.

The most ground-breaking study, “Premature mortality attributable to socioeconomic inequality in England between 2003 and 2018: an observational study,” by the University College London, was published in 2019 in *The Lancet Public Health*. It found that between 2003 and 2018, a staggering 877,000 people died as the result of rocketing social inequality. The authors concluded that “nearly 900,000 deaths in England could have been avoided in a more equal society, according to a UCL study of 2.5 million premature deaths over the last 16 years.” Over the 16 years, the number of deaths annually averages 54,812. This is significantly higher than the 41,790 annual average of the GCPH.

The researchers utilised Office for National Statistics on all deaths between the ages of zero and 74 in England

between 2003 and 2018. Mortality rates were calculated for 33,000 neighbourhoods, graded in terms of levels of deprivation.

As a result of de-industrialisation, most of the urban areas of Britain—with many in the north of England, Scotland and Wales—are now wastelands. The report notes, “Northern towns and cities had the highest number of premature deaths associated with social inequality. In Manchester, Blackpool and Liverpool, there was more than double the number of premature deaths than in the best-off parts of the country. Cambridgeshire, Dorset and Hampshire had the lowest number of premature deaths.”

Lead author, Research Fellow Dan Lewer (UCL Epidemiology & Health Care), commented, “We have known for a long time that poverty and inequality have a major effect on people’s health and life expectancy. Our study shows how this translates into actual numbers of deaths. If everyone in England had the same mortality rate as people living in the best-off areas, there would have been 877,000 fewer premature deaths between 2003 and 2018. That’s one death every 10 minutes.”

Tens of thousands of young children were killed as a result. Lewer said, “When we look at the figures across the life-course, we show that there could have been 22,000 fewer deaths in children aged under 10 if everyone had the same life chances as the best-off.”

An important aspect of the UCL report is that *seven of the years* it covers were during the 1997-2010 Tony Blair/Brown Labour governments. Today, both main parties of the ruling elite are united in their determination to shift the entire burden of the economic crisis onto the working class, which can only result in an intensification of social inequality and its attendant deadly impact.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has committed the party to taking office in the “national interest”, “determined to reduce debt as a share of our economy. Every policy we announce will be fully costed... That’s what responsible government looks like.”



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