

# UK slips down child height ranking as a result of austerity

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A survey of average children's height across 200 countries has shown British children slipping down the global rankings. The most pronounced decline is among children born since David Cameron's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government launched its austerity programme in 2010.

The Non-Communicable Diseases Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC), a global network of health scientists, has collated national measurement data at the ages of five and 19 between 1985 and 2019.

British children's average height has risen marginally, but this has been outstripped by improvements elsewhere. Boys aged 19 fell from 28th of the 200 countries in 1985, with an average height of 176.3 cm, to 39th in 2019 (178.2 cm). Girls of that age fell from 42nd (162.7 cm) to 49th (163.9 cm).

The reasons become clearer looking at average height of five-year-olds, where the decline in ranking is more dramatic. In 1985, both boys and girls ranked 69th of the 200 countries, with boys averaging 111.4 cm, girls 111 cm. In 2019, girls now ranked 96th (111.7 cm), boys 102nd (112.5 cm).

The British data were drawn from a 2019 study at the School of Public Health, Imperial College London (ICL). When the ICL study was published in 2020, senior author Professor Majid Ezzati explained, "Children in some countries grow healthily to five years, but fall behind in school years," which "shows an imbalance between investment in improving nutrition in pre-schoolers, and in school-aged children and adolescents."

Responding to the NCD-RisC survey, Professor Tim Cole, an expert in child growth rates at the Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, University College London (UCL), called the 30-place fall down the global rankings "pretty startling," and asked, "Why?"

Cole said comparison with the data on 19-year-olds suggested austerity. These children grew up in the 2010s, he told the *Times*, "which happens to coincide with the period of austerity... [that] tells me that austerity has clobbered the

height of children in the UK."

Austerity has devastated health generally. Height reflects diet and medical care but is also a good indicator of general living conditions such as stress, poverty and sleep quality.

Many have been left without the money to meet food bills that are rising faster than wages. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation charity reported last week that 5.7 million low-income households are having to cut down or skip meals because they cannot afford them.

Figures from the Food Foundation, published in April, showed that the households at greatest risk of food insecurity were those with children under four. Their data showed that 27.3 percent of such households were food insecure in January 2023. The poorest fifth of the population would need to spend half their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the government-recommended healthy diet. For the top 20 percent of the population, it would be just 11 percent of disposable income.

The Food Foundation notes that healthier foods can be more than twice as expensive per calorie than less healthy alternatives. Children from the most deprived 20 percent of families eat around one third less fruit and vegetables, 75 percent less oily fish, and one fifth less fibre than children from the top 20 percent.

The 2020 ICL study also identified dietary inequality as key. Dr Andrea Rodriguez Martinez, its lead author, said its findings "should motivate policies that increase the availability and reduce the cost of nutritious foods, as this will help children grow taller without gaining excessive weight for their height."

Initiatives such as "food vouchers towards nutritious foods for low-income families, and free healthy school meal programmes," which she noted were particularly threatened under pandemic conditions, would provide "lifelong benefits for their health and wellbeing."

That hardly figures in the calculations of the ruling class, which has systematically defunded and axed public health provision, cutting the National Health Service (NHS) to the bone.

Hard-pressed medical staff are reporting a resurgence of diseases associated with nutritional deficiencies. Around 700 children a year are admitted to hospital in England with malnutrition, rickets or scurvy.

Cheap junk food makes people simultaneously overweight and undernourished, with direct effect on child development. Henry Dimbleby, the former government food health adviser, noted the height differential between the richest and poorest and its health corollaries: “Children in the most deprived 10 percent of the population are shorter on average than the most affluent 10 percent, and are three times more likely to have tooth decay at age five.”

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Dimbleby noted “a problem last experienced in the Victorian era.” When the poorest lived on bread and tea, he wrote, “army generals expressed concern about the stunted height and physical weaknesses of the soldiers they were sending to the Boer War.”

Dietary inequality is driving a range of medical problems, including obesity, type 2 diabetes and dental issues. According to NHS figures, children in the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than those in the least deprived areas. Hospital admissions of obese children had tripled from 3,370 in 2011-12 to 9,431 in 2021-22, according to NHS England.

A recent report from the King’s Fund thinktank confirmed that inactivity during the pandemic only increased the effects of years of cuts. Siva Anandaciva, the report’s author, said the pandemic had just “compounded the consequences of more than a decade of squeezed investment in staff, equipment and wider services.”

Anandaciva’s report looked at 19 affluent countries, including France, Germany, Sweden, Japan and the US. The UK had the second-lowest life expectancy of the studied countries, with the report saying it “underperforms significantly” on tackling cancer and heart disease. There are “below average” survival rates for the commonest cancers.

The UK “performs poorly” when judged by avoidable deaths and fatalities that could have been prevented by better or quicker treatment. These “below average” health outcomes are the result of “below average” expenditure per person on healthcare. The UK had fewer CT and MRI scanners than any of the other countries included, and the second smallest number of hospital beds. Access to NHS dental care is “worryingly threadbare in some areas,” all as a result of cuts.

“The NHS... trails behind its international cousins on some key markers of a good healthcare system,” said Anandaciva.

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, director of the Institute of Health Equity at UCL, cited a Unicef report on child poverty in 41 (mostly rich) OECD countries. Using the relative measure of children in households at less than 60 percent

median income, this placed Britain 31st. Using this measure, and excluding housing costs, child poverty in England rose from 27 percent in 2010 to 30 percent in 2019.

The government instead uses an absolute measure of poverty “because,” as Marmot writes, “that looks more favourable,” even though its baseline is the 2010-11 relative poverty level. Marmot cites another absolute measure, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s minimum income standard, according to which child poverty was 39 percent in 2008-9 and 40 percent in 2020-21.

He notes that public spending on child education and care for children up to age five is \$4,000 per child, when the OECD average is £6,000, with Norway and Sweden spending around £12,000, and France close to \$9,000.

Marmot and Clare Bambra, professor of public health at Newcastle University, told the government’s official COVID inquiry that Britain went into the pandemic with “public services depleted, health improvements stalled, health inequalities increased and health among the poorest people in a state of decline.”

The COVID inquiry has already confirmed that the British ruling class remains committed to exactly this policy. Both former Prime Minister David Cameron and his Chancellor George Osborne gave opening testimony in which they stood by their austerity programme and denied that it had caused any damage.

At the same time, one of current Chancellor Jeremy Hunt’s advisers was telling the BBC that the Bank of England would “have to create a recession” to bring inflation down. Karen Ward, from JP Morgan Asset Management, who sits on Hunt’s economic advisory council, said the Bank would “have to create uncertainty and frailty, because it’s only when companies feel nervous about the future that they will think ‘Well, maybe I won’t put through that price rise,’ or workers, when they’re a little bit less confident about their job, think ‘Oh, I won’t push my boss for that higher pay.’ It’s that weakness in activity which eventually gets rid of inflation.”



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