

Growing UK inequality in years spent living in good health between rich and poor

Margot Miller
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On many indices relating to health, education, and quality of life, the working class trails behind its better-off counterparts.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has detailed the growing disparity in the UK between the rich and poor in years spent living in good health. This correlates with the rising number of families living in poverty and the spike in those living in deep poverty.

Over the past decade, the average expected years spent in good health have fallen by three years. This social regression—recorded in the ONS report *Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE), UK: Between 2011 to 2013 and 2022 to 2024*—is shocking, but hardly surprising (published February 2026).

The data for people born between 2022 and 2024 show the steepest decline in health expectancy since the ONS began collecting such data in 2011-2013.

The report states that, on average, males in the UK can now expect to spend 60.7 years (77 percent of their life) in 'good' general health, while females can expect 60.9 years (73 percent). This represents a decrease of 1.8 years for males and 2.5 years for females compared to the previous period (2019-2021).

According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the reduction in HLE (or HALE, the acronym used by the WHO), which fell globally by around 1.5 years between 2019 and 2021.

While the ONS study does not specify which morbidities produce ill health, Long COVID has had a devastating effect on health outcomes and the decline in HLE. ONS figures reveal that about one million people reported debilitating symptoms of Long COVID lasting over two years.

When the pandemic began, Labour, then in opposition, gave its full support to the Conservatives' drive to reopen the economy precipitously, resulting in

unnecessary deaths and long-term illness. Current UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer was insistent that schools be reopened, “no ifs or buts,” and complicit in allowing the virus to take its deadly toll.

The ONS reports differences in years of good health between the nations and regions. Scotland fared worst for males (59.1 years) and Wales for females (58.5 years) for 2022-2024. England had the highest HLE statistics for both males (60.9 years) and females (61.3 years).

Most significant was the gap between those with the highest HLE in the 97.5th percentile of the population and those with the lowest in the 2.5th percentile—14.7 years for males and 15.8 years for females.

Comparing HLE by region, it was highest in the richer areas in the south and lowest in the north for both sexes. London, the South East, and South West had the highest HLE, while the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the North West scored the lowest.

A boy born between 2022-2024 in a leafy suburb of Richmond upon Thames can look forward to living in good health until he reaches 69.3 years, and a girl, 70.3 years, the highest HLE scores. Within the Greater London area, home to Kew Gardens, the borough has 100 parks and open spaces, far from the carcinogenic traffic fumes choking the inner city. Poverty levels at 14-15 percent are much lower than London's 26 percent and England's average of 22 percent.

Blackpool, a seaside resort on the north-west coast of England, scored the lowest HLE, 50.9 and 51.8 years for males and females respectively. Of the 296 local authorities in England, Blackpool is the most deprived, scoring high on the indices of child poverty (19.8 percent), unemployment, low income, food insecurity and fuel poverty, bad housing, and poorly paid seasonal employment, in tourism.

In the town of Rochdale in Greater Manchester, with high deprivation and a large immigrant population, the average HLE projected for men and women born in 2022-2024 is 54.2, a decline since the previous period (2019-2021), when it was 58.

The general trajectory since 2011 has been an overall decrease in HLE and a widening gap between those anticipating the most years in good health and those less fortunate. The gap narrowed slightly in the period just before the beginning of the pandemic and then continued to accelerate.

Addressing the statistics in the ONS report in a letter to *The Guardian*, Alan Walker, University of Sheffield Emeritus Professor of Social Policy and Social Gerontology, noted: “A girl born in Barnsley can expect an average of 53 years of good health, whereas one born in Wokingham can look forward to 71 healthy years—an extra 18 years.” The “determinants of ill health,” he attributes to “poverty, poor diets, lack of exercise, and air pollution.”

Sarah Wilkinson, Evidence Manager at the Centre for Aging Better, said: “Where you live, how much money you earn—these are significant factors in shaping our health in later life... Statistics tell a story.”

Research by academics at King’s College London and the University of Nottingham found that people living in deprived areas of the UK were more prone to ill health due to less gut diversity. A range of bacteria in the gut is essential for gut health, and while it is not completely understood why, it is essential for physical and mental well-being.

In the UK in 1939, life expectancy was 54-57 years in working-class males and 58-61 in females; on average, it was 60-64 years. After the war, there was a steady improvement bound up with improved nutrition, strides in medicine such as vaccination and antibiotics, and the universal provision of healthcare by the National Health Service (NHS), funded by general taxation and free at the point of use.

Average life expectancy rose, though the better-off benefited more than the working class, another indicator that poverty leads to inequality in health outcomes, as is the case with educational achievements.

Life expectancy is no longer improving, after decades of sustained increases. According to the ONS figures, the projected average life expectancy for the cohort born between 2022-2024 is 83 years for females and

79.1 years for males. For those living in deprivation, figures for 2020-2022 showed a drop to 72.6 years for males and 77.7 years for females.

The poorer you are, the shorter your lifespan will be, and the fewer years you can expect to live in good health. Reliance on the NHS, hit by a further decade of cuts after the banking crisis of 2008/9, is no longer a given. Medical attention is not provided in good order due to staff shortages as waiting lists grow. Reports list crises in maternity care, leading to avoidable maternal and neonatal deaths. Lack of aftercare for elderly patients means beds cannot be freed up.

The priority of governments across the globe today is to massively increase military budgets at the expense of essential spending on health and welfare. Health Secretary in Starmer’s Labour government, Wes Streeting, declared “The answer to the NHS isn’t just more money... I don’t want to just pour money into a black hole... The NHS is going to have to get used to the fact that money is tight.”

The wealth of the rich is ringfenced. In every country, inequality has deepened dramatically, with the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich being compared to the days of the Gilded Age (1870s-1900) and the 1920s, which preceded the great crash of 1929 and depression. The richest 50 families in the UK possess total wealth of £468 billion, equivalent to what is owned by the poorest half of the population, or 34 million people.



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