120,000 additional premature deaths in the UK 2010-2017

Text as sent:

Danny Dorling

On Thursday 16th November 2017 the Journal BMJ Open published an article which concluded that severe public spending cuts in the UK had contributed to causing 120,000 additional premature deaths between 2010 and 2017. The article was put together by ten researchers who worked at Kings College, UCL and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; at the Medical sciences division in Oxford, at the University of Cambridge and in the Philippines.

Figure 1: Life Expectancy in England and Wales, 1840-2016


We had known for some time that austerity was bringing deaths forward, but not that the rate of death associated with the cuts was rising so rapidly. The large majority of deaths associated with austerity had taken place in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Only third occurred between 2012 and 2014 and almost none in 2010 or
2011 when austerity was just beginning. There was a dose response relationship. The greater the austerity and cuts to services the more people died earlier than they otherwise would have. Most of these additional premature were of elderly people, but far from all of them.

Inset of Figure 1

Life expectancy flat-lined after 2010. It had be rising at a remarkably steady before then. After 2010 it barely rose by a month a year for men and just two weeks for women when Cameron was in power, possibly less around when May took over. The latest figures, published in September 2017 were for the period 2014-2016. Women can now expect to live 83.06 years and men 79.40 years. For the first time in over a century the health of people in England and Wales as measured by the most important consideration has stopped improving.

As early as 2014 it was realized that the most plausible culprit for the small initial increases in mortality in certain groups was a combination of the particular kind of austerity for the poor and elderly that the 2010 Conservative government so quickly enacted; it was the loss of care support to half a million elderly people by 2013; the effect of a million fewer social care visits a year; the cuts to NHS budgets and its disorganisation by the 2012 Health and Social Care Act; the increased bankruptcy and running down of old age care homes; the rise in fuel-poverty among the old; sanctions and the cuts to disability benefits.
By 2016 cuts in welfare spending, especially to older pensioners had been linked to a rise in deaths among poorer pensioners.\(^6\) Public health experts writing in the British Medical Journal called for an inquiry.\(^7\) But the government’s public health officials continued to claim that: ‘Recent high death rates in older people are not exceptional’.\(^8\) The situation in Scotland was worse.\(^9\) By summer 2017 Michael Marmot’s Institute of Health Equity was linking health services cuts to the rise in dementia deaths and the faltering national life expectancy.\(^10\) Working with researchers at the Universities of Liverpool, Glasgow and York we connected a small part of the stalling in health improvements to delays in discharging patients from hospital due to insufficient older adult social care.\(^11\) The Financial Times reported that the deceleration of previous rises in life expectancy was so rapid that it had cut £310 billion from future British pension fund liabilities. And this was just for a few pension schemes generally used by more affluent pensioners.\(^12\)

Life expectancy for women in the UK is now lower than in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Often it is much lower.\(^13\) Men in Britain do little better. Then, on October 26\(^{th}\) 2017, in the seventh note of an official publication, that the Office for National Statistics announced that they now project that people will, on average, live shorter lives in the UK for many decades to come.\(^14\) As of that date the national statisticians estimated that by 2041 life expectancy for women would be 86.2 years and for men it would be 83.4. In both cases almost a whole year less than had been projected just two years earlier in 2014. There is no need for this projection to become reality. Austerity is a choice. People in most other countries near to the UK make very difference choices and life longer, healthier lives.

For the long history of the choices that politicians make resulting in different political outcomes a colleague and I have written a book called “Why Demography Matters?” Hopefully in the UK at least we are now beginning to realize that it does and behind it is politics.

\[http://www.dannydorling.org/books/demography/\]
Danny Dorling is a British social geographer and is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography of the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. Here he discusses the link between austerity and premature deaths.

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Sources of data and information – all accessible as of December 19th 2017:

1. http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/11/e017722


5 https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/02/why-are-old-people-britain-dying-their-time


