

Life expectancy of men in lowest and highest socio-economic groups diverging for the first time since the 1870s

May 2 2016, by Sophie Cubbin



Research from Cass Business School and the International Longevity Centre-UK (ILC-UK) has found growing inequalities in adult life expectancy.

Based on data from the Human Mortality Database, Professor of Statistics Les Mayhew and Dr David Smith measured the differences in age between the earliest 10% of adult deaths and the top 5% of survivors.

They found that while people in the UK are living longer than ever, the [gap](#) between the longest and shortest lifespans appears to be increasing.

In particular, the life expectancy of those in the lowest and the highest socio-economic groups is diverging for the first time since the 1870s.

The full report, "An investigation into inequalities in adult lifespan," is published today. It finds:

- In England and Wales, 5% of men that have attained the age of 30 are living on average to 96.0 years, 33.3 years longer than the lowest 10%.
- This gap grew by 1.7 years between 1993, when it was at its narrowest, and 2009.
- It is the first time since the 1870s that the gap in life expectancy is widening
- Unhealthy lifestyles are the main causes of this widening gap.
- For women, the longest surviving are reaching 98.2 years-old, 31 years longer than the lowest. The female gap reached its narrowest in 2005, but has since levelled out
- Men in lower socio-economic groups are most likely to make damaging lifestyle choices.

Report author Professor Mayhew said:

"We looked at data from the 1870s onwards comparing England and Wales with France and Italy. It was clear that the first half of the 20th Century was characterised by a narrowing of the gap in lifespan as everyone benefited from improvements in clean drinking water, better housing, higher incomes and better health. Despite general rises in life expectancy after 1950, the life expectancy gap between men and women widened whilst inequalities in lifespan persisted rather than narrowing further.

"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. The research blames the widening disparity on poor life style choices rather than ambient risks which were prevalent in the first half of the 20th Century. Key amongst these life style choices are smoking, drinking and poor diet – choices that are more likely to be made by the poorest in society".

A previous UK Government set a target in 2003 that by 2010 life expectancies in the best and worst areas of the country would not differ by more than 10 per cent. Not only was the target missed but in fact the opposite has happened. The research concludes the answer is not so much about redistributing healthcare expenditure but more about changing lifestyle habits. The research argues that more powerful policy tools aimed at behavioural change are needed to steer people towards healthier lifestyles.

Baroness Sally Greengross, ILC-UK Chief Executive added:

"This very timely report highlights how, despite huge increases in life expectancy, the gap between rich and poor is increasing for the first time since the 1870s. This trend is particularly worrying for society and policymakers must do more to begin to narrow this gap again. Preventing inequalities in ill health and disability must be a priority for policy action".

A previous study by Professor Mayhew and Dr Smith, published in March 2015, found that age at death will increasingly cluster in the 90s and the life expectancy of men and women will converge. Based on historical mortality data from England and Wales, the researchers developed a new method for forecasting [life expectancy](#).

They found that over the coming decades, men in particular will live

longer, increasing the need for the country to face the challenges of an ageing society. This new method is beneficial to individuals, government policy makers, pension providers and insurers as the new forecasts provide more certainty with which to plan.

Provided by City University London

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