

# UK life expectancy declining after financial crisis

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Increases in life expectancy in the UK and elsewhere had slowed even before 2016—and COVID-19 is expected to further eliminate any gains, Newcastle University studies show.

After 2011, over the post-financial crisis period the authors find that the UK performed poorly, in almost all measures, compared to the 28 countries of the European Union (EU28).

Life expectancy at birth, and age 65, in the UK were increasing rapidly in 2008 but slowed around 2011 and Germany, Portugal and France showed evidence of a similar slowing.

Furthermore, years of good health, called Healthy Life Years, at birth in the UK decreased, whereas it increased in most EU28 countries. The UK experienced a period of absolute expansion of unhealthy life in both [older men](#) and [women](#).

The authors, led by Dr. Claire Welsh at Newcastle University, suggest the reasons for the decline may include cuts to public spending on health and [social care](#) under austerity, increasing [mortality rates](#) from seasonal influenza combined with more frequent extremes of temperature, a larger proportion of the population in the 'susceptible' group of older, frail people, and a higher mortality rate amongst the working age population.

Dr. Welsh explains: "Given that other countries in the EU have already achieved higher life expectancy than the UK, it seems unlikely that the deceleration in the UK is due to being close to any natural maximum lifespan of human beings. This suggests that our health and social care

system was under strain even before the effects of COVID-19."

## **Slowing life expectancy in UK**

In 2008, life expectancy at birth was highest for French women (84.8 years) and Swedish men (79.2 years). The countries with the lowest life expectancy at birth were Lithuania and Bulgaria (for men, 65.9 years and women, 77.0 years, respectively).

By 2016, the highest life expectancy for men was recorded in Italy (81.0 years) and for women, in Spain (86.3 years) and the lowest in Lithuania and Bulgaria (for men 69.1 years, and women 78.5 years, respectively).

Life expectancy at birth in the UK in 2008 was the seventeenth highest in women (81.8 years) and tenth highest in men (77.7 years) and the UK remained tenth and seventeenth highest for life expectancy at birth in 2016 in men (79.4 years) and women (83.0 years), respectively.

However, modeling suggested that life expectancy growth slowed significantly around 2011 for both UK men and women.

Modeling also suggested that the increase in UK men's life expectancy at age 65 slowed significantly around 2011. In 2008 the UK had the eighth highest life expectancy at age 65 for men (17.6 years), and the sixteenth highest for women (20.2 years), but by 2016 both had dropped down one place (women, seventeenth with 21.1 years, men to ninth with 18.8 years).

Another recently published study from Newcastle University using the Cognitive Function and Ageing Studies I and II found that inequalities in disability-free life expectancy between the most and least advantaged older people increased between 1991 and 2011. For the most advantaged men and women all the gains in life expectancy at age 65 between 1991 and 2011 were years free of disability. In contrast, the least advantaged

women experienced little increase in life expectancy or disability-free [life expectancy](#). COVID-19 is only expected to increase these gaps.

**More information:** Claire E. Welsh et al, Trends in life expectancy and healthy life years at birth and age 65 in the UK, 2008–2016, and other countries of the EU28: An observational cross-sectional study, *The Lancet Regional Health - Europe* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.lanepe.2020.100023](#)

Provided by Newcastle University

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