

The devastating cost of austerity on health across the UK

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People across the U.K. are dying younger as a result of austerity, with people living in the poorest areas hardest hit. A new report out today calls for urgent action and presents 40 recommendations to turn the

situation around.

Mortality rates, and related indicators such as [life expectancy](#), are important markers of the health of a population. Over the past two centuries, there has been a consistent improvement in [mortality rates](#) across the U.K. However, after 2012 life expectancy stopped improving and death rates among people living in the poorest areas have increased.

These profound changes are deeply concerning and a sign that something fundamentally wrong is happening in society. A vast array of Scottish, U.K. and international analysis has been conducted to analyze what has been happening. There is an urgent need to increase understanding of why these changes have occurred, and consequently what we need to do to address them. A new report and animation, published today, do just that.

The report, "Resetting the course for population health," published jointly by the University of Glasgow and the Glasgow Center for Population Health, provides detailed analysis and evidence of the mortality changes that have occurred across the UK. It critically appraises the evidence for a range of hypotheses that have been suggested as possible contributory factors. From this assessment, it reports UK Government economic 'austerity' policies as the most likely contributory cause and presents a range of actions to address the crisis.

The evidence makes clear that such trends are not inevitable, and that action at different levels can improve life expectancy once again. The report makes a total of 40 recommendations spanning macroeconomic policy, social security, work, taxation, public services, material needs, obesity, and COVID-19 recovery. The need to avoid a further period of austerity as we emerge from the pandemic is highlighted, in particular by increasing the value of social security benefits and local authority funding. Protecting the real incomes of the poorest groups, especially

with escalating inflation rates, is vital. The evidence strongly suggests that implementing these measures would reverse the death rates and reduce the widening inequalities we are seeing.

The animation is designed to be an accessible summary of the evidence. It starkly highlights why the changes are of so much concern and how austerity has impacted on people. It highlights the effect of poverty and the loss of vital services on people's lives, resulting in decreased income, poor housing, poor nutrition, poor health, social isolation and, ultimately, poor health and premature death.

Dr. Gerry McCartney, Professor of Well-being Economy, at the University of Glasgow and lead author of the report added, "At a time when we are witnessing an escalating cost of living crisis and when decisions and policy choices are being made about pandemic recovery and rebuilding the economy, now is the time to listen to the evidence and implement these solutions that will support rather than damage population health. Any further austerity policies that squeeze public spending will have disastrous long-term impacts on population health and result in more and more lives cut short. We cannot allow that. The report's recommendations and policy responses would put us back on a trajectory of improving mortality trends that we were on pre-austerity and support the population and economy to recover and flourish equitably."

Dr. David Walsh, co-author of the report and Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Glasgow, stated, "These changes are almost unprecedented. They should simply not be happening in a wealthy society such as the U.K. The evidence shows they are principally the result of U.K. government austerity policies that have squeezed billions of pounds from public services and social security and have had a devastating impact on the lives of so many in our communities.

"We have created this animation to highlight the tragic consequences of these policy choices. This is a matter that affects us all and we want to ensure that as broad a range of people as possible are aware of what has been happening and add their voices to those calling for [urgent action](#)."

Reflecting on the findings in relation to her work as a Deep End GP working across Glasgow, Dr. Andrea Williamson commented "The findings of this report are shameful but sadly not surprising. As Deep End GPs working in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Glasgow, we see first-hand the damaging effects of austerity on health. On a daily basis, we see patients who simply don't have enough money to live on—money to heat their home, feed themselves once their kids are fed or pay the bus fare to visit their family.

"And despite careful budgeting, there is never anything left for the occasional treat or holiday that keeps the better off like me enjoying life. The pervasive stress of worrying whether the next pay cheque will cover the cost of the shoes their child really needs, the fear of benefits being sanctioned again, or heating bills vastly outstripping any chance of payment is crippling. It stops people, families and communities living the lives we all have a right to live. Every time I speak to a patient experiencing the sharp end of austerity, I feel angry. It is time for change."

Chris Birt, Associate Director for Scotland at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation added: "This report highlights a crucial truth in the fight to solve poverty, government choices matter. In imposing austerity, the U.K. Government has managed to stall improvements in life expectancy in one of the wealthiest countries in the world and, worse still, have reduced life expectancy in our least well-off communities.

"And these mistakes of the recent past are coming home to roost in the present, the austerity driven attack on the adequacy of social security has

left low-income households unable to cope with the current dramatic spike in the cost of living. It is a crisis of the U.K. Government's making. It is, therefore, vital that the recommendations of this report are taken seriously. The fundamental inadequacy of our [social security](#) system must be reversed, crucial public services must be rebuilt and the distribution of income, wealth and power within our economy and society must be fairer. Future crises are inevitable but the devastating impacts on low-income households are not, governments can, and must, make different choices and do better."

More information: Resetting the course for population health report: www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_852696_smxx.pdf

Provided by University of Glasgow

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