

Austerity led to twice as many excess UK deaths as previously thought. Here's what that means for future cuts

October 7 2022, by Danny Dorling



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Cuts to public services and living standards across Britain from 2010 contributed to 335,000 excess deaths—twice as many as previously

thought, according to new research. These austerity measures were introduced by the coalition government elected into office that year, partly in response to the banking crash of 2008.

Previous estimates had suggested that [152,000](#) people died prematurely between 2015 and 2019 due to austerity. The [new study](#), conducted by researchers at the University of Glasgow and the Glasgow Center for Population Health and published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, suggests this was an underestimate and also suggests that austerity had a growing effect over time.

These findings are troubling for several reasons. They suggest that men were much more affected than [we first thought](#). Furthermore, the U.K. government now plans to embark on a [new round](#) of very large public spending cuts. Against this backdrop, these new numbers of excess deaths linked to a previous period of stringent public spending cuts [can give us an idea](#) of what might lie ahead this time round too.

There were actual [overall falls](#) in U.K. [life expectancy](#) between 2014 and 2018, with large falls for particular groups such as the poorest tenth of the population, although the health of people living in the best-off areas continued to improve. Previous [suggestions](#) that flu or particularly cold winters might have been key reasons don't stand up to scrutiny, given that, during this period, there was neither an unusual flu outbreak nor any notably cold winter.

Before this new study, some disputed the idea that austerity could be blamed for the increase in deaths by pointing out that most of those who had died prematurely were old and so had benefited from the ["triple lock"](#) of the U.K. state pension.

This safeguarding mechanism was introduced in 2010 to ensure that pensions would rise by the highest of inflation, earnings growth, or 2.5%

a year. In theory this meant that pensioners—the over-66s—were sheltered from the effects of austerity. Sadly, that was not true.

Over 330,000 excess deaths in Great Britain linked to austerity, finds study <https://t.co/FpAclB2mZU>
<pic.twitter.com/e8rHIZ4ENU>

— Randeep Ramesh (@tianran) [October 4, 2022](#)

Between 2010 and 2020 the average U.K. pensioner saw their real-terms weekly income (after housing costs) rise by only £12, to £331 a week. That represents a meager 3.8% rise [over the whole decade](#), which works out to £1.71 extra per day. This in no way compensates for rising fuel and other costs that [especially hurt](#) poorer pensioners.

The Financial Times published last week analysis on excess deaths in England. The increase in excess deaths is correlated to the surge in A&E waiting times seen over the last year.
<pic.twitter.com/3xIOpP8NTh>

— Peter Donaghy (@peterdonaghy) [August 16, 2022](#)

The overall rise in weekly income was this small because other state benefits that pensioners received, and relied upon to ensure they could cope, were reduced in real terms. For example the proportion of pensioners receiving disability payments [fell from 23% to 19%](#) between 2010 and 2020.

Poorer pensioners and those in most need were also most harmed by cuts to state services. They lost their adult social worker and caregiver visits, local government help, and so much else that existed in 2010—but was largely gone by 2019.

It is now becoming clear that far more people died prematurely due to the direct and indirect effects of austerity and [government policy](#) than we had at first believed to be the case. In international comparisons, only in the U.K. and U.S. were the cuts as bad and [their impacts on health and well-being](#) so sustained.

Government policy in the U.S. [has changed](#) since the election of Joe Biden and his taking office in January 2021. The U.K., by contrast, has moved in the opposite direction.

Data reporter John Burn-Murdoch [recently argued](#) that, in adopting what might well be "the most extreme economic position of any major party in the developed world," Liz Truss's Conservative government has "become unmoored from the British people."

More people in Britain died due to austerity in the five years before the pandemic, than died from COVID-19 in the first three years of the pandemic. The effects of austerity continued after the pandemic hit, but initially became harder to discern.

However, in August 2022 the Financial Times [published](#) estimates suggesting a large proportion of recent non-COVID-related deaths could be ascribed to just one aspect of austerity: waiting over 12 hours to be seen in accident and emergency departments.

The pandemic has not gone away. Cases are [rising again](#). So too are austerity-related deaths.

Most worrying is the coming winter. The last time the U.K. suffered a [similar energy crisis](#) was during Edward Heath's term of office (1970–1974). That was also the last time a prime minister in Britain came into office upon winning a general election and left it on losing one.

Today, despite all the deaths from [austerity](#) and the pandemic, the U.K. has a far [larger elderly and frail population](#) than it did in the early 1970s. That decade was characterized by much greater social solidarity and income and wealth inequalities were at an [all-time low](#). Life expectancy never fell or even slowed in its rise, [despite rising heating costs and power cuts](#).

The situation we face now is more akin the 1930s. Then, we were [as unequal as today](#). Mortality rates were very high in poorer areas. Most people were poor. There were few average areas. And the very wealthy were protected by their wealth.

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