

# New global ranking for life expectancy shows decades-long UK decline

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A new analysis of global rankings of life expectancy over seven decades shows the UK has done worse than all G7 countries except the U.S.. Researchers writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* say that while UK life expectancy has increased in absolute terms over recent decades, other, similar countries are experiencing larger increases.

In 1952, when Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne, the UK had one of the longest life expectancies in the world, ranking seventh globally behind countries such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark. In 2021 the UK was ranked 29th.

The researchers show the rankings of the G7 countries at each decade from 1950 to 2020. The G7 is a collection of [countries](#) with [advanced economies](#) (UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the U.S.) that represent about half of global economic output.

One of the researchers, Dr. Lucinda Hiam, of the University of Oxford, said, "The rankings show that the only G7 country to do worse than the UK is the U.S."

The relative decline of the UK portrayed in the figures is stark, say the researchers, adding that the causes of the UK falling down the [life expectancy](#) ranks appear to have been decades in the making. "While politicians invoke global factors, especially the effects of the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, the reality is that, as in the 1950s, the country suffers from major structural and institutional weaknesses," said another researcher, Professor Martin McKee, of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

The researchers point to income inequalities which rose greatly in the UK during and after the 1980s. "That rise also saw an increase in the variation in life expectancy between different social groups," said Professor McKee. "One reason why the overall increase in life expectancy has been so sluggish in the UK is that in recent years it has fallen for poorer groups."

According to the OECD, state the researchers, the UK recently became the second most economically unequal country in Europe after Bulgaria. "Perhaps we should not be surprised to see that inequality reflected in

such wide health inequalities and a declining overall position," said Dr. Hiam.

Dr. Hiam and her co-authors describe the UK at a crossroads, with the cost-of-living crisis meaning that 'business as usual' is no longer an option. "In the short term, the government has an acute crisis to address. However, a relative worsening of population health is evidence that all is not well. It has historically been an early sign of severe political and [economic problems](#)," said Dr. Hiam. "This new analysis suggests that the problems the UK faces are deep seated and raises serious questions about the path that this country is following."

**More information:** Lucinda Hiam et al, Falling down the global ranks: life expectancy in the UK 1952–2021, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01410768231155637](https://doi.org/10.1177/01410768231155637)

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