Life expectancy in England

A north–south journey

What is the north–south health divide and how does it relate to aspects of place?

The north–south health divide

A baby boy born today in the northeast of England will live on average 6 years less in good health than one born in the southeast. The life-expectancy gap between the two regions is over 2 years for both men and women: life expectancy for men is 80.4 years in the south and 78 years in the northeast, for women 83.9 years in the southeast and 81.7 years in the northeast. The same pattern occurs both men and women: life expectancy for men is 80.4 years in the southeast and 78 years in the northeast, for women 83.9 years in the southeast and 81.7 years in the northeast. The same pattern occurs

Historical trends

These differences have been documented since the mid-eighteenth century and have fluctuated over time. In the 1840s Edwin Chadwick found that life expectancy for all social classes was higher in Bath than in Liverpool. From the 1950s to the 1970s the health gap between areas of England was smaller, but it rose again from the 1980s onwards. Health inequalities between the north and the south, and between affluent and deprived areas more generally, are now at levels not seen since Victorian times. Since 1965, the ‘health penalty’ paid by the north has amounted to 1.5 million excess early deaths.

Further reading


Life expectancy by region, England

Source: Bambra 2016

Figure 1 Life expectancy by region, England

Life lines

Figures 2 and 3 present average life expectancy at birth for both men and women for the stops along some of the major train lines in England. The data are geo-referenced to each of the main stations along the routes using the relevant Local Authority (e.g. the data for Newark are for Nottinghamshire). They show life expectancy compared to the English average of 79.4 years for men and 83.1 years for women.

Source: Bambra and Orton (2016)

Figure 2 Life expectancy for men along the East Coast, Great Western and West Coast mainlines, 2011

Life expectancy

Below average

Around average

Above average

Place matters

Conventional explanations of geographical inequalities in health include:

+ the compositional approach: the health of an area is the result of the individual characteristics of the people who live there

+ the contextual approach: the economic, social, and physical environments of a place shape the health of the people who live there

More contemporary explanations include:

+ the relational approach: compositional and contextual factors interact

+ the political economy approach: the economy of a region depends on national and global influences

See page 26 for some ideas of NEA techniques based on this study.

Source: Bambra and Orton (2016)

Figure 3 Life expectancy for women along the East Coast, Great Western and West Coast mainlines, 2011

Life expectancy

Below average

Around average

Above average

Clare Bambra is at the Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University and Chris Orton in the Cartography Unit, Department of Geography, Durham University.

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