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Inequality kills in Britain

Anarcho

May 12, 2005

Welcome to modern Britain, where the difference in life expectancy between the poorest and most affluent parts of the country is now wider than in Victorian times. Where thousands of people are dying prematurely in poor inner city areas as the gap between rich and poor in Britain widens for the past 11 years.

Blair's government has failed to stem the tide. In February 2001, it announced national targets to raise life expectancy in the most disadvantaged areas faster than elsewhere by 2010. Taking 2001 as its baseline, the government aimed to reduce "by at least 10 per cent the gap between the fifth of areas with the lowest life expectancy at birth and the population as a whole." After four years, the figures are moving in the wrong direction. The increase in life expectancy in the richer areas is outrunning that in the poorest.

For men, the gap between those who lived in Glasgow (the local authority with the lowest life expectancy) and East Dorset (the one with the highest) rose from 10 to 11 years between 1995-97 and 2001-03. For women, it increased from 7.8 to 8.4 years. The head of the researchers who produced the study, George Davey Smith (professor of clinical epidemiology at the University of Bris-

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tol) wrote in the **British Medical Journal**: “*In a relatively short period, that is a substantial increase.*”

The health gap remained stable between 1992–94 and 1995–97 but has been widening since. The researchers are clear, this gap reflects increases in the gap between rich and poor. Income and wealth inequalities rose markedly in the 1980s and have been sustained throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Wealth inequality has increased, with the percentage of wealth held by the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population increasing from 47 per cent to 54 per cent and the share of the top 1 per cent rising from 18 per cent to 23 per cent between 1990 and 2000. The poorest 10 per cent in society now receive 3 per cent of the nation’s total income whereas the richest 10 per cent receive more than a quarter.

In their 1999 study, **The Widening Gap**, the same authors found the death rate among people under 65 was two and a half times higher in Glasgow than in more prosperous areas in southern Britain. If they had the same health then 71 per cent of the deaths under 65 would have been avoided. This would have saved more than 10,000 lives. In the words of Professor Davey Smith: “*As health inequalities have worsened since, we can say that if anything the proportion of premature deaths that might have been avoided in the worst areas has increased.*”