Visit Britain: Differences in Life Expectancy by Famous Places and Landmarks

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Life expectancy in the UK is lower than in many other countries with comparable levels of economic development (Ho and Hendi 2018; ONS 2018a). In the UK men are expected to live for 79 years and women 83 years. This compares to Japan where men are expected to live for 81 years and women are expected to live 87 years (ONS 2018a).

In the UK there are also striking differences in life expectancy between areas (Buchan et al. 2017; ONS 2018a; ONS 2019). Despite the long term increases in life expectancy - in 1851 life expectancy in England and Wales was estimated to be only 41 years (Szreter and Mooney 1998) - evidence suggests that life expectancy in the UK has started to decline in a number of areas including, for example, in Devon, Hartlepool and Derbyshire. Life expectancy has also stalled for older people aged 65 years and older in England, Wales and Scotland and has declined for men aged 65 years and older in Northern Ireland.

In order to help raise public and policy maker awareness of the stark inequalities in life expectancies a map was created which links life expectancy estimates with a selection of some of the most famous places and landmarks in the UK.
Figure 1. Visit Britain: Differences in Life Expectancy by Famous Places and Landmarks

Whilst life expectancy has increased in the last century there are still substantial differences between areas. Life expectancy is no longer increasing in some areas. A number of interrelated factors are associated with lower life expectancy including: low income, employment status, the local environment, housing, access to health care, smoking and alcohol consumption, diet, exercise, social status and social isolation. The lost years of life have an impact on the families and friends left behind.

Sources: The data is from the Office for National Statistics. The National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Department of Health. The area-level estimates are calculated from multiple years of mortality data and linked to postcode-level addresses using the ONS Address Mapping Service. The estimates are based on the key for calculating deprivation, which links to the level of death rates and health care provision in an area are likely to change and many people will see decreases for some part of their lives.

What makes your area different to other areas? Let us know. Email: life.expectancy@manchester.ac.uk
As the map highlights, life expectancy across the UK can vary by more than twenty-five years between areas. For example, life expectancy is 63 years for men and 70 years for women around Celtic Park (Glasgow); around Blackpool Tower it is 70 years for men and 79 years for women; and in Knightsbridge it is 89 years for men and 92 years for women. The differences in life expectancy are not only an issue for those people who die, but also for those people they leave behind.

The Data

Life expectancy data was obtained by mapping the postcode of the famous place or landmark to the ward or local area it is in and the data available. The estimates of life expectancy were taken from the different national statistics agencies and health departments across the UK - the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the National Records of Scotland (NRS) and the Northern Ireland Department of Health (NIDH).

For England, Wales and Scotland the life expectancy estimates were calculated from five years of mortality data (NRS 2010; ONS 2018b). For Northern Ireland the estimates were based on three years of mortality data for local government district areas (NIDH 2018). The famous places and landmarks were selected based on some of the most well-known and suggested places to visit in Britain in tourist guides and also to highlight some of the striking differences in life expectancy at the local area level.

The area level life expectancy estimates are subject to some margin of error. In addition, period life expectancy is the average number of additional years a person would live if they experienced the age-specific mortality rates of the given area and time period for the remainder of their life. Life expectancy estimates are not the years a baby could expect to live, because the death rates and health care provision in an area are likely to change and many people will live elsewhere for some of their lives.

Addressing the Inequalities in Life Expectancy

Dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, circulatory diseases (including heart disease and strokes), respiratory diseases and lung cancer are the most common causes of death in the UK (ONS 2018c). A number of interrelated factors are associated with lower life expectancy in the UK. These include: access to health care, income, employment, smoking and alcohol consumption levels, diet, exercise, the local environment, social status and social isolation. The deprivation levels of an area and premature mortality have been shown to be strongly associated (Marmot 2010). The gap in life expectancy between economically deprived and economically prosperous areas is increasing (Barr et al. 2017; Bennett et al 2018; Hacking et al. 2011; ONS 2019).

Austerity and cuts to public services including to the National Health Service have been claimed to be impacting on health outcomes in the UK (Hiam et al. 2017; Humphries et al. 2016; Loopstra et al. 2016). Research by Age UK (2018) has highlighted how an estimated 1.4 million older people aged 65
years and older have unmet social care needs. Different ethnic populations can have different health profiles and can face additional barriers to accessing health services (Becares 2013).

A range of new initiatives are underway in the UK to try to tackle the inequalities in health. For example, the government is experimenting with devolving health spending to the local level and integrating health and social care. See the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership (http://www.gmhsc.org.uk).

Map Design and Use – The Public and Policy Makers

The map was designed to raise public and policy maker awareness of the inequalities in life expectancy in the UK. A key design consideration was that map needed to be instantly recognisable and resonate with the cartoon style of many tourist information maps. Using the famous places and landmarks provides a visual reference for people to engage with compared to simply presenting the data in a table.

The map uses the title ‘Visit Britain’ even though it includes places in Northern Ireland. This is similar to the way in which the UK is promoted as a tourist destination. The design did involve some compromises. Additional information on the map such as area boundaries, socio-economic data, healthy life expectancy estimates and the ethnic diversity of the different areas could have been included, but the preference was for a map that was in the style of a tourist information map with a clear message.

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Age UK (2018) New analysis shows number of older people with unmet care needs soars to record high. London: Age UK.


