



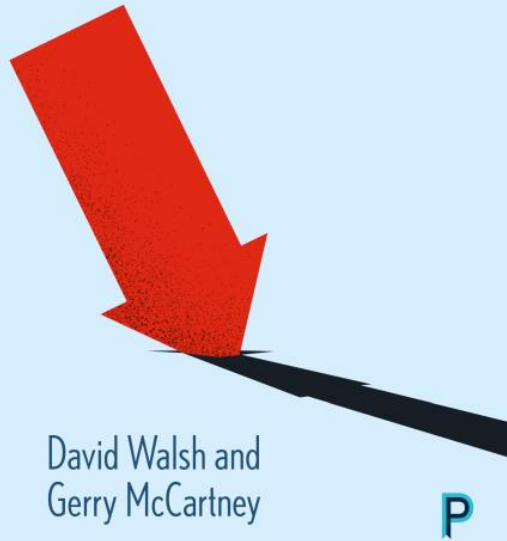
University
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SOCIAL MURDER?

Austerity and Life Expectancy in the UK



David Walsh and
Gerry McCartney

P

David Walsh
University of Glasgow

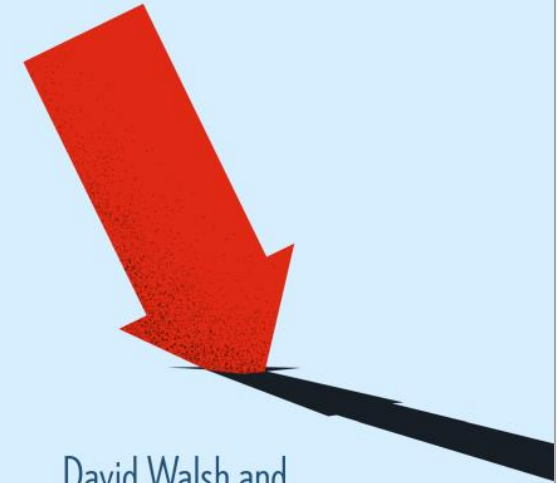
June 2025

Today

- **Very brief** (!) overview of the book
 - What's happened in the UK?
 - Why?
 - What's happened elsewhere?
 - Other factors to consider
 - Responses to the evidence...
 - ...and how we need to respond
- Where you can buy the book to get more details..
- Q&A

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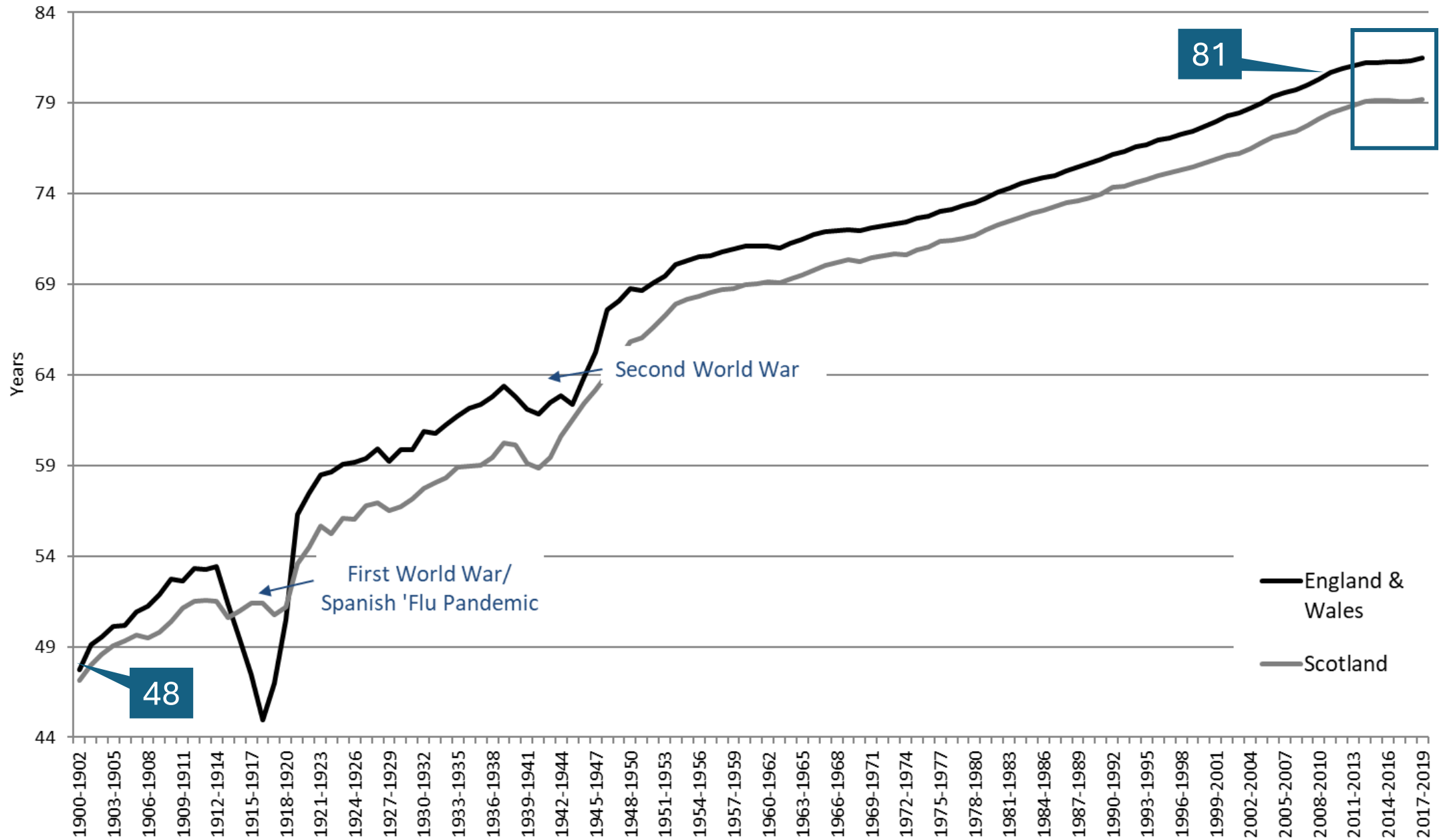
What is life expectancy?

- Just a measure of the health of the population?
- Or much more than that?
- It's marker of societal progress



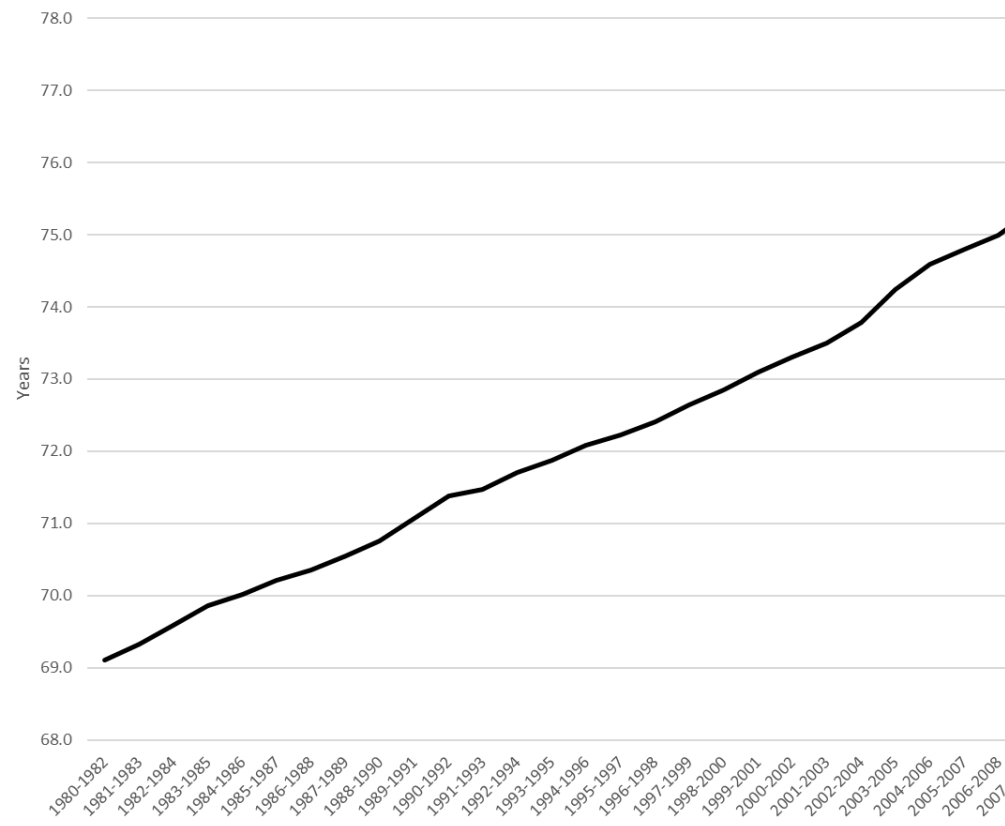
Male & female life expectancy, Scotland and England & Wales, 1900-2019

Source: Human Mortality Database



Male life expectancy, Scotland 1980-2019

Source: Human Mortality Database

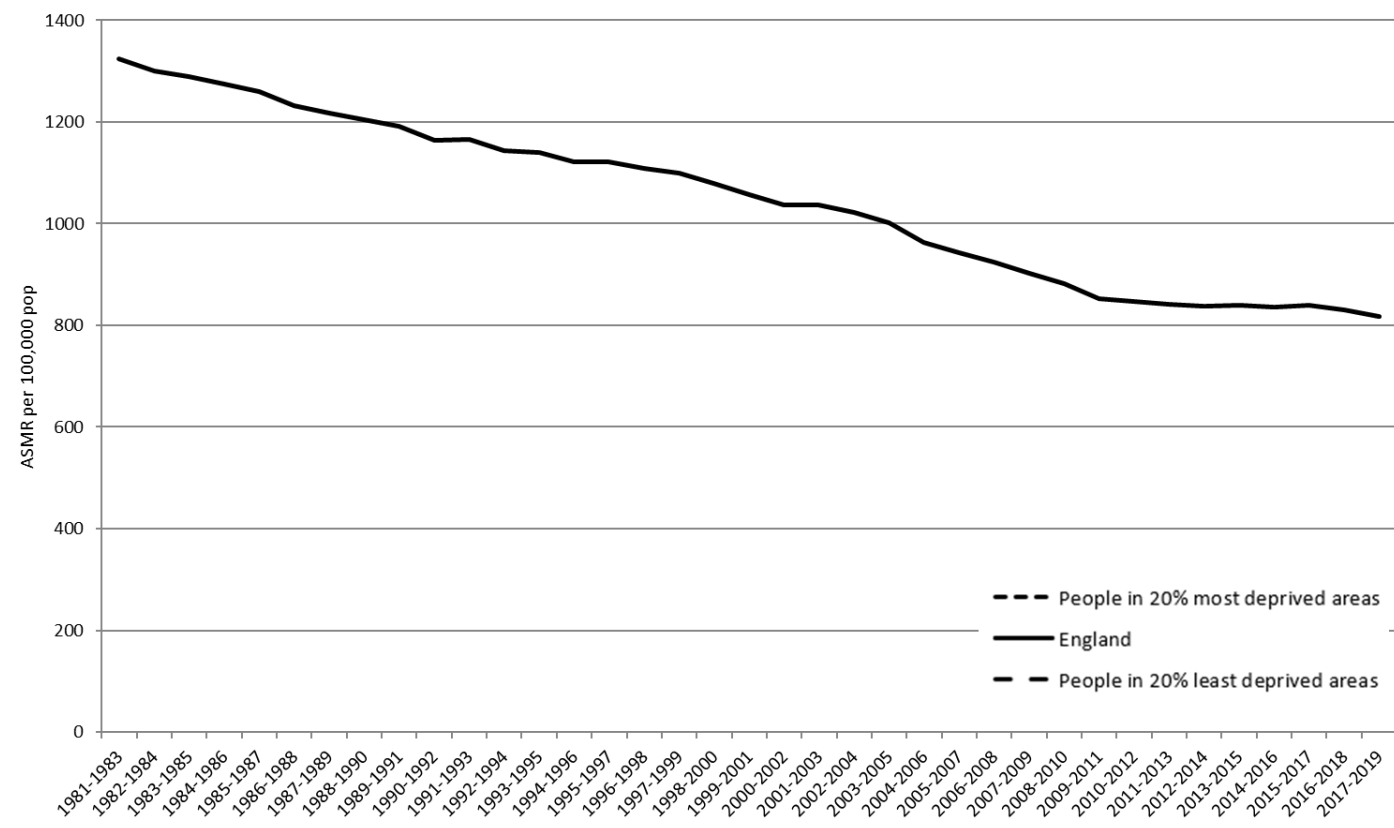


Male life expectancy

Female mortality rates

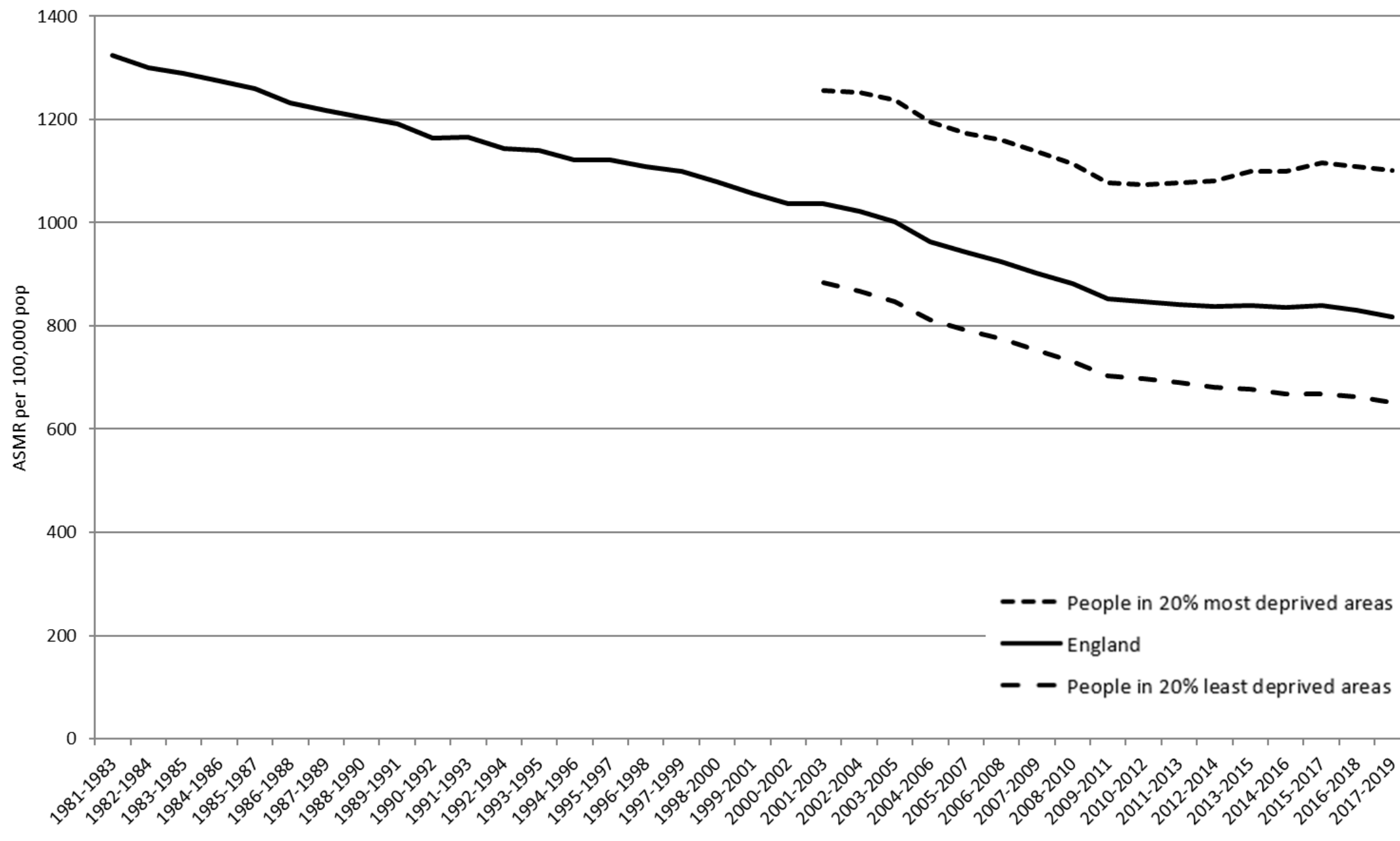
Age-standardised mortality rates, females, England 1981-2019

Source: Walsh & McCartney 2023



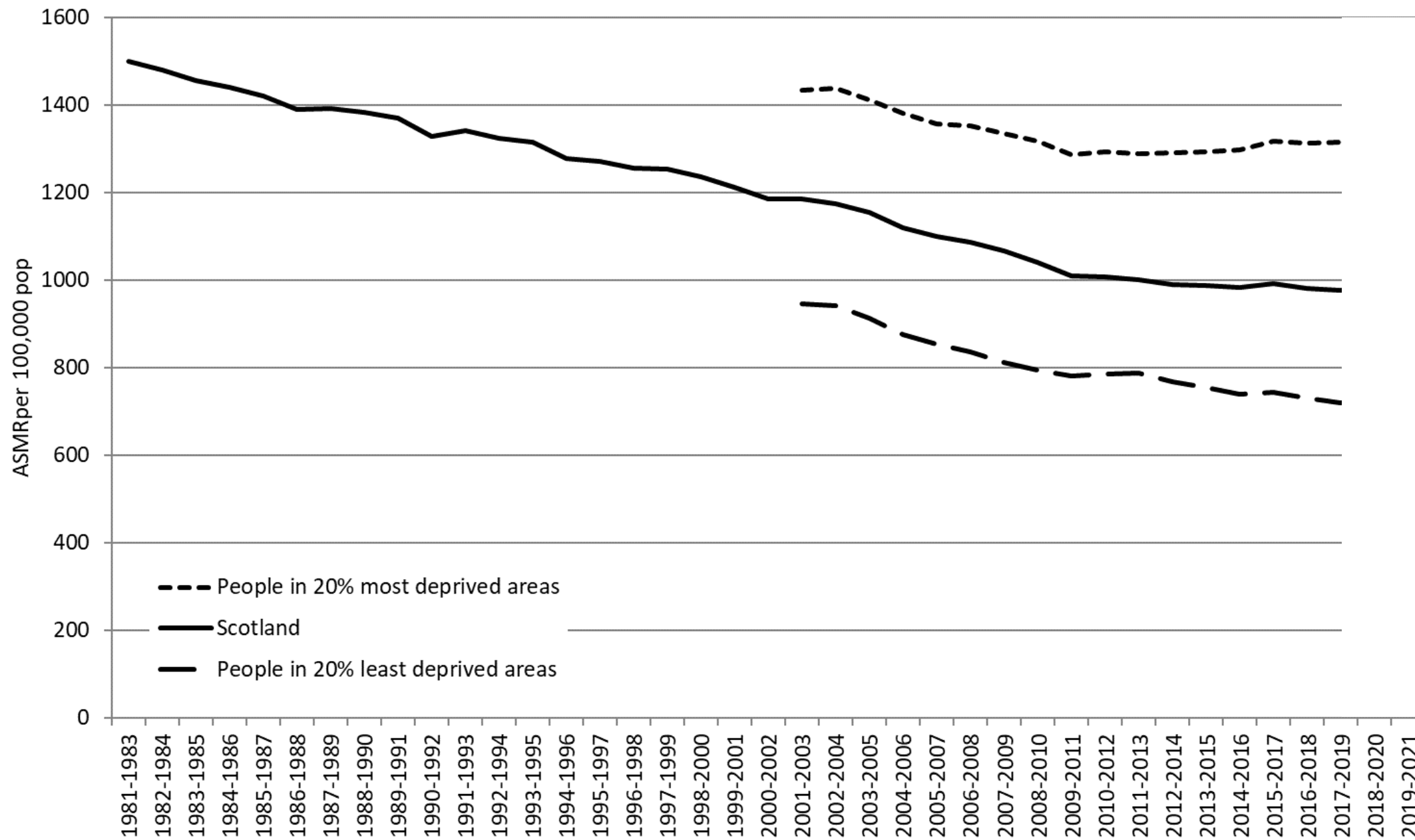
Age-standardised mortality rates, females, England 1981-2019

Source: Walsh & McCartney 2023



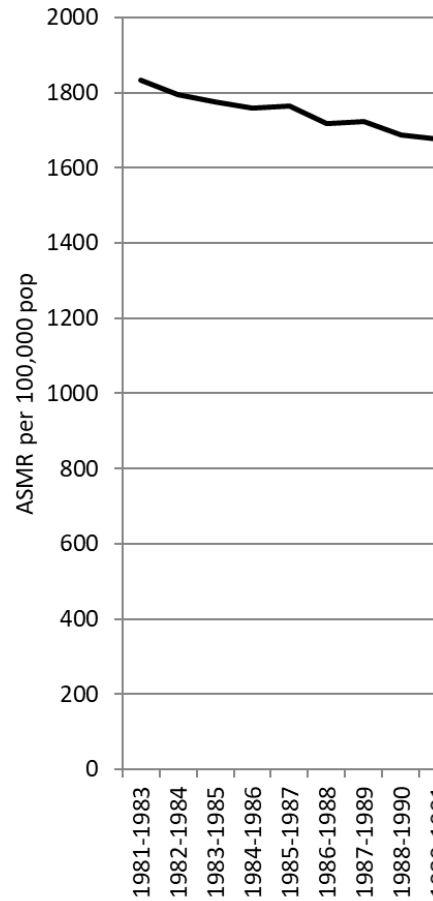
Age-standardised mortality rates, females, Scotland 1981-2021

Source: Walsh & McCartney 2023



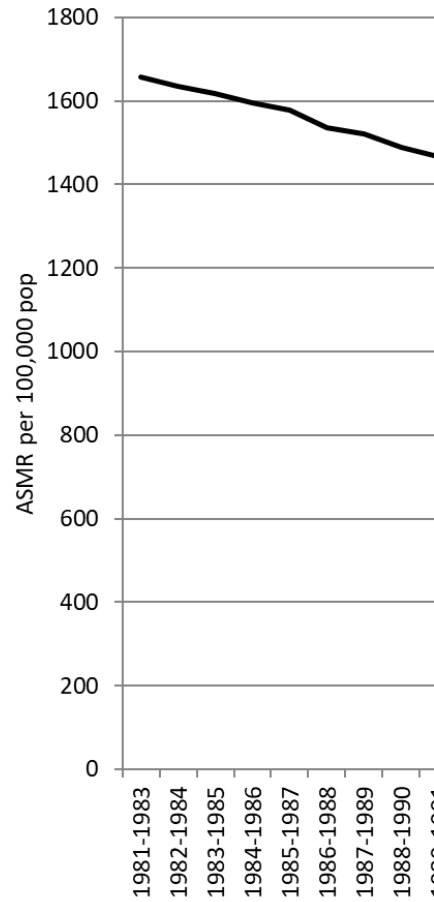
LIVERPOOL: age-standardised mortality rates, males and females, all ages

Source: de Haro Moro et al 2025



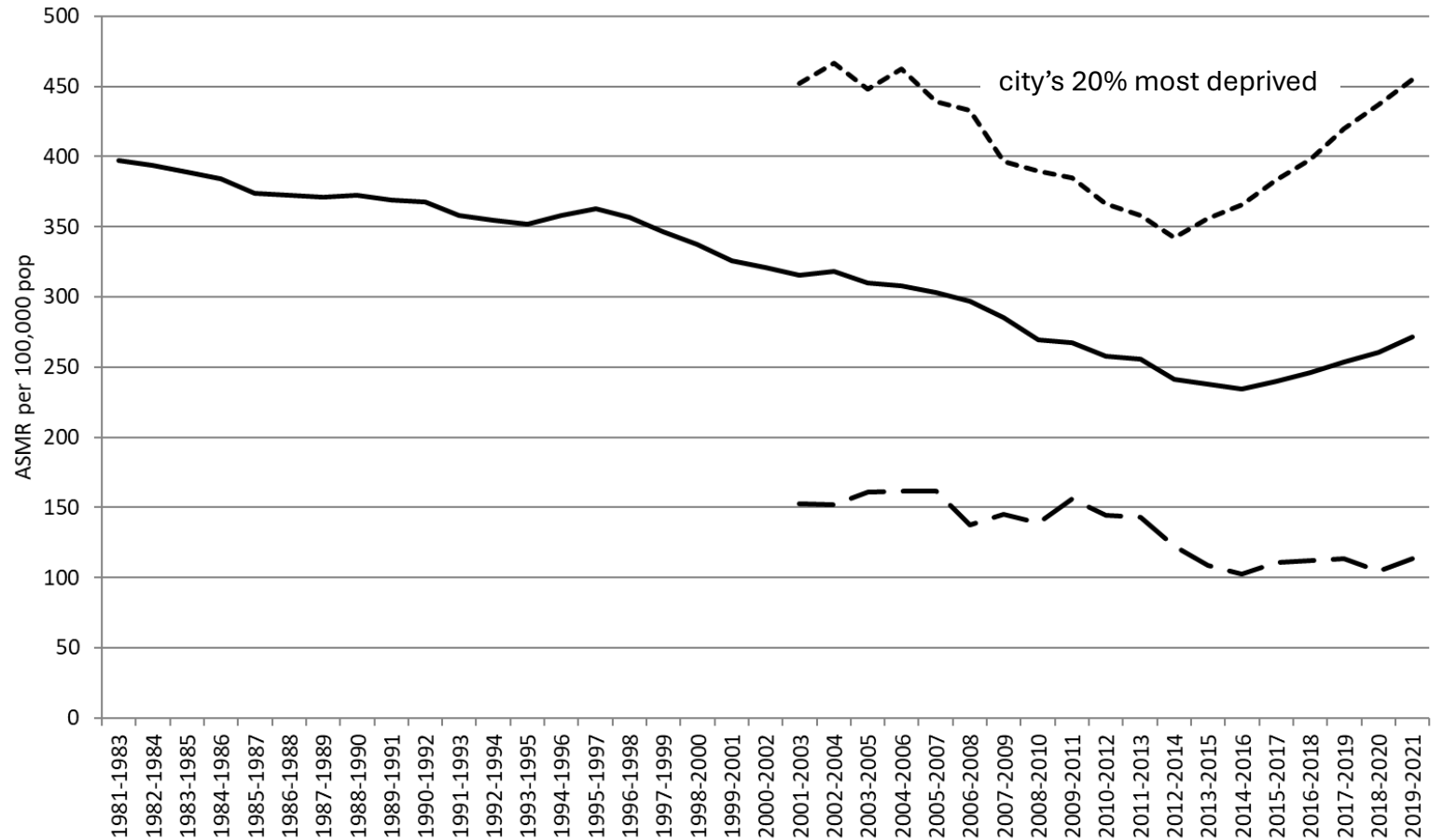
LEEDS: age-standardised mortality rates, males and females, all ages

Source: de Haro Moro et al 2025



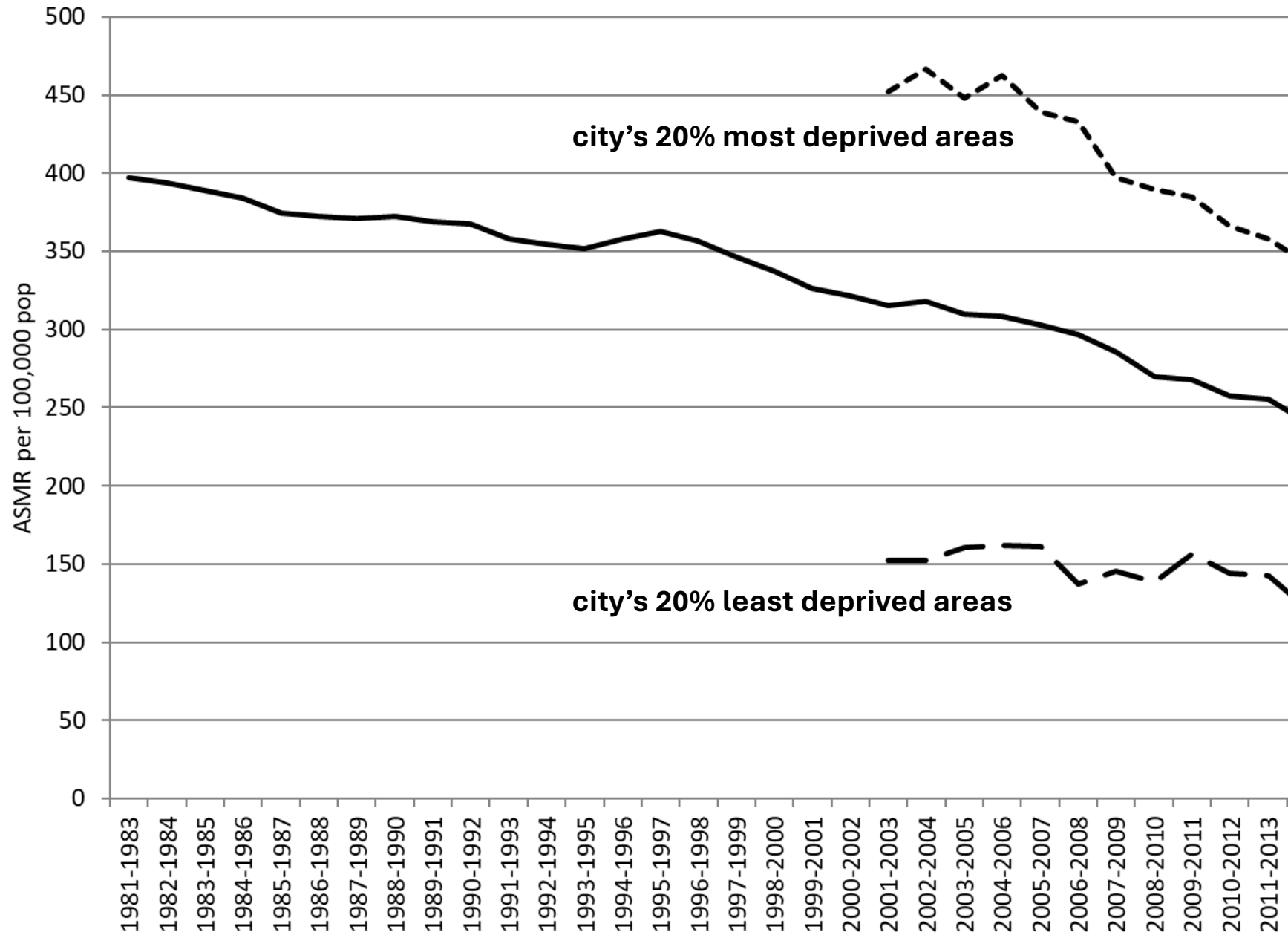
GLASGOW: age-standardised mortality rates, females, 0-64 years

Source: Walsh & McCartney 2023



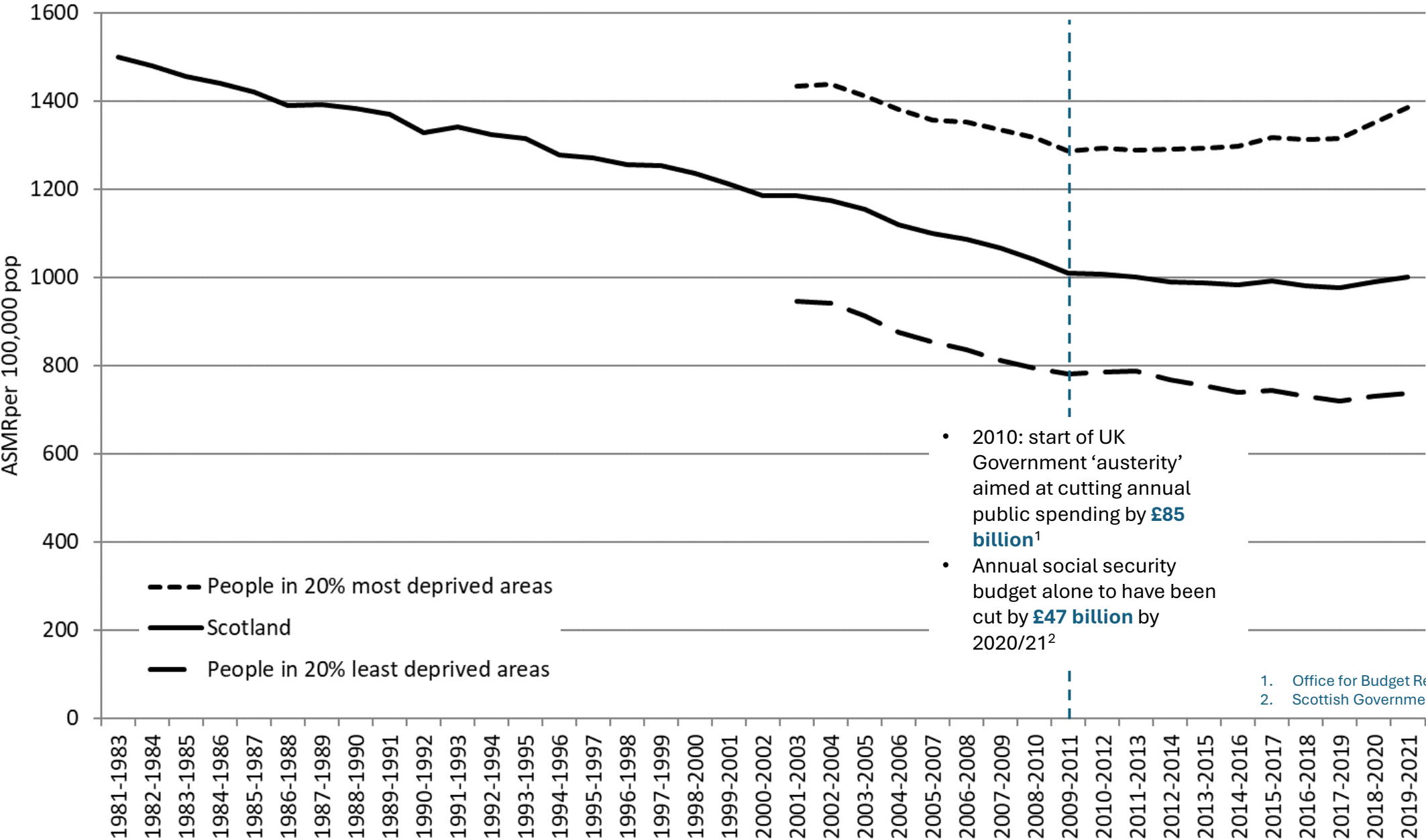
GLASGOW: age-standardised mortality rates, females, 0-64 years

Source: Walsh & McCartney 2023



Age-standardised mortality rates, females, Scotland 1981-2021

Source: Walsh & McCartney 2023



- 2010: start of UK Government 'austerity' aimed at cutting annual public spending by **£85 billion**¹
- Annual social security budget alone to have been cut by **£47 billion** by 2020/21²

1. Office for Budget Responsibility 2013.
2. Scottish Government 2017

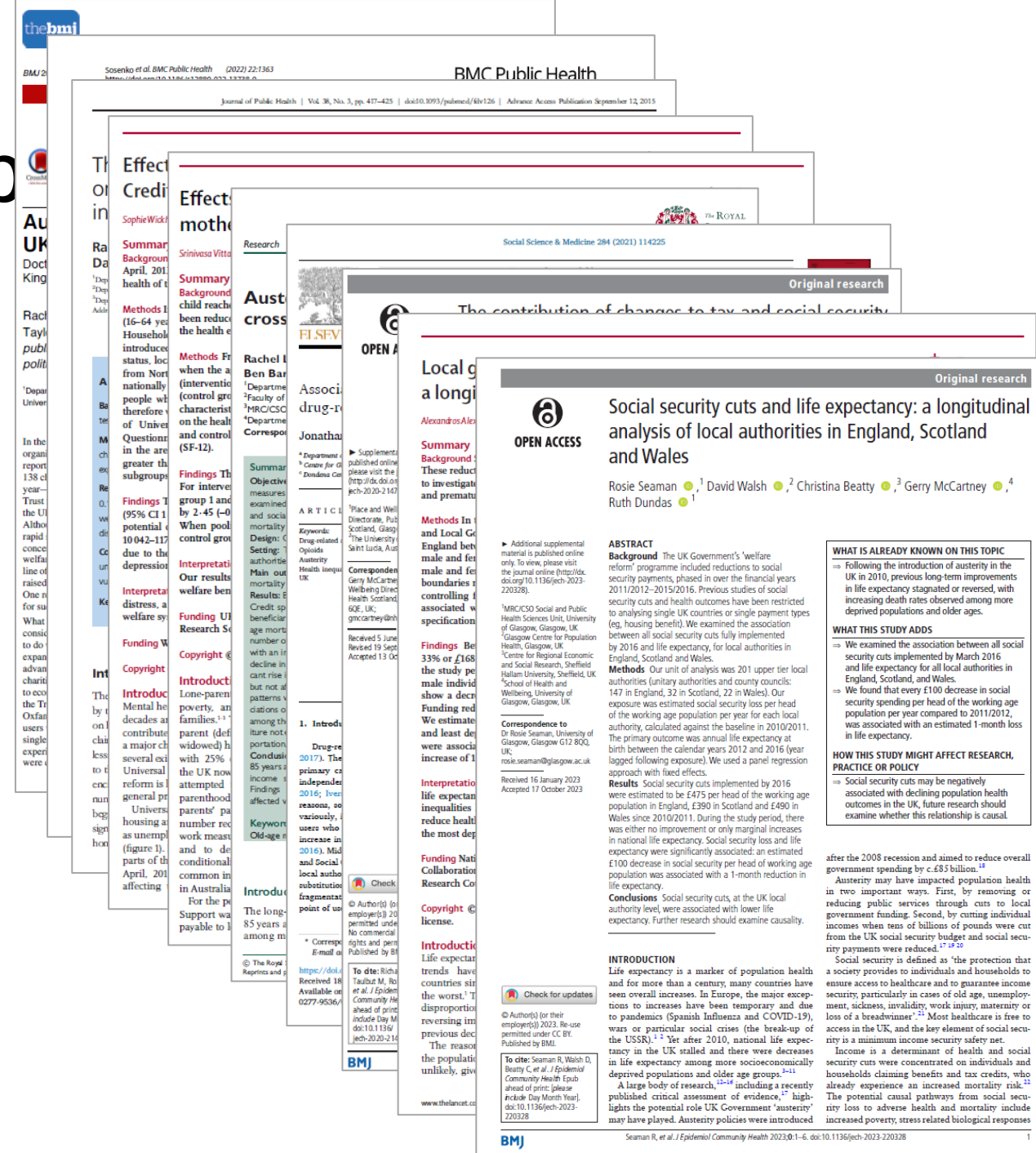
Is there evidence to support this?

- Yes: that's the whole point of the book
- Huge literature on political determinants of health
- International evidence of the impact of austerity policies



Is there evidence to sup

- Yes: that's the whole point of the book
- Huge literature on political determinants of health
- International evidence of the impact of austerity policies
- Wealth of UK evidence of the impact of *this particular type* of austerity...



The evidence...

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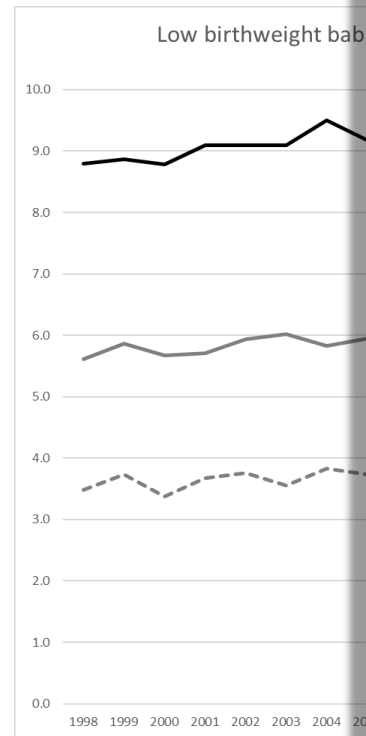
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Austerity’s impact on social determinants of health

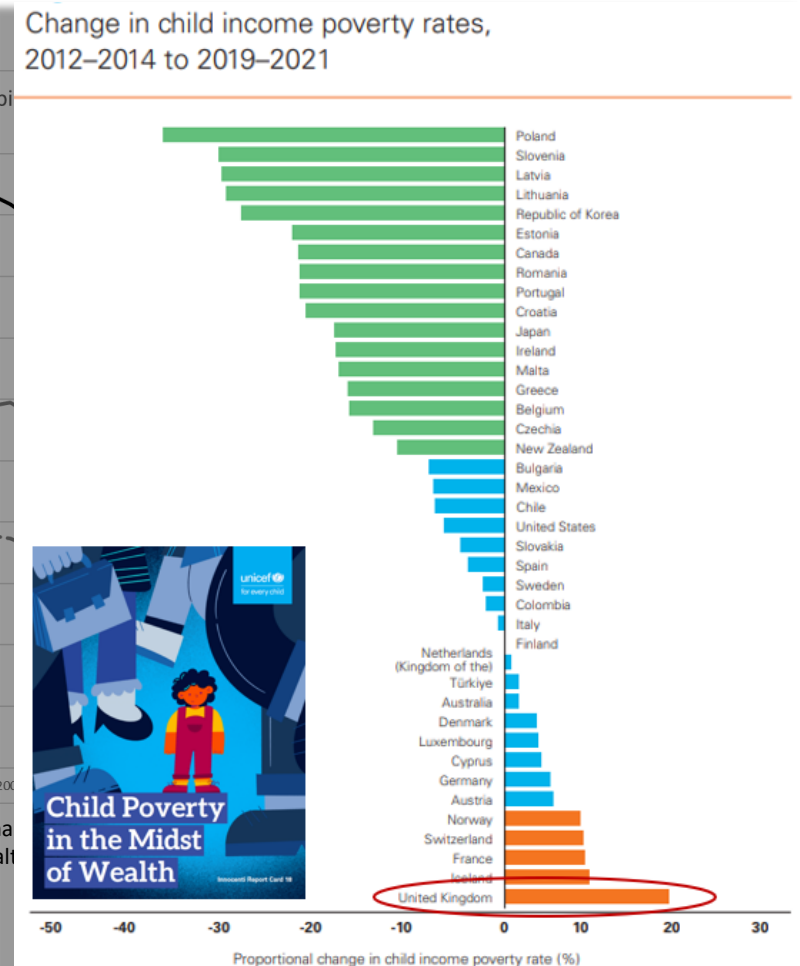
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The evidence of an altered society

- Food banks
- Child poverty
- Mortality trends
 - Including drugs deaths
- Healthy life expectancy
- Mental health trends
- Birth outcomes
- And more besides...



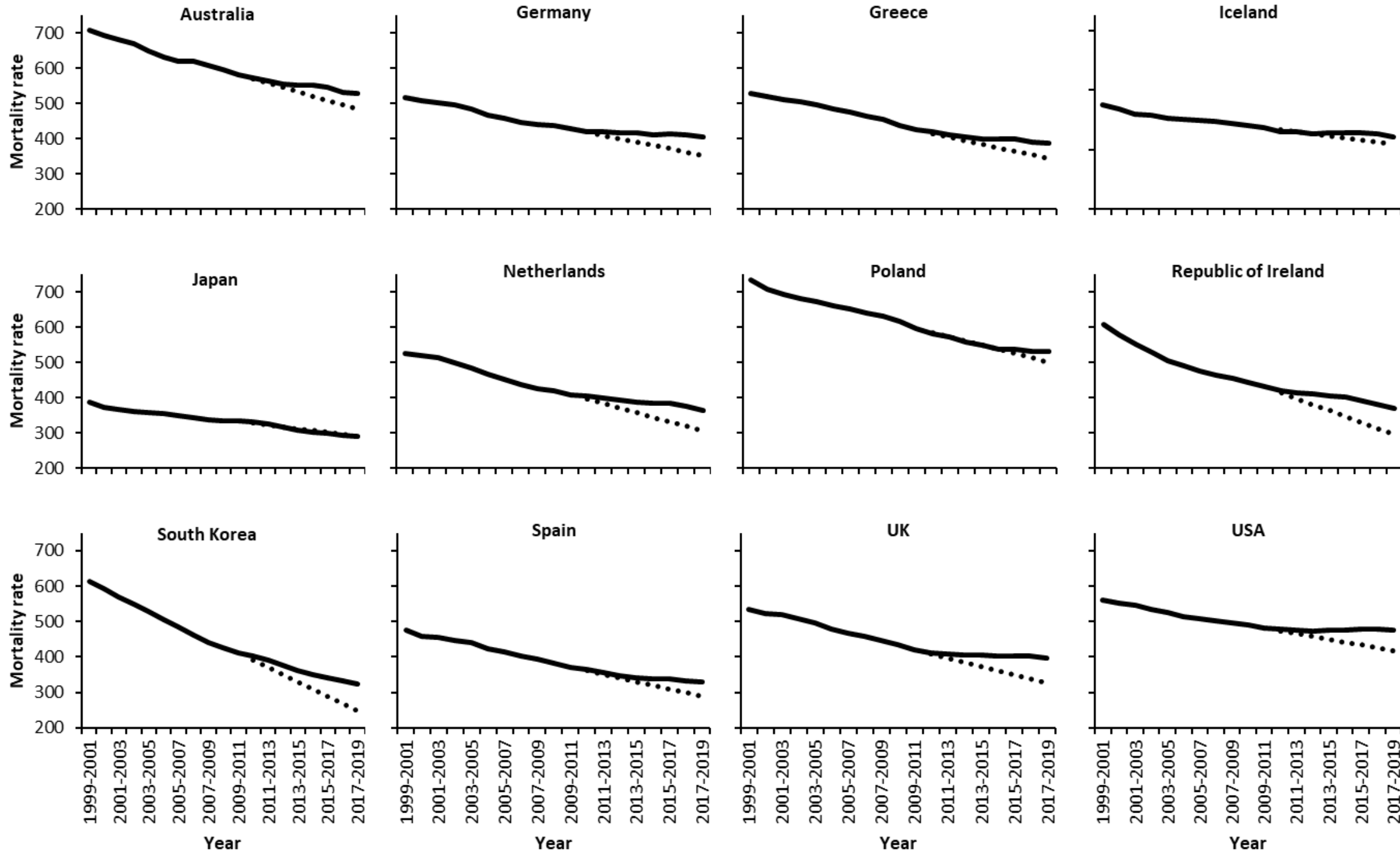
Source: Walsh D., McCartney G. *Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*
Glasgow Centre for Population Health



Researchers believe cuts to social security benefits and services are key to understanding these trends, which have hit families living in the poorest areas in Scotland

Is it just the UK?

- No – austerity introduced in different countries in aftermath of 2007/08 financial crisis
- Different forms of austerity
- But wherever introduced, it has a negative impact



Is it just the UK?

- No – austerity introduced in different countries in aftermath of 2007/08 financial crisis
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Is austerity a cause of slower improvements in mortality in high-income countries? A panel analysis

Gerry McCartney^{a,*}, Robert McMaster^a, Frank Popham^b, Ruth Dundas^c, David Walsh^d

^a College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom
^b Fife, Scotland, United Kingdom
^c MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, 99 Berkeley Street, Glasgow, G3 7HR, United Kingdom
^d Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 3rd Floor, Olympia Building, Bridgton Cross, Bridgton, Glasgow, G40 2QH, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

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Stalled mortality

ABSTRACT

Background: The rate of improvement in mortality slowed across many high-income countries after 2010. Following the 2007–08 financial crisis, macroeconomic policy was dominated by austerity as countries attempted to address perceived problems of growing state debt and government budget deficits. This study estimates the impact of austerity on mortality trends for 37 high-income countries between 2000 and 2019.

Methods: We fitted a suite of fixed-effects panel regression models to mortality data (period life expectancy, age-standardised mortality rates (ASMRs), age-stratified mortality rates and lifespan variation). Austerity was measured using the Alesina-Ardagna Fiscal Index (AAFI), Cyclically-Adjusted Primary Balance (CAPB), real indexed Government Expenditure, and Public Social Spending as a % of GDP. Sensitivity analyses varied the lag times, and confined the panel to economic downturns and to non-oil-dominated economies.

Results: Slower improvements, or deteriorations, in life expectancy and mortality trends were seen in the majority of countries, with the worst trends in England & Wales, Estonia, Iceland, Scotland, Slovenia, and the USA, with generally worse trends for females than males. Austerity was implemented across all countries for at least some time when measured by AAFI and CAPB, and for many countries across all four measures (and particularly after 2010). Austerity adversely impacted life expectancy, ASMR, age-specific mortality and lifespan variation trends when measured with Government Expenditure, Public Social Spending and CAPB, but not with AAFI. However, when the dataset was restricted to periods of economic downturn and in economies not dominated by hydrocarbon production, all measures of austerity were found to reduce the rate of mortality improvement.

Interpretation: Stalled mortality trends and austerity are widespread phenomena across high-income countries. Austerity is likely to be a cause of stalled mortality trends. Governments should consider alternative economic policy approaches if these harmful population health impacts are to be avoided.

1. Background

The rate of improvement in mortality rates stalled across many high income countries around 2012, pre-dating the COVID-19 pandemic (Fenton et al., 2019a). The changed trends in the UK are evident for women and men, across almost all age groups, and for almost every specific cause of death, suggesting that the causes are impacting across multiple causal pathways simultaneously (Currie et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2018; Ramsay et al., 2020). The stalled average trends mask a rapid widening in health inequalities by deprivation in England & Wales (Rashid et al., 2021) and Scotland (Fenton et al., 2019b), and worsening mortality inequalities by ethnicity in the USA (Woolf et al., 2021), with mortality rates for people living in the most disadvantaged groups increasing (Fenton et al., 2019b; Rashid et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020; Woolf et al., 2021). The change in trends also been recorded in Iceland, the Netherlands, Portugal, France and Germany, among others (Fenton et al., 2019a; Ho and Hendi, 2018).

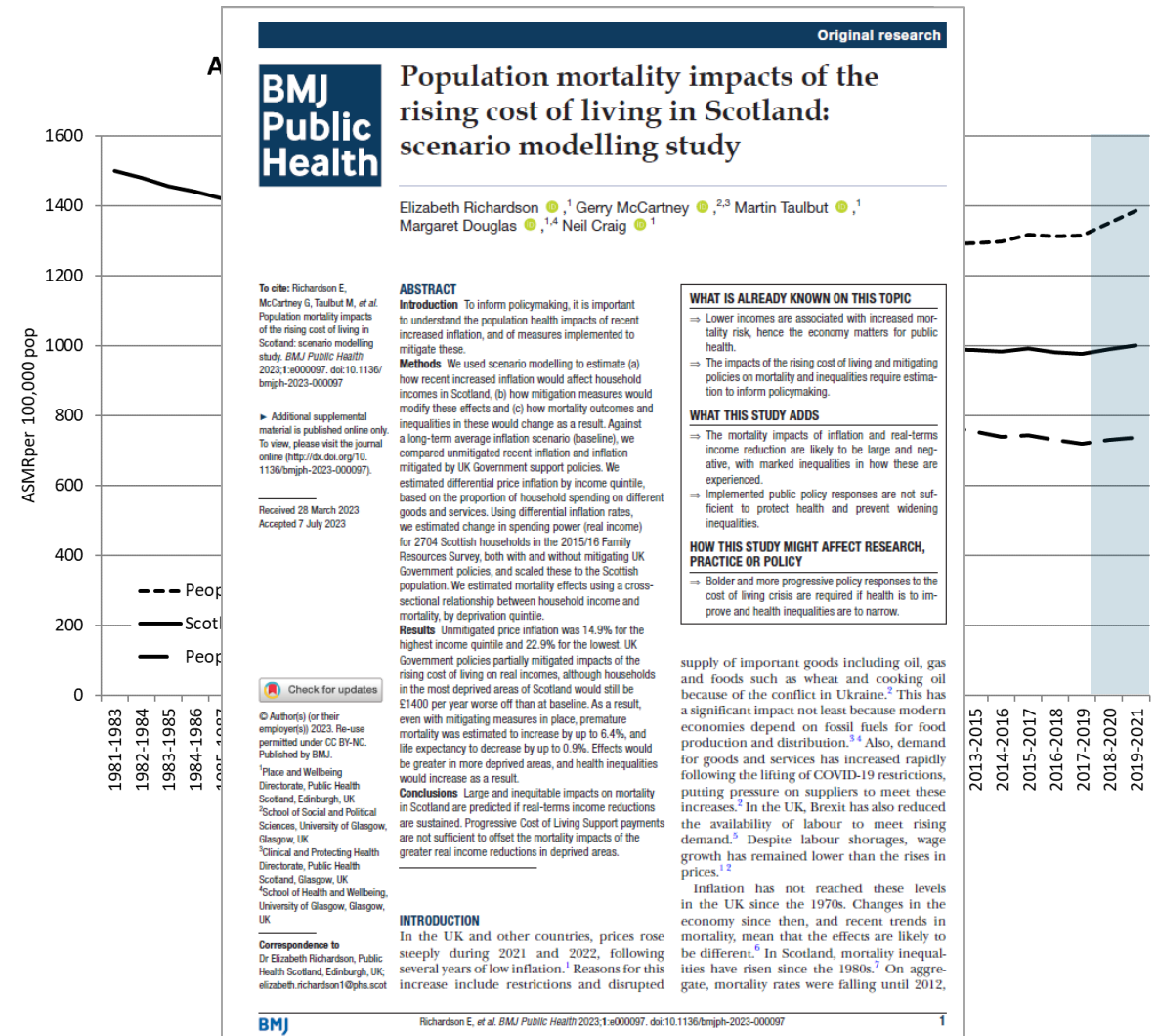
Many hypotheses have been proposed to explain the stalled mortality trends. Demographic and artefactual hypotheses (Murphy et al., 2019; Public Health England, 2018) can now be ruled out as substantive explanations (McCartney et al., 2022a). Although this stalling is due to a change in trends across almost all age groups and specific causes of death (Currie et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2018; Ramsay et al., 2020), the marked contribution some specific causes (cardiovascular

^{*} Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Gerard.McCartney@glasgow.ac.uk (G. McCartney).

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0277-9536/© 2022 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Have other issues affected the trends?

- Historical obesity trends
 - But only a small proportion
- Covid-19
- Inflation (cost of living crisis)
- But principal driver is austerity



Responses (1): how has this been allowed to happen?

- Broad discussion point re. lack of awareness
 - Role of the media?
 - Bad news overload/apathy?
 - And much more
- Book focuses on the roles of individuals and organisations with power and influence e.g.
 - 'Think tanks'
 - Public Health England
 - WHO

Figure 5.1 – Timeline of research published on the role of economics and austerity, with publication of reports denying austerity as a cause in bold type*

2010	UK austerity starts	Landmark health inequalities report (Marmot Review) shows importance of economic policy¹⁸
2011		Austerity linked to HIV outbreak in Greece²⁵
2012		Austerity linked to worsening health across Europe¹⁷
2013		<i>'The body economic: why austerity kills'</i> book published⁹ 1 study highlights likely negative impacts of austerity on UK health²⁶
2014		5 studies link austerity to worse health across Europe^{10,27–30}
2015	UK mortality changes first noted in weekly data	- Weekly data show mortality increases in UK³¹ <i>'How politics makes us sick: neoliberal epidemics'</i> book published³² 3 studies investigate austerity impacts on suicide in Europe, 2 show links^{13,14,33} - Rise in mental health problems in England linked to austerity³⁴ - Austerity linked to rise in food banks in UK³⁵ - Review of evidence from across disciplines on the austerity-health link¹¹
2016		- Austerity linked to increased homelessness in England³⁶ 4 studies link austerity to mortality and health problems in 4 countries^{37–40} 3 studies link austerity to mental health problems in UK^{41–43} Public Health England first suggest influenza as likely cause of the changes⁴⁴
2017		- First UK study demonstrating austerity as cause of mortality change⁴⁵ - Study summarising evidence for austerity, and not influenza, as cause of changes in the UK⁴⁶ - Austerity-related delayed hospital discharges linked to mortality change⁴⁷ - Qualitative study linking austerity in UK to worse health⁴⁸ <i>'The Violence of Austerity'</i> book published⁴⁹ 5 international studies examining links between austerity and health^{50–54} Public Health England continue to suggest influenza as likely cause⁵⁵
2018		- Study demonstrates UK social security cuts causing worse mental health⁵⁶ 3 studies link worse birth outcomes, health inequalities & mortality to austerity^{57–59} 2 qualitative studies link austerity in UK to worse health^{60,61} - Worsening UK mental health trends linked to austerity⁶² 3 studies critique Public Health England explanations for mortality changes^{63–65} Public Health England response to critique 'doubles down' on influenza as likely cause⁶⁶ King's Fund argues against austerity, focusing on specific causes of death^{67,68} Public Health England mortality review fails to consider austerity⁶⁹

• Health Foundation says 'limited and inconclusive' evidence for austerity⁷⁷

2019

44 studies published

- Research commentary discusses why austerity is an important cause⁷⁰ of 'the *crisis in the care of disabled people*' book
- UK to worse health⁷²
- Insecurity⁷³
- do not conclude austerity is a cause^{74,75}
- Report commissioned by Health Foundation suggests austerity is a likely

2020 Pandemic starts

- Study demonstrates UK social security cuts causing worsening mental health⁸⁰
- 2 studies show negative impacts of austerity on health internationally^{81,82}
- Qualitative study linking austerity in UK to worse health⁸³
- Update to the Marmot Reviews of health inequalities in England concludes austerity is driving changed trends⁸⁴
- Public Health Wales report states austerity is a likely contributor to the changed trends⁸⁵
- King's Fund/OECD argue against austerity, focusing on specific causes of death⁸⁶**
- Modelling study shows austerity explains mortality change in Scotland⁸⁷
- 2 studies demonstrate austerity causing mortality change in England^{88,89}
- 4 studies link austerity to foodbank use, worse mental health & drug deaths^{90–93}
- Study links austerity to rising childhood obesity⁹⁴
- Study summarises the evidence for austerity causing mortality changes⁹⁵
- Scottish Chief Medical Officer report includes austerity as explanation⁹⁶

2021

2022 Inflation rises

59 studies published

- do not demonstrate austerity health and social
- usually linked to higher nutritional
- for Population Health report concludes

• King's fund argue that the causes of the changed trends remains unclear¹¹⁰

2023

- 3 studies show austerity causing mental health, obesity and mortality problems^{111–113}
- Study links austerity period with changed trend in severe mental illness¹¹⁴
- Health Foundation report on Scottish trends acknowledges role for austerity but focuses on 'implementation gap' as explanation¹¹⁵
- UK Chief Medical Officers argue that high mortality can be addressed with cardiovascular disease interventions¹¹⁶

Responses (1): how has this been allowed to happen?

- Broad discussion point re. lack of awareness
 - Role of the media?
 - Bad news overload/apathy?
 - And much more
- Book focuses on the roles of individuals and organisations with power and influence e.g.
 - 'Think tanks'
 - Public Health England
 - WHO
- We argue there is been a dereliction of public health duty on the part of many
- Has allowed UK Government to hide behind various reports

Responses (2): what needed

- Required policy responses (evidence-based) in final chapter
- Builds on previous recommendations and previous recommendations before those...
- Key:
 - reversing cuts to social security – to create a robust ‘safety net’
 - investing in public/social services
 - adopting evidence-based measures to narrow societal and health inequalities
- They require political will
- Luckily we have a new UK Government....



Oh, hold on....

The Guardian UK ▾
Society Law Scotland Wales Northern Ireland

Ministers privately ruling out scrapping two-child benefits cap

Sources say government is 'not going to find a way' to ditch cap despite predictions that child poverty levels will soar



📧 In a letter to Keir Starmer, Child Poverty Action Group estimated that the number of children in poverty would rise to 4.8 million by 2029 unless action was taken. Photograph: Adam Angelides/Getty Images

Ministers are privately ruling out scrapping the two-child benefit cap despite warnings from charities that a failure to do so could result in the highest levels of child poverty since records began.

Government sources said charities and Labour MPs who were concerned that

'I was the wimpy kid who got sand kicked in his face'
Huel co-founder James Collier → G2

What I've learned from 15 years of being single → G2

The Guardian
Tuesday 14 January 2025
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Starmmer backs Reeves and warns of 'ruthless' public spending cuts

Chancellor under pressure after difficult week in the markets

Pippa Crerar
Jessica Elgot

Rachel Reeves will remain chancellor until the next general election, Keir Starmer has insisted, as he warned the Treasury would be "ruthless" over public spending cuts to help meet the government's fiscal rules. The Treasury is looking for billions of pounds of savings from departmental budgets to balance the books at this summer's spending review, after another difficult day on which the cost of government borrowing rose and the value of the pound fell.

Starmer said Reeves was "absolutely right" to take a tough approach to public spending after a bruising week in the markets and concern among some Labour MPs over her plan to get the economy back on track. "Yes, we will be ruthless, as we have been ruthless in the decisions that we've taken so far," the prime minister said at the launch of the government's artificial intelligence action plan in east London.

"We have got clear fiscal rules, and we are going to keep to those fiscal rules, and that's why the chancellor was absolutely right in the words that she chose to describe the approach that we will take."

In a speech to the Institute for Government next week, Darren Jones, the chief secretary to the Treasury, will warn cabinet colleagues that they will be expected to make sweeping changes to public services as part of the spending review.

He is expected to say: "I don't accept the idea that we should just keep spending more for poor outcomes. Taxpayers, and the users of public services, deserve better. "We therefore won't settle for doing things the same and hoping for a different outcome - we've seen that play out, with a £22bn black hole in the public finances and public services on their knees. We have to do things differently - and we will."

Among the changes ministers believe are needed are significant reductions in the £300bn a year welfare budget, with the annual cost of support

'We have clear fiscal rules and we are going to keep to them'

Keir Starmer
Prime minister

6 →

Oh, hold on... (no. 2)

The Guardian UK

Up to 1.2m disabled people will lose thousands in UK welfare overhaul, experts warn

Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, laid out plans for £5bn savings but faces rebellion from some Labour MPs



📷 Liz Kendall, the secretary of state for work and pensions, laid out the welfare overhaul in the House of Commons, 18 March 2025. Photograph: House of Commons/Reuters

Up to 1.2 million people with disabilities will lose thousands of pounds under the government's welfare overhaul, experts have said, as campaigners warn the plan will exacerbate the country's mental health crisis and push more children into poverty.

Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, laid out her **long-awaited changes** to the benefits system on Tuesday, announcing a set of measures

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Benefits crackdown unveiled with aim to save £5bn a year by 2030



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Becky Morton
Political reporter

18 March 2025

The government has unveiled sweeping changes to the benefits system, aimed at saving £5bn a year by 2030.

£1.50 THURSDAY MARCH 27, 2025 WWW.THENATIONAL.SCOT

THE NATIONAL

THE NEWSPAPER THAT SUPPORTS AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND

'A NEW ERA OF AUSTERITY'

- 50,000 children to be plunged into poverty
- Flynn: Reverse Brexit and rip up fiscal rules
- SNP: Tap up millionaires, not disabled people
- Greens: Climate emergency totally ignored



MacAskill wins Alba leadership but beaten deputy candidate threatens legal action

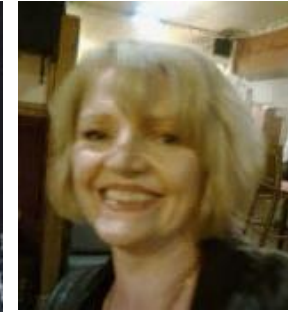


Responses (2): what needs to happen?

- Required policy responses (evidence-based recommendations) set out in final chapter
- Builds on previous recommendations and previous recommendations before those...
- Key:
 - reversing cuts to social security – to create a robust ‘safety net’
 - investing in public/social services
 - adopting evidence-based measures to narrow societal and health inequalities
- They require political will
- Luckily we have a new UK Government....
- Absolutely vital that they understand the evidence and take action

‘Health statistics represent people with the tears wiped off’*

- All the evidence in the book interspersed with real-life stories of seven individuals affected by the policies
- Illustrative of different (pernicious) effects:
 - work capability assessments (Michael)
 - cuts to social care services (Rachel)
 - cuts to housing services (Paul)
 - bedroom tax (Frances)
 - impact of ‘reforms’ on mental health (Moira)
 - impacts on people who use drugs (Ellen)
 - social security ‘sanctions’ (David)



‘Health statistics represent people with the tears wiped off’*

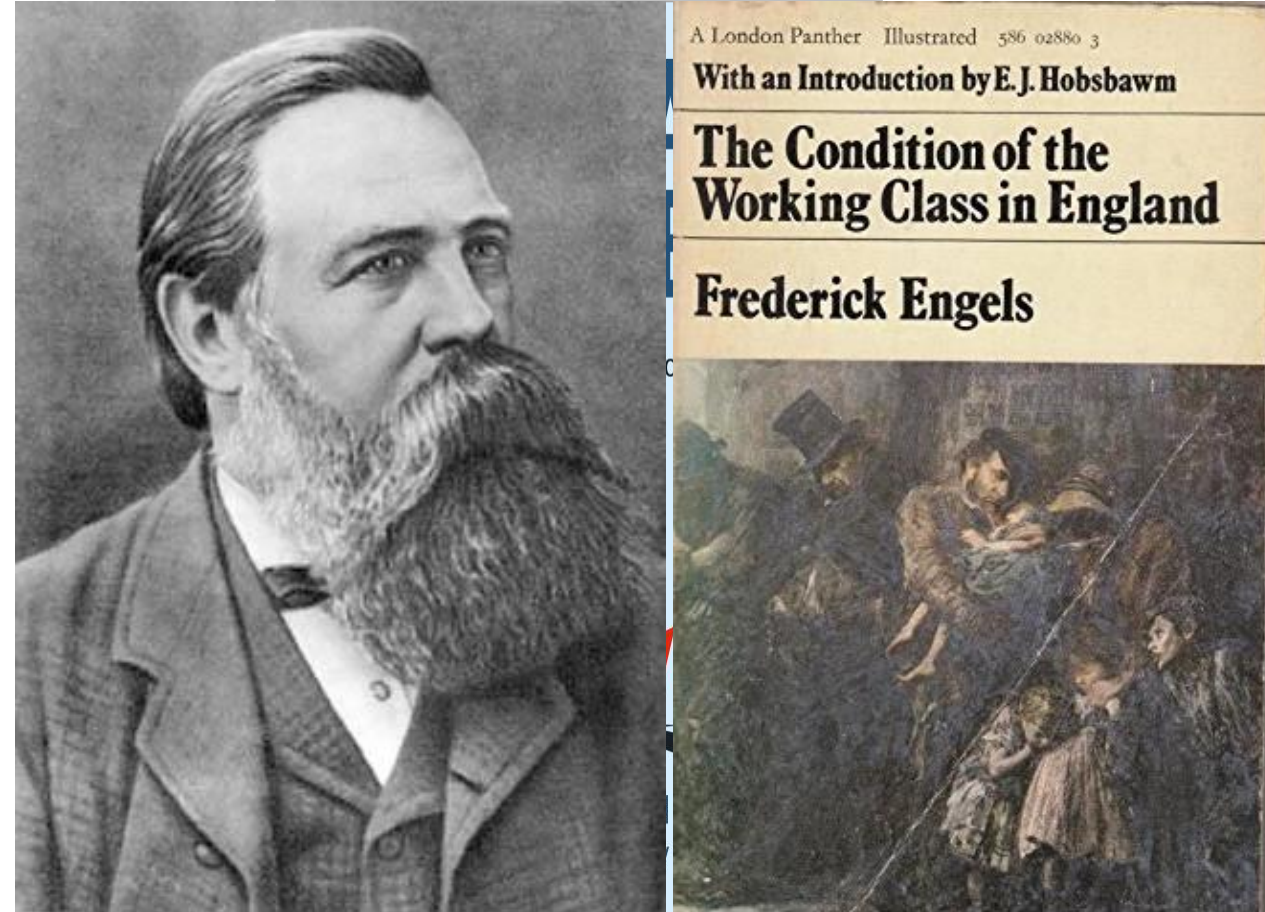
- ‘When you feel like, I can’t feed myself, I can’t pay my electric bill, I can’t pay my rent, well, all you can feel is *the world collapsing around you*. It does a lot of *damage, physically and mentally* ... there were points where *I did think about ending my life...*’
- ‘It’s not right. *I shouldn’t have to go to my daughters and depend on her for something to eat. It should be the other way round...* It makes you feel so low, especially when you’ve got to go to the foodbanks. *I don’t want to be like this for the rest of my life.*’
- ‘He was in and out of hospital with his depression, like self-harming and that. It was just horrible ... He spoke to the psychiatrist in the hospital. He was like, we’ve got no money, *what’s the point, I can’t go out, can’t see people, can’t even eat properly*’
- ‘It’s like *insidious brutality*, this Universal Credit thing’

Source: Cheetham et al 2014

* attributed to Austin Bradford Hill

What does all this add up to?

- ‘Social murder’?
- We present the evidence and leave it up to the reader to decide
- No matter the description, we desperately need a political remedy
- So buy a copy of the book and send it to your local Labour MP
- **NB All royalties go to NHS charities, not to us**



Other ways of shouting about this

- Buy and circulate more copies of the book!
- Share the (cringeworthy) video!
 - <https://tinyurl.com/socialmurdervideo>
- Share 'The Conversation' and/or other blogs we have written recently!
- Share 'Transforming Society' and other podcasts!
- Publish your own blog!
- Ask us (e.g. Gerry) to come and give a talk!
- Email local councillors/elected members/anyone with power!
- Anything and everything!

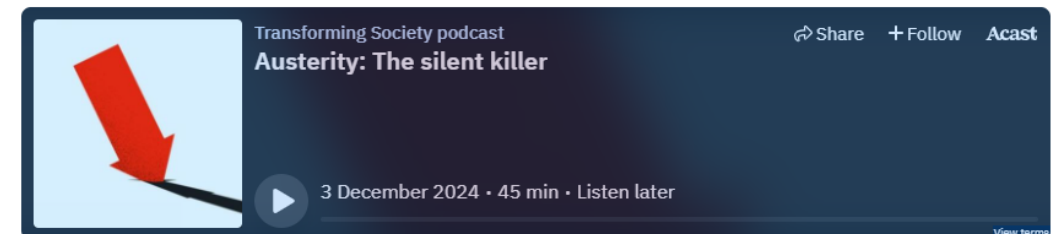
PODCAST: Austerity: The silent killer

Life expectancy is about more than just health – it's about the kind of society we live in.

In this episode, Richard Kemp speaks with David Walsh and Gerry McCartney, co-authors of *Social Murder?: Austerity and Life Expectancy in the UK*, about the monumental impact austerity has had, and continues to have, on life expectancy.

They discuss the real-life stories of people affected by austerity policies, the reasons austerity is often sidelined in official health reports and the steps that need to be taken to reverse the horrific effects of these last 14 years.

Listen to the podcast here, or on your favourite podcast platform:



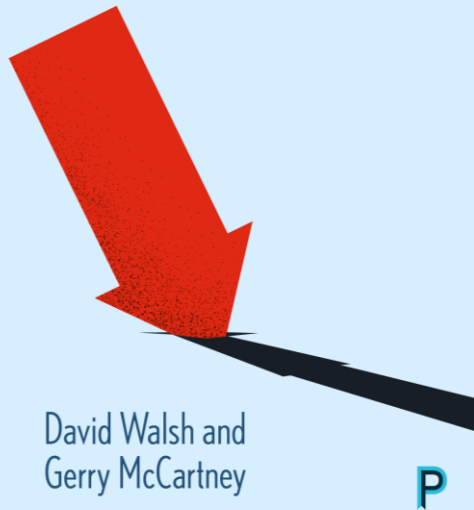
Scroll down for shownotes and transcript.

Gerry McCartney



SOCIAL MURDER?

Austerity and Life Expectancy in the UK



David Walsh and
Gerry McCartney

P

Social Murder?

Austerity and Life Expectancy in the UK

By David Walsh and Gerry McCartney

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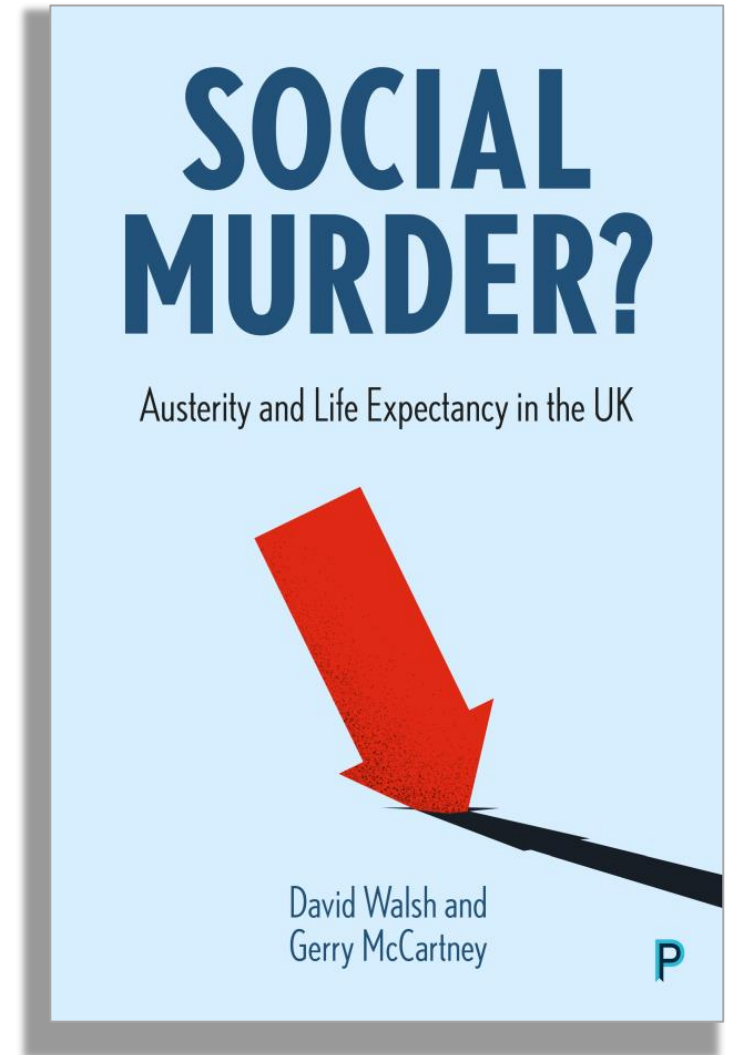
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Thank you to:

- Relatives of those who were featured in the book: Anne-Marie O'Sullivan (daughter of Michael), Gill Thompson (sister of David Clapson) & Nicole Drury (daughter of Moira)
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Note: all royalties go to NHS charities via the NHS Endowment fund at NHS GG&C.

Contacts :

david.walsh.2@glasgow.ac.uk

Gerard.McCartney@glasgow.ac.uk