# UK mortality among under-50s rises sharply driven by drugs and violence



The UK is increasingly being described as “the sick person of the wealthy world,” a stark label emerging from a troubling report by the Health Foundation thinktank. Research published by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine reveals rising mortality rates among those under 50, primarily due to drug use, suicide, and violence. These concerning trends contrast sharply with the overall improvements in health seen in many other affluent nations, where similar causes of death have decreased over recent years.

Although the UK has seen a decline in fatalities from diseases like cancer and heart disease, deaths caused by injuries, accidents, and drug poisonings have escalated dramatically. Notably, the drug-related death rate in the UK was recorded at three times higher than the median rate of 21 comparable countries by 2019. In stark terms, mortality among younger adults in the UK is increasingly dire; deaths among working-age women surged by 46% and 31% for men from 1990 to 2023.

Jennifer Dixon, chief executive of the Health Foundation, emphasized the urgency of this report, stating, “This report is a health check we can’t afford to ignore – and the diagnosis is grim.” The findings shed light on a disturbing trend: while most other nations made headway in improving health outcomes, the UK appears to have stagnated, impacted significantly by austerity policies implemented since 2010. Experts highlight that factors such as smoking, alcohol misuse, and poor diet are crucial to understanding the alarming state of the nation’s health.

Statistics outline a bleak reality: by 2023, women in the UK faced a 14% higher rate of death than the median across the studied nations, with men confronting a 9% excess. Professor David Leon, who spearheaded the study, remarked on the disconcerting nature of these statistics, particularly the rise in mortality among those in the prime of their lives—those under 50. “Most mortality between the ages of 25 and 49 years is in principle avoidable,” he noted.

In 2023, the Office for National Statistics reported that drug poisonings reached a harrowing high of 5,448 deaths in England and Wales, signifying an 11% increase from the previous year and the worst figures since records began in 1993. This tragic rise is compounded by a notable increase in cocaine-related fatalities, which surged by over 30% to 1,118 cases. The increase has been attributed to lowered cocaine prices and higher purity levels, indicating a marked shift in substance use patterns.

Scotland's situation is particularly dire, with drug-related deaths remaining the highest in Europe. In 2023, deaths in Scotland rose by 12%, bringing the total to 1,172, representing rates significantly higher than those in England and Wales.

The Local Government Association, alongside the drugs charity WithYou, has called for enhanced access to naloxone, a life-saving antidote for opiate overdoses, and greater support for individuals struggling with addiction. As noted by Robin Pollard of WithYou, streamlined access to structured treatment services is crucial in combating the rise in drug-related fatalities.

In response to the spiralling crisis, a spokesperson from the Department of Health and Social Care stated, “Every death from the misuse of drugs is a tragedy.” The government remains committed to reducing drug-related deaths and ensuring that more individuals are guided towards recovery. However, the emergence of new substances such as the tranquiliser xylazine into the illicit drug market poses additional challenges, complicating efforts to curtail the alarming trends in drug-related mortality.

As the data overwhelmingly illustrates, the UK is grappling with a multifaceted health crisis, marked by increasing deaths from avoidable causes among younger populations. The stark realities presented in the report indicate an urgent need for comprehensive policy responses and targeted interventions to change the current trajectory.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence)
2. Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence)
3. Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence)
4. Paragraph 4: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y5ll3ler7o)
5. Paragraph 5: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence)
6. Paragraph 6: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/9d668480-87e4-4eb9-a095-a8f0a6895eae), [[7]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations?dm_i=21A8%2C8RJMM%2C7GWY7Z%2C10G7JU%2C1)
7. Paragraph 7: [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y5ll3ler7o)
8. Paragraph 8: [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/9d668480-87e4-4eb9-a095-a8f0a6895eae), [[6]](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0071/)
9. Paragraph 9: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/93e07d74-c379-41fb-87e2-06280031d167)
10. Paragraph 10: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/20/uk-sick-person-of-wealthy-world-deaths-drugs-violence> - An article from The Guardian discusses a report by the Health Foundation thinktank, which highlights the UK's rising mortality rates among under-50s due to drugs, suicide, and violence. The study reveals that while deaths from cancer and heart disease have decreased, deaths from injuries, accidents, and poisonings have increased, with drug-related deaths being particularly concerning. The UK's drug-related death rate in 2019 was three times higher than the median of 21 other wealthy nations studied. The report emphasizes the need for urgent attention to these health issues.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/9d668480-87e4-4eb9-a095-a8f0a6895eae> - A Financial Times article reports that drug-related deaths in England and Wales reached a record high in 2023, with an 11% increase compared to the previous year, totaling 5,448 deaths. The surge is partly attributed to a 30.5% rise in cocaine-related fatalities, reaching 1,118 cases. Factors such as falling cocaine prices and increased purity are contributing to the crisis. The article also highlights that men represent nearly 80% of cocaine-related deaths, with the 'Generation X' cohort being particularly affected.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y5ll3ler7o> - BBC News reports that Scotland's drug-related deaths remain the highest in Europe, despite a 12% rise in 2023. The number of deaths increased by 121 to 1,172, making Scotland's rate 2.7 times higher than England and Northern Ireland and 2.1 times higher than Wales. The article emphasizes the need for continued efforts to address the drug crisis in Scotland.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/93e07d74-c379-41fb-87e2-06280031d167> - A Financial Times article discusses the infiltration of the lethal tranquillizer xylazine, known as 'tranq,' into the UK's illicit drug market. Research from King's College London found that between May 2022 and August 2023, xylazine was detected 35 times in UK toxicology labs, drug-testing facilities, and drug seizures, resulting in 11 deaths among the 16 identified cases. The drug, typically used for sedating animals, is often mixed with heroin or fentanyl, leading to dangerously low breathing and heart rates, as well as severe skin wounds.
6. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0071/> - A House of Commons Library research briefing provides data on drug use and drug-related deaths in the UK. According to Office for National Statistics (ONS) data, in 2023, there were 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning registered in England and Wales, the highest number since records began in 1993. The briefing also discusses the UK government's 10-year drugs plan, 'From harm to hope,' published in December 2021, aimed at reducing crime and saving lives.
7. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations?dm_i=21A8%2C8RJMM%2C7GWY7Z%2C10G7JU%2C1> - The Office for National Statistics (ONS) provides official data on deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales for 2023. The report reveals that there were 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning, equivalent to 93.0 deaths per million people, marking an increase from 4,907 deaths in 2022. The data also highlights that nearly half of these deaths involved opiates, such as heroin and morphine, and that the age-standardised mortality rate for deaths related to drug poisoning has risen every year since 2012.