# Child deaths linked to cousin marriages in England rise amid debate on public health risks



Mortality records reveal a troubling rise in child deaths linked to cousin marriages in England, with more than two such deaths occurring each week during the year to March 2024. Data prepared for the National Health Service (NHS) show that consanguinity was a contributory factor in 128 child deaths within that period, marking an increase compared to figures from seven years earlier. The average weekly death rate of 2.47 children in this context surpasses the one child per week killed through homicide in England and Wales, as per the Office for National Statistics.

Cousin marriages, particularly prevalent among South Asian and Islamic communities such as those of Pakistani heritage, represent longstanding cultural traditions intended to preserve family wealth, cultural identity, religious beliefs, and extended kinship networks. Yet the practice carries significant medical consequences. Although British Pakistani families account for under 4% of births, they disproportionately represent about a third of cases involving genetic disorders in children. These include fatal conditions affecting the skin, brain, muscles, as well as ailments causing blindness, deafness, heart and kidney failure, neurological disorders, and other serious physical and intellectual disabilities. Many affected children die shortly after birth, while thousands more survive with lifelong debilitating health problems requiring intensive healthcare.

This public health issue, prominently documented in the Bradford area—a city where cousin marriages are common—has been the focus of several major studies. Research from the Born in Bradford study highlighted that children born to first cousins face a more than doubled risk of congenital defects, such as heart and lung abnormalities, cleft palates, and other birth defects. While the absolute risk remains low, the incidence in Bradford is nearly twice the national average, raising significant concern among healthcare professionals. These findings were echoed in a parliamentary debate in June 2025, which underscored the heightened risk of serious birth defects among children of closely related parents.

The debate over cousin marriage has intensified politically and socially. Conservative MP Richard Holden has called for a governmental ban on first-cousin marriages, branding the practice as both a public health threat and a constraint on women's freedoms. Holden’s comments followed a contentious NHS England Education Programme report that controversially suggested some economic and social benefits to cousin marriages while acknowledging the increased genetic risks. The report faced criticism for appearing “woke” and was subsequently removed from official websites. Opponents of a ban, including independent MP Iqbal Mohamed and ethicists from the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, argue that a legislative ban would be ineffective, potentially eugenic, and that educational initiatives would be a more productive approach to mitigating risks without stigmatizing communities.

Internationally, some countries have taken stricter measures. Norway outlawed cousin marriage last year, and Sweden is anticipated to enact similar legislation soon. Others argue that banning cousin marriage does not eliminate the risk of genetic illnesses but rather shifts the demographic composition of affected children. This perspective calls for nuanced strategies centred on community education and expanded health services to reduce incidence rates and support affected families.

The issue remains deeply complex, balancing respect for cultural traditions and identities against urgent public health concerns. Families affected by genetic disorders linked to consanguinity, such as those recounted in Bradford, highlight the personal and emotional toll alongside statistical data. As the UK grapples with the question of potential legal restrictions or educational reforms, the priority for healthcare providers remains clear: to offer skilled care to children born with genetic conditions and to engage communities in informed dialogue about the implications of consanguineous marriages.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-46558932)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-46558932), [[7]](https://www.expatica.com/uk/general/cousin-marriage-doubles-gene-risk-for-babies-study-77851/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://theconversation.com/first-cousin-marriage-doubles-risk-of-birth-defects-in-children-15779/), [[7]](https://www.expatica.com/uk/general/cousin-marriage-doubles-gene-risk-for-babies-study-77851/), [[6]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-18/debates/D7DF8C0B-0896-4325-B8D2-DD9A777166D7/MarriageBetweenFirstCousins)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czend1y0xjko), [[5]](https://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/2025/03/banning-first-cousin-marriage-would-be-eugenic-and-ineffective/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czend1y0xjko), [[5]](https://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/2025/03/banning-first-cousin-marriage-would-be-eugenic-and-ineffective/), [[6]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-18/debates/D7DF8C0B-0896-4325-B8D2-DD9A777166D7/MarriageBetweenFirstCousins)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/2025/03/banning-first-cousin-marriage-would-be-eugenic-and-ineffective/), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czend1y0xjko), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 7 – [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-46558932), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15164631/More-TWO-child-deaths-week-linked-cousin-marriages-SUE-REID-risky-phenomenon-backed-NHS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czend1y0xjko> - In December 2024, Conservative MP Richard Holden proposed a ban on first-cousin marriages in the UK, citing increased risks of birth defects in children from such unions. He argued that the practice poses a threat to public health and women's freedom. However, independent MP Iqbal Mohamed opposed the ban, suggesting that education programmes would be more effective in addressing the issue. Downing Street acknowledged the risks but indicated no plans to change the law. The debate highlights differing views on balancing cultural practices with public health concerns.
3. <https://theconversation.com/first-cousin-marriage-doubles-risk-of-birth-defects-in-children-15779/> - A study in Bradford, UK, found that first-cousin marriages more than double the risk of congenital problems in children, including heart and lung defects, cleft palates, and extra fingers. The research, part of the Born in Bradford study, analysed 11,300 babies and revealed that while the absolute risk remains low, the incidence of birth defects is nearly twice the national average in Bradford. The study underscores the significant genetic risks associated with consanguineous marriages, particularly within communities with high rates of such unions.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-46558932> - The BBC News article explores the personal impact of cousin marriages on families in Bradford, UK. It features the story of Ruba, who lost three children to genetic disorders linked to consanguinity. Despite initial disbelief, Ruba acknowledges the connection between her children's health issues and cousin marriage. The piece highlights the emotional and health challenges faced by families and the broader implications of cousin marriages within certain communities, emphasizing the need for awareness and understanding of the associated risks.
5. <https://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/2025/03/banning-first-cousin-marriage-would-be-eugenic-and-ineffective/> - An article from the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics argues against banning first-cousin marriages in the UK, stating that such a ban would be eugenic and ineffective. The piece discusses a study from Bradford, where first-cousin marriages were linked to higher rates of learning and speech problems in children. It suggests that while consanguinity increases the risk of genetic illnesses, banning cousin marriages would not prevent these issues but rather lead to different children being born. The article calls for alternative approaches to address the health concerns.
6. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-18/debates/D7DF8C0B-0896-4325-B8D2-DD9A777166D7/MarriageBetweenFirstCousins> - The UK Parliament debate on 18 June 2025 addressed the issue of first-cousin marriages, highlighting the increased risk of serious birth defects in children from such unions. The Born in Bradford study found that for unrelated parents, about one in 40 children are born with serious birth defects, whereas for first cousins, it rises to roughly one in 15. The debate underscored the genetic risks associated with consanguinity and the need for informed discussions on the matter.
7. <https://www.expatica.com/uk/general/cousin-marriage-doubles-gene-risk-for-babies-study-77851/> - A study in Bradford, UK, published in The Lancet, found that first cousins who marry run twice the risk of having a child with genetic abnormalities. The research analysed data from the 'Born in Bradford' study, which tracks the health of 13,500 babies born at the city's main hospital between 2007 and 2011. The study noted that while the absolute risk is still considered very small, the incidence of birth defects is nearly twice the national average in Bradford, highlighting the genetic risks associated with consanguineous marriages.