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Life expectancy: White people in England and Wales had worst outcomes before pandemic, data show

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White men and women in England and Wales had lower life expectancy at birth than all other ethnic groups, show new data for 2011 to 2014 from the Office for National Statistics have shown.¹

People in the black African ethnic group had statistically significant higher life expectancy than most groups, the data show (table 1).

Table 1 | Life expectancy at birth by sex and ethnic group, England and Wales, 2011 to 2014

Ethnic group	Women	Men	Sex gap (years)
Asian other	86.9	84.5	2.4
Bangladeshi	87.3	81.1	6.2
Black African	88.9	83.8	5.1
Black Caribbean	84.6	80.7	3.9
Black other	86.8	82	4.8
Indian	85.4	82.3	3.1
Mixed	83.1	79.3	3.8
Other	86.9	84	2.9
Pakistani	84.8	82.3	2.5
White	83.1	79.7	3.4
Ethnic group gap (years)	5.8	5.2	

Source: Office for National Statistics

The analysis was the first in which the ONS has used linked 2011 census and death registration data to produce experimental national estimates of life expectancy and mortality by cause of death and by ethnic group, covering a period before the covid-19 pandemic. It included 95% of people listed in the census and used self-reported ethnic status.

Julie Stanborough, deputy director for health analysis and life events at ONS, said, “Further research is required to investigate the reasons for the differences. However, these results reveal important patterns in life expectancy and mortality by ethnic group which are complex but nevertheless consistent with most previous studies.”

Cancers and circulatory diseases accounted for 61% of deaths among men and 53% of those among women in the study and were therefore a major influence on the differences in life expectancy seen between ethnic groups.

The analysis found:

- Statistically significant higher age standardised cancer mortality among white men and women than among black and Asian ethnic groups, and
- Statistically significant higher age standardised mortality from circulatory (heart and related) diseases among Indian, Bangladeshi, and mixed ethnicity men and among Pakistani, Indian, and mixed women than among white groups.

Commenting on the report, Veena Raleigh, senior fellow at the healthcare think tank the King’s Fund, said, “The headline life expectancy figures bely a complex picture of different ethnic groups being disproportionately affected by different causes of death. For example, white groups had the highest death rates from cancer. In contrast, south Asian and black ethnic groups had significantly higher death rates from diabetes and some cardiovascular diseases, such as heart attack and stroke.

“These results predate the pandemic, and we know that ethnic minority groups suffered a disproportionate number of deaths from covid-19. The severe impact of the pandemic has reversed the previous picture for some ethnic minority groups, who now have higher overall mortality than the white population.”

Raghib Ali, senior clinical research associate at the MRC Epidemiology Unit at Cambridge University, said, “The findings are particularly surprising for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, as these groups are more likely to be deprived, and deprivation is a key driver of life expectancy.

“This paradox may be explained by the different relationship between deprivation and key risk factors such as tobacco use, alcohol use, and obesity as well as with educational attainment. Also, elderly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are much more likely to live in multigenerational households—a living arrangement which is generally advantageous to health—but tragically has had the opposite effect

with covid (as well as with influenza and other respiratory infections in the past.”

- 1 Office for National Statistics. Ethnic differences in life expectancy and mortality from selected causes in England and Wales: 2011 to 2014. 26 Jul 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/ethnicdifferencesinlifeexpectancyandmortalityfromselectedcausesinenglandandwales/2011to2014>.