

# Life expectancy: An international view



**"some countries have seen the opposite trend to the UK"**

**Richard Wright**  
rwright@bwcigroup.com



In the quarter 2 2018 edition of Bandwagon we noted how the UK has been experiencing a slowdown in mortality improvements since 2011. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) subsequently released the results of an international study, which looked at recent changes in life expectancy. The ONS's study suggests that the UK's recent experience is not unique.

## Survey results

The ONS analysed data from the Human Mortality Database. The results indicate that over half of the 20 countries considered had seen a reduction in the rate of mortality improvements in the last 6 years relative to the preceding 6 year period. The analysis is not saying that life expectancy is reducing (at least not yet), but that the rate of improvement relative to the previous 6 year period, is lower. Improvements in life expectancy are measured in terms of weeks per year over a person's entire lifetime from birth.

The charts show the change in the average annual increase in life expectancy at birth for males and females over two successive 6 year periods.

For both males and females, the UK has experienced the greatest slowdown amongst the 20 countries considered; annual rises in life expectancy reduced by 13.1 weeks for males and 11.7 weeks for females, relative to the previous 6 years. The USA was not too far behind. However, what is particularly intriguing is that a minority of countries have seen the opposite trend to the UK, with an increase in the rate of improvement in life expectancy.

## What's behind this?

A deeper analysis of the data points to the slowdown in the mortality improvements in particular generations as contributing to the patterns being observed. For example, the 65 to 79 age bracket experienced a slowdown in the majority of countries considered.

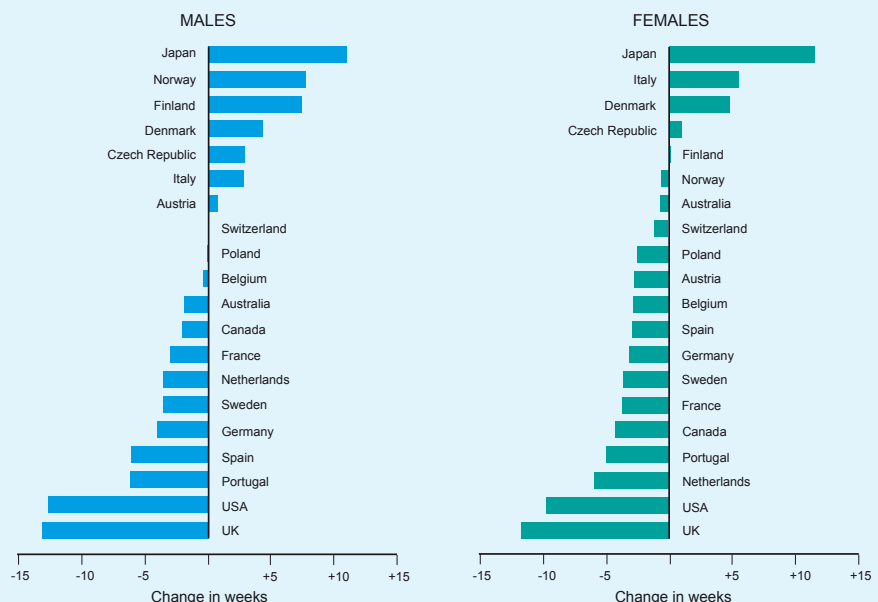
The study does not provide an analysis of the reasons for these particularly noticeable reductions amongst this age group. However, it could be a reflection of a slowing rate of medical advances during the 21st century, compared to that during the 20th century. Additionally, the reduction in smoking rates, which has contributed to improving life expectancies in the past, may no longer be having an effect. This is because there is limited capacity for further reductions in smoking rates.

## Are slower improvements the new norm?

As many of the countries experiencing significant slowdowns in life expectancy improvements are highly developed, might this be a natural occurrence as economies and populations mature? The data does not support this; Japan (the country with the highest life expectancy in the world) showed the largest increase in the rate of improvement in life expectancy.

The slowing down of life expectancy improvements in the UK has had significant media coverage. However, realistically it is unlikely to continue increasing indefinitely. Perhaps one of the key points to take away from the ONS report is that looking beyond our borders at the changes that are occurring elsewhere is vitally important in an increasingly connected world.

Change in life expectancy at birth between successive 6 year periods



**Location** PO Box 68, Albert House  
South Esplanade, St Peter Port  
Guernsey, GY1 3BY  
**Tel** +44 (0)1481 728432  
**Fax** +44 (0)1481 724082  
**Web** www.bwcigroup.com

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/changingtrends inmortalityaninternationalcomparison/2000to2016>