Introduction

Research has established life expectancy and mortality differences between Western European countries and has now started to explore lifespan variation differences. Lifespan variation adds to life expectancy by summarising the inequality surrounding age of death that a population faces. Countries that tackle premature mortality generally have decreasing lifespan variation but this is the first study to compare and statistically assess when and to what extent trends in lifespan variation have changed across Western Europe. Lifespan variation was measured using the formula that quantifies changes to trends, and calculates the time points at which a change in trend is statistically significant by testing whether a multi-segmented line is a significantly better fit than a straight or less-segmented line. It is used to evaluate both the time point and the level of change across a time series for any given health outcome. Detailed information on the joinpoint regression programme has been experienced a slightly increasing trend since 1989 (95% CI 0.0 to 0.1). Finland has had a decreasing trend in lifespan variation in order to calculate annual percentage change (APC).

Results

Figure 1 shows the modelled trends for lifespan variation for men in all 17 Western European countries, grouped by geographic area. The equivalent graph for women is provided as a Supplementary figure.

Men

Since 1950 there has been a general decreasing trend for lifespan variation amongst men in Western Europe with some increases for short periods before returning to a downward trend. Rapid decreases in trends were found in the years immediately after 1950 with the steepest decline of −4.1% (95% CI −5.0 to −3.2) found in Spain between 1950 and 1954. However more recently, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland and Finland have changed to a flattening or slightly increasing trend that has yet to be reversed.

Acknowledging the sometimes wide confidence intervals, Scotland has been experiencing a slightly increasing trend since 1989 (95% CI 1986–1993) with an APC of 0.1% (−0.0 to 0.1). Finland has had a
slight increasing trend since 2002 (1981–2007) with an APC 0.1% 
(−0.4 to 0.5), Northern Ireland since 1997 (1992–2001) with an 
APC 0.2% (0.0–0.4%) and Ireland since 2007 (1983–2007) with an 
APC 1.6% (−1.5 to 4.7).

Women

For women, all countries show a general decreasing trend since 1950, 
with some short periods of increasing lifespan variation, before 
returning to a decreasing trend. A similar rapid decline in lifespan 
variation is found for women, as was found for men, in the years 
immediately after 1950 with Spain again having the steepest decrease 
of −4.5% (−5.3 to −3.7%) between 1950 and 1954.

Lifespan variation shows a strong converging trend for women in 
Western Europe, not evident for men. However, Scotland is an 
exception as it has had higher levels of lifespan variation and a 
greater slowing in the rate of change, slowing from −1.9% (−2.3 to 
−1.6) between 1950 and 1956 to −0.1% (−0.3 to 0.2) now. This is in 
contrast to its nearest neighbour, England and Wales which has 
experienced an APC decrease of −1.3% (−1.6 to −0.9) between 1950 
and 1956 to an APC decrease of −0.4% (−0.4 to −0.4) between 1970 
and 2011. Scotland has had the highest level of lifespan variation for 22 
of the past 59 years, and is the only country to still have a lifespan 
variation of over 10 years amongst women (10.4 years in 2011). 

From the modelled data women in Sweden, The Netherlands, 
Norway, Finland, Spain and Switzerland have all had the lowest 
level of lifespan variation, and thus occupied the most favourable 
position, at more than one time point between 1950 and 2009. This 
finding is in contrast to men, for whom Sweden has consistently had 
the lowest lifespan variation.

Discussion

This study adds to the growing body of research that is concerned 
with the timing and extent of change in trends for population health 
and mortality inequalities across Western Europe. It is the first to 
formally identify, quantify and compare changes for trends in 
lifespan variation, a novel measure of mortality inequality.

Most countries have been able to sustain a decreasing trend; 
however, lifespan variation for men in Scotland, Finland, Northern 
Ireland and Ireland has diverged to a flattening or slight increasing 
trend, with change occurring in recent, but different, years. The 
trends identified for Scotland and Finland are consistent with 
existing research which identified rising lifespan variation for the 
whole population in Scotland and across all social classes, except 
the highest, in Finland.4,6 For women across Western European 
countries, a strong converging trend is found, with the exception 
of Scotland where the level of lifespan variation has been higher and 
the rate of change has slowed.

These trends may be partly explained by continuing high levels of 
premature working age mortality, particularly amongst those 
socioeconomically deprived.6 Evidence for Scotland demonstrates 
high rates of premature deaths caused by violence, suicides and 
alcohol and substance abuse which are associated with rising 
socioeconomic inequality in mortality between 1981 and 2001, and 
Scotland’s slow improvements in life expectancy.1,9 In Finland, 
external causes of death amongst working age adults partly 
explained diverging trends in lifespan variation by social class.5 The 
contribution premature mortality has made to changes in 
lifespan variation in Scotland has not yet been estimated.

Future research could apply decomposition analysis to calculate 
the amount each age and cause of death contributed to the change in 
lifespan variation.6 This may identify the drivers of health gaps and 
gives an indication as to which public health actions should be taken 
to reduce them.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at EURPUB online.
Acknowledgements

We thank the University of California, Berkeley (USA), and Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (Germany) for the HMD data which are available at www.mortality.org or www.humanmortality.de.

Funding

R.S. is funded by a UK Medical Research Council (MRC) 1+3 PhD studentship. A.L. is funded by the MRC (MC_UU_12017/5) and the Chief Scientist Office (SPHSU2). F.P. is funded by the MRC (MC_UU_12017/7).

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

Key points

- Lifespan variation, the amount of inequality surrounding age at death, is generally found to be lower in the countries with higher life expectancy and that have been more successful at reducing premature mortality.
- Trends for lifespan variation in some Western European countries have been studied but changes to trends have not been statistically assessed and compared, this research aims to fill this gap and analyse changes to trends since 1950.
- Most countries in Western Europe have sustained a decreasing trend in lifespan variation with the exception of men in Scotland, Finland, Northern Ireland and Ireland that have diverged towards increasing inequality, but at different time points.

References