

Cutting welfare to protect the economy ignores lessons of history, researchers claim

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Dinner time in St Pancras Workhouse, London, 1911. Workhouses, established under the Poor Law Amendment Act, were part of a Victorian programme that cut universal welfare support and stigmatised many poor people as “unproductive.” Credit: Peter Higginbotham via Wikimedia Commons

Amid ongoing welfare cuts, researchers argue that investment in health and social care have been integral to British economic success since 1600.

Cutting [welfare](#) and social care budgets during times of economic

hardship is an "historically obsolete" strategy that ignores the very roots of British prosperity, a group of Cambridge academics have warned.

Writing in the leading medical journal, *The Lancet*, a team of researchers argue that squeezing health and welfare spending in order to reduce taxes, and on the basis that these are luxuries that can only be afforded when times are good, overlooks a critical lesson of British history – namely that they are central to the nation's economic success.

The authors are all part of a group based at St John's College, University of Cambridge, which is studying the causes of health inequalities and looking at how research in this area can be used to inform policy interventions.

Drawing on recent research, they argue that the concept of a British welfare state, widely thought to have begun after the Second World War, actually dates back to a "precocious welfare system" forged during the reign of Elizabeth I, which was fundamental to England's emergence as "the most dynamic economy in the world".

While the Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that there will be no further welfare savings during the present Parliament beyond those already announced, the paper is directly critical of the continuation of those existing policies, which have reduced welfare spending overall in the name of economic austerity.

Referring to the statement made by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, that "you can only have a strong NHS if you have a strong economy", the authors argue: "The narrow view that spending on the National Health Service and [social care](#) is largely a burden on the economy is blind to the large national return to prosperity that comes from all citizens benefiting from a true sense of social security."

They continue: "There are signs that Theresa May subscribes to the same historically obsolete view. Despite her inaugural statement as Prime Minister, her Chancellor's autumn statement signals continuing austerity with further cuts inflicted on the poor and their children, the vulnerable, and infirm older people."

By contrast, the paper argues that a universalist approach of progressively-funded health and welfare spending is an integral part of economic growth, and something that modern states cannot afford to do without. That conclusion is echoed in a new educational film, developed from work by Simon Szreter, Professor of History & Public Policy at Cambridge and a co-author of the *Lancet* piece.

More information: Simon Szreter et al. Health, welfare, and the state—the dangers of forgetting history, *The Lancet* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)32429-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)32429-1)

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