

INFANT MORTALITY

Infant mortality, the rate at which babies and children of less than one year of age die, reflects the effect of economic and social conditions on the health of mothers and newborns, the social environment, individual lifestyles as well as the characteristics and effectiveness of health systems.

Many studies use infant mortality as a health outcome to examine the effect of a variety of medical and non-medical determinants of health. Although most analyses show that higher health spending tends to be associated with lower infant mortality, the fact that some countries with a high level of health expenditure do not exhibit low levels of infant mortality suggests that more health spending is not necessarily required to obtain better results.

Overview

In most OECD countries, infant mortality is low and there is little difference in rates. In 2013, the average in OECD countries was less than four deaths per 1 000 live births, with rates being the lowest in Iceland, Slovenia, Finland, Estonia and Japan. A small group of OECD countries still have comparatively high infant mortality (Mexico, Turkey and Chile), although in these three countries infant mortality has reduced considerably over the past few decades.

In some of the emerging economies (India, South Africa and Indonesia), infant mortality remains above 20 deaths per 1 000 live births. In India, one-in-twenty-five children die before their first birthday, although the rates have fallen sharply over the past few decades. Infant mortality rates have also reduced greatly in Indonesia.

In the United States, the reduction in infant mortality has been slower than in most other OECD countries. In 2000, the US rate was below the OECD average, but it is now higher.

In OECD countries, around two-thirds of the deaths that occur during the first year of life are neonatal deaths (i.e., during the first four weeks). Birth defects, prematurity and other conditions arising during pregnancy are the main factors contributing to neonatal mortality in developed countries. With an increasing number of women deferring childbearing and a rise in multiple births linked with fertility treatments, the number of pre-term births has tended to increase. In a number of higher-income countries, this has contributed to a levelling-off of the downward trend in infant mortality over the past few years. For deaths beyond a month (post-neonatal mortality), there tends to be a greater range of causes – the most common being SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome), birth defects, infections and accidents.

Definition

The infant mortality rate is the number of deaths of children under one year of age, expressed per 1 000 live births.

Comparability

Some of the international variation in infant mortality rates is related to variations in registering practices for very premature infants. While some countries register all live births including very small babies with low odds of survival, several countries apply a minimum threshold of a gestation period of 22 weeks (or a birth weight threshold of 500 grams) for babies to be registered as live births. To remove this data comparability limitation, the data are based on a minimum threshold of 22 weeks of gestation period (or 500 grams birth weight) for a majority of OECD countries that have provided these data. However, the data for some countries (e.g. Canada and Australia) continue to be based on all registered live births, resulting in some over-estimation.

Sources

- OECD (2015), *OECD Health Statistics* (Database).

Further information

Analytical publications

- OECD (2015), *How's Life? Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2011), *Doing Better for Families*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2009), *Doing Better for Children*, OECD Publishing.

Statistical publications

- OECD (2015), *Health at a Glance*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2014), *Health at a Glance: Asia/Pacific*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2014), *Health at a Glance: Europe*, OECD Publishing.

Websites

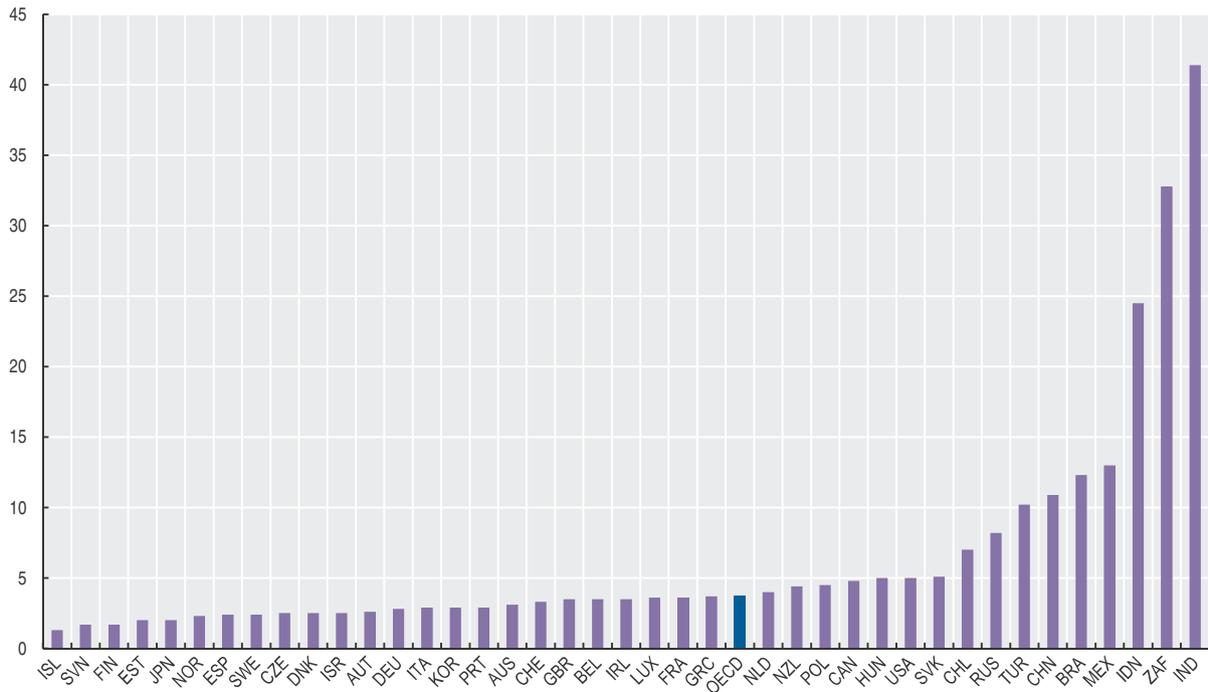
- Health at a Glance (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/health/healthataglance.
- OECD Health Statistics (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/health-statistics.htm.



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Infant mortality rates

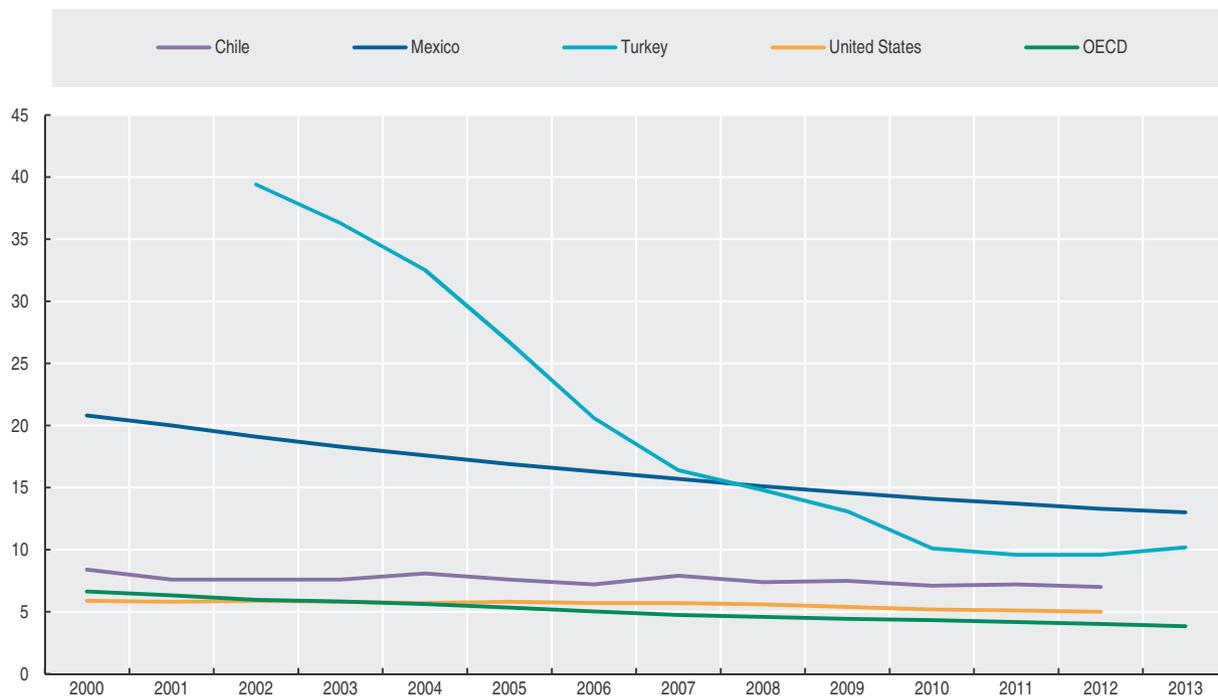
Deaths per 1 000 live births, 2013 or latest available year



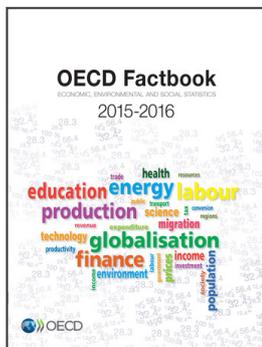
1 2 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933335136>

Trend in infant mortality in selected OECD countries

Deaths per 1 000 live births, 2000-13 or latest available period



1 2 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933335775>



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