

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Life expectancy at birth continues to increase steadily in OECD countries, going up on average by 3 to 4 months each year, with no sign of slowing down. These gains in longevity can be attributed to a number of factors including improved lifestyle and better education, and progress in health care.

Higher national income (as measured by GDP per capita) is generally associated with higher life expectancy at birth,

although the relationship is less pronounced at higher levels of national income.

Life expectancy in OECD countries varies not only by gender, but also by socio-economic status as measured, for instance, by education level. A higher education level not only provides the means to improve the socio-economic conditions in which people live and work, but may also promote the adoption of healthier lifestyles and facilitate access to appropriate health care.

Overview

In 2013, life expectancy on average across OECD countries reached 80.5 years, an increase of more than ten years since 1970. Japan, Spain and Switzerland lead a large group of 25 OECD countries in which life expectancy at birth now exceeds 80 years.

Although the life expectancy in emerging economies such as India, Indonesia, Brazil and China remains well below the OECD average, these economies have achieved considerable gains in longevity over the past decades, with the level converging rapidly towards the OECD average. There has been much less progress in countries such as South Africa (due mainly to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS), and Russia (due mainly to the impact of the economic transition in the 1990s and a rise in risk increasing behaviours among men, notably rising alcohol consumption).

The gender gap in life expectancy stood at 5.3 years on average across OECD countries in 2013, with life expectancy reaching 77.8 years among men and 83.1 years among women. While the gender gap in life expectancy increased substantially in many OECD countries during the 1970s and early 1980s to reach a peak of almost seven years in the mid-1980s, it has narrowed during the past 25 years, reflecting higher gains in life expectancy among men than among women.

On average among 16 OECD countries for which recent data are available, people with the highest level of education can expect to live six years longer than people with the lowest level of education at age 30 (53 years versus 47 years). These differences in life expectancy by education level are particularly pronounced for men, with an average gap of almost eight years. The differences are especially large in Central and Eastern European countries (Slovak Republic, Estonia, Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary), where the life expectancy gap between higher and lower educated men is more than ten years. This is largely explained by the greater prevalence of risk factors among lower educated men, such as tobacco and alcohol use. Differences in other countries such as Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway are less pronounced.

Definition

Life expectancy at birth measures how long, on average, people would live based on a given set of age-specific death rates. However, the actual age-specific death rates of any particular birth cohort cannot be known in advance. If age-specific death rates are falling (as has been the case over the past decades), actual life spans will be higher than life expectancy calculated with current death rates.

Comparability

The methodology used to calculate life expectancy can vary slightly between countries. This can change a country's estimates by a fraction of a year. Life expectancy at birth for the total population is calculated by the OECD Secretariat for all OECD countries, using the unweighted average of life expectancy of men and women.

Sources

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

Further information

Analytical publications

- OECD (2015), *How's Life? Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2010), *Health Care Systems: Efficiency and Policy Settings*, OECD Publishing.

Statistical publications

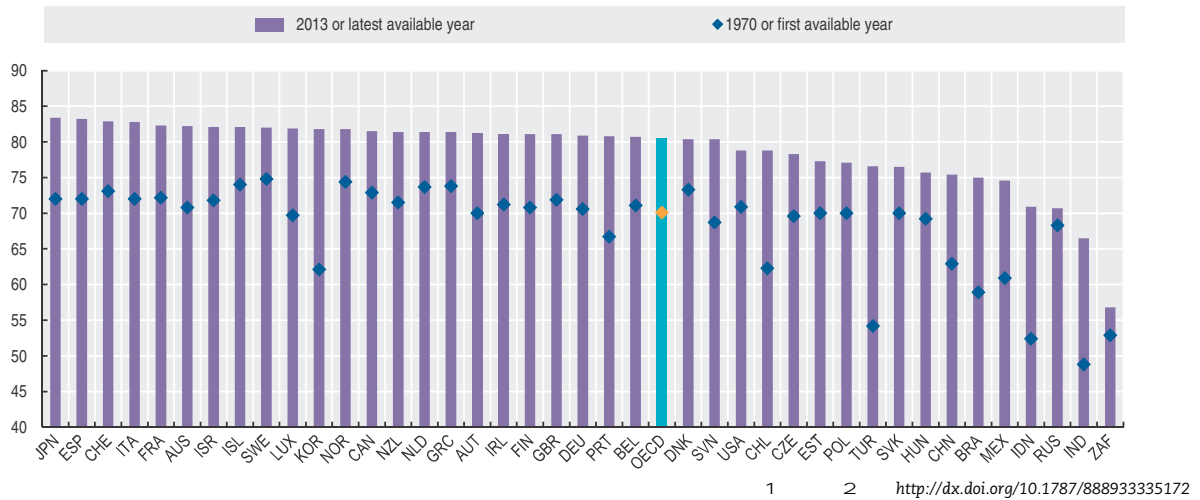
- OECD (2015), *Health at a Glance*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2014), *Health at a Glance: Asia/Pacific*, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2014), *Health at a Glance: Europe*, OECD Publishing.

Websites

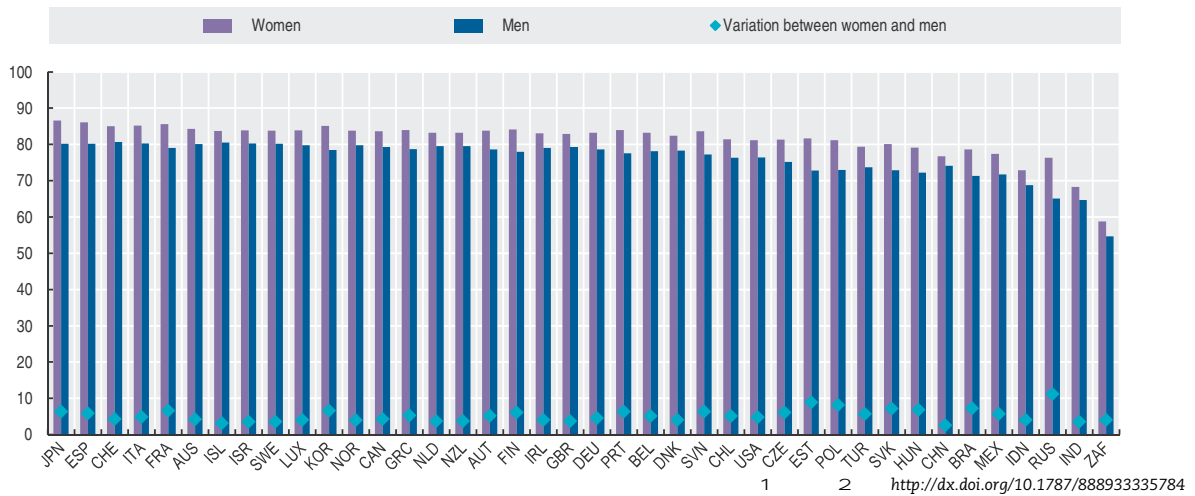
- Health at a Glance (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/health/healthataglance.
- OECD Health Statistics (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/health-statistics.htm.



Life expectancy at birth
Number of years

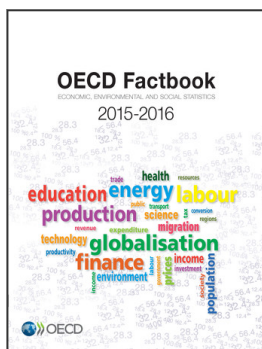


Variation in life expectancy by sex
Number of years, 2013 or latest available year



Gap in life expectancy at age 30 by sex and educational level
Gap in years, 2012 or latest year





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