

Life expectancy has increased in EU countries over the past decades, but progress has slowed down in recent years in many countries. The COVID-19 pandemic will result in a further stagnation or possible decline in life expectancy in 2020 in those countries that have been most impacted.

In the EU as a whole, life expectancy at birth reached 81 years in 2018. Spain and Italy had the highest life expectancy among EU countries, with life expectancy reaching over 83 years in 2018. Life expectancy at birth exceeds 80 years in almost two-thirds of EU countries, but still remains at only around 75 years in Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania (Figure 3.1).

Women continue to live longer than men in all EU countries – on average almost 6 years longer – although this gap has narrowed by about one year since 2000 as men's life expectancy increased more rapidly than women's in most countries. The gender gap in life expectancy is particularly large in Latvia and Lithuania, where women live almost 10 years longer than men, and is also quite large in Estonia (nearly 9 years). These gender differences in life expectancy are partly due to greater exposure to risk factors among men, particularly greater tobacco consumption, excessive alcohol consumption and less healthy diet, resulting in higher death rates from heart diseases, various types of cancer and other diseases. Men are also more likely to die from violent deaths, such as suicide and accidents.

Until recently, life expectancy was rising fairly rapidly and steadily across EU countries, increasing by about 2.5 years per decade on average. While some countries have registered fairly large gains in life expectancy during the last decade (notably Baltic countries like Estonia), gains in life expectancy have slowed down markedly in some Western European countries like Spain, France and Germany even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The gains in life expectancy at birth in these countries have been limited to only about half a year between 2011 and 2018. The slowdown has been particularly marked among older people (Figure 3.2).

The severe flu seasons of 2014/15, 2016/17 and 2017/18 have contributed to substantial excess mortality in those years, especially among older people. A slowdown in the reduction in death rates from circulatory diseases, which was previously the main factor driving life expectancy gains, also contributed to the recent slowdown in many EU countries (OECD/The King's Fund, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic will further contribute to the stagnation in life expectancy in 2020 – and even possible

reduction – in those European countries severely hit, such as Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The impact of COVID-19 on mortality and life expectancy will depend on both infection rates and fatality rates of people infected during the year. According to some estimations at the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 might lead to a reduction in life expectancy in all the countries where life expectancy was already high and where the infection rate will exceed 1% or 2% of the population (IIASA, 2020). In France, preliminary estimates based on the number of COVID-19 deaths until the end of June 2020 indicate that life expectancy may fall by 0.2 year for men and 0.1 year for women in 2020, if the number of deaths were to stabilise at that level (The Conversation, 2020). In addition to direct deaths related to COVID-19, the number of indirect deaths may increase due to disruptions to patients' care for other conditions, or may decrease due to lower mortality from other causes such as road accidents.

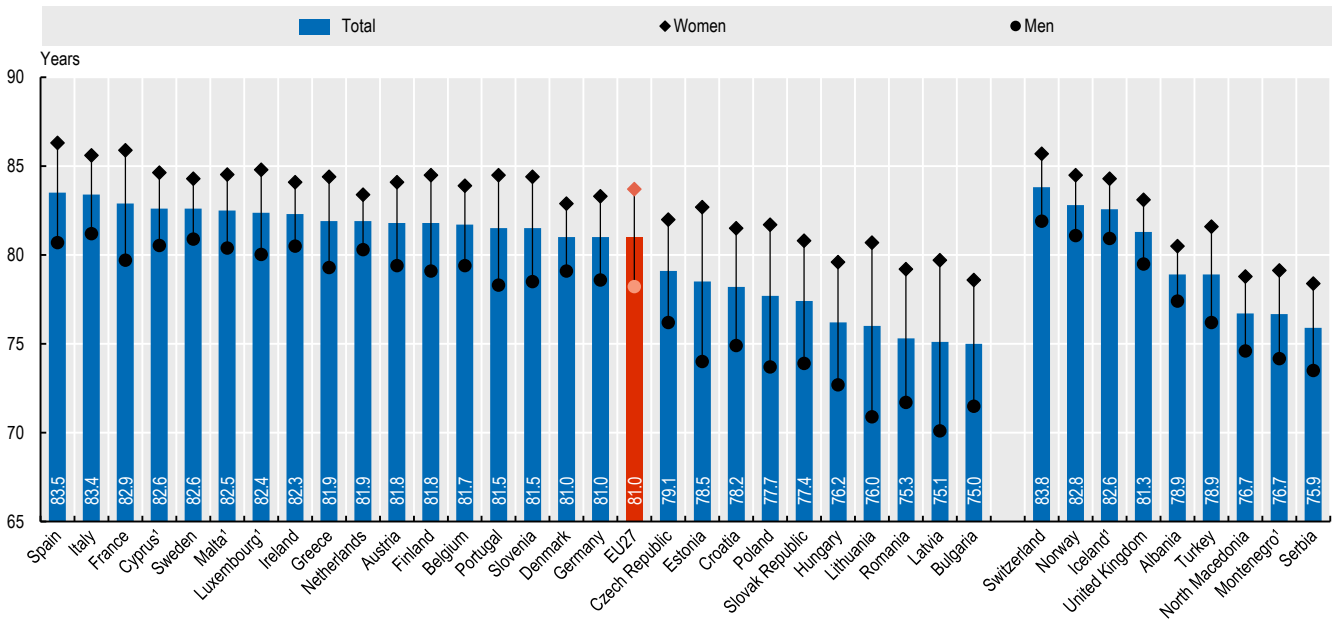
Definition and comparability

Life expectancy at birth measures the average number of years that a person can expect to live based on current mortality rates (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, actual life spans will be, on average, higher than life expectancy calculated with current death rates.

References

- IIASA (2020), "Assessing the potential impact of COVID-19 on life expectancy", Working Paper, WP-20-005, May 2020.
- Raleigh, V. (2019), "Trends in life expectancy in EU and other OECD countries: Why are improvements slowing?" *OECD Health Working Papers*, No. 108, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/223159ab-en>.
- OECD/The King's Fund (2020), *Is Cardiovascular Disease Slowing Improvements in Life Expectancy?: OECD and The King's Fund Workshop Proceedings*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/47a04a11-en>.
- The Conversation (2020), "COVID-19 epidemic: what impact on life expectancy in France?" [Épidémie de COVID-19: quel impact sur l'espérance de vie en France?], June 2020.

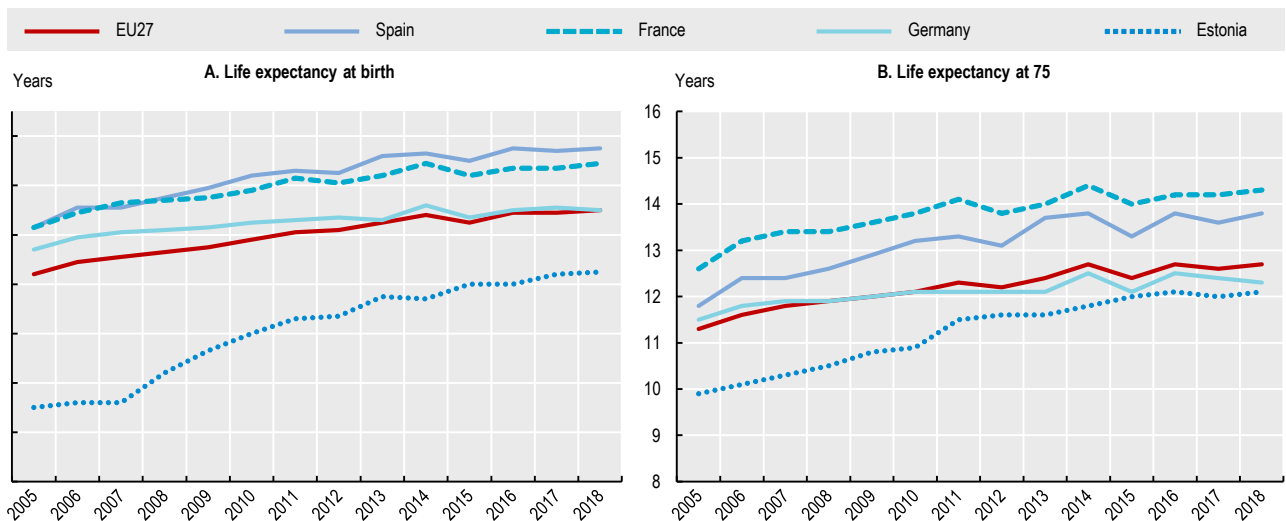
Figure 3.1. Life expectancy at birth, by gender, 2018



Note: The EU average is weighted. 1. Three-year average (2016-18).
Source: Eurostat Database.

StatLink <https://stat.link/042196>

Figure 3.2. Trends in life expectancy, 2005-18



Note: The EU average is weighted.
Source: Eurostat Database.

StatLink <https://stat.link/gsb2oa>



From:
Health at a Glance: Europe 2020
State of Health in the EU Cycle

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/82129230-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/European Union (2020), "Trends in life expectancy", in *Health at a Glance: Europe 2020: State of Health in the EU Cycle*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/da5bba97-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area. Extracts from publications may be subject to additional disclaimers, which are set out in the complete version of the publication, available at the link provided.

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.