

CO1.2: Life expectancy at birth

Definitions and methodology

This indicator uses three main measures to capture life expectancy:

- *Life expectancy at birth*, defined as the average number of years a new-born child would live if prevailing patterns of mortality at the time of its birth were to stay the same throughout their life.
- *Healthy life years (HLY) at birth*, a measure used across the EU and defined as the average number of years that a new-born child can expect to live in a healthy condition *and* free from disability (also called disability-free life expectancy).

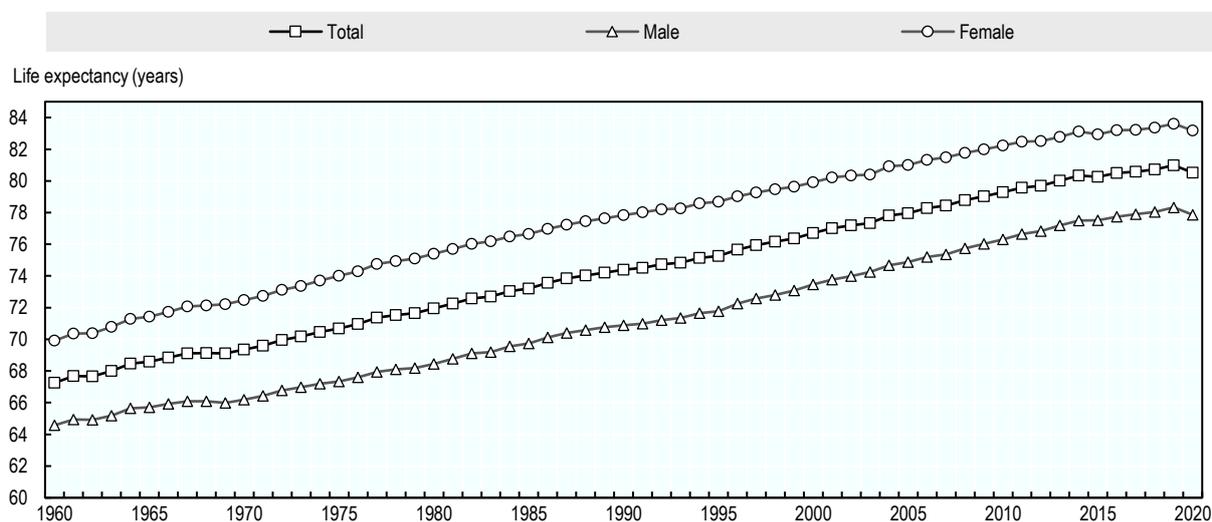
Key findings

OECD countries have made remarkable progress in increasing life expectancies at birth (Chart CO1.2.A). In 2020, the OECD average life expectancy for a new-born girl stood at 83.2 years, just over 13 years longer than the average for a girl born in 1960 (71 years). Similarly, in 2020, the average life expectancy for a new-born boy stood at 77.9 years -- about 13 years longer than the average life expectancy for a boy born in 1960 (65 years).

COVID-19 is expected to have an important effect on life expectancy, due to the high number of deaths this pandemic has caused in many countries. Preliminary data for 2020 suggest that life expectancy dropped in all OECD countries for which data are available, other than in Norway, Japan, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland and Latvia. The annual reduction was particularly large in the United States (-1.6 years), Spain (-1.5), Lithuania and Poland (both -1.3), as well as in Belgium and Italy (both -1.2). Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, gains in life expectancy had been slowing down markedly in a number of OECD countries over the past decade, largely due to a slowdown in improvements in mortality from cardiovascular diseases, a rise in mortality from dementia and bad flu seasons (OECD Health at a Glance, 2021).

Chart CO1.2.A. Trends in life expectancy at birth by gender, 1960-2020

OECD unweighted average life expectancy at birth in years



Note: Unweighted average across 38 OECD countries; the average is trended backward from 2001 to be consistent over time. 2020 data are estimates based on 2020 data available for 29 countries and 2019 data for 9 countries.

Source: [OECD Health Statistics](#)

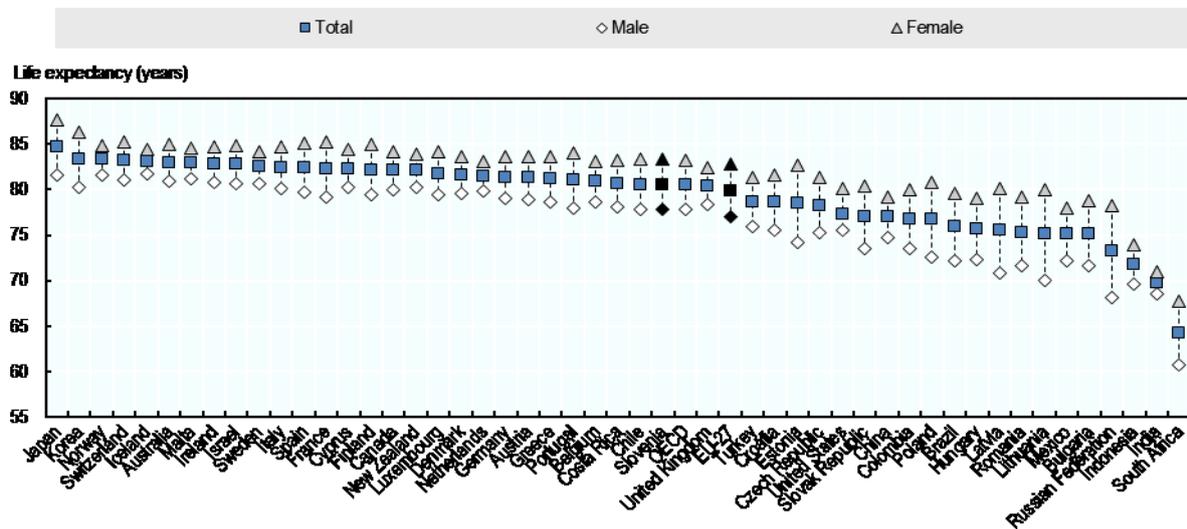
Other relevant indicators: CO1.1: Infant mortality rate; CO1.6: Disease-based indicators: prevalence of diabetes and asthma among children; CO1.7: Obesity among children aged 10 and CO1.8: Regular smokers among 15 year olds by gender.

Girls tend to live longer than boys, but the size of the gender gap has varies across countries and over time. In 2020, a new-born girl could expect to live, on average across OECD countries, around 5.3 years longer than a new-born boy. This is equal to the gender gap in 1960 (5.3 years). However, the gender gap has changed over time. While the gap increased substantially during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (reaching a peak of 7.0 years in 1991), it has narrowed over the past 30 years. This “narrowing” pattern reflects in part a reduction in gender differences in risky behaviours such as smoking and alcohol use.

In 2020, female life expectancy at birth ranged from 78.0 years in Mexico to 87.7 years in Japan. Girls born in Australia, Finland, France, Korea, Spain and Switzerland could also expect to live particularly long lives (more than 85 years). For boys, life expectancy at birth ranged from a low of 70.1 years in Lithuania to a high of 81.7 years in Iceland. Cross-country differences in life expectancy, though still high, have declined over the past 50 or so years. This reduction is mainly due to important gains in life expectancy in countries like Korea and Turkey (21 and 24 years since 1970, respectively). Catch-up gains in these countries are partly explained by substantial declines in infant mortality rates (see CO1.1).

Chart CO1.2.B. Life expectancy at birth by gender, 2020 or latest available year

Average number of years a newborn infant would live if prevailing patterns of mortality at the time of its birth were to stay the same throughout its life



Note: 2019 instead of 2020 for Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Switzerland, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Russian Federation, South Africa, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta; 2018 for Romania.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to « Cyprus » relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the “Cyprus issue”;

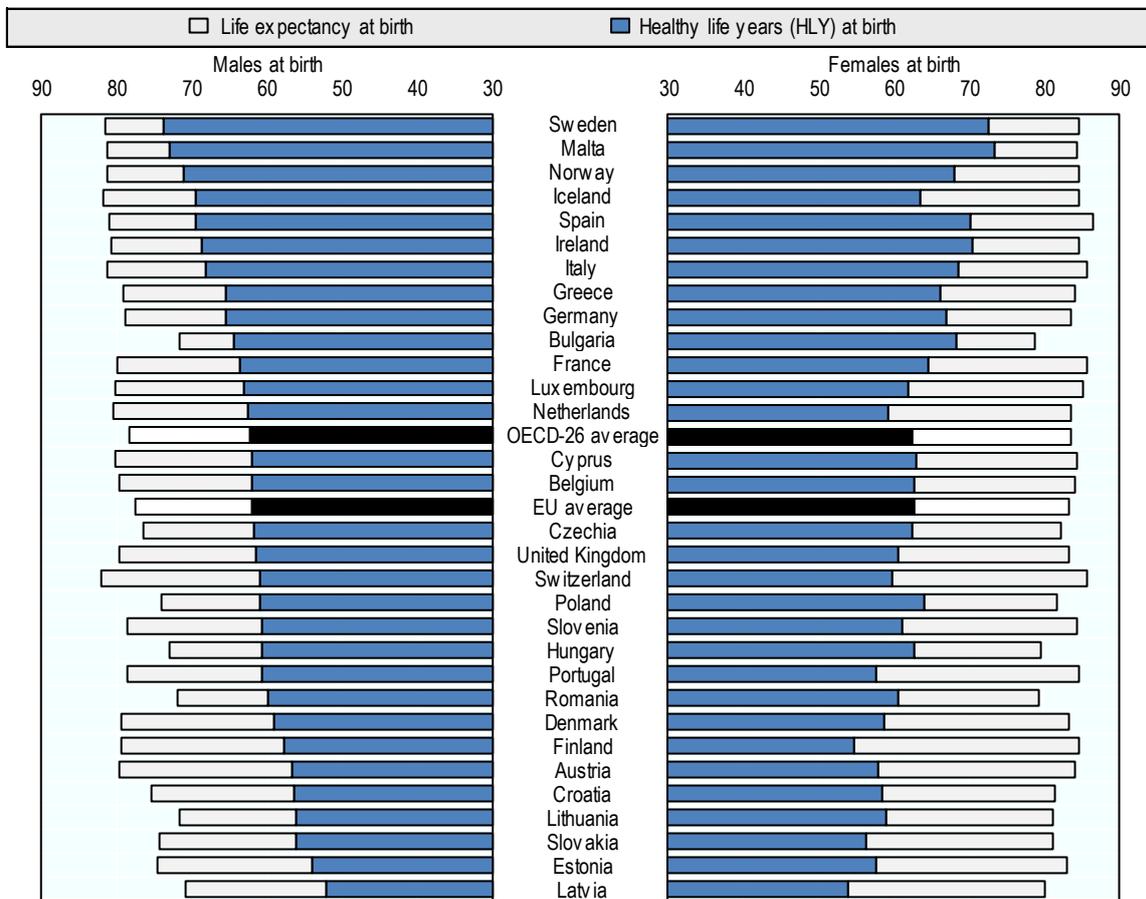
Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Source: [OECD Health Statistics](#); [Eurostat Health Statistics](#)

Estimates of Healthy Life Years (HLY), a measure used across the EU, indicate that both new-born girls and new-born boys in European OECD countries can expect to live approximately 62.5 and 62.3 years free from disabilities that limit their daily activities (Chart CO1.2.C). The relatively small gender gap here thus suggests that, although women in European countries will live longer lives, these may not necessarily be lives of greater quality. There remains, however, substantial variation in expected Healthy Life Years across countries. While in Sweden both boys and girls can expect to live around 70 years or more in good health and free from disability, in Latvia the number of years a new-born can expect to live free of disability is between 52-54 years.

Chart CO1.2.C. Life expectancy at birth and Healthy Life Years (HLY) at birth, 2019 or latest available year

Average number of years a new-born infant can expect to live if prevailing patterns of mortality at the time of its birth were to stay the same throughout its life (life expectancy at birth), and average number of years that a new-born infant can expect to live in a healthy condition and free from disability (HLY).



Note: 2018 instead of 2019 for Iceland and the United Kingdom.

Source: Eurostat

Comparability and data issues

The data on life expectancy at birth shown in Charts CO1.2.A and CO1.2.B have been taken from two sources: OECD Health Statistics for OECD and OECD key partner countries, and Eurostat for non-OECD European countries. The OECD data comes from national statistics. Some of the international variation in life expectancy at birth may be due to variations among countries in registering mortality rates.

Chart CO1.2.C presents data on Life Expectancy and Healthy Life Years (HLY), which have been taken from Eurostat. Life expectancy and HLY are calculated by Eurostat using mortality statistics from Eurostat's demographic database and data on self-reported disability from EU-SILC. The question used for constructing the measure is: "For at least the past six months, to what extent have you been limited because of a health problem in activities people usually do? Would you say you have been: severely limited? / limited but not severely? / not limited at all?". Those answering "severely limited" or "limited but not severely" are considered as living in an 'unhealthy' condition, while those answering "not limited at all?" are considered as 'healthy'. For more information on the data and methods used in the calculation of the HLY data, see the [Eurostat website](#).

Sources and further reading:

OECD Health Statistics (www.oecd.org/health/healthdata);

OECD Health at a Glance 2021 (<https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance/>);