

VII. LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH

International goals

Countries should aim to achieve by 2005 a life expectancy at birth greater than 70 years and by 2015 a life expectancy at birth greater than 75 years. In addition, countries with the highest levels of mortality should aim to achieve by 2005 a life expectancy at birth greater than 65 years and by 2015 a life expectancy at birth greater than 70 years (ICPD Programme of Action, para. 8.5).

... By the year 2000, a life expectancy of not less than 60 years in any country (WSSD Programme of Action, para.3(b)).

The Declaration of Alma Ata endorsed the goal of health for all by the year 2000. The global strategy of Health for All by the Year 2000, adopted by the WHO World Health Assembly in 1980, aims to achieve a level of health for all peoples in all countries which would permit them to work productively and participate actively in the social life of their community.

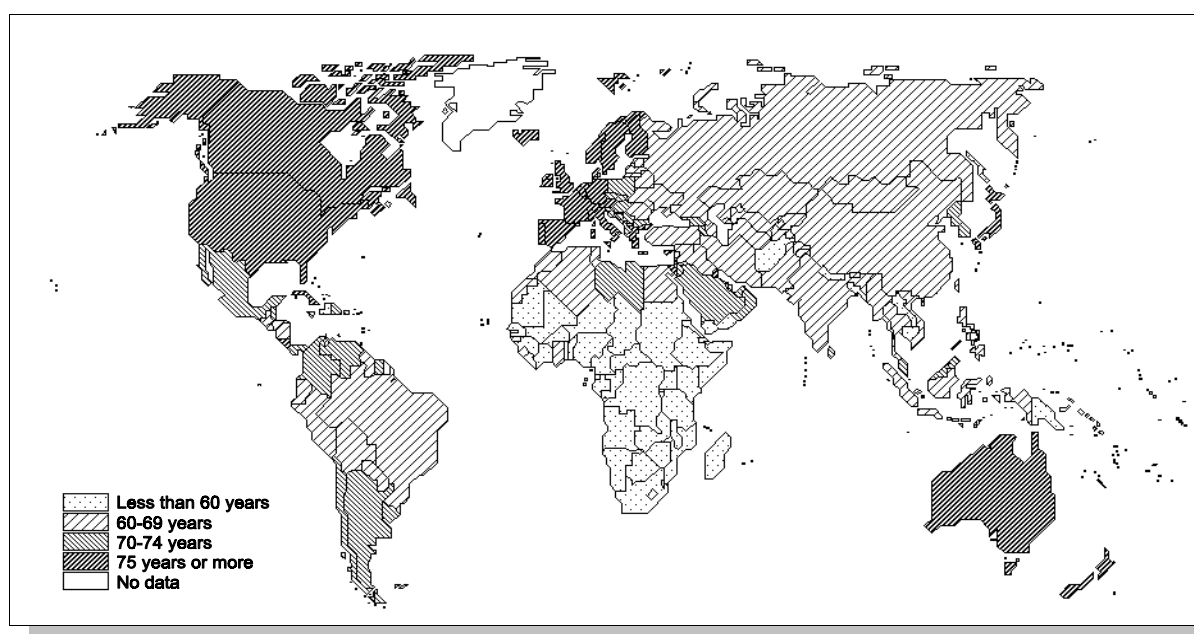
DEFINITION

Life expectancy at birth is defined as the average number of years that a newborn could expect to live if he or she were to pass through life subject to the age-specific mortality rates of a given period.

RECENT SITUATION

The past half century of improvement in life expectancy at birth, both for developing and developed countries, has been a remarkable demographic and social achievement. Life expectancy at birth is 65 years (63 years for males and 68 for females). Average life expectancy at birth has increased by nearly 20 years since 1950, with every region of the world benefiting. However, as recently exhibited by a number of countries, mortality declines are not irreversible. In parts of Eastern Europe and the former USSR, adult mortality, particularly for men, rose during the 1980s and early 1990s. New infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, have emerged while others have re-emerged and quickly spread in a mobile world. Civil strife continues to cost lives in all regions.

As of 1995-2000, slightly over 70 per cent of all countries have achieved the year-2000 goal of a life expectancy at birth of 60 years or more (table VII.1). In fact, 45 per cent have already attained the year-2005 goal of 70 years, and about one fifth have achieved the year-2015 goal of 75 years. Of the nearly 30 per cent of all countries that have not yet reached the goal for the year 2000, most are African.

Figure VII.1. Life expectancy at birth, 1995-2000 (both sexes)

Source: *World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.XIII.9).
NOTE: Estimates are not presented for countries or areas with populations under 150,000.

All countries in the more developed regions have achieved the life expectancy goal of 60 years by year 2000, and over half have achieved the 2015 goal. Yet, one fifth of the countries (8 countries) have still to reach the goal for 2005, and about one quarter (11 countries), the goal for 2015. These countries are concentrated in Eastern Europe, including Russia. In sharp contrast to the more developed regions, nearly two fifths of the countries in less developed regions have not achieved the 2000 goal. A large majority of the least developed countries have not achieved the 2000 goal, and only 2 countries (4 per cent) have reached the 2005 goal. Four fifths of African countries and over one tenth of the developing Asian and Oceanic countries have not achieved the 2000 goals; however, nearly all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have. Only one African country has achieved the goal for 2015. About one fifth of Latin American and Caribbean countries and about one tenth of Asian and Oceanic countries have already reached the 2015 goal.

Figure VII.2 shows life expectancy for individual countries by country ranking and region. The distribution for the more developed regions is more rectangular, indicating smaller intraregional disparities. Differences in life expectancy at birth among countries within Africa are larger than in the other regions.

Nearly two thirds of the world population live in countries where life expectancy at birth is between 60 and 70 years (fig. VII.3). About 15 per cent of the population (800 million people) live in countries where life expectancy at birth is less than 60 years, and a similar percentage live in countries where life expectancy at birth is more than 75 years.

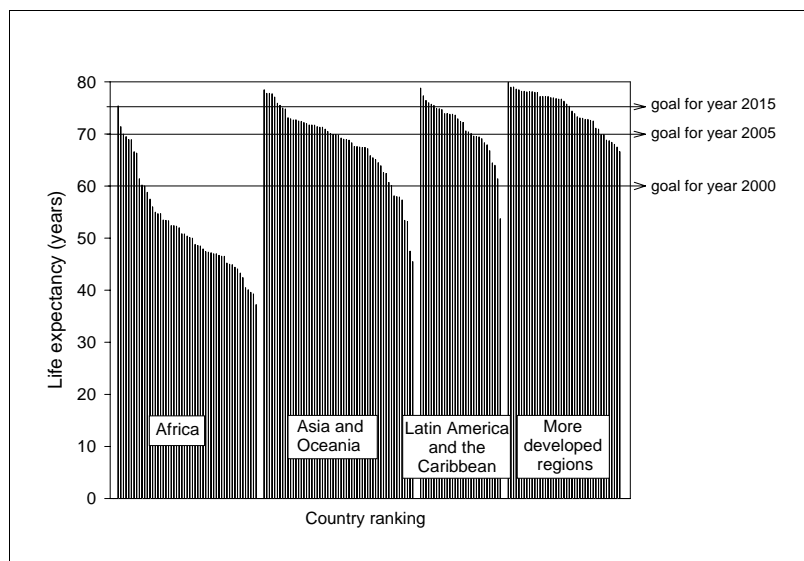
Table VII.1. Distribution of countries according to life expectancy at birth, 1995-2000

	Percentage of countries with life expectancy at birth of:					Number of countries
	More than 75 years	70-75 years	60-70 years	Less than 60 years	Total	
World	21	24	27	28	100	184
More developed regions	56	26	19	0	100	43
Less developed regions	10	24	30	36	100	141
Least developed countries	0	4	11	84	100	45
Africa	2	2	17	79	100	53
Asia and Oceania ^a	12	33	40	14	100	57
Latin America and the Caribbean	19	45	32	3	100	31

Source: *World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.XII.9).

NOTE: Excludes countries and areas with populations under 150,000. Due to rounding, the sum of the subcategories may not be equal to 100 per cent.

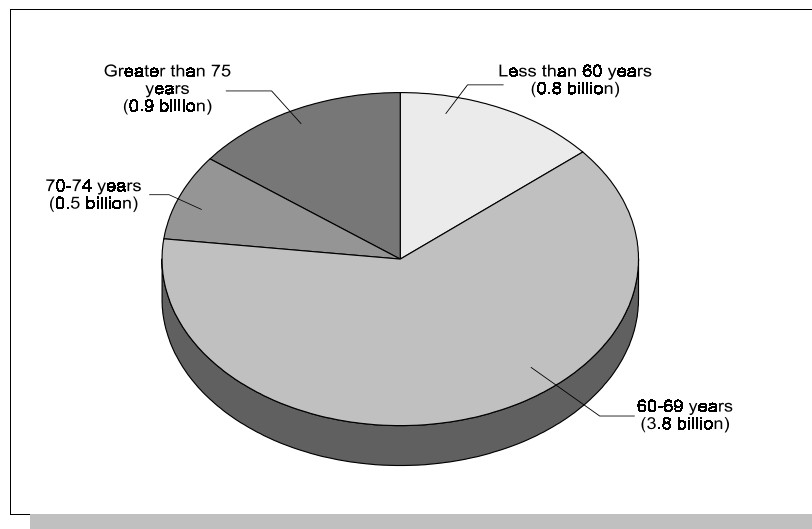
^a Excluding Japan, Australia and New Zealand, which are included in the more developed regions.

**Figure VII.2.** Life expectancy at birth, 1995-2000, by country ranking and region

Source: *World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.XIII.9).

NOTE: Bars show level of life expectancy at birth for individual countries.

Figure VII.3. Distribution of world population by life expectancy at birth, 1995-2000



Source: *World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.XIII.9).

SOURCES OF DATA, COVERAGE AND QUALITY

Estimates of life expectancy at birth are calculated and biennially updated by the Population Division of the United Nations Secretariat, within the framework of the official United Nations world population estimates and projections prepared by the Population Division.

Original data sources include vital registration, sample registration systems, surveillance systems, censuses and demographic surveys. Such information is compiled by the United Nations on a regular basis from national sources and publications and from special country questionnaires sent to national statistical offices by the Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat.

For all countries, available data are evaluated and, if necessary, adjusted for incompleteness by the Population Division. Where data on deaths by age are of good quality or where adjustments for age misstatement and incompleteness can be made, the life expectancy at birth can be calculated directly from registered deaths and population counts, which are usually based on census enumerations. When data on deaths by age are unavailable from registration systems or sample surveys, life expectancies at birth are derived through indirect methods based on special questions asked in censuses or demographic surveys and the use of model life-tables.

Life expectancy at birth is based on age-specific mortality rates for a given year or period of years. Rates are commonly available and tabulated for ages under 1 year, 1-4 years and for 5-year age intervals thereafter, up to a final category, such as 80 years and above (depending on the country). Some data sources yield estimates for only some age groups, so that it may be necessary to employ separate adjustments to data from different sources in order to arrive at a complete and consistent set of rates for a given period of time (also see the discussion of the infant and child mortality rates above, chap. VI).

The Population Division updates and publishes estimates of national life expectancy at birth, by sex, in its *World Population Prospects* series. The most recent publication is *World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision* (United Nations, 1999). Data on life expectancy at birth are available for all countries and areas of the world with populations of 150,000 persons or more. Estimates are presented for 5-year periods from 1950-1955 through 1990-1995. Projected life expectancies are also given through 2050.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Director
Population Division
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations
New York, NY 10017
United States of America
Facsimile: 1-212-963-2147

REFERENCES

- United Nations (1996). *Indicators of Sustainable Development: Framework and Methodologies*. Sales No. E.96.II.A.6.
- _____ (1999). *World Population Prospects: The 1998 Revision, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables*. Sales No. E.99.XIII.9.
- United Nations and Population and Family Study Centre, Flemish Scientific Institute, Brussels (1998). *Report of the Symposium on Health and Mortality*. United Nations, New York.
- WHO (1978). *Primary Health Care. Report of the International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma-Ata, USSR, 6-12 September 1978* (CPHC/ALA/78.10) Geneva.
- _____ (1981). *Global Strategy for Health for All by the Year 2000*. Geneva.