

Responsiveness of public services: Timeliness

Responsive public goods and services explicitly recognise and adapt to the heterogeneity of citizens' needs. Rather than adopting a "one size fits all" approach, responsive service providers implement strategies that segment customer bases, as well as establish mechanisms that proactively seek and take into account citizens' feedback or complaints. In addition, responsive public goods and services seek to be reactive to needs, responding as quickly as possible and minimising delays. Timeliness of service delivery therefore stands out as a responsiveness indicator that particularly affects citizens' confidence in the ability of public services to meet their needs.

Health care

Waiting time is one measure of the timeliness of service delivery. Excessive waiting times may affect not only the perception of the quality of the service but also the expected impact of the service. For example, delaying a medical treatment can sometimes lead to adverse health effects and unnecessary hospitalisation at an acute stage. In addition, it can strain the doctor-patient relationship and reduce the trust of citizens in the health system. Still, waiting times may also reflect the fact that, in the absence of any other allocation factor, when services are provided entirely for free, time may become a variable of adjustment in case of limited supply. Among OECD member countries for which data are available, on average, almost 40% of citizens who had been advised to see a specialist reported having to wait more than four weeks before seeing the specialist in 2010 (Figure 9.8). There is, however, significant cross-country variation. The share of citizens waiting more than four weeks was almost 60% in Canada and less than 20% in Germany.

On average, fewer citizens (about 10%) had to wait more than four months for an elective surgery. Approximately 20% of citizens reported long waiting times in Canada, Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom. No citizen in Germany has reported a waiting time of more than four months. Understaffing, poor organisation or a shortage of hospital beds can all contribute to long waiting times for surgeries.

Tax administration

A number of OECD member countries have included timeliness as a key performance standard for certain public services, notably tax administration. Among the countries where a time standard was set for tax returns, the average processing time did not exceed 40 days for paper returns and 35 days for electronic returns (Figure 9.9). In two countries – the Netherlands and Poland – returns were processed within three months. For all other countries, standards for the processing time for paper returns ranged from up to 10 days in Ireland to 42 days in Australia, Denmark and Japan. For the majority of countries, electronic filing did not significantly lower processing time standards, with the exception of Australia, Canada and Ireland. In these countries, citizens filing their tax returns electronically saw their tax returns processed three to four times faster than citizens filing tax returns in paper form.

Justice

Timeliness can also be very important in determining the quality of justice systems. Delays can reflect badly on the capacity of justice systems to uphold the rule of law and to provide an efficient level playing field for resolving economic disputes, thus undermining confidence in the justice institutions. Delays can also create added costs as cases remain pending and economic situations unresolved, impeding prospects for future investment. Excessively short processing times on the other hand may undermine the need for due process.

Trial length is one common indicator of timeliness in the justice sector. Across the 31 OECD member countries for which data are available, average disposition time of first instance civil cases ranged from more than 550 days in Italy to approximately 100 days in Japan, with an OECD average of approximately 242 days (Figure 9.10). Countries following the French legal system report the longest disposition times. Beyond procedural and substantive differences across legal systems, however, the organisation of the justice system – including staffing and human resource management policies, use of IT and capabilities for managing the case load – can affect the time necessary for solving a case in court.

Methodology and definitions

Data on waiting times for specialist and elective surgery are derived from *OECD Health Data 2011*. The waiting time for specialist and elective surgery is the time between the patient being advised to seek care and the appointment. Only those respondents who had specialist consultations or elective surgery were asked to specify waiting times.

Data on the processing time of personal tax returns are derived from *Tax Administration 2013: Comparative Information on OECD and other Advanced and Emerging Economies*. Processing time refers to the time between the filing of the personal income tax return by a citizen and the decision by the tax authority on tax refunds. Tax returns are the forms on which citizens report their taxable income to the relevant authorities. Tax refunds refer to the reimbursement that citizens receive when the amount they paid is greater than their tax liability.

Justice data on the average length of first-instance civil trial cases have been drawn by OECD “Judicial Performance and its Determinants: A Cross-Country Perspective”. Trial length is estimated with a formula commonly used in the literature: $[(Pending_{t-1} + Pending_t) / (Incoming_t + Resolved_t)] * 365$. Where information on the number of pending cases was not available but the country was able to provide information on the actual length, the latter was used (England and Wales, Mexico, New Zealand and the Netherlands). For those countries for which neither the estimated nor the actual trial length was available, trial length has been calculated imputing the predicted value of the regression of the estimated length trial as found in the World Bank Group’s, *Doing Business* (database).

Further reading

OECD (2013a), *Tax Administration 2013: Comparative Information on OECD and other Advanced and Emerging Economies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264200814-en>.

OECD (2013b, forthcoming), *Health at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Palumbo, G. et al. (2013), “Judicial Performance and its Determinants: A Cross-Country Perspective”, *OECD Economic Policy Papers*, No. 5, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k44x00md5g8-en>.

Figure notes

9.9: The figure only includes countries where an administrative standard is applied in practice. For the Netherlands, the number of days could not be estimated with reasonable approximation and have not been included. Data for Austria: same standard applied for both paper and e-filed returns. Data for Chile: returns filed between 1 April and 19 April: refunds by deposit are due on 10 May and refunds by sending a cheque are due on 30 May; returns filed between 20 April and 27 April: refunds by deposit are due on 17 May and refunds by sending a cheque are due on 30 May; returns filed between 28 April and 9 May: refunds by deposit are due on 26 May and refunds by sending a cheque are due on 30 May. Data for Hungary refer to the standard set by the tax authority and not the actual performance. Data for the United States: the standard is for individual paper returns only. A separate standard for electronically filed returns is not applicable. For returns filed electronically, the goal is to issue refunds within 5 to 21 days, which the Internal Revenue Service achieves for most returns filed electronically. Data concerning paper returns are not applicable for Estonia and Portugal.

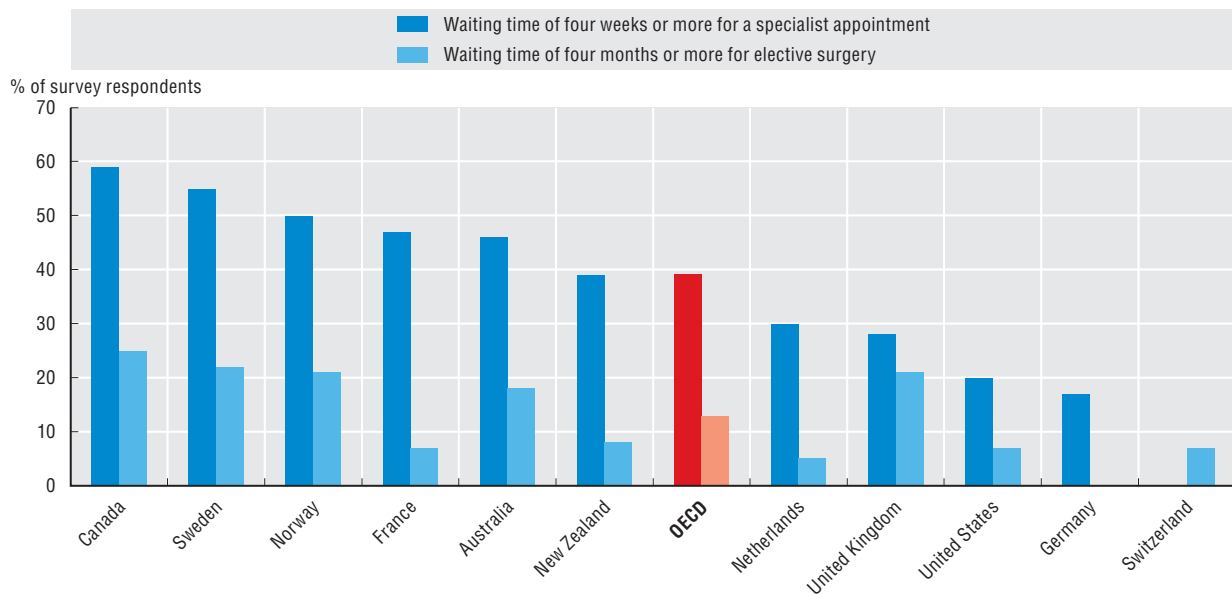
9.10: Data for the United Kingdom refers to England and Wales.

Information on data for Israel: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

9. SPECIAL FEATURE – SERVING CITIZENS

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9.8. Waiting times for a specialist appointment and elective surgery (2010)

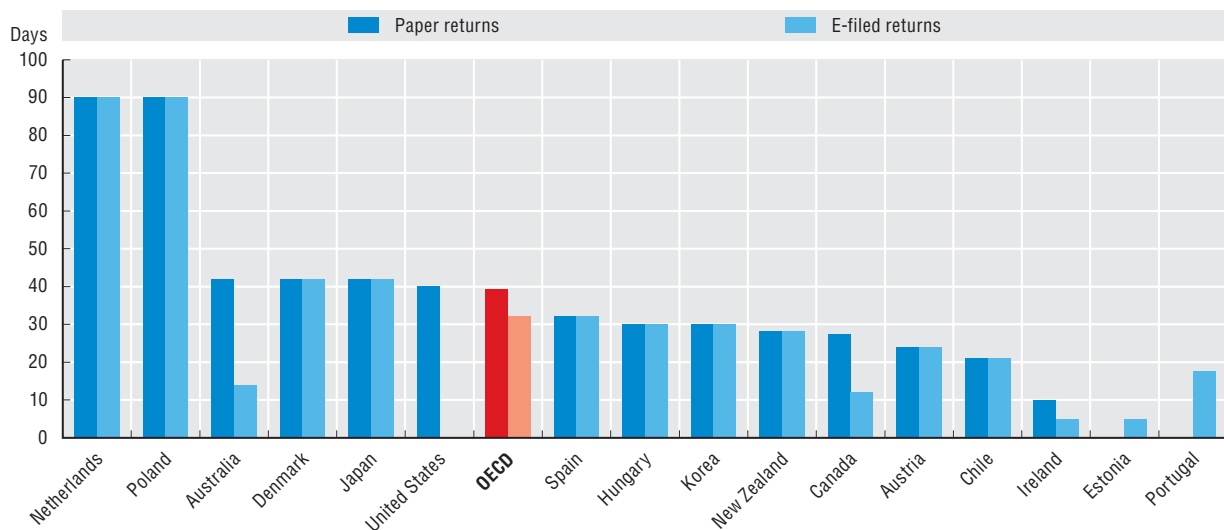


Source: Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey 2010.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932943077>

9.9. Processing time of personal tax returns where a tax refund is expected (2011)

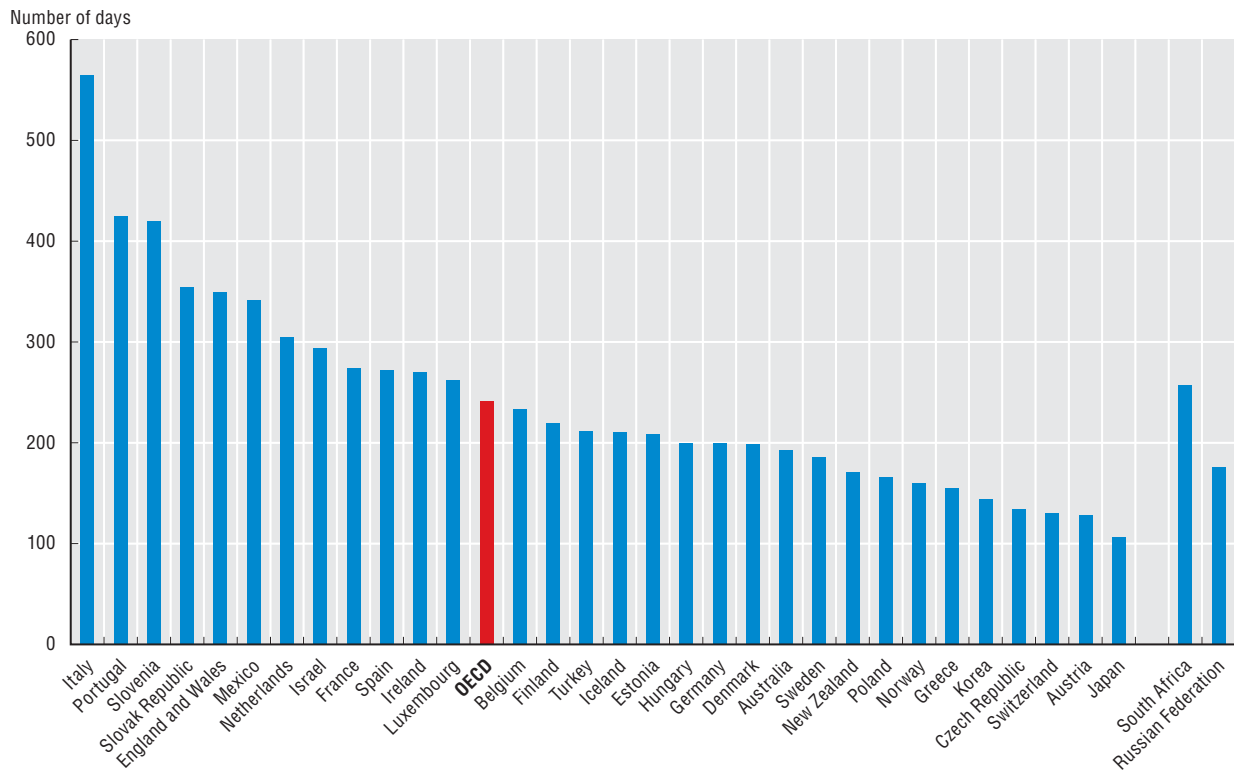
Average number of days for at least 80% of returns




Source: OECD (2013), *Tax Administration 2013: Comparative Information on OECD and other Advanced and Emerging Economies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264200814-en>.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932943096>

9.10. Trial length of first-instance cases in days (2012)



Source: OECD, CEPEJ, World Bank; and Palumbo, G. et al. (2013), “Judicial Performance and its Determinants: A Cross-Country Perspective”, OECD Economic Policy Papers, No. 5, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k44x00md5g8-en>.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932943115>



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