

1. HEALTH STATUS

1.1. Life expectancy at birth

Life expectancy at birth has continued to increase remarkably in OECD countries, reflecting sharp reductions in mortality rates at all ages. These gains in longevity can be attributed to a number of factors, including rising living standards, improved lifestyle and better education, as well as greater access to quality health services. Other factors, such as better nutrition, sanitation and housing also play a role, particularly in countries with developing economies (OECD, 2004c).

On average across OECD countries, life expectancy at birth for the whole population reached 79.1 years in 2007, a gain of more than ten years since 1960 (Figure 1.1.1). In almost one-half of OECD countries, life expectancy at birth in 2007 exceeded 80 years. The country with the highest life expectancy was Japan, with a life expectancy for women and men combined of 82.6 years. At the other end of the scale, life expectancy in OECD countries was the lowest in Turkey, followed by Hungary. However, while life expectancy in Hungary has increased modestly since 1960, it has increased sharply in Turkey, so that it is rapidly catching up with the OECD average (OECD and the World Bank, 2008). Life expectancy at birth in Korea, Turkey, Ireland and Portugal has increased by three years or more in the ten-year period 1997-2007.

The gender gap in life expectancy stood at 5.6 years on average across OECD countries in 2007, with life expectancy reaching 76.3 years among men and 81.9 years among women (Figure 1.1.2). Between 1960 and 2007, this gender gap widened on average by about half a year. But this result hides different trends between earlier and later decades. While the gender gap in life expectancy increased substantially in many countries during the 1960s and the 1970s, it narrowed during the past 25 years, reflecting higher gains in life expectancy among men than among women in most OECD countries. The recent narrowing of the gender gap in life expectancy can be attributed at least partly to the narrowing of differences in risk-increasing behaviours between men and women, such as smoking, accompanied by sharp reductions in mortality rates from cardio-vascular diseases among men.

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

(Figure 1.1.3). There are also notable differences in life expectancy between OECD countries with similar income per capita. Japan and Spain have higher, and the United States, Denmark and Hungary lower life expectancies than would be predicted by their GDP per capita alone.

Figure 1.1.4 shows the relationship between life expectancy at birth and health expenditure per capita across OECD countries. Higher health spending per capita is generally associated with higher life expectancy at birth, although this relationship tends to be less pronounced in countries with higher health spending per capita. Again, Japan and Spain stand out as having relatively high life expectancies, and the United States, Denmark and Hungary relatively low life expectancies, given their levels of health spending.

Variations in GDP per capita may influence both life expectancy and health expenditure per capita. Many other factors, beyond national income and total health spending also explain variations in life expectancy across countries.

Definition and deviations

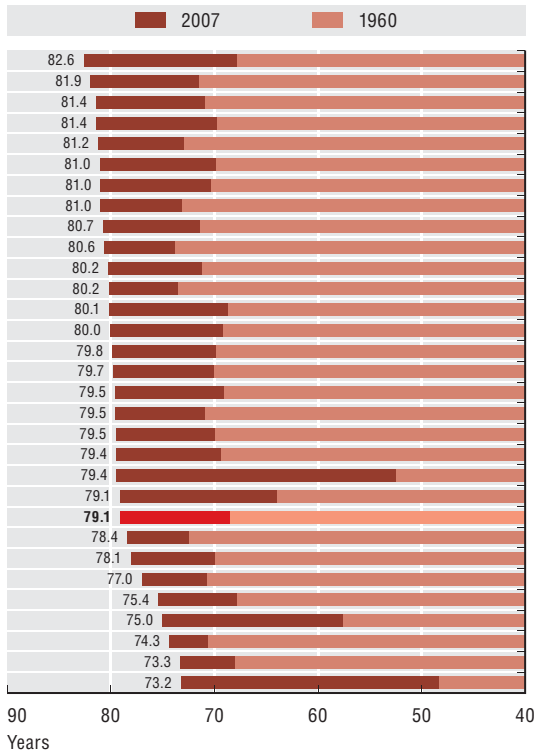
Life expectancy measures how long on average people would live based on a *given* set of age-specific death rates. However, the *actual* age-specific death rates of any particular birth cohort cannot be known in advance. If age-specific death rates are falling (as has been the case over the past decades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

Each country calculates its life expectancy according to methodologies that can vary somewhat. These differences in methodology can affect the comparability of reported life expectancy estimates, as different methods can change a country's life expectancy estimates by a fraction of a year. Life expectancy at birth for the total population is calculated by the OECD Secretariat for all countries, using the unweighted average of life expectancy of men and women.

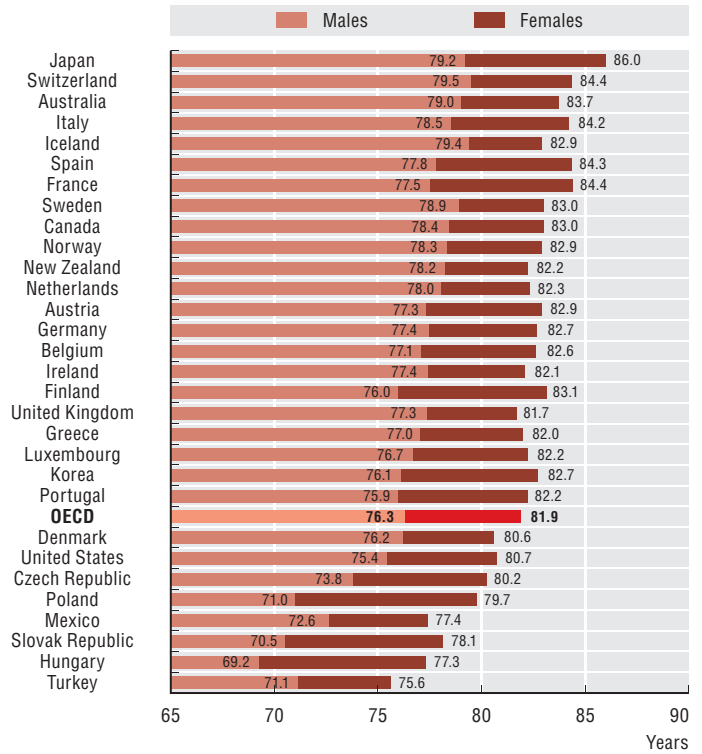
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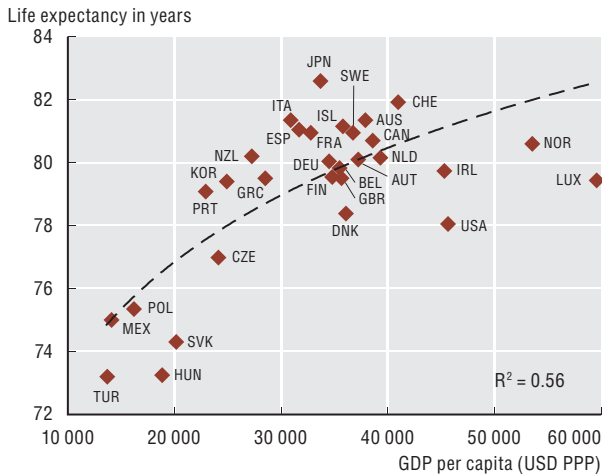
1.1.1 Life expectancy at birth, total population, 1960 and 2007 (or latest year available)



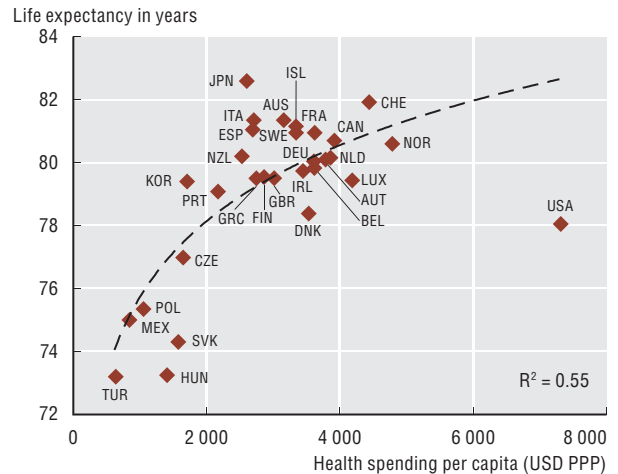
1.1.2 Life expectancy at birth, by gender, 2007 (or latest year available)



1.1.3 Life expectancy at birth and GDP per capita, 2007 (or latest year available)



1.1.4 Life expectancy at birth and health spending per capita, 2007 (or latest year available)



Source: OECD Health Data 2009.

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