

Global convergence in mortality 1950-2000?

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Abstract

Since 1950 there have been large improvements in mortality worldwide. However, any belief that we were set on a path of inexorable improvement in mortality benefiting all and leading to worldwide convergence towards low mortality has recently been undermined by deteriorating mortality in countries of sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union. This paper investigates how far the worldwide improvements in mortality have been accompanied by convergence in the mortality experience of the world's population. We use a novel approach to the objective measurement of global mortality convergence. The global mortality distribution is described using the Dispersion Measure of Mortality (DMM), trends in which indicate convergence or divergence. The analysis uses UN data 1950-2000 for all 152 countries with population $\geq 1M$ in 2000 (99.7% of world population). The DMM for life expectancy at birth declined until the late 1980s but has since increased, signalling a switch from global convergence of life expectancy at birth to divergence. This indicates that the progress in reducing mortality differences between many populations is now more than offset by the scale of reversals in adult mortality in others. Future global progress needs to be judged on whether mortality convergence can be re-established and indeed accelerated.

The full published version of this paper is available at:

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<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/83/3/202.pdf>