

Every Life is Vital... in the National Vital Statistics System

How many babies were born in the United States last year?

How many people died?

How long is the average person expected to live?

Where would you look for the answers to these questions?

The National Vital Statistics System has counted and described over 343 million births and 169 million deaths since 1900 as a result of the combined efforts of the National Center for Health Statistics' Division of Vital Statistics, the State Vital Statistics offices, and the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems. With these data, the shape, pattern, and profile of lives in the United States are witnessed and written into history.

The National Vital Statistics System provides the information by which progress in the United States is evaluated and advanced. The system provides the statistics to answer the basic question: Are people living healthier lives? The statistics are the foundation on which so much of the nation's health and demographic research is based.

But how does the system work? Who provides the information? It is about all of us and the information comes from everyone. The families experiencing critical life events—births and deaths, the professionals delivering babies, the physicians caring for the dying, and the funeral directors and medical examiners documenting the details of a death. These details about births and deaths go to state vital statistics offices, which issue birth and death certificates for use in everyday life. And they share the statistical information through the National Vital Statistics System to give a summary of how the United States is changing. Are birth rates declining? Is life expectancy increasing? These questions and more are answered with data from the National Vital Statistics System.

Even before the founding of the United States, there was the beginning of a vital statistics system. In the 1600s, the colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts enacted legislation requiring the recording of certain life events.

The beginnings of our modern National Vital Statistics System can be traced to 1880, with routine mortality publication beginning in 1900 and all states participating in both birth and death data collection by 1933. Over time, changes have been made to provide people in the United States more timely, accurate data, covering a broad spectrum of health concerns captured on birth and death certificates. The combined efforts of the National Center for Health Statistics, the State Vital Statistics offices, and the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems result in a National Vital Statistics System that provides policy and program planners information needed so that Americans can enjoy better and longer lives.

Who's having babies in the United States?

Where, when, and how do these births take place?

The National Vital Statistics System answers all of these questions.

The birth certificate, issued by the states, captures a variety of valuable information. About both parents: “How old were mom and dad?”, “What is their educational status?”, and “Are they of ‘multiple race’?” About the mother: “What was her pre-pregnancy weight?”, “Did she smoke?”, and was her delivery cesarean?” About the baby: “born too early” or “right on time”?, “Twin birth or triplets”. These types of data are used to document changes in behavior, maternal and paternal age and education, and are used to shape social policy in the United States.

Over the years, the National Vital Statistics System has demonstrated the value of collecting birth data by highlighting changing birth patterns, increases in twin and other multiple births, and disparities in the population, as differences among racial groups persist. Birth statistics have provided useful information to improve the beginning of life for Americans. For example, the vital statistics system tracked the post-war baby boom that signaled the need for more schools and houses. Vital statistics documented the rise in teenage births and all of the consequences associated with young women having babies and the services and support they would need. Most recently, the data showed a drop in teenage birth rates and the factors associated with this decline noted across the nation in all racial and ethnic groups.

The National Vital Statistics System also provides answers to basic questions about deaths: the who, when, where, and why questions. Knowing about death also tells about survival in the United States.

The death certificate, collected by the states, captures valuable demographic and medical information. These data are widely used to identify and target areas to improve public health. Some of the major news stories of the past two decades have featured these data, underscoring its importance to the lives of everyone in the United States.

Infant mortality is used as a key indicator of a nation’s well-being. The United States has made great strides in reducing infant mortality over the decades, although progress has slowed in recent years. When compared with other nations, it is clear that there is a need for continued improvement. Babies born too soon are of interest among births and this is one of the important factors that limit improvements in infant mortality.

As with birth data, the National Vital Statistics System has demonstrated the value of collecting mortality data by highlighting gains in life expectancy and changes in mortality risk, and by showing disparities in the population, as women continue to outlive men and differences among racial and ethnic groups persist. By tracking the leading causes of death, from the drop in infectious diseases to the rise in such chronic conditions as heart disease, cancer, strokes, and diabetes, the National Vital Statistics System plays a vital role in showing where public health and health care resources need to be directed. Although much work remains, mortality statistics have helped to target resources to achieve lower death rates in the United States and have helped people in the United States to live longer and better lives.

Working together, the National Center for Health Statistics’ Division of Vital Statistics, the State Vital Statistics offices, and the National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems collect birth and death information that allows the nation to identify disparities, track progress, and alert the government and general public to emerging health related problems.

As the National Vital Statistics System deals with the challenges emerging in the 21st century, it will continue to improve its methods of data collection so that this vital information is available to help build better and longer lives into the future. Each part of this system is critical to the process from the National Center for Health Statistics, which compiles and analyzes the information and publishes reports, to the states and individuals who collect this important information, and to those experiencing the events. And in the end, every life counts in the United States and all are included in this extraordinary process.