

As is typical of pioneer populations, Canada had high death rates in the mid-1800s when the country was still in the throes of settlement. The crude death rate during that period is estimated as between 22 and 25. Although no data are available, it is assumed that, while mortality at all ages was high, the rate among infants, children and young adults must have been particularly high since even in the 1920s mortality in these ages was still quite high. With the gradual increase in population density, urbanization and improved sanitation and medical services, the crude rate was halved during the 80 years between 1851 and 1930, dropping from about 22 to 11. It declined steadily to slightly over 8 in the late 1950s and dropped to record lows of 7.3 in 1970 and 1971.

Table 5.31 shows the trends in crude death rates since 1951 in the provinces and territories. The low rates shown for Newfoundland and Quebec are attributable mainly to the large proportion of young people in their populations and the relatively high rates for British Columbia to the high proportion of elderly people in that province.

Table 5.32 shows the numbers of deaths in urban centres of 50,000 population and over in 1971, and the average deaths per year for the periods 1966-70 and 1961-65.

Age and sex distribution of deaths. During the period of national vital statistics (1921 to date) the mortality pattern at all ages has been downward. Of major significance in lowering the over-all death rate were the reductions in infant mortality, in childhood death rates and in those of young adults.

Table 5.42 shows that, in the 20 years between 1951 and 1971, mortality rates among infants (under one year of age) and for children 1-4 years of age dropped by more than one half. Rates for older children and young adults also declined steeply. Despite the reduction in infant mortality, more deaths still occur in the first year of life than in any other single year of age. As shown in Table 5.43 males under age 40 accounted for 18.1% of all male deaths in 1961 but for only 13.6% of such deaths in 1971; in 1961, 16.4% of all female deaths were of persons under age 40, a percentage that declined to 10.7 in 1971. Percentage reductions in the mortality of older males since 1951 were more moderate, and over the 55-69 range they were quite small; the corresponding reductions for older females, however, were very substantial in every age group up to 85.

The sharp declines in mortality in the age groups under 40 has tended to increase the population in the older groups and to raise the average age at death. Over the 1961-71 period, the average age at death among males rose from 59.7 to 63.3 and the average age for females increased still more markedly, from 63.1 to 68.2. Over the same period, the male median age at death rose only 0.6 year, from 67.9 to 68.5 and the gain for females was 2.5 years, from 72.2 to 74.7. This means that half of the females who died during 1971 were more than 74.7 years old.

There are variations from province to province in average and median ages at death; these, in turn, are dependent in large measure on the age distribution of the population as well as on varying mortality rates at each age. For example, in Newfoundland a high mortality rate among infants and young children reduces the average and median age for that province, but the reverse is the case in British Columbia and several other provinces with older populations.

Causes of death. Table 5.44 summarizes the most recent figures for deaths and death rates in Canada, grouped according to the International Abbreviated List of 50 Causes of the International Classification of Diseases. Over 71,500, or 46% of the 157,272 deaths occurring in 1971 were due to diseases of the heart and circulatory system; 31,036 (almost 20%) to cancer; 12,031 (over 7%) to accidents; 8,986 to the major respiratory diseases (other than lung cancer); and 5,266 to diseases associated with early infancy. Combined, these accounted for almost 129,000 or almost 82% of all deaths during the year. Because of the rise in the average age at death during the past 30 years, the proportions of deaths from causes that affect older people have increased. Cancer and diseases of the cardiovascular-renal systems now account for a larger proportion of all deaths than formerly. By the same token, deaths from causes that affect mainly infants, children and young adults have declined.

Table 5.45 shows that accidents are, by far, the leading cause of death among males from age one to 44 and one of the five major causes above that age; although less predominant among females, accidents are also one of the leading causes of female death beyond the first year of life. Similarly, cancer is among the major causes of death among both males and females at all ages beyond infancy, while cardiovascular diseases are, on the whole, the major cause of death beyond age 45 among both males and females.