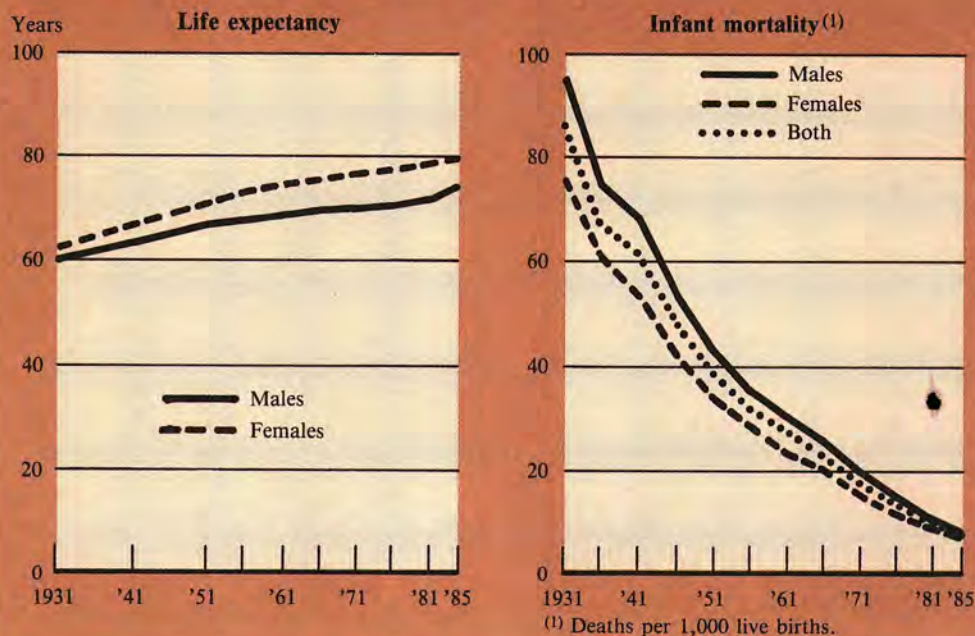


Chart 3.1

**Trends in life expectancy and infant mortality, 1931-85**

mortality and is to some extent an indicator of the population's overall health status. High life expectancy attained in industrialized nations attests to the success of the battle against infectious diseases, which were a threat primarily during the first year of life.

Canada has a high average life expectancy for both males and females that compares favourably with leading countries such as Sweden and Japan. It reached 71.9 years for males and 79.0 for females in 1981. The continued decline in age-specific death rates has resulted in further improvements in longevity for Canadian males and females since 1981. According to preliminary life tables prepared for the 1983-85 period, average life expectancy has increased by approximately one year for both males and females, reaching 72.9 years for males and 79.8 years for females (Table 3.2). Although the gap between male and female life expectancy has decreased since 1976, female life expectancy remains nearly seven years greater than that for males.

The primary change since 1931 has been not so much the length of old age as the proportion of the population reaching this level. Under prevailing conditions in 1931, 66% of the male

population could expect to reach the age of 60; by 1981 the proportion had increased to 83%; the corresponding figures for females were 68% and 90%. (*Longevity and historical life tables 1921-1981 (Abridged), Canada and the Provinces*, Statistics Canada 89-506, July 1986.)

**Infant mortality.** A major reason for the overall increase in life expectancy at birth is the drop in infant mortality. Death rates for infants under one year of age declined about 78% between 1953 and 1985. Improvement is due to factors such as better health care before and after birth, and to improved nutrition and living standards. However, the death rate in recent years remains 20% to 24% higher for male infants than for females.

### 3.1.2 Causes of death

The increase in life expectancy that has been observed in Canada and other countries throughout this century is the result of the shift in the cause pattern of mortality toward degenerative diseases that occur primarily in the older age groups. For example, in 1921, while heart disease and cancer were among the leading causes of death, as they are today, they accounted for just