

Low birthweight



Figure 1: Proportion of low birthweight babies, 1992

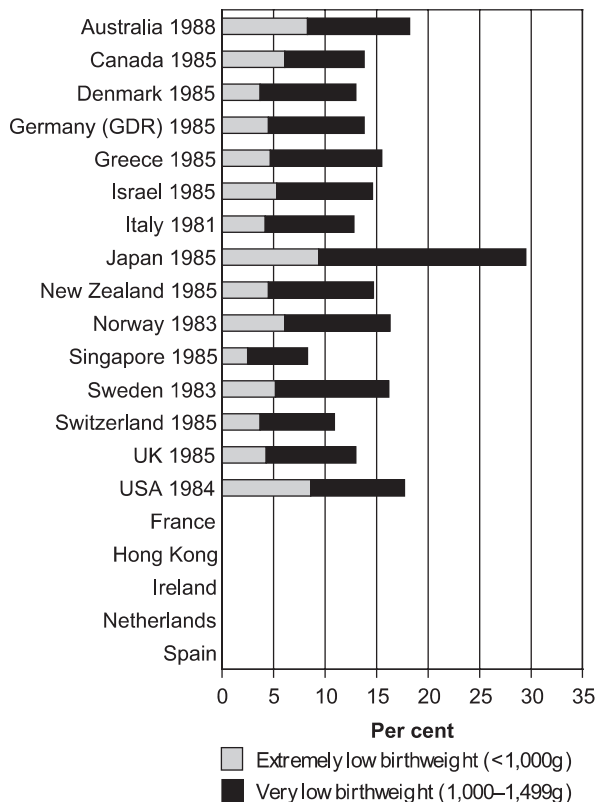


Figure 2: Proportions of extremely low and very low birthweight babies, mid-1980s

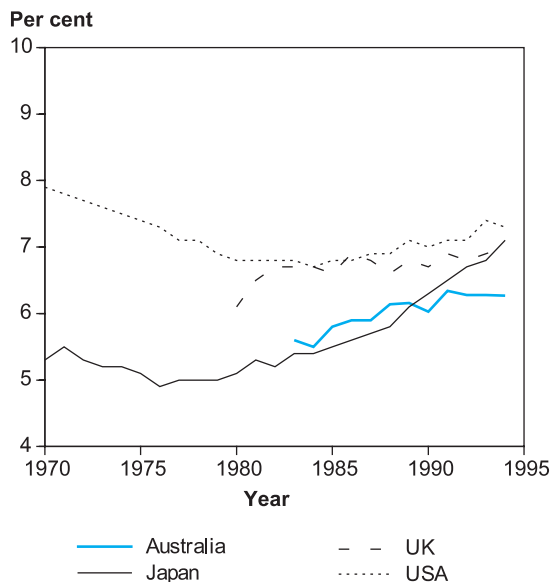


Figure 3: Trends in proportions of low birthweight babies, 1970 to 1994

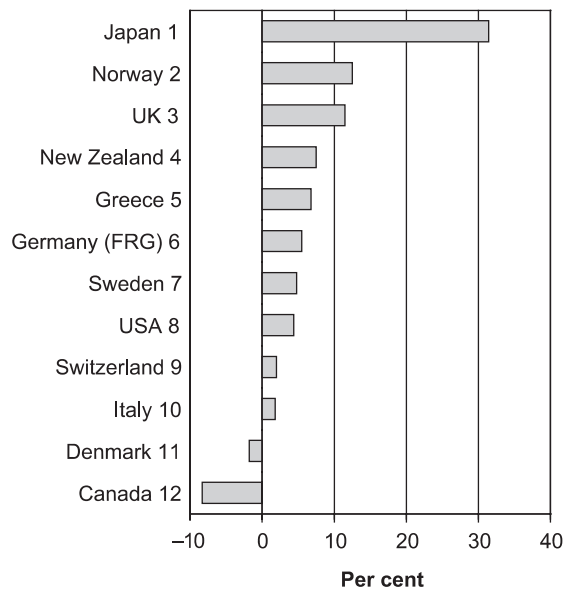


Figure 4: Changes in the proportion of low birthweight babies, 1980 to 1992

Low birthweight

Low birthweight (per cent <2,500g)

Country	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Australia				5.8	6.0	6.4	6.3	6.3	6.3
Canada	7.8	6.6	6.0	5.7	5.4	5.5	5.5	5.8	6.0
Denmark	6.0	6.6	5.6	5.4	5.2	5.4	5.5	5.3	5.2
France					5.3	5.7	5.8	5.8	5.9
Germany (FRG)		5.9	5.5	5.7	5.7	5.8	5.8	5.8	6.0
Greece			5.9	6.0	6.0	6.1	6.3	6.8	
Hong Kong									
Ireland				4.1	4.2	4.2	4.1		
Israel		6.1	7.0	7.3	7.0				
Italy			5.6	5.6	5.6	5.8	5.7	5.9	6.0
Japan	5.3	4.8	5.1	5.4	6.3	6.5	6.7	6.8	7.1
Netherlands					4.9	4.9	4.9		
New Zealand		5.4	5.3	5.5	5.8	5.9	5.7	5.9	6.0
Norway	4.8	4.4	4.0	4.4	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.4	4.5
Singapore		8.7	7.5	6.9	7.0				
Spain				4.4	5.0	5.5	5.0	5.4	
Sweden	4.3	4.7	4.2	4.8	4.5	4.5	4.4	4.3	4.1
Switzerland			5.1	5.2	5.1	5.2	5.2	5.3	5.2
UK			6.1	6.6	6.7	6.9	6.8	6.9	7.0
USA	7.9	7.4	6.8	6.8	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.2	7.3

Sources: OECD 1997; United Nations 1988.

- Low birthweight is an important indicator of the social and biological processes leading to birth. It can result from prematurity or poor foetal growth, and may also be associated with elevated risks of infant morbidity and mortality.
- In 1992, 6.3% of all newborns in Australia weighed less than 2,500 grams, and were thus classified as low birthweight. This placed Australia in the first quarter of 17 developed countries for which data were available (Figure 1). The United States (7.1% in 1992) and the United Kingdom (6.8%) had higher proportions of low birthweight infants. Ireland (4.1%) and Sweden (4.4%) had much lower proportions of low birthweight babies.
- Risk factors for low birthweight include maternal age and parity, socioeconomic status, multiple births, cigarette smoking, the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy, and the nutritional status of the mother.
- The proportion of infants considered to be of low birthweight has been rising in Australia and Japan and several other developed countries in recent years (Figures 3 and 4). New technology is giving extremely low (<1,000g) and very low (1,000–1,499g) birthweight infants an increased chance of survival which may have contributed to these upward trends.
- Although they might be expected to be closely related, a population's average birthweight is

not considered to be a good predictor of overall infant mortality. Sweden and Japan both have low infant mortality rates, yet have high and low average birthweights respectively. Japan and the United States have low average birthweights, yet the lowest and highest infant mortality rates among the comparison countries (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1993). Instead of using an arbitrary weight of 2,500g to define low birthweight, it may be more useful to use a proportion of a particular country's birthweight distribution.

For more information, see:

US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment 1993. International health statistics: what the numbers mean for the United States. Background paper, OTA-BP-H-116. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.