

History

Vital Statistics – Stillbirth Database

(Survey number 3234)

For Canada as a whole, it was impossible to compile a satisfactory series of vital statistics prior to 1921. Eight provinces initially joined the cooperative Canadian vital statistics system, leading to the publication of the first annual report for Canada in 1921; that report included Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Quebec began to participate in 1926 and Newfoundland in 1949 (after joining Confederation) and their data were included in the tabulations from those years onward. Basic data from the Yukon and Northwest Territories were published as appendices to the national tables from 1924 to 1955; their data were first included in the regular tabulations in 1956. Nunavut came into being officially as a Territory of Canada on April 1, 1999. The name Northwest Territories applies to a Territory with different geographic boundaries before and after April 1, 1999.

Prior to 1944 all vital events were classified by place of occurrence. Since 1944, births, stillbirths, and deaths have been classified by area of reported residence, with births and stillbirths according to the residence of the mother.

Stillbirth is currently defined as the complete expulsion or extraction from its mother of a product of conception, which did not at any time after birth breathe or show other sign of life. In 2001, most provinces and all three territories required a stillbirth with a gestational age of at least 20 weeks or a birth weight of at least 500 grams to be registered. In Quebec and Saskatchewan (and New Brunswick prior to November 1996), only stillbirths weighing at least 500 grams were required to be registered, regardless of the gestational age. Until 1997, a gestational age of at least 20 weeks was required for stillbirths to be registered in Prince Edward Island, regardless of the birth weight.

Starting in 1959, the definition of a stillbirth was revised to conform, in substance, to the definition of “fetal death” recommended by the World Health Organization. At the same time, the compulsory registration of stillbirths was extended to 20 weeks’ gestation – from 28 weeks – and the new period of gestation incorporated into the definition: “Stillbirth means the complete expulsion or extraction from its mother, after at least 20 weeks’ pregnancy, of a product of conception in which, after such expulsion or extraction, there is no breathing, beating of the heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord, or unmistakable movement of voluntary muscle.”

Provinces implemented the new definition at different times, as shown in the table below:

Province	Implementation Date of Revised (1959) Stillbirth Definition
Nova Scotia	March 1959
Manitoba	August 1959
Alberta	January 1, 1960 24 or more weeks or 750 grams weight
	January 1, 1963 20 or more weeks or 500 grams weight
Saskatchewan	January 1, 1961
Quebec	January 1, 1961
Ontario	December 15, 1961
New Brunswick	January 1, 1962
British Columbia	July 1, 1962
Prince Edward Island	January 1, 1964
Newfoundland	1986

Prior to 1959 the following definition of stillbirth was incorporated in the vital statistics legislation of the provinces: “Stillbirth means the birth of a fetus, after at least 28 weeks’ pregnancy, which, after complete separation from the mother, does not show any sign of life.”

The underlying cause of stillbirth variable in the stillbirth database is classified according to the World Health Organization “International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems” (ICD). The following table shows the data years for which each revision of this classification was used. Data users must note that underlying cause of stillbirth data coded to different revisions of the classification are not comparable and they should contact Statistics Canada for assistance with the use of this variable across classification revisions.

International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) Revision	Data Year Used at Statistics Canada
ICD-3	1921 to 1930
ICD-4	1931 to 1940
ICD-5	1941 to 1949
ICD-6	1950 to 1957
ICD-7	1958 to 1968
ICDA-8	1969 to 1978
ICD-9	1979 to 1999
ICD-10	2000 to present

An online version of ICD-10, second edition, (in English) became accessible as of October 2004 on the World Health Organization (WHO) website (www.who.int/classifications/en). The second edition incorporates the updates to ICD-10 that came into effect up to January 1, 2003.