

The under-five mortality rate: The indispensable gauge of child health

The under-five mortality rate, often known by its acronym U5MR or simply as the child mortality rate, indicates the probability of dying between birth and exactly five years of age, expressed per 1,000 live births, if subject to current mortality rates. It has several advantages as a barometer of child well-being in general and child health in particular.

First, it measures an 'outcome' of the development process rather than an 'input', such as per capita calorie availability or the number of doctors per 1,000 population – all of which are means to an end.

Second, the U5MR is known to be the result of a wide variety of inputs: the nutritional status and the health knowledge of mothers; the level of immunization and oral rehydration therapy; the availability of maternal and child health services (including prenatal care); income and food availability in the family; the availability of safe drinking water and basic sanitation; and

the overall safety of the child's environment, among other factors.

Third, the U5MR is less susceptible to the fallacy of the average than, for example, per capita gross national income (GNI per capita). This is because the natural scale does not allow the children of the rich to be 1,000 times as likely to survive, even if the human-made scale does permit them to have 1,000 times as much income. In other words, it is much more difficult for a wealthy minority to affect a nation's U5MR, and it therefore presents a more accurate, if far from perfect, picture of the health status of the majority of children (and of society as a whole).

See References, page 104.