People living with Down syndrome in Latin America and the Caribbean: **Births and Populations**

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This fact sheet summarizes recently published estimates of the numbers of babies born and people living with Down syndrome in Latin America and the Caribbean.[1]

Births

- **How many babies are born with Down syndrome each year in Latin America and the Caribbean?** For the period 2016–2020, we estimate 18,655 annual live births of children with Down syndrome – a rate of around 1 in every 542 live births across Latin America and the Caribbean (18.4 per 10,000 live births; Figure 1). Recent estimates of actual live birth prevalence in comparison regions (USA, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) are much lower, ranging from 6.9 per 10,000 live births in New Zealand to 13.2 per 10,000 in the USA.[2-7]
- **What has happened to the birth rate over time in Latin America and the Caribbean?** Compared with the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, maternal ages after

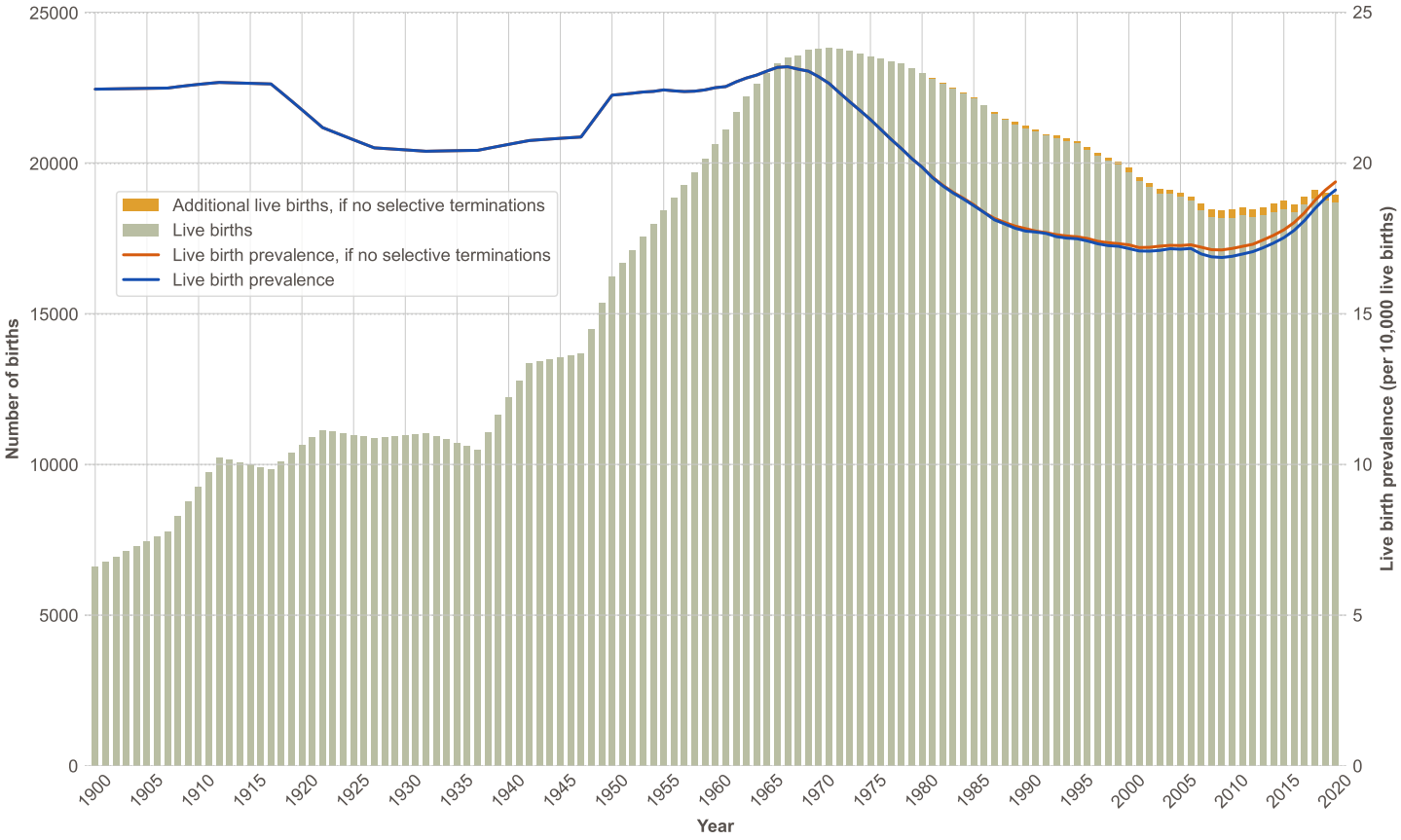

Figure 1. Births of babies with Down syndrome and live birth prevalence in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1900–2020.

World War II were relatively high in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a result, the prevalence of Down syndrome began at a higher level and continued to rise until around 1970. It peaked at about 23 per 10,000 live births, then gradually declined to 17.1 per 10,000 in 2009, and subsequently increased again to 19.4 per 10,000 in 2020, driven by delayed childbearing – a trend that had already begun in the late 1970s in the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, across these five comparison regions, between 1980 and 2020, as maternal ages continued to rise, only the potential live-birth prevalence of children with Down syndrome increased substantially. Yet, due to selective terminations, the actual live-birth prevalence either decreased or increased only slightly (as in the USA and Canada). In other words, selective terminations largely offset the rise in Down syndrome births that would have been expected from delayed childbearing. Consequently, these regions exhibit a very different pattern compared with Latin America and the Caribbean

- **What is the effect of selective terminations?** In contrast to the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the overall impact of selective terminations on live birth prevalence of children with Down syndrome is very small in Latin America and the Caribbean. As of 2020, among the 50 countries and territories in the region, 18 allowed elective terminations for fetal impairment, and only 4 of these – Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, and Mexico – have relatively large populations. Consequently, the overall reduction in live births of children with Down syndrome in Latin America and the Caribbean was less than 2% in 2020, meaning that 98% of the potential live births of children with Down syndrome occurred. The reduction percentage was highest in the Caribbean (10%), followed by Central America and Mexico (2%) and South America (0.1%). The comparatively large reduction observed in the Caribbean is strongly influenced by Cuba, which has a substantial population in the region and an estimated – and notably high – reduction rate of 69% as of 2020.

- **Are similar numbers of babies with Down syndrome born in all regions and all countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean?** Among the three distinct regions in Latin America and the Caribbean, the actual live-birth prevalence was highest in South America at 19.7 per 10,000 live births, followed by the Caribbean at 17.3 per 10,000, and Central America and Mexico at 16.1 per 10,000 live births. In addition, there are substantial differences between individual countries, ranging from as low as 4.4 per 10,000 live births in Cuba to around 30 per 10,000 in the Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands, or 25 per 10,000 in Haiti when very small countries are excluded. This wide variation reflects differences in maternal age, as well as differences in prenatal screening and selective abortion practices. In Latin America and the Caribbean, only 12 of the 50 countries or territories had an actual live-birth prevalence below 15 per 10,000 in recent years, and in 11 of these cases, this was mainly due to selective abortions. By comparison, in Europe, only two countries – Malta, where abortion is illegal, and Ireland, where abortion was highly restricted until 2019 – have recent estimates above 15 per 10,000. Table 1 provides an overview of the estimated annual number of live births of children with Down syndrome by country for the period 2016–2020. Figure 2 provides an overview of live birth prevalence by country.

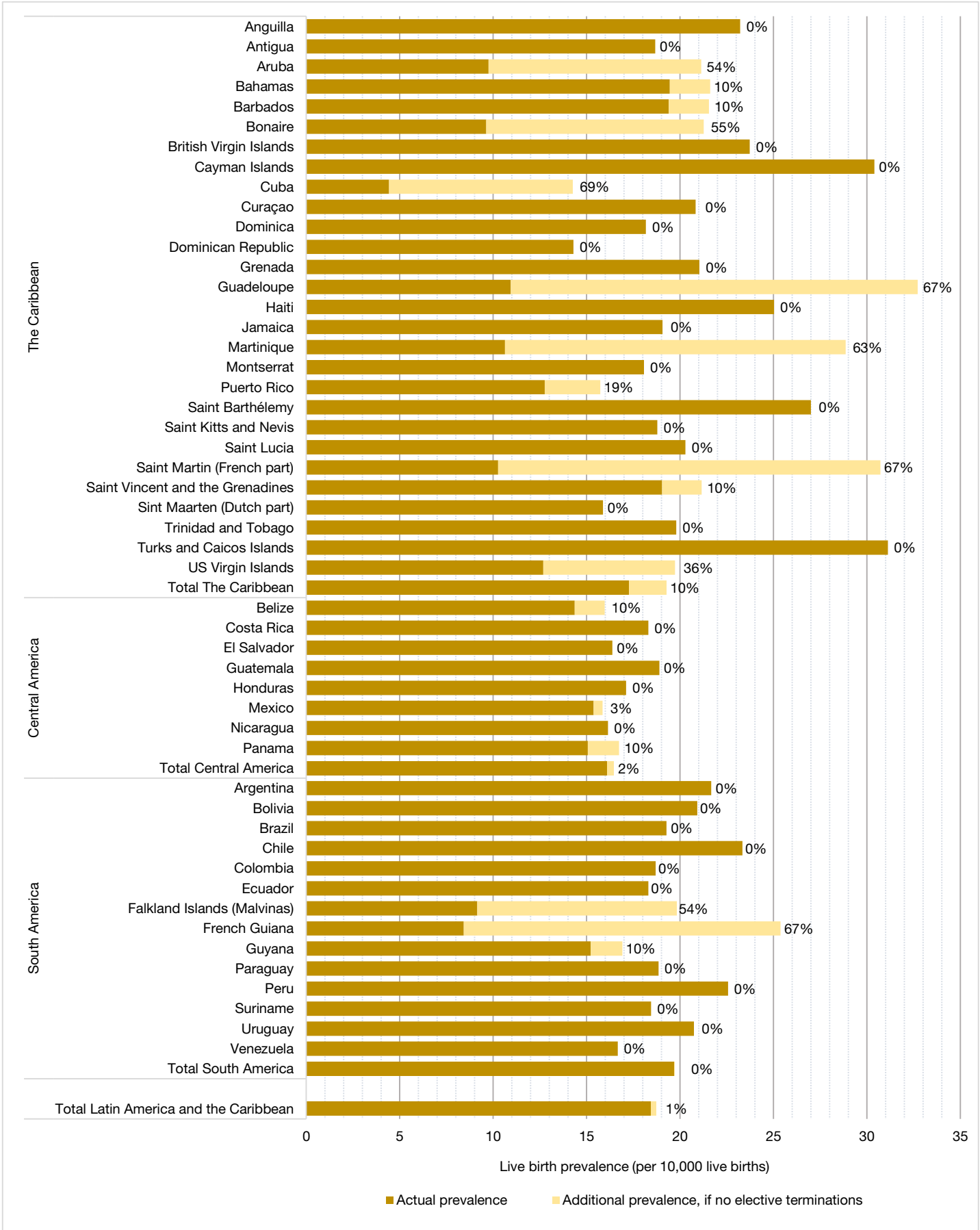

Figure 2. Live birth prevalence in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016–2020.

Population

- **How many people with Down syndrome are living in Latin America and the Caribbean today?** Based on our modeling,[a] we estimate that approximately 574,092 people with Down syndrome were living in Latin America and the Caribbean as of 2020 (Figure 3). These estimates include 33,298 in the Caribbean, 159,922 in Central America and Mexico, and 380,872 in South America. The largest estimated populations are in Brazil (160,204), Mexico (110,715), Colombia (45,619), Argentina (45,134), Peru (38,466), and Venezuela (31,343). See Table 1 for an overview of the estimated number of people with Down syndrome living in the various countries. In 2020, the population of people with Down syndrome in Latin America and the Caribbean was 2.3 times larger than in 1990. In contrast, in the comparison regions, the increase was much smaller due to selective terminations, ranging from 1.2 times in New Zealand to 1.4 times in the USA, with Europe (excluding the former Eastern bloc) even showing a slight decrease over the same period.

- **What proportion of the Latin American and Caribbean population are people with Down syndrome?** As of 2020, the population prevalence of Down syndrome in Latin America and the Caribbean is estimated at 8.8 per 10,000 inhabitants (about 1 in 1,133). In the five comparison regions, the population prevalence was notably lower, ranging from 5.2 per 10,000 inhabitants in Australia to 6.7 per 10,000 in the USA. Within Latin America and the Caribbean, excluding very small countries, estimates ranged from 5.3 per 10,000 in Cuba (mainly due to selective abortions) to 11.8 per 10,000 in Paraguay).

- **How has life expectancy changed for people with Down syndrome?** In Latin America and the Caribbean, based on our modeling, the estimated mean life expectancy for individuals with Down syndrome increased from about 10 years in 1950 to 48 years in 2020, with the median

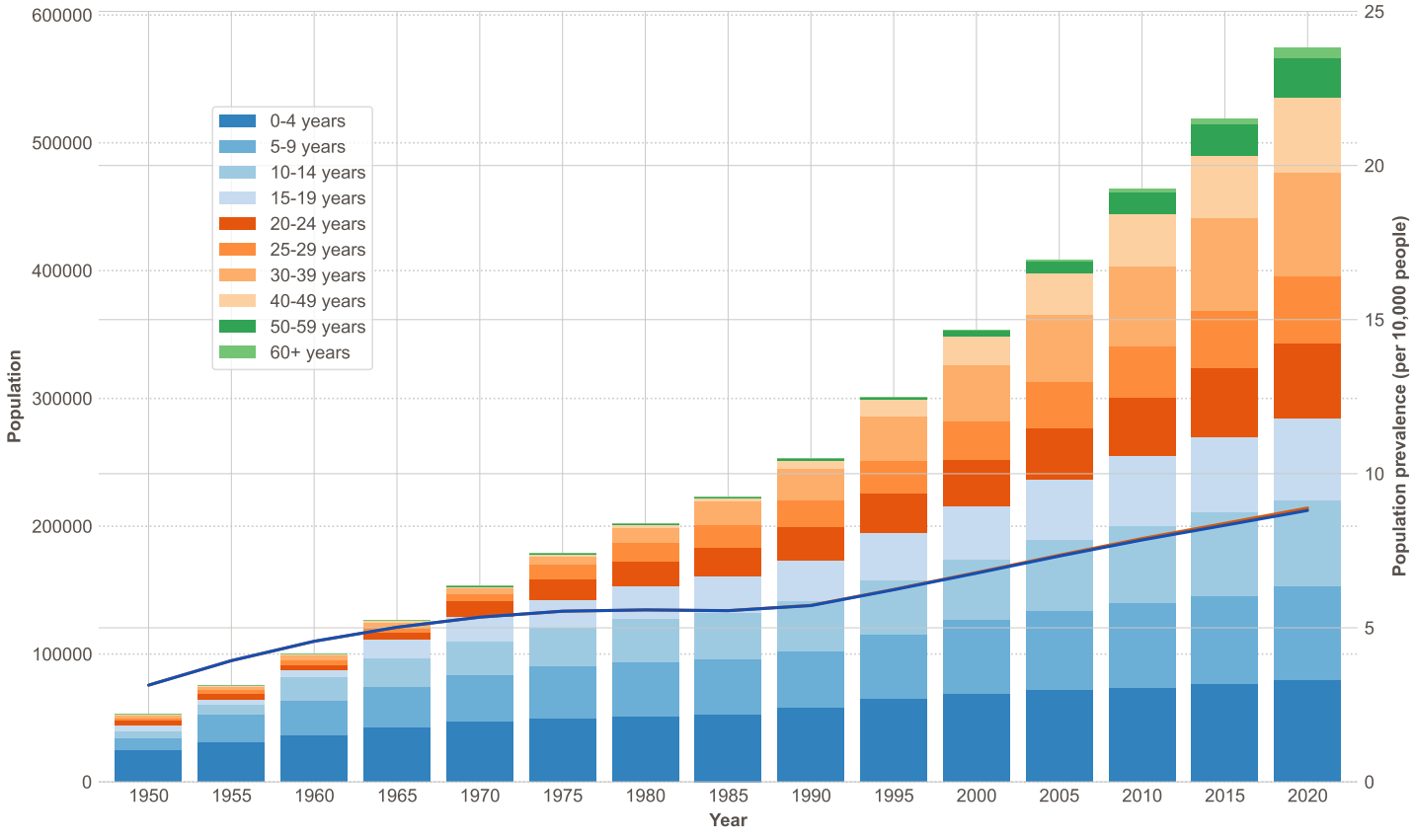

Figure 3. The number of people living with Down syndrome in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1950–2020.

rising from 0 to 57 years over the same period. In comparison, the United States had a higher life expectancy in 2020 (mean of 54 years and median of 60 years), but the gap between the regions has been gradually narrowing. There are, however, large differences within the region. In some countries (for instance Chile and Cuba), our estimated mean life expectancy for people with Down syndrome was, as of 2020, even slightly higher than in the United States. In contrast, in Haiti, it remains much lower, although it has gradually risen from an estimated 3 years in 1950 to 27 years in 2020.

- **How are people with Down syndrome distributed across age groups?** In 1950, Down syndrome was mostly a childhood condition everywhere, with very few people reaching age 40 or older. Today, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the population of people with Down syndrome is still relatively young: about 50% are under 20 years old, and only 17% are 40 or older (Figure 3). In contrast, in the comparison regions, the population shifted to older ages: in the USA, 43% are under 20 and 26% are 40 or older, while in Europe (excluding the former Eastern bloc) these figures are 28% and 41%, respectively. The relatively small proportion of older individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean reflects much lower life expectancy in the past, while recent birth cohorts are relatively large because selective terminations are rare.

Region/country	Estimated number of people with Down syndrome	Estimated annual births of children with Down syndrome
The Caribbean	**33,298**	**1,214**
Anguilla	12	<1
Antigua and Barbuda	95	2
Aruba	67	1
Bahamas	367	9
Barbados	261	6
Bonaire	15	<1
British Virgin Islands	18	<1
Cayman Islands	46	2
Cuba	6,044	50
Curaçao	212	4
Dominica	93	2
Dominican Republic	7,516	299
Grenada	166	4
Guadeloupe	399	5
Haiti	9,942	675
Jamaica	2,906	66
Martinique	395	4
Montserrat	7	<1
Puerto Rico	2,922	34
Saint Barthélemy	3	<1
Saint Kitts and Nevis	50	1
Saint Lucia	200	4
Saint Martin (French part)	31	<1
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	122	3
Sint Maarten	27	<1
Trinidad and Tobago	1,229	37
Turks and Caicos Islands	42	<1
U.S. Virgin Islands	109	2
Central America and Mexico	**159,922**	**4,872**
Belize	320	11
Costa Rica	4,771	122
El Salvador	6,779	171
Guatemala	18,124	750
Honduras	10,033	364
Mexico	110,715	3,110
Nicaragua	5,861	228
Panama	3,320	117
South America	**380,872**	**12,568**
Argentina	45,134	1,475
Bolivia	11,321	546
Brazil	160,204	5,549
Chile	18,531	524
Colombia	45,619	1,352
Ecuador	17,552	543
Falkland Islands	1	<1
French Guiana	160	6
Guyana	770	25
Paraguay	7,785	261
Peru	38,466	1,306
Suriname	548	20
Uruguay	3,437	83
Venezuela	31,343	877

Table 1. Estimated numbers of people living with Down syndrome and annual live births in Latin America and the Caribbean. (Annual births: average 2016-2020)

Note

a. We have assumed that a lower 1-year survival in the general population will be indicative for a less well-developed medical care system, which will concomitantly impact the survival of children with Down syndrome for the different countries. We constructed country-specific survival curves by year of birth for people with Down syndrome on the basis of their historical and current 1-year mortality rates in the general population. We compared the model projections with population counts of people with Down syndrome (available for 2 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean), and with data on the distribution of age at death of people with Down syndrome from national statistics (available for 14 countries in the region). Further details are available in our paper and supplementary materials.[1]

References

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Also available

- **USA**: https://go.downsyndromepopulation.org/usa-factsheet
- **Europe**: https://go.downsyndromepopulation.org/europe-factsheet
- **Australia**: https://go.downsyndromepopulation.org/australia-factsheet
- **New Zealand**: https://go.downsyndromepopulation.org/new-zealand-factsheet
- **Canada**: https://go.downsyndromepopulation.org/canada-factsheet
- **Factors influencing birth rates**: https://go.downsyndromepopulation.org/reduction-factors-factsheet