
The latest prevalence estimates of stunting and underweight (Figure 2 displays maps with the latest national estimates depicting global patterns for each of the child malnutrition indicators) among children under-five years of age worldwide suggest that there have been decreases since 1990. While progress has been made, it is insufficient—leaving millions of children at risk of lower chances for survival. If current trends continue, UN regional projections for 2015 indicate that the goal of halving the 1990 underweight prevalence levels is unlikely to be achieved on a global level or in all developing countries (Figure 3 and Statistical Tables). The same holds for stunting, for which the new target — a 40% reduction in the global number of children under-five years of age who are stunted by 2025 (since 2010) — remains out of reach under current rates of decline. Nonetheless, the declines in prevalence of underweight and stunting translate into substantial decreases in the number of affected children with a forecasted decrease of 11–13 million children by 2015.

Since 1990 the global prevalence of stunting has decreased 36%, from an estimated 40% (95% confidence limits: 38%, 42%) in 1990 to 26% (24%, 28%) in 2011 with an average annual rate of reduction of 2.1% per year during this period. The number of stunted children under-five years of age in the world has declined from an estimated 253 million (241, 265 million) in 1990 to 165 million (151, 179 million).

The global prevalence of underweight has declined 37% from 25% (23%, 28%) in 1990 to 16% (13%, 18%) with an average annual rate of reduction of 2.2% per year.

Figure 2. Latest country prevalence estimates for stunting among children under-five years of age.
Figure 2. continued. Latest country prevalence estimates for underweight, wasting and overweight among children under-five years of age.
Figure 3. Estimated prevalence and burden numbers of stunting and underweight globally and for all developing countries, 1990–2015
Estimates from 2011 suggest stunting prevalence reductions of more than 40% in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean since 1990. Reductions in Africa and Oceania have been more modest (10-15%). During the same period, reductions in the prevalence of underweight were 56% in Latin America and the Caribbean (overall prevalence <10%), 41% in Asia, 28% in Oceania and 22% in Africa.

In Least Developed Countries (LDCs) the prevalence of underweight decreased from 41% (32%, 52%) in 1990 to 23% (21%, 26%) in 2011 (Figure 4) — a 21% decrease from 37 million underweight children in 1990 to 29 million in 2011. While underweight prevalence is decreasing, increases in the under-five population in the LDCs counteracts this trend and results in stagnation in the proportion of the underweight burden numbers accounted for by LDCs since 2005.

Similarly, the prevalence of stunting in LDCs decreased from 60% (52%, 67%) in 1990 to 38% (35%, 42%) in 2011 (Figure 4). This decline accounts for an estimated decrease from 53 million stunted children in 1990 to 48 million in 2011 (an 11% decrease). Again, while stunting prevalence is decreasing, the increase in under-five population in the LDCs results in a continuing increase in the number of stunted children in LDCs.

*Figure 4.* Prevalence of stunting and underweight (moderate or severe) among children under-five years of age and proportionate stunting and underweight burden accounted for by children under-five years of age in Least Developed Countries compared to the total population proportion of children under-five years, 1990-2011.
Across World Bank income groups as of 1 July 2012\(^5\) (Figure 5), estimated prevalences of stunting are highest among the low income country group and lowest among the upper middle income group.

Estimated prevalences of underweight are similar among the low and lower middle income groups yet remain consistently higher than those for the upper middle income group.

For overweight, the low and high income country groups increase at a similar rate, but at different levels. Current estimates for the low and high income country groups are 4% (3%, 6%) and 8% (6%, 12%), respectively. The low income group is currently catching up with the lower middle income group.

\(^5\) The World Bank’s income classifications are updated on 1 July each year based on estimates of gross national income (GNI) per capita for the previous year. This analysis reflects the classification as of July 2012, and is applied for a whole time series.