

1.2 lakh fewer deaths in under-5 category in 2016

Survival stories: The deaths vary from 43 in rural areas to 25 in urban areas.

India posted its sharpest year-on-year decline in the under-5 infant mortality rate (u5) since 2010, according to figures from the Sample Registration Survey (SRS) made public this week. The u5, at 39 deaths per 1,000 live births, recorded a 5-point decline from the 2015 figure of 43.

According to the Union Health Ministry, this was a “landmark achievement” that translated to nearly 1,20,000 fewer deaths in 2016 as compared to 2015.

At the national level, the u5 varies from 43 in rural areas to 25 in urban areas and ranges from 11 in Kerala to 55 in Madhya Pradesh. Except Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, all the “bigger States/Union Territories” have higher u-5 mortality rates among girls than boys.

“In Kerala the number of children dying between 1 and 5 years is very low, at just one per 1,000 live births. However, the data shows that the gender divide and the urban-rural gap when it comes to infant deaths continue in Kerala too as in most States. More girls seem to be dying than boys, the death rate of girls being 12 against 10 for boys. Also, the death rate is 12 in rural areas against 10 in urban areas,” Job Zachariah, UNICEF chief for Kerala and Tamil Nadu, told *The Hindu*, while commenting on the numbers from Kerala.

Though not as good as Kerala, Maharashtra too has recorded a dip. From 23 in 2014 and 24 in 2015, the State has gone down to 21 deaths per 1,000 children in the age group of 1 to 5 years in 2016.

“Our aim is to get as good as Kerala,” Maharashtra’s Health Minister Deepak Sawant said on Tuesday.

Last year in September, the State had recorded a dip in the infant mortality rate (0 to 1 year) and the progress was attributed to the regular screening and immunisation camps, especially in the tribal areas of Jawahar, Mokhada, Melghat, Palghar, etc.

The State’s aggressive troubleshooting, however, started after more than 50 babies died in the Special Newborn Care Unit (SNCU) of the Nashik Civil Hospital last August.

The latest round of data builds on the SRS numbers made public last September that showed India had registered a significant 8% (3 point) decline in infant deaths per 1,000 live births (IMR) over the previous year. The IMR refers to death in infants who were yet to turn one.

The decline from 37 to 34 per 1,000 live births translated to 90,000 fewer infant deaths in 2016 compared to 2015.

In 2016, that edition of the report noted, India also recorded a major drop in birth cohort, which had for the first time come down to below 25 million.

Despite this drop, one in every 29 infants nationally, one in every 26 infants in rural areas and one in every 43 infants in urban areas continues to die within the first year of their lives. Moreover, the sex ratio at birth — the SRS found — continued a steady decline that began in 2013 with only 898 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2016 compared to 909 girls for 1,000 boys in 2013.

(With inputs from Jyoti Shelar and C. Maya)

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