

Basic demographics

The demographic composition of a community offers an excellent starting point for assessment. Such population factors as size, age structure, density, fertility and mortality may suggest health problems. Available services and resources should also be noted. The information obtained can assist the health care worker in recognizing high-risk groups and can suggest common health problems. It also better defines the population and outlines the amount of resources necessary and available for interventions.

Information about the study population can be gathered from published reports. These reports often include the size and density of the population, the male-to-female ratio, the age composition, the literacy rate, the number of schools, the number of clinics, the fertility rate, the birth rate, the death rate, the average income and the main industry. All of these factors can impinge upon health. Health care workers should use published reports only as a rough guide because national statistics may not apply to local communities.

Upon arrival at the project site, the health care worker should observe the demographic makeup of the population. For small villages, the inhabitants may come out to meet a guest. This is an excellent opportunity to assess the approximate size and age structure of the community. The age distribution in LDCs is skewed toward younger ages because many children do not live into adulthood (Figure 3.1). Even a lack of people can be telling. If debilitated people are all that remain in the town, it may be that most able-bodied people are working or farming elsewhere.

