

Unnoticed decline in the number of unnatural deaths in South Africa

To the Editor: In South Africa, deaths due to unnatural causes among adults aged 15 - 49 years underwent a major decline during the second half of the 1990s. This reduction has gone almost unnoticed. Table I shows published data from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) for the period 1993 - 1996, based on all registered deaths. As no similar figures have been published for the period 1997 - 2000, the closest data available are those obtained from the Department of Home Affairs population register and published by Stats SA (without breakdown into natural and unnatural deaths). Since the population register data are only for those with ID numbers it has been necessary to adjust them to compensate for those without ID numbers to make these data comparable to full deaths data published by Stats SA for the earlier period. This was done by first calculating age and sex-specific ratios for the number of unnatural deaths in the full deaths data and the population register data for 1996. These ratios were then applied to the population register data for 1997 - 2000. These adjusted numbers are unofficial and are shown in Table I in italics. These numbers, as reflected in Figs 1 and 2 for males and females respectively, show that while deaths due to these causes had been rising since 1993, the turning point occurred in 1996 for males and in 1997 for females. Since then, unnatural

Table I. Number of deaths among males and females aged 15 - 49 years for the period 1993 - 1996 (reported deaths) and the period 1997 - 2000 (estimated)

Year	Males		Females	
	Unnatural deaths	Natural deaths	Unnatural deaths	Natural deaths
1993	24 062	19 558	5 328	13 759
1994	25 852	21 208	5 841	15 937
1995	33 706	29 158	7 512	22 366
1996	36 478	38 565	8 627	30 394
1997	<i>36 887</i>	<i>45 364</i>	<i>8 826</i>	<i>37 996</i>
1998	<i>34 900</i>	<i>58 220</i>	<i>8 427</i>	<i>50 357</i>
1999	<i>31 999</i>	<i>70 504</i>	<i>7 879</i>	<i>65 394</i>
2000	<i>29 560</i>	<i>80 989</i>	<i>6 843</i>	<i>82 343</i>

Source: Stats SA (various years)^{1,4} (for data from 1993 to 1996, and Stats SA (2001)⁵ for the unadjusted data from 1997 to 2000.

deaths have been on the decline for both males and females.

These preliminary findings are supported by recent data released by Stats SA (2002)⁶ based on a 15.0% sample of all registered deaths from 1997 to 2001. These data show that as a percentage of all male deaths in the sample ($N = 150\ 969$),

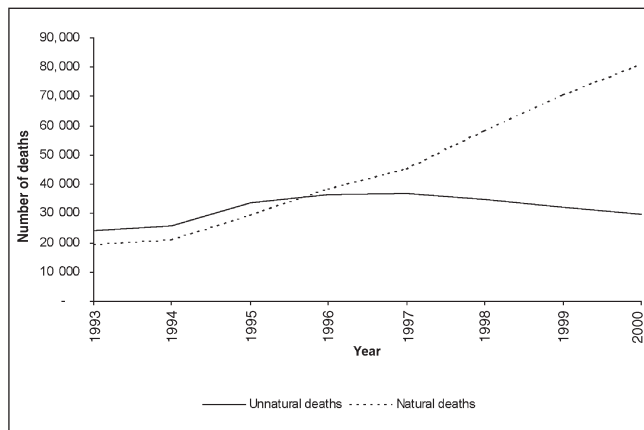


Fig. 1. Trend in natural and unnatural deaths among males aged 15 - 49 years, 1993 - 2000.

deaths due to unnatural causes declined from 23.0% in 1997 to 19.9% in 1999, and to 15.9% in 2001. Similarly, for females, out of a total of 128 618 deaths in the sample, the percentage of deaths due to these causes declined from 9.9% in 1997 to 8.1% in 1999, and to 5.5% in 2001.

Ordinarily this would have been cause for celebration, with the various role players identified and given due merit. Unfortunately these gains have been eroded by the rapid rise in natural deaths, with infectious and parasitic diseases accounting for 20.5% of all male deaths in the sample and 21.5% of all female deaths in the sample. In this case the decrease in unnatural deaths pales alongside the increase in natural deaths. This possibly explains the reason for the missed opportunity to celebrate.

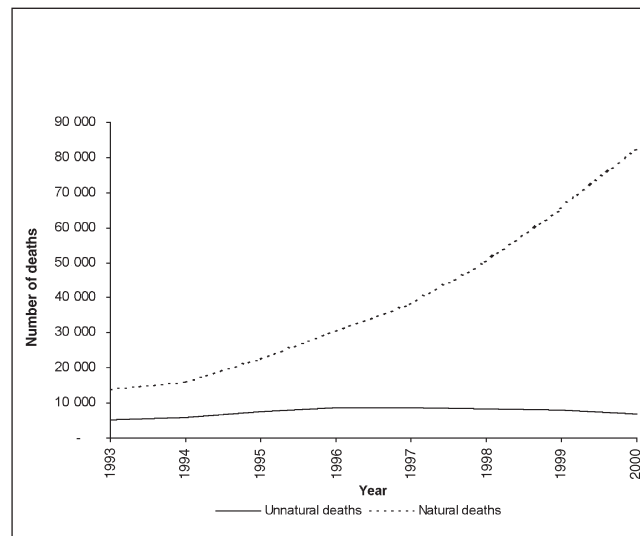


Fig. 2. Trend in natural and unnatural deaths among females aged 15 - 49 years, 1993 - 2000.

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