



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Finland is a Scandinavian, or Nordic, country that borders Russia. Just smaller than Vietnam or the U.S. state of Montana, Finland covers 130,559 square miles (338,145 square kilometers). Finland is known as a land of lakes and forests. More than 187,800 lakes and other bodies of water dominate the landscape. Forests cover three-quarters of the country's surface area. Only 8 percent of the land is arable. The terrain is low and flat in the south but gives way to rolling plains and low hills in the north. A few minor mountains are found in the far north of Lapland. Finland has implemented tough environmental standards and initiatives to protect its environment.

Although Finland is located at about the same latitude as Alaska, Siberia, and southern Greenland, its climate is moderated by its many lakes, the warming North Atlantic current, and the Baltic Sea. Still, winters are long and cold, averaging temperatures below freezing. Summers are short and cool, averaging from 63 to 68°F (17–20°C), but there are occasional warm spells.

North of the Arctic Circle, the sun remains above the horizon day and night in the summer and below the horizon day and night in the winter. The aurora borealis lights up winter nights in the north. South of the Arctic Circle, where most of the population lives, summer days last 19 hours, and the nights are never completely dark. By contrast, midwinter daylight lasts only six hours, and the sun remains low on the horizon throughout the day.

History

People lived in the area known as Finland as early as 8000 BC. Germanic peoples and other tribes, including the Tavasts, Lapps (also called Sami—pronounced “SAW-me”), and Karelians, also inhabited the area thousands of years ago. Eventually the Finno-Ugric tribe became dominant. Tradition has it that in 1155, a crusade from Sweden brought Catholicism and Swedish rule to the region, though neither were fully established until the mid- to late 13th century. For the next several hundred years, Finland remained a part of the Swedish kingdom, although Protestantism replaced Catholicism during the Reformation. Upon losing a war to Russia in 1809, Sweden ceded Finland to the conquering power.

Under Sweden's rule, Finland existed as a group of provinces, not a unified entity. After his victory, the Russian czar Alexander I fulfilled his promise to grant Finland extensive autonomy; Finland soon became a grand duchy of the Russian Empire with Alexander as its grand duke. The years spent under Alexander's command are considered one of the best periods in Finnish history. A national movement led to the establishment of Finnish as an official language, along with Swedish, in 1863. The Finns also had a semiautonomous legislature to administer local affairs.

Eventually, Russia came to resent this autonomy and attempted to more fully integrate Finland in 1899, but the Finns resisted the Russification policies. This struggle would have led to armed rebellion; however, the Bolshevik Revolution gripped Russia before that could happen. Finland declared its independence, which was recognized by the Bolsheviks, on 6 December 1917.

After a brief civil war, the Finns adopted a republican constitution in 1919. During World War II, Finland fought the Soviet Union twice: in the Winter War (1939–40) and then in the Continuation War (1941–44). Finland was forced to cede one-tenth of its territory (now the Russian region of Karelia) to the Soviet Union but avoided Soviet occupation and preserved its independence.

The Finns signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1948, binding themselves to resist any attack on the Soviet Union that involved Finnish territory. The treaty still allowed trade and good relations with the West but created a situation where the Soviet Union could influence Finnish foreign policy. In 1989, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev officially recognized Finland's neutrality for the first time. In 1992, Russian and Finnish presidents signed a treaty voiding the 1948 agreement. The new treaty recognizes Russia's and Finland's equality, sovereignty, and positive economic relations. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland moved toward integration with Europe. Voters supported European Union (EU) membership in a 1994 referendum; the country officially joined the EU in 1995.

The 1991 elections brought Finland its first nonsocialist government in years, sending the once-ruling Social Democrats into Parliament's opposition. The new center-right coalition government took office during the global recession and suffered a loss of popularity when the economy weakened. Control of the government has since changed hands multiple times but was always dominated by the same three parties in various coalition governments. In 2000, Tarja Halonen became Finland's first female president; she was narrowly reelected in 2006. The April 2011 elections marked a change in the country's political landscape; the National Coalition party formed an alliance with the Social Democrats, the Greens, and other small parties to gain control of Parliament. The victory of conservative Sauli Niinistö in the 2012 presidential runoff marked the first time the National Coalition party had held that office in 30 years.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Finland has over 5.2 million people, and the population is growing at a rate of 0.08 percent annually. The majority (93 percent) of the people are Finns, although there is a significant Swedish-speaking minority (6 percent). Finland also has very small minorities of native Sami, Roma (Gypsies), Russians, and Estonians.

The overall population density is only 40 people per square mile (15 per square kilometer), but most people live in southern Finland. Around 85 percent of Finns live in towns or cities. Urbanization is a relatively new trend, so most people still have roots in the countryside and their home villages.

Language

More than 91 percent of the population speaks Finnish, a Finno-Ugric language belonging to a different language family than other Scandinavian languages. It is most closely related to Estonian. Swedish is also officially recognized.

While only the Sami minority speaks Sami, Finland recognizes the language (although not as an official one). English is a popular second language, especially among younger people and the educated.

Those who speak Finnish as a native language must study Swedish for three years in school. Likewise, Swedish speakers learn Finnish. Finnish words often include many vowels. Changing the length of a vowel or a consonant sound can alter the meaning of a word. Because it has a complex set of grammar rules, Finnish is often a difficult language for foreigners to learn.

Religion

Although about 83 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, the government has an official policy of religious neutrality. In fact, freedom of religion has been guaranteed since 1923.

However, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is supported by state taxes and performs important functions as a state church, including population registration and cemetery maintenance. The Finnish Orthodox Church, also supported by the state, claims the next largest following in Finland (1 percent). Several other Christian groups and other religions are active. As in many European nations, growing secularization has caused a decline in church attendance and membership. Slightly more than 15 percent of Finns are not affiliated with any religion.

General Attitudes

Finns maintain high ideals of loyalty and reliability, taking promises and agreements seriously. Finns tend to prefer formal structure in their institutions and in their relationships with others. People generally are reserved and appreciate etiquette and punctuality. They are proud of their Finnish heritage, especially since their language, culture, and national identity survived centuries of domination by other powers. Although Finland belongs to Europe, Europe is considered in some respects as a place one goes *to* as much as it is a place one is a part *of*; cultural identity is strong. Finns are especially proud of their small nation's status in the world; Finland has been a leading nation in peace conferences and initiatives.

Finns are proud to have one of the cleanest environments in the world, and they stress values that maintain this. Enjoying nature (through activities such as berry picking in the forests) is an important part of their lives. Allowing people access to natural habitats, regardless of who actually owns the land, is a highly valued right in Finland. Finland is also a leader in women's rights. Finnish women were the first in Europe to receive the vote, in 1906. Indeed, there is little talk of "feminism" because women expect to be involved in careers, politics, social issues, and motherhood, all as a matter of course.

Personal Appearance

Finnish dress is relatively casual. Young people follow trends, but Finns generally are not overly fashion oriented. Formal wear is popular on festive occasions. Hats are worn in winter when it is very cold.

Colorful native Finnish costumes may be seen during

festival times or weddings. The clothing varies from region to region but for women usually involves a layered dress (including an apron) and a bonnet or cap. Instead of caps, younger women wear ribbons as headbands. Men's costumes include trousers, a shirt, and a waist-length jacket or vest. They also usually wear a peaked cap, woolen cap, or felt hat. These costumes have their origins in the 18th and 19th centuries. Fabrics for the dresses and jackets are often striped, but there are hundreds of variations.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men and women customarily shake hands and make eye contact when greeting. The most common form of greeting is a nod of acknowledgment and a *Hei* (Hello), though young women often embrace upon greeting each other. During introductions, Finns often use only one name: the first name in informal situations or the last name in more formal settings. Titles are reserved for formal occasions. Using first names on first meeting is now quite common, especially among the younger generation. A general greeting is *Hyvää päivää* (Good morning/afternoon), or even just *Päivää*. Another expression for "Good morning" is *Hyvää huomenta*, or just *Huomenta*. In recent years, both young and old have begun using the more informal *Moi* (Hi) in greeting. Finns tend to carefully consider what they say and expect others to do so as well; the ability to "make small talk" generally is not valued.

Gestures

Finns use few gestures when speaking. However, talking with one's hands in one's pockets is considered impolite. Maintaining eye contact is important during conversation. When yawns cannot be suppressed, one covers one's mouth.

Visiting

Finnish homes are private places. In a sense, one is invited into a friendship with the host when one is invited to a home. It is a meaningful gesture. Finns expect visitors to be punctual. Visitors usually take cut flowers, a bottle of wine, or chocolates as a gift to the hosts, and they remove their shoes when entering a guest's home. Visits are nearly always an occasion for coffee and cakes or cookies. Guests wait until the host has taken a first sip before they drink.

Most visits are informal and involve relaxing and socializing. On special occasions, guests may be invited to sit in a sauna with the hosts. Spending time in the sauna is a national pastime.

Eating

When invited to dinner, visitors sit where the hosts ask them to, and they do not begin eating until the hosts begin. Table conversation is usually light but may span a variety of topics. Finns eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Dress is conservative in restaurants. The check is presented on request and is paid at the table. While some people leave small change on the table, a 15 percent tip

usually is included in the bill and is therefore not otherwise expected. However, porters, doormen, and coat checkers sometimes receive tips.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The family is important in Finnish culture but tends not to be as close-knit as in some other cultures. Parents are often busy with work responsibilities, and extended families rarely gather outside of special occasions, such as Christmas, birthdays, graduation parties, weddings, and funerals.

The average Finnish family has one or two children. The Finnish government is trying to increase the birthrate because the number of working people is declining compared to the number of people receiving retirement benefits. Women are offered paid maternity leave of up to 11 months, and their husbands can share a portion of that leave. In addition, families receive a small monthly allowance for each child under age 17. Day care facilities are provided by the government free of charge. Older children spend their time after school doing homework, working on hobbies, or going to the local mall to socialize with friends. Generally, high school students do not have jobs because work places do not allow anyone under 18 to work with a cash register.

Finnish gender roles tend to be flexible. Both parents usually work outside the home. In fact, half of all Finnish wage earners are women, although wages for women continue to be less than those for men. An increasing number of men share household responsibilities with their wives. Women hold important government posts and fill a substantial number of Parliament's two hundred seats. Women are also found in top business positions, including high executive positions at international companies based in Finland. Some businesses and government offices offer flexible working arrangements to better accommodate the demands of family and work.

Young people tend to become independent fairly early in Finland, taking advantage of government assistance such as housing and education subsidies. About half of females have moved away from their parents' home by the age of 20. Males usually leave a few years later because of military obligations. At around age 19 or 20, men serve in the military for 6 to 12 months, depending on the chosen field, although some do civil service instead. Service in the military is voluntary for women, and they may serve in all the same capacities in which men serve. Approximately 500 women enlist in the Finnish military each year.

Housing

Nearly two thirds of Finnish families own their own homes, though home ownership is much less common among people under age 30. Taxes are high and housing is expensive. In the cities, most people live in apartment blocks between four and six storeys high. The appearance of apartment buildings varies greatly according to when they were built. Those built in the sixties and seventies tend to look like grey concrete cubes. Older buildings are sometimes made of red brick and

other times of concrete dyed yellow, pink, or green. Traditionally, houses were made of Finland's plentiful wood. Especially in Helsinki, the older apartment blocks often showcase a Russian style, featuring ornaments on the windows and balconies made from finely worked iron. Nearly every house has a sauna, either in the house itself or, in some older homes, in a separate building. In the south, people usually keep their pets inside. Further north, it is common for dogs to be kept in a dog house and for cats to run free. Most families have access to summer cottages for vacations.

Dating and Marriage

Among Finns, dating begins at about age 15. Teenagers tend to socialize in large groups rather than in one-on-one dating situations. House parties provide a place for most of these gatherings. Movies, restaurants, and dances are also popular meeting places for teenagers. When a couple begins dating exclusively, it usually signals that they have decided to enter into a steady, committed relationship.

The marriage rate has dropped substantially since World War II. Many young couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying. This is called an "open marriage." Couples may live for years this way, sometimes waiting to marry until they have children or jointly purchase property. When two people marry, they both have the right to keep their original surnames or to take the spouse's name. Their children may bear either surname. Finnish couples tend to marry in their late twenties. Gay couples may register their relationship.

Those Finns who do marry typically prefer summer weddings (*kesähäät*). Couples usually get married in a church, then celebrate afterward at a reception. It is customary for friends of the bride and groom to throw them each a party prior to the wedding. At these parties, a bride sometimes dresses up in a humorous costume, and friends take her to public places where she must perform silly tasks such as selling kisses to passersby or letting men cut small pieces of cloth from her skirt for money. Friends of the groom will often take him on an outdoor activity like fishing, scuba diving, or rock climbing. Weddings usually include speeches by family members of close friends, good food, the cutting of the wedding cake, and the traditional wedding waltz, where the bride and groom each dance briefly with members of the wedding party. The bride sometimes wears a gold crown, which she then passes on to one of the single women after the wedding ceremony has taken place. A popular tradition among some Finns is the stealing of bride. Friends of the groom will "steal" the bride and hold her for ransom until the groom performs an embarrassing task to get her back.

Divorce ends slightly more than 50 percent of marriages in Finland. The divorce rate has increased dramatically since the 1950s as people have adopted increasingly secular views of personal relationships. The welfare system also supports the trend, as parents can depend on the state rather than a spouse to help relieve the financial burdens of childrearing.

Life Cycle

Many Finns celebrate pregnancy with baby showers, which are becoming increasingly popular in Finland. Friends and

relatives give the expectant mother items for her or for the baby. Regularly scheduled visits to a maternity clinic also make up a traditional part of the waiting period before the birth of the baby and help account for Finland's low infant mortality rate. Most Finnish parents have their babies christened in a Lutheran ceremony within three months of birth, selecting close friends to act as godparents to the newborn. Finns consider it unlucky to tell anyone the baby's name before the baptism.

At 15, members of the church and sometimes other children, too, are confirmed. The responsibility of the godparents ends at confirmation. At 18, a person is considered an adult. For many young Finns, this rite of passage includes going out with friends for the first legal alcoholic drink. It is also when Finns become eligible to drive, an important sign of adulthood. Although Finns tend to be independent, parents will sometimes help their adult children by helping them purchase an inexpensive car or co-signing on a house loan with them.

Important birthdays, such as when someone turns 18 or reaches each of the decades (30, 40, 50, etc.), are typically celebrated with close friends and family members. Well-wishers shout *Hyvää Syntymäpäivää!* (Happy Birthday!) and offer congratulations to the birthday celebrant.

Lutheran-style funerals are most common. The priest blesses the deceased, and mourners leave flowers on the coffin and read farewells. Generally a Lutheran hymn is sung. Throughout Finland, it is tradition for the men in the deceased's family to carry the coffin to the grave and lower it into the earth. After the burial, guests talk while they eat dinner or coffee and cake.

Diet

Finnish cuisine has been influenced by many cultures, from French to Russian, but it includes a wide variety of Finnish specialties using seafood, wild game, and vegetables. Reindeer steak is a traditional specialty, as is salmon. Wild berries (blueberries, cloudberries, strawberries, currants, and raspberries) are popular in desserts and liqueurs. Potatoes, cheeses, and a Finnish buffet (such as the *smörgåsbord*) are also popular. Rye bread is common, and open-faced sandwiches are eaten at breakfast and for snacks. Milk and coffee are the most common beverages for everyday drinking. Usually served with coffee is *pulla*, a sweet bread that comes in many forms, often flavored with cardamom. Finland has many pastries. *Makkara* (sausage) is roasted over a fire and eaten with *sinappi* (mustard). Traditional Christmas foods include salmon, ham, herring, and various casseroles.

Recreation

Finns have traditionally enjoyed the outdoors, with many of their favorite activities revolving around it, from picking wild berries and mushrooms to fishing, hiking, and boating. Favorite sports include downhill and cross-country skiing, track-and-field, basketball, *pesäpallo* (Finnish baseball), soccer, cycling, boating, and ice hockey, which is extremely popular in Finland. Many Finnish professional hockey players are heroes to young Finns. Finns especially enjoy the rivalry with neighboring Sweden. Nordic walking, in which one uses

modified ski poles while walking, was invented in Finland and is popular among older generations. Golf is gaining popularity; some even play on the ice in the winter.

Sauna, a Finnish word that has been adopted by English and other languages, is a traditional way for people of all ages to relax. During retreats to summer cottages, people like to run from their hot saunas for a swim in the cold, clear lakes nearby. In the winter it is common for sauna users to cool off in the snow between sauna sessions. Men and women usually use the sauna separately, but among family members, both sexes often use it at the same time. Business meetings will sometimes end in a sauna. Heat for the sauna is typically generated by burning wood, which heats rocks that radiate heat. Birch-water is poured over the rocks every so often to provide additional heat and humidity. To increase their circulation and gain more benefit from the sauna experience, some sauna users will whisk (lightly whip) themselves with a few birch twigs while taking a sauna. To the Finns, taking a sauna is a way of life, not just something to do.

Finns also love attending sporting events or watching them on television. Many enjoy watching car races. Tinkering with computers is a popular hobby as well, especially among boys. Other, less well-known games have also emerged from Finland, including mobile phone throwing (*kännykänheitto*), wife carrying (with roots in an old Estonian game called *eukonkanto*), and swamp football (*suojaljkapallo*). Championships for these events are held yearly, and they are gaining in popularity.

Dancing, especially during the summer months, is very popular among people of all age groups in Finland. Dance floors (*lavatanssit*) can be found throughout Finland, and traditional music such as the waltz, the tango, the polka, and the *hump* (a quick, bouncy two-step dance music) are played and danced to.

The Arts

The performing arts are widely appreciated in Finland. Because the government subsidizes the theater, ticket prices are low, so many people can attend. Opera is popular, though tickets are relatively expensive, and many Finns also enjoy folk music. The national instrument of Finland is the *kantele*, a stringed instrument played with the fingers.

The *Kalevala*, Finland's national epic, is a compilation of folk songs and stories gathered by philologist Elias Lönnrot. Sculpture, often abstract, is a prominent art form. Modern Finnish architecture is considered innovative. Finnish textiles, glass, and porcelain have also gained worldwide recognition.

Holidays

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At Easter, families decorate Easter eggs and grow grass on

plates in their homes. On Palm Sunday (a week before Easter), children dress up as Easter witches and recite charms door to door; they receive sweets or money for their verses. *Vappu* is celebrated in honor of both springtime and laborers. Whether or not the weather is warm and spring-like, many students gather to party and picnic, dressed in overalls and their matriculation caps. The overalls are colored according to the student's field of study. When the weather cooperates, some Finns celebrate Sleighing Tuesday (approximately seven weeks prior to Easter) by going sledding and eating a traditional snack of a sweet roll with whipped cream, jam, and almond paste, and drinking hot chocolate.

Finns celebrate Midsummer with huge bonfires by the lake; people usually leave cities and towns to go to the countryside for the day. The blue and white Finnish flag is also prominent on this holiday. Christmas is a time of peace, family, and gifts. Families eat the main meal on Christmas Eve after visiting local cemeteries and placing candles on the graves of soldiers and family members. Later, *Joulupukki*, also known as Santa Claus, arrives with gifts for the children. Families also enjoy time in the sauna on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day and 26 December are days for visiting and relaxing. Epiphany (*Loppiainen*) is a public holiday celebrated on 6 January and marks the end of the Christmas season. People usually spend this time taking down their Christmas trees and putting their Christmas decorations away.

SOCIETY

Government

The republic's constitution provides for a directly elected president (currently Sauli Niinistö) who serves as head of state for a six-year term. However, recently approved constitutional reforms limit presidential power in favor of a stronger parliament. Members of Finland's unicameral parliament (*Eduskunta*) and the prime minister (currently Jyrki Katainen) serve four-year terms. The prime minister and the *Valtioneuvosto* (cabinet) are chosen by the president, but the selections must be approved by the *Eduskunta*. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Finland has a large free-market economy that is highly industrialized. A skilled and well-educated workforce has contributed to Finland's global competitiveness, with the country's per capita output equaling that of large European economies.

Natural resources include timber, silver, iron ore, and copper. Manufacturing, technology, and trade are essential; exports represent more than 30 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Timber and timber-related products are the most important exports, followed by shipbuilding, chemicals, and textiles. The country relies heavily on imports for many raw materials and energy. But Finland provides many of its own grains, dairy products, and meats. Communications and other high-tech industries are quickly becoming mainstays. Mobile phone-maker Nokia is responsible for about a quarter of exports.

Finns enjoy a high standard of living. Most people are fairly prosperous despite the high cost of living. The economy recovered from a severe recession in the early 1990s, which was caused by depressed foreign markets and weakened trade with Russia. Inflation is low, but unemployment is high. Integration and trade with western Europe will continue to impact the economy's future. In 2002, the euro replaced the *markka*, or *Finmark* (FIM), as Finland's national currency.

Transportation and Communications

Most Finnish families own at least one car. Overall, the roads are in good condition. Public transportation is excellent and includes railways, buses, domestic air service, taxis, and ferries (for lake, river, and ocean crossings). Ferries cross regularly to Stockholm, Sweden, and other locations. Helsinki has a subway.

Finland's modern communications network includes numerous television and radio stations, an efficient phone system, and more than 250 newspapers. Roughly 80 percent of Finnish people own a mobile phone; users are asked to turn them off in places like hospitals, cinemas, and theaters. Landlines are quickly becoming a thing of the past. Most Finns are well acquainted with the internet and e-mail; the country has a large number of web servers and broadband internet connections.

Education

Education is a major priority for the Finnish government. Schools are well equipped with the latest computer equipment, smart boards, and wireless internet access. Parents can check their children's grades and attendance online and communicate regularly with teachers and administrators about their child's progress. Equality is also a high priority in the Finnish school system. All academic subjects are considered important to both genders and to all students, regardless of their cultural background. Children typically have an average of an hour's worth of homework each day and increasing amounts as they get older. They seek homework help from teachers, parents, and peers. In some cases, schools provide extra classes or special tutoring sessions for struggling students. If necessary, some students are sent to schools that specialize in particular kinds of learning difficulties.

Beginning at age seven, children are required to attend a free comprehensive school for at least nine years. Except for a few specialty schools and private schools, these comprehensive schools are public and tuition is free. After ninth grade, students must apply to attend three years at either a vocational school or a high school (*lukio*). Admission into a high school depends primarily on good grades. These schools are also tuition free, but students must pay for books, notebooks, and other school supplies. Hot lunch is provided free for all students from first through twelfth grade. Finland has a high rate of enrollment in secondary schools. A little more than 50 percent of students go on to high school, while approximately 40 percent attend vocational schools.

To graduate from high school, students must take matriculation exams. These exams can be attempted three times. Once a student has passed their exams, a diploma and white cap are awarded, and the student is eligible to take a

college entrance exam if he or she plans to apply for admission to a university. Dropout rates in Finland are extremely low.

There are several private schools in Finland, some of which cater to the community of expatriates and international business and government employees in the Helsinki region. There are also a handful of schools affiliated with religious denominations, including a Jewish school and a few Christian schools.

Many students go on to further studies at one of Finland's several university-level institutions. The Åbo Academy, in Turku, was founded in 1640, but the University of Helsinki is the national university. University students are not required to pay tuition, and they receive a generous *opintotuki* (stipend) for up to four years and can qualify for further financial aid for housing. Finns like to read, and public libraries are well used.

Health

Finland takes great pride in its health programs. Health care is socialized, reliable, and modern. It is funded by national and local taxes. Citizens receive basic health care from municipal health centers for a minimal fee, but they can also pay to visit a private doctor if they choose. Public and private hospitals provide specialized care. Finland has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world. This is due in part to an extensive network of maternity clinics. Finland has high rates of alcoholism and suicide. Most festivities and celebrations are accompanied by liberal alcohol use.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	5,259,250 (rank=113)
Area, sq. mi.	130,559 (rank=65)
Area, sq. km.	338,145

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	22 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	5 of 155 countries
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	3 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	76 (male); 83 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2011 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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