

National Family Health Survey - Key Indicators and Changes

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National Family Health Survey Latest News

- The Union Health Ministry has released NFHS-6 fact sheets revealing notable gains in maternal care and child nutrition, but with a net reduction of 30 indicators, including critical metrics like anaemia, mortality, and sex ratio at birth.

About NFHS

- The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) is a large-scale, multi-round household survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, with the **International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS)**, Mumbai, as the nodal agency.
- It provides reliable data on population, health, and nutrition indicators.
- **NFHS-4 (2015-16)**: Introduced district-level estimates and tablet-based digital interviewing, measuring 114 indicators.

- **NFHS-5 (2019-21):** Expanded to 131 key indicators, introducing new topics like preschool education, disability, and menstrual practices.
- **NFHS-6 (2023-24):** Covered nearly 6.8 lakh households across all states and UTs except Manipur.
- Historically, the NFHS has been additive by design, retaining previous questionnaires and adding new ones.
- However, NFHS-6 marks a departure, for the first time, the survey has subtracted overall.

What NFHS-6 Gained

- NFHS-6 introduced several new dimensions:
 - Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)
 - Self-Help Group (SHG) memberships
 - Digital literacy
 - Financial transactions
 - Hepatitis-B and Hepatitis-C testing among women and men
 - Dried blood spot collection from children aged 4-5 for Hepatitis-B testing
 - Biological HIV testing has been brought back as part of clinical and biochemical testing
- **Improvements in Key Indicators**
 - Mothers receiving at least 4 antenatal check-ups: Up about 7 percentage points from NFHS-5.
 - Institutional births: Increased to 90.6% from 88.6%.
 - Women's Internet use: Notable increase across states.
 - Stunting among children under 5: Declined by over 6 percentage points, compared to under 3 percentage points between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5.
 - Spousal violence: Dropped from 29.3% to 22.3%.
- **State-Level Highlights**
 - Health insurance coverage in West Bengal rose from 33.7% to 88.2%, the largest increase.
 - Women's Internet use in Andhra Pradesh jumped from 21% to 63.6%, the steepest rise.
 - However, the share of women classified as overweight or obese increased in every state.

What NFHS-6 Lost

- The preliminary fact sheet of NFHS-6 has only 101 indicators, compared to 131 in NFHS-5, a net reduction of 30 indicators (43 dropped, 13 added).
- **Anaemia Dropped**
 - Anaemia had shown a worsening picture between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5:
 - Children: 58.6% to 67.1%
 - Women aged 15-49: 53.1% to 57%
 - Pregnant women: 50.4% to 52.2%
 - The rise was near-universal, with child anaemia increasing in 28 states/UTs despite the Anaemia Mukt Bharat campaign (2018).
 - Why dropped? NFHS measured haemoglobin from a finger-prick blood sample read on a portable analyser, which several nutrition researchers argued overstated anaemia compared to venous blood drawn by other surveys.

- **Replacement:** Anaemia will now be tracked through the Diet and Biomarkers Survey, launched in December 2022 at the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad. This survey uses venous blood instead of the finger-prick method and tracks obesity alongside anaemia for the first time. Data collection is complete but yet to be released.
- **Mortality Indicators Removed**
 - Three mortality indicators have been cut:
 - Neonatal mortality
 - Infant mortality
 - Under-five mortality
 - These will now be tracked by the Sample Registration System (SRS), whose latest bulletin pegged infant mortality at 24 per 1,000 live births. However, SRS does not provide district-level data or socio-economic breakdowns available in NFHS.
- **Sex Ratio Indicators Removed**
 - Both the sex ratio of the total population and the sex ratio at birth (929 females per 1,000 males in NFHS-5) are absent.
 - This removes a key signal of sex-selective practices in the country.
- **Sanitation and Clean Cooking Fuel Dropped**
 - Two indicators closely tied to flagship government programmes have been removed:
 - Access to sanitation facilities: NFHS-5 recorded 70%, a measure linked to the Swachh Bharat Mission and the 2019 declaration of India as open defecation-free.
 - Clean cooking fuel use: 58.6% in NFHS-5, a direct measure of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana's success.
- **Cancer Screening Indicators Gone**
 - Four cancer-screening indicators covering cervical, breast, and oral cancer, introduced for the first time in NFHS-5, have been dropped after a single round.

Implications of the Changes

- **Data Gaps:** The removals leave no current survey-based national figure for:
 - Infant mortality with district-level breakdowns
 - Sanitation coverage
 - Sex ratio at birth
 - Cancer screening rates
 - Comprehensive HIV knowledge
 - These are gaps that no other single source fills at the same scale.
- **Concerns Over Programme Evaluation**
 - The removal of indicators tied to flagship schemes, sanitation, clean cooking fuel, anaemia, limits the ability to:
 - Independently evaluate the effectiveness of programmes like Swachh Bharat Mission, Ujjwala Yojana, and Anaemia Mukh Bharat.
 - Track district-level disparities that aggregate statistics cannot reveal.
 - Identify socio-economic patterns in health outcomes.

- **Trade-offs in Survey Design**

- The shift represents a fundamental change in NFHS philosophy, moving from an additive design to a more selective approach.
- While this may reduce respondent burden and improve data quality, it also reduces the survey's role as a single comprehensive source of health and demographic data.

Significance of NFHS-6 Changes

- **Methodological Improvements**

- The dropping of finger-prick anaemia measurement in favour of venous blood methods reflects efforts to improve data accuracy.
- The reintroduction of biological HIV testing addresses a gap from NFHS-5.

- **New Areas of Inquiry**

- The addition of digital literacy, DBT, and SHG indicators acknowledges the changing landscape of welfare delivery and women's empowerment in India.

- **Concerns Over Transparency**

- The lack of a published rationale for many changes raises questions about:
- Transparency in survey design decisions.
- Consistency in measuring progress over time.
- Continuity of long-term data series critical for policy evaluation.

Source: TH

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