

How the world got better in 2018, in 15 charts

5-6 minutes

A lot went wrong in 2018, so much that it was easy to lose sight of global improvements in the midst of incessant bad news. But while it may be hard to believe, 2018 was in many ways the best year yet to be a human living on Earth.

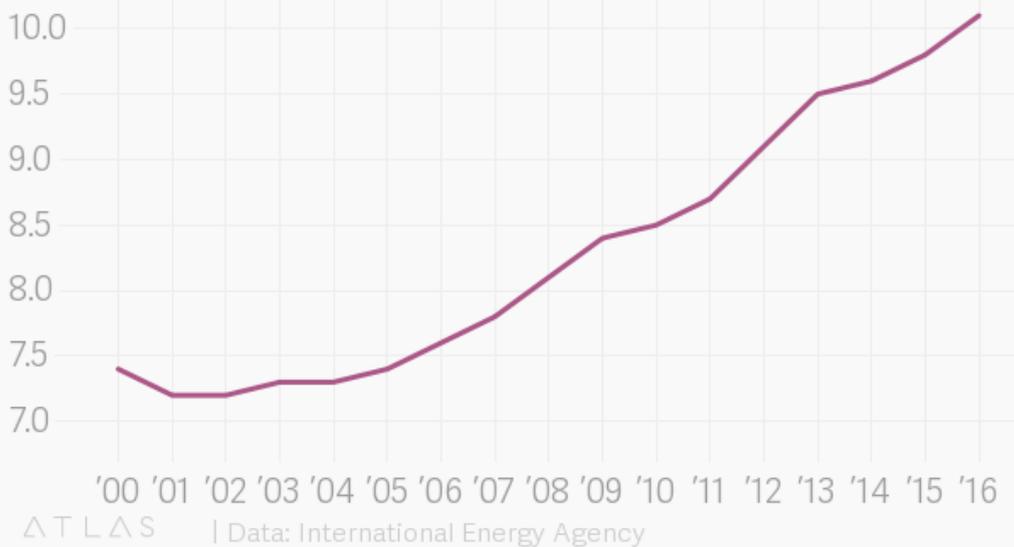
Environment

One of the worst pieces of global news this year came from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's October report, which showed that [carbon emissions are set to rise this year over last](#). We need a steep decline in greenhouse-gas emissions to avoid catastrophic climate change, so the fact that we've yet to even flatline is more than troubling. On the other hand, there has been some good news.

For example, in 2016, for the first time, the share of global energy that came from renewables passed 10%. According to the International Energy Agency, the world got [nearly 25% of its electricity from renewables in 2017](#), and that number should jump to 30% within the next few years. *(Note: Many of the figures cited in this story are from 2017 or 2016, but most were published in 2018 because it usually takes a year or two to gather and analyze global data.)*

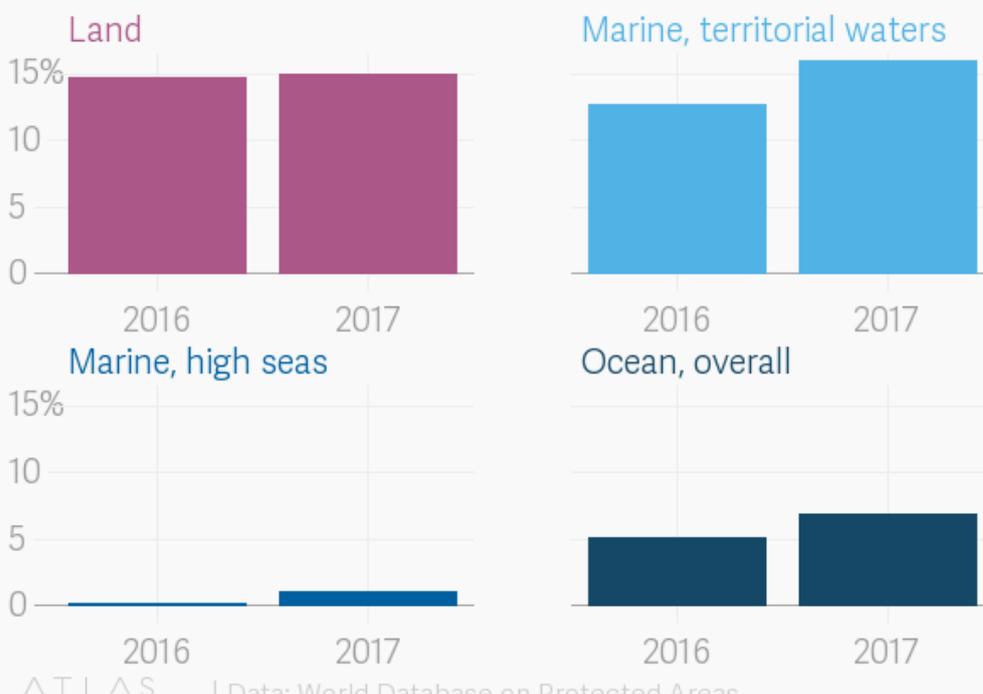
Over 10% of the world's energy now comes from renewable sources

10.5% of total energy from renewables

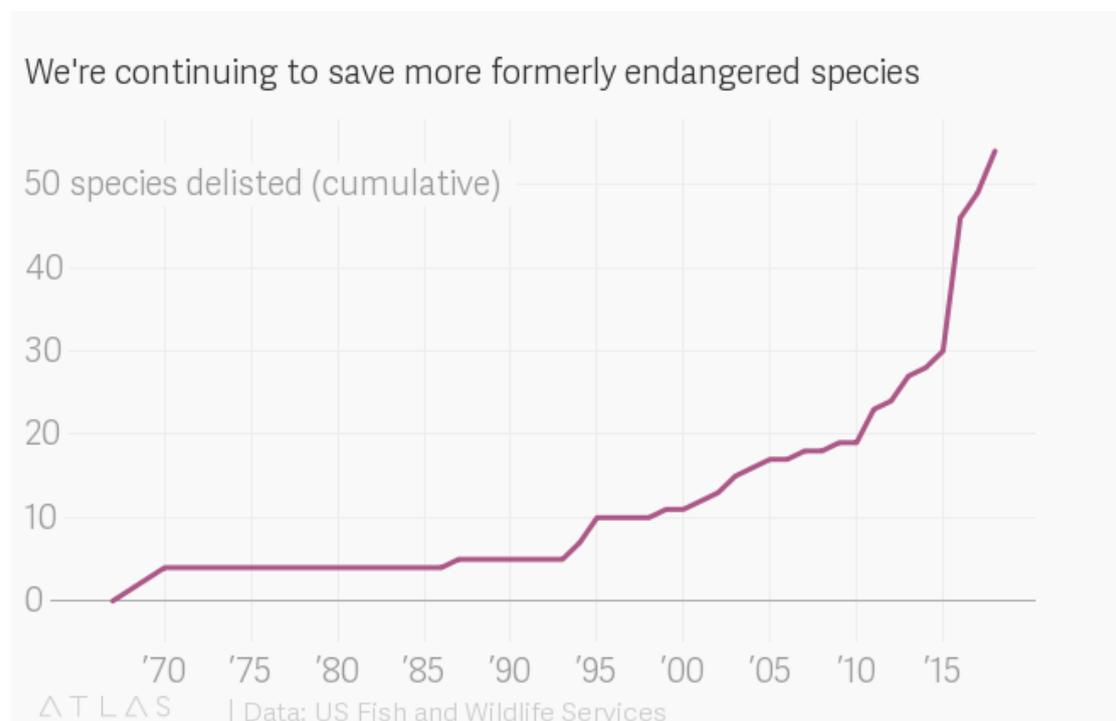


New data also show that, between 2016 and 2017, some 6.7 million additional sq km (2.6 million sq miles) of the world's oceans were put under environmental protection. The majority of that is in national waters, meaning more countries are actively assisting in the global ocean conservation project. (About 260,000 sq km of land were also added.)

We're finally starting to put at-risk marine areas under protection

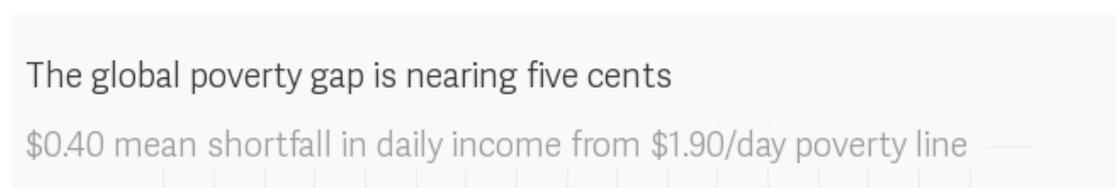


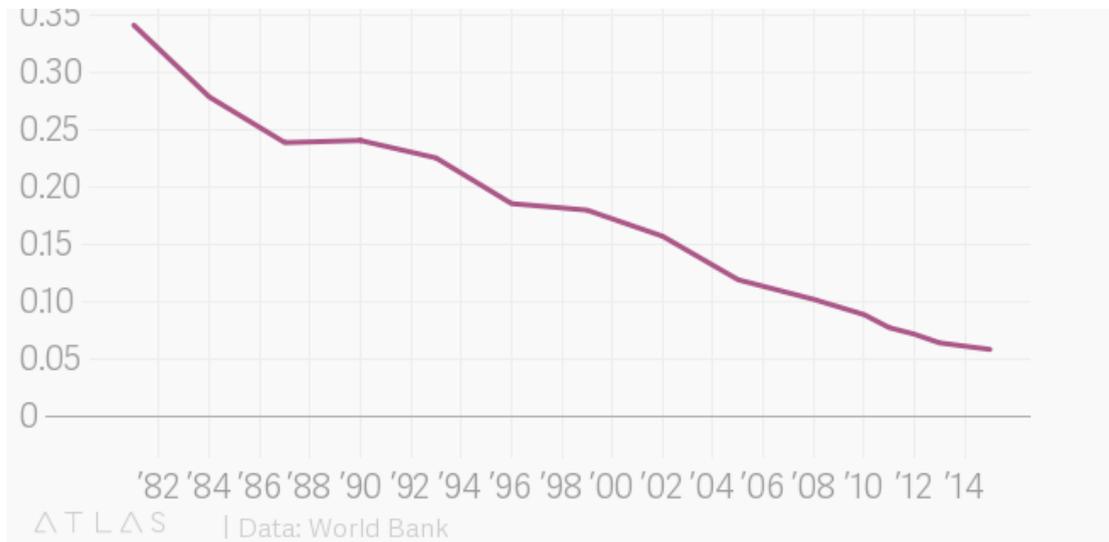
It's a bit hard to contextualize how many endangered or threatened species we've been able to save, since their ranks grow as humans explore more of the world and find new species we must assess. But the fact that we've been able to take an increasing number off these lists is encouraging. In 2018, the lesser long-nosed bat was delisted [thanks largely to the efforts of tequila producers](#), whose agave plants the bats feed on.



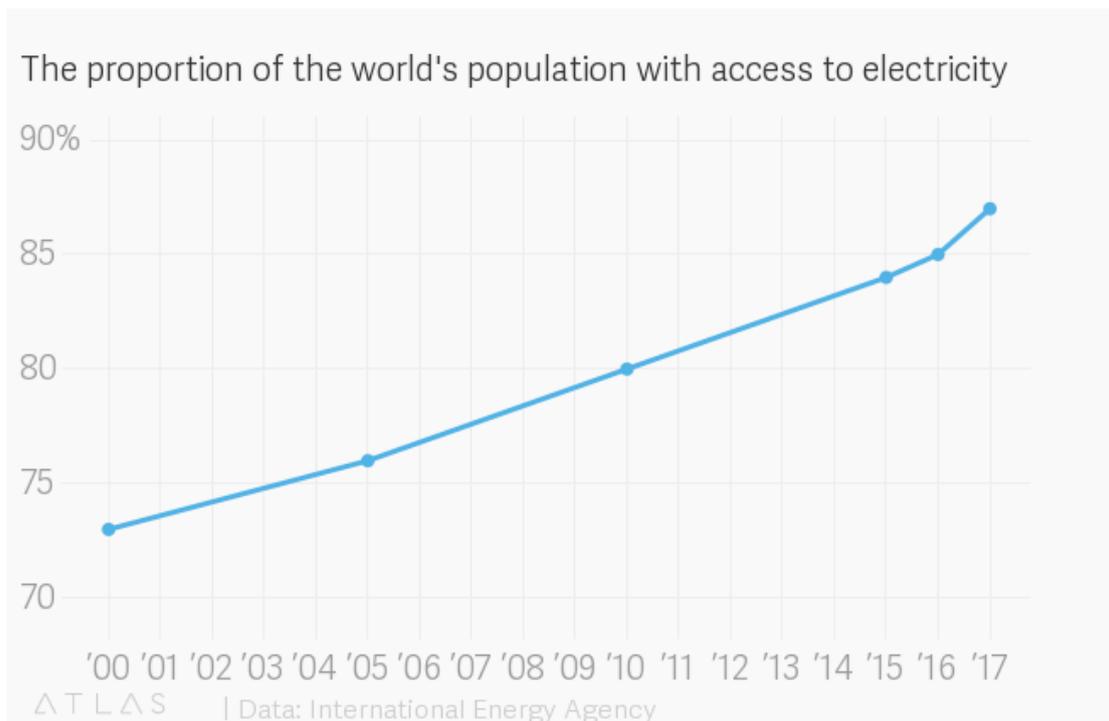
Poverty/Income

It can be hard to assess global poverty rates, since context can vary dramatically. One way to look at it is by comparing the difference between what the average person makes a day, and the global poverty line of \$1.90 a day (as determined by the World Bank). Based on that measure, global poverty is falling.





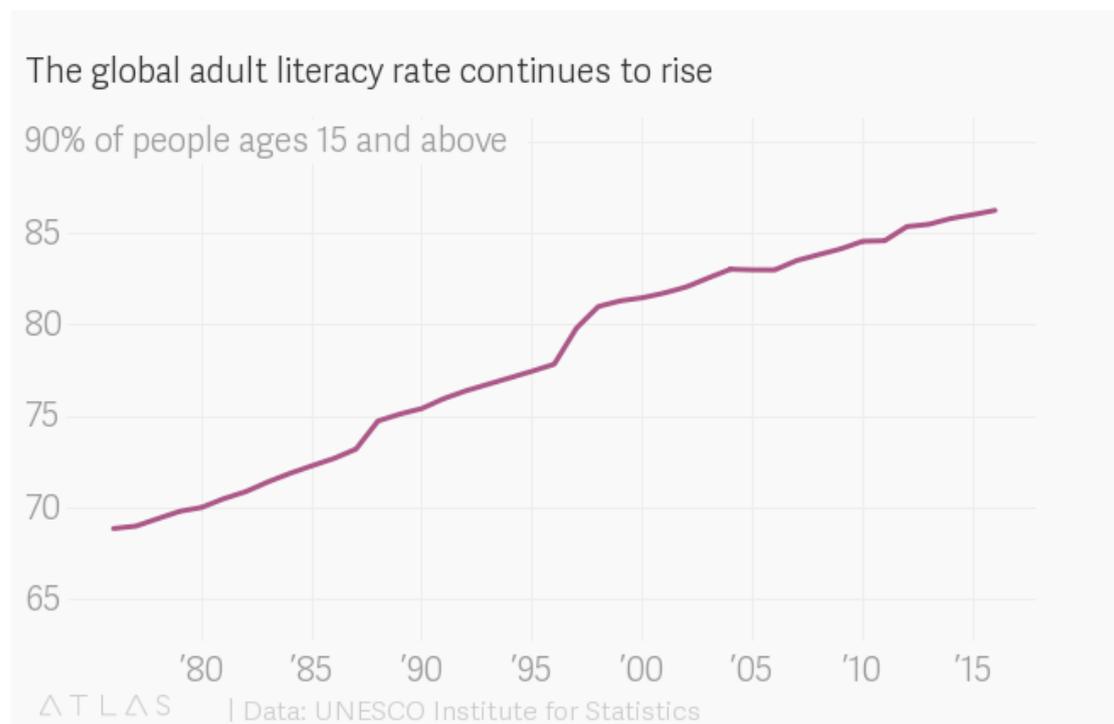
Another thing to consider is quality of life. Electricity is essential to health, education, and general satisfaction. According to new data released this year, 87% of people around the world had access to electricity in 2017.



Education

Literacy rates have been steadily climbing for decades now, and though it seems incremental, even a fraction of a percentage point can make a huge difference. Considering there are some 5.5 billion adults alive today, the 0.23

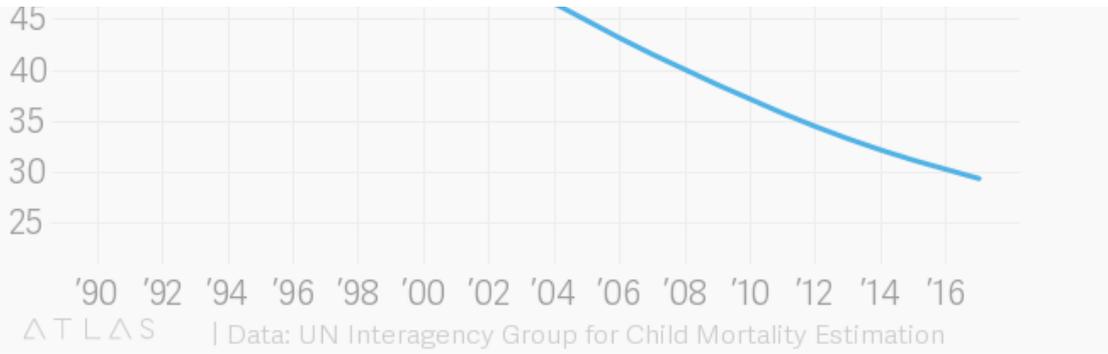
percentage-point increase from 2015 to 2016 (the last year for which data are available) means about 11.5 million more people can read.



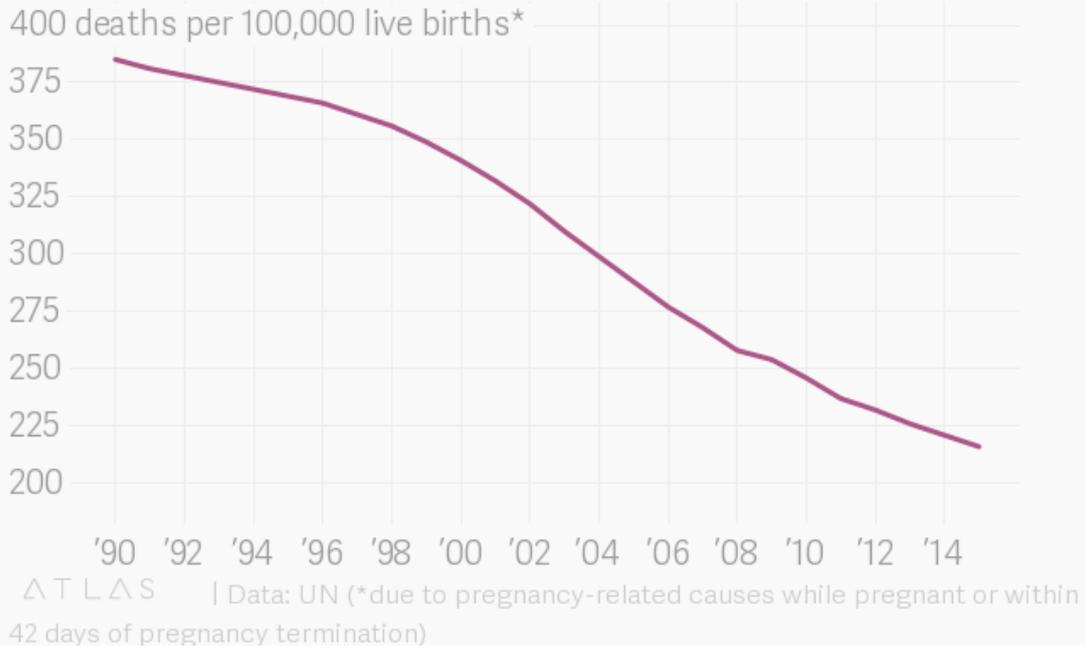
Public health

Probably the biggest invisible improvements the world sees year to year are essential indicators of overall global public health, like rates of infant mortality, maternal mortality, childhood stunting, and teen pregnancy. These are important, because they represent access the average person alive has to health care professionals, facilities, medicine, and more. All of these rates have been falling in the past few decades, in some cases dramatically.

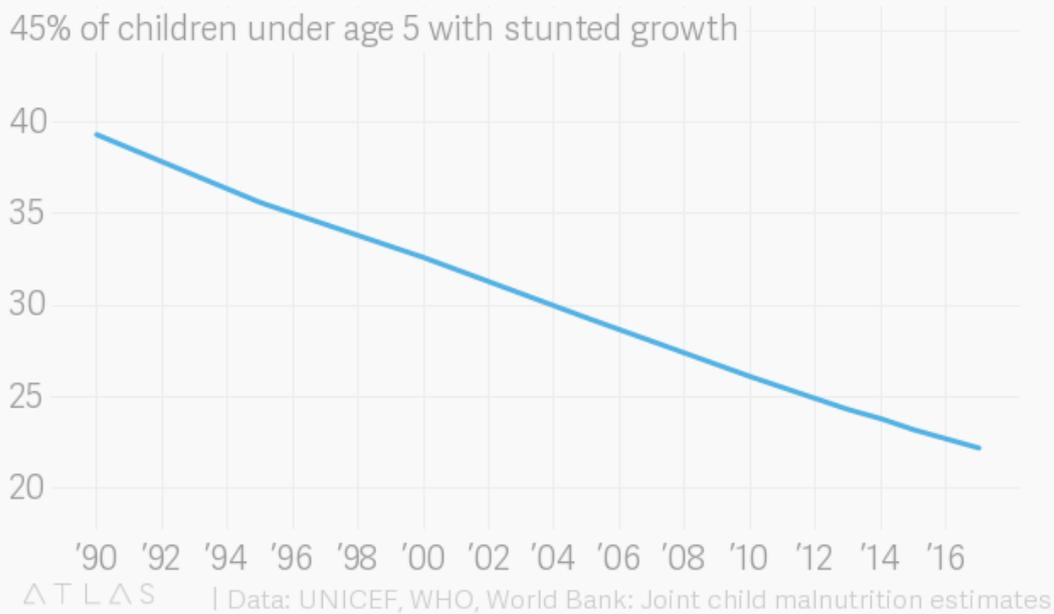




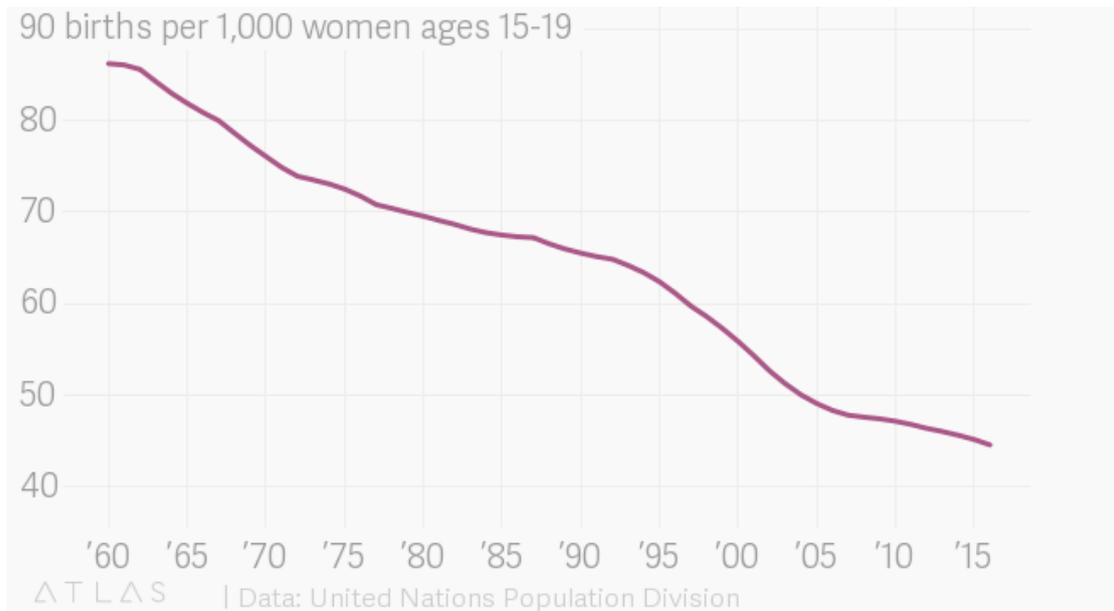
Global maternal mortality rates are falling



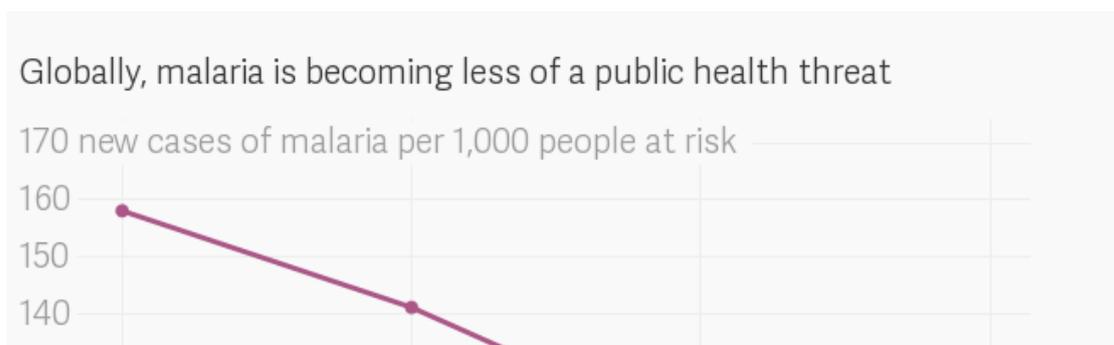
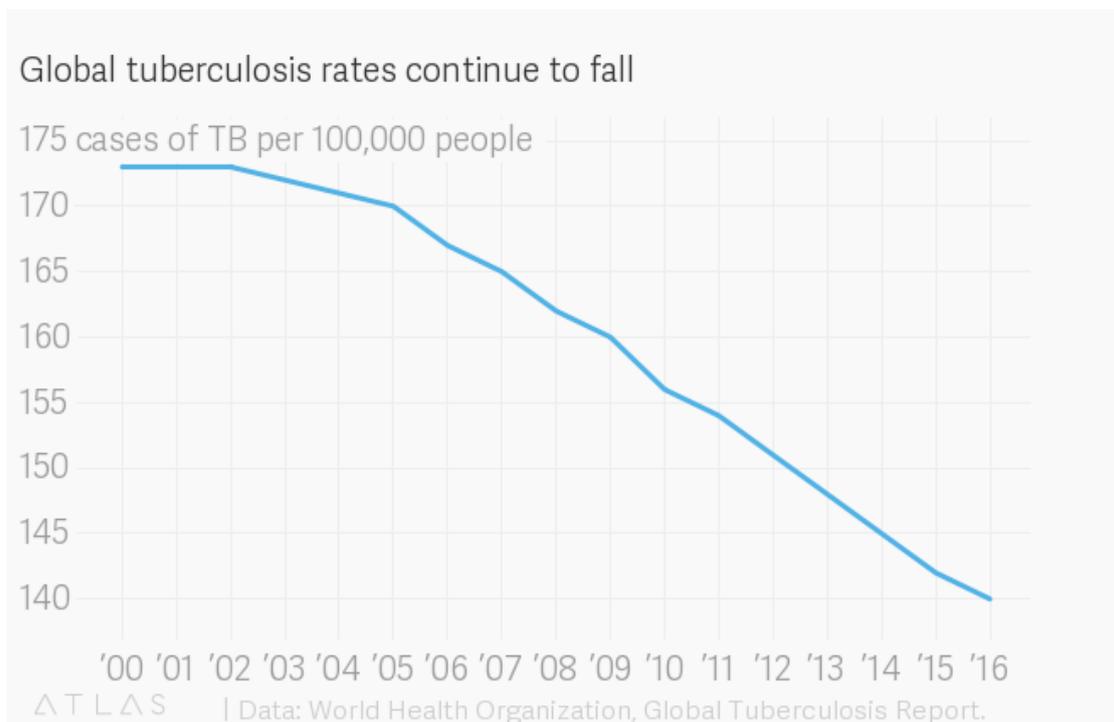
Childhood stunting has fallen dramatically

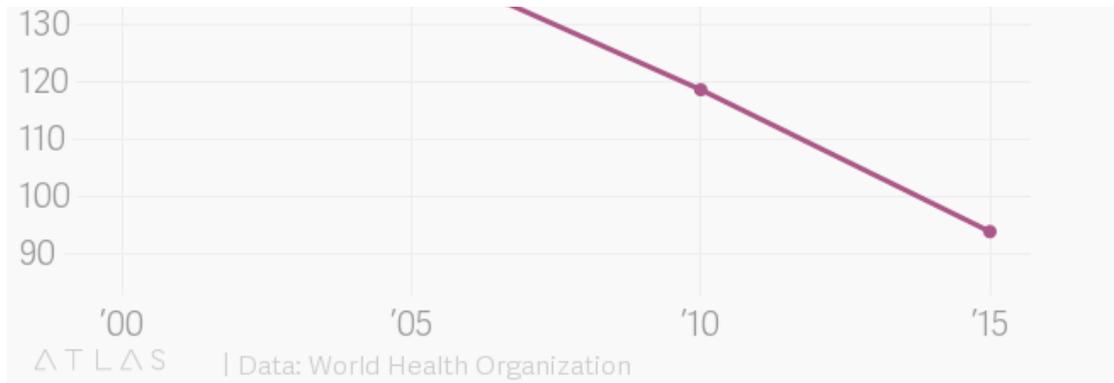


Teen pregnancy rates are falling worldwide



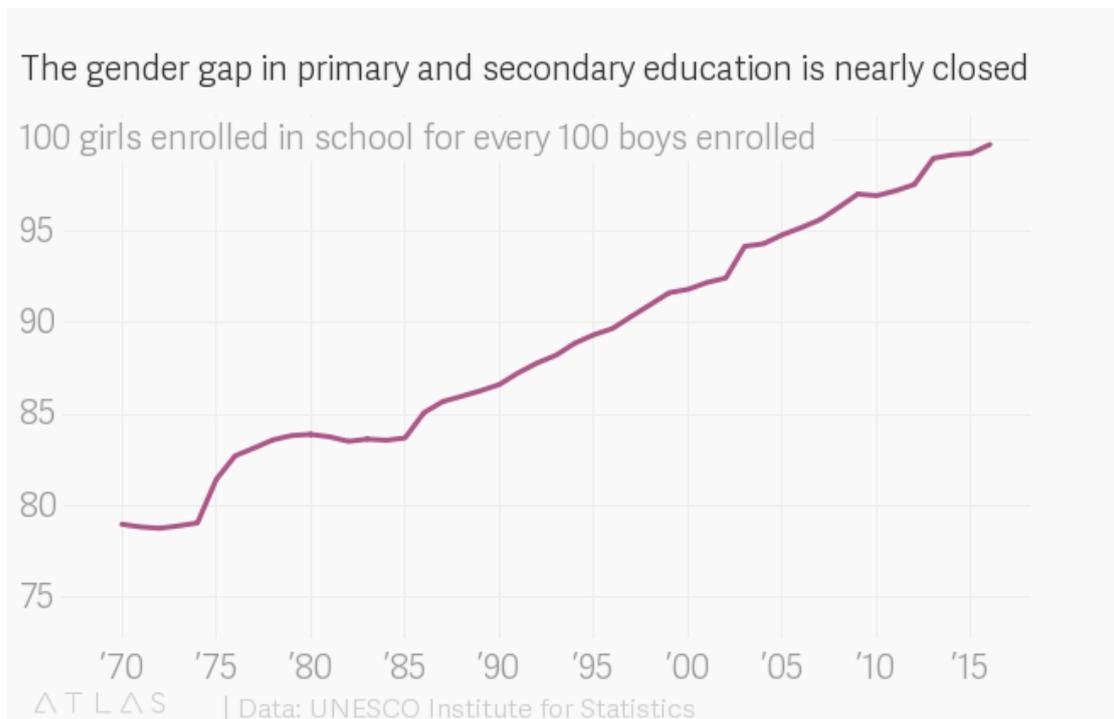
Another good indicator of improving global health is rates of treatable infectious diseases, like tuberculosis and malaria. These have typically been much bigger problems in poorer parts of the world, but those care gaps continue to close.





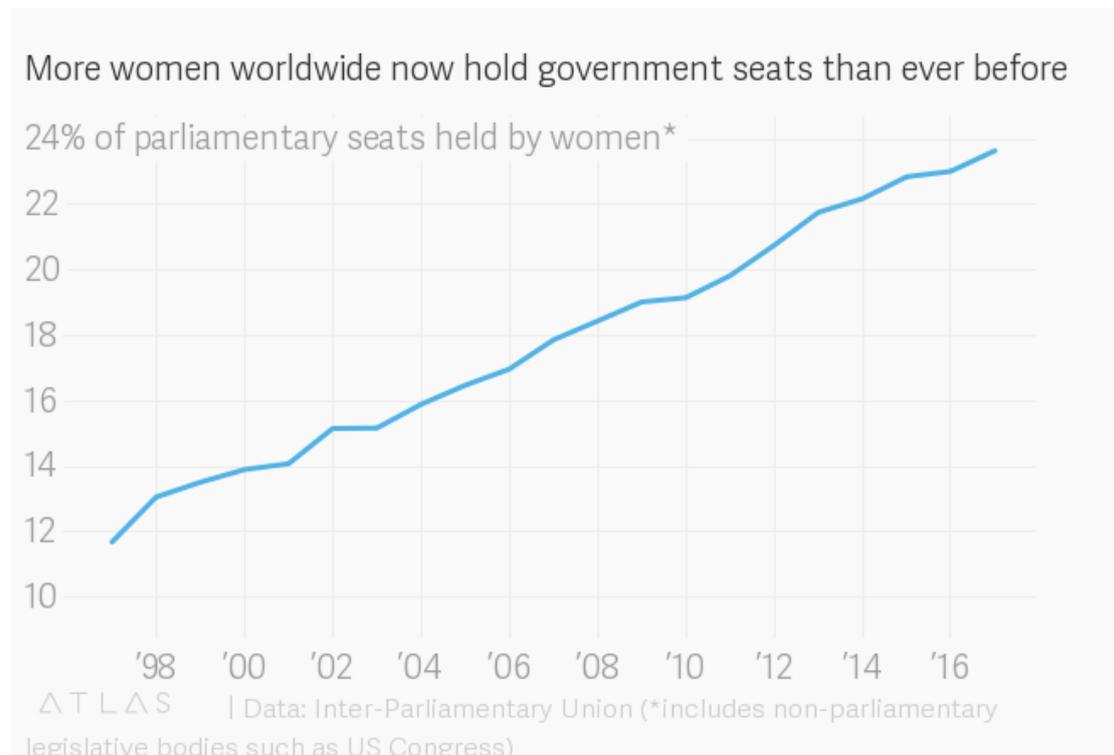
Gender equality & LGBT rights

Another positive trend that can fly under the radar, especially in wealthier countries, is how the global gender gap in education continues to close. New data published this year show that, in 2016, there were 99.7 girls enrolled in primary and secondary school for every 100 boys. For comparison, in 1986 that number was 85.1. As with some of these other indicators, each year sees only what appears to be incremental improvement, but given the size of the global population, those tiny increases have outsized impact.



The 2018 US elections resulted in a [historic new class of](#)

[congressional representatives](#): at least 121 women will serve in Congress starting next year, accounting for just under 23% of Congress members. That, though, just brings the US in line with the global trend, in which women's share of government seats passed 23% in 2016, and rose to nearly 24% in 2017.



There's still much to do for women's equality. There's also much more to do for LGBTQ rights. But one encouraging trend is that countries continue to legalize same-sex marriage. In 2018, Costa Rica's highest court ruled that laws banning same-sex marriage are unconstitutional, bringing the country in line with about 30 others that have done the same.



