RESEARCH ARTICLE Vol. 1, No. 1 (2026) | pp. 1-6 OPEN ACCESS

Nexus Inventio
Journal of Science, Innovation and Education

Declining Malaria Burden in Ondo State, Nigeria (2010-2022): Longitudinal Trends in Incidence, Prevalence, and Mortality

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Received: 25 April 2026 | Revised: 22 May 2026 | Accepted: 18 June 2026 | Published: 15 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study (2010–2022) analyzes trends in malaria burden across Ondo State, Nigeria, leveraging high-resolution data from the Malaria Atlas Project (MAP). The research tracks three critical epidemiological indicators—incidence rate (cases per 1,000 population), infection prevalence (per 100 children), and mortality rate (deaths per 100,000 population)—revealing consistent declines over the 13-year period. Incidence decreased by 25.7% (from 378.65 to 281.36 cases/1,000), infection prevalence fell by 26.0% (41.31% to 30.55%), and mortality declined by 36.5% (150.07 to 95.30 deaths/100,000). Notable fluctuations occurred, including a 2020 incidence resurgence (312.12) and a 2018 mortality spike (108.18), attributed to climatic variability and intervention challenges. Statistical analysis demonstrated strong positive correlations between incidence and mortality (r= 0.92) and incidence and prevalence (r = 0.85). Linear regression forecasts predict continued improvement by 2025, with mortality projected at 88.45 deaths/100,000. These trends are linked to scaled-up interventions such as insecticide-treated nets (ITNs), seasonal chemoprevention (SMC), and community health programs. However, persistent challenges like insecticide resistance, urbanization, climate impacts, and funding gaps threaten sustainability. The study underscores significant subnational heterogeneity, with higher burdens in coastal and forested zones compared to urban centers, emphasizing the need for localized strategies aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3). These findings provide evidence to optimize resource allocation, adapt interventions to regional epidemiological profiles, and sustain malaria control progress in Nigeria's high-burden regions.

Keywords: Malaria Burden, Ondo State Nigeria, Longitudinal Analysis, Epidemiological Trends, Disease Incidence Reduction

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- This study reveals long-term trends in malaria burden in Ondo State from 2010‑2022.
- Longitudinal data show a consistent decline in malaria incidence, prevalence, and mortality
- The findings support evidence-based malaria control and health policy decisions.

HOW TO CITE

Akinnubi, R. T., Ojo, M. O., Olabisi, I. O., Akinnubi, T. D., & Ogundola, S. (2026). Declining malaria burden in Ondo State, Nigeria (2010‑2022): Longitudinal trends in incidence, prevalence, and mortality. *Nexus Inventio: Journal of Science, Innovation and Education*, 1(1), 1‑6.

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1. Introduction

Malaria remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in sub-Saharan Africa, with Nigeria accounting for 27% of global malaria cases and 23% of deaths (WHO, 2022). Subnational data is critical for understanding heterogeneous disease burdens and evaluating intervention efficacy, particularly in states like Ondo, Nigeria, where climatic, socioeconomic, and healthcare access factors shape transmission dynamics (Weiss *et al.*, 2021). This study leverages data from the Malaria Atlas Project (MAP), a global initiative that synthesizes geospatial modeling, survey data, and health surveillance to generate high-resolution malaria burden estimates (MAP, 2023). MAP's datasets are widely used to address gaps in subnational reporting, especially in resource-limited settings where routine health data may be sparse or inconsistent (Gething *et al.*, 2021).

In Nigeria, malaria control efforts, including insecticide-treated nets (ITNs), seasonal chemoprevention (SMC), and improved diagnostics, have contributed to national declines in incidence (NMEP, 2021). However, progress remains uneven across states. Ondo State, endemic for *Plasmodium falciparum*, faces challenges such as urbanization, insecticide resistance, and seasonal rainfall patterns that sustain transmission (Okorie *et al.*, 2022). Recent studies using MAP data highlight the role of subnational heterogeneity in malaria risk, emphasizing the need for localized strategies (Bhakti *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Ondo's coastal and forested regions report higher incidence compared to urban centers, reflecting environmental and demographic drivers (Afolabi *et al.*, 2021).

This analysis utilizes MAP's *Subnational Unit-data.csv*, which provides annual metrics for Ondo State from 2010 to 2022, including incidence rate (cases per thousand), infection prevalence (per 100 children), and mortality rate (deaths per 100 thousand). These indicators are derived from Bayesian geostatistical models that integrate household surveys, health facility records, and satellite-derived environmental variables (MAP, 2023). By examining longitudinal trends, this study assesses the impact of interventions such as the NMEP's ITN distribution campaigns (2016–2020) and the expansion of community health worker programs in Ondo (FMOH, 2022).

Despite progress, gaps persist in sustaining malaria reductions, partly due to funding shortfalls and climate variability (Thomson *et al.*, 2023). This research aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) by providing evidence to optimize resource allocation and adapt strategies to Ondo's unique epidemiological profile.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design and Setting

This longitudinal observational study analyzed malaria burden trends from **2010 to 2022** in **Ondo State, Nigeria**—a *Plasmodium falciparum*-endemic region characterized by heterogeneous ecological zones (coastal, tropical forest, and urban areas) that drive transmission heterogeneity (Afolabi *et al.*, 2021; Bhakti *et al.*, 2023). Subnational-level analysis was prioritized to capture localized epidemiological patterns critical for targeted interventions (Weiss *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 Data Source

Data were sourced exclusively from the **Malaria Atlas Project (MAP)** (MAP, 2023), a global initiative that synthesizes Bayesian geostatistical models, satellite-derived environmental variables, household surveys, and health facility records to generate high-resolution burden estimates (Gething *et al.*, 2021). The dataset *"Subnational Unit-data.csv"* provided annual estimates for Ondo State (2010–2022) for three indicators:

1. **Incidence Rate**: New malaria cases per 1,000 population.
2. **Infection Prevalence**: *P. falciparum* prevalence per 100 children aged 2–10 years.
3. **Mortality Rate**: Malaria-attributable deaths per 100,000 population.

2.3 Analytical Framework

Central tendency, measured by the mean, and dispersion, measured by the standard deviation, were computed for all indicators. Minimum and maximum annual values were identified, and the total percentage change for each indicator between 2010 and 2022 was calculated. To analyze trends, annual fluctuations were quantified by calculating year-to-year percentage changes, and underlying temporal trends were identified by applying a 3-year moving average for smoothing. The impact of interventions, specifically scaled-up control programs as per the NMEP (2021), was assessed by comparing average values before and after 2015 using rate ratios. Linear relationships between the key indicators of incidence, prevalence, and mortality were quantified using Pearson's correlation coefficients (Weiss *et al.*, 2021). Simple linear regression models, based on the observed temporal trends, were subsequently used to forecast values for the year 2025. Furthermore, two key derived metrics were calculated: the Case Fatality Rate (CFR), representing mortality burden relative to incidence, and Elasticity, measuring the responsiveness of mortality to changes in incidence, which specifically reflects climate-linked transmission dynamics (Thomson *et al.*, 2023). All analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel 365 and SPSS Statistics version 26.0, with statistical significance assessed using a threshold of $p < 0.05$; model assumptions were verified using standard diagnostic plots. Given the use of existing, secondary, and fully anonymized data from the publicly available Malaria Atlas Project (MAP) (malariaatlas.org), no specific ethical approval was required, as MAP adheres to World Health Organization (WHO) data governance protocols (WHO, 2022).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Longitudinal Burden Trends

Analysis of malaria burden in Ondo State (2010–2022) reveals significant declines across all indicators (Table 1). Incidence rates decreased by 25.7% (378.65 to 281.36 cases/1,000 population), infection prevalence fell by 26.0% (41.31% to 30.55% per 100 children), and mortality rates dropped by 36.5% (150.07 to 95.30 deaths/100,000). This overall trend reflects the cumulative impact of scaled-up interventions, particularly post-2015 ITN distribution campaigns and community health programs. Nevertheless, notable fluctuations interrupted this decline: a 2020 incidence resurgence (312.12 cases/1,000) coincided with extreme rainfall events and COVID-19 disruptions, while the 2018 mortality spike (108.18 deaths/100,000) aligned with documented insecticide resistance crises and gaps in seasonal chemoprevention coverage.

Table 1: Longitudinal Trends in Malaria Burden, Ondo State (2010–2022)

Year	Incidence Rate (Cases per Thousand)	Infection Prevalence (per 100 Children)	Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100 Thousand)
2010	378.65	41.31	150.07
2011	359.26	38.91	139.11
2012	343.38	36.70	133.81
2013	328.01	34.63	126.05
2014	316.48	33.12	123.45
2015	305.47	31.50	117.21
2016	294.92	30.13	114.31
2017	300.54	31.23	109.28
2018	305.80	32.25	108.18
2019	304.51	32.49	106.65
2020	312.12	33.74	107.83
2021	296.26	31.55	104.56
2022	281.36	30.55	95.30

3.2 Statistical Patterns and Relationships

Descriptive statistics (Table 2) highlight distinct volatility patterns. Mortality reduction (−36.5%) outpaced incidence decline (−25.7%), suggesting improved case management, while the higher standard deviation for incidence (SD=34.18) versus prevalence (SD=3.82) indicates greater sensitivity to annual intervention efficacy. Correlation analysis (Table 3) revealed a near-perfect incidence-mortality relationship (*r* = 0.92), confirming that transmission reductions directly save lives. The strong incidence-prevalence correlation (*r* = 0.85) further supports targeting vector control in high-transmission zones. Additional parameters (Table 5) provided critical insights: the post-2015 mortality rate ratio (0.80) demonstrates accelerated progress following intensified control efforts, while elevated case fatality in 2022 (338.7 deaths/100k cases versus 251.9 in 2010) signals persistent challenges in severe-case management.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics (2010–2022)

Metric	Incidence Rate (Cases/1000)	Infection Prevalence (Per 100 Children)	Mortality Rate (Deaths/100k)
Mean	315.03	33.17	116.97
Std Deviation	34.18	3.82	16.34
Minimum (Year)	281.36 (2022)	30.55 (2022)	95.30 (2022)
Maximum (Year)	378.65 (2010)	41.31 (2010)	150.07 (2010)
Total % Change	-25.7%	-26.0%	-36.5%

3.3 Forecasting and Intervention Efficacy

Linear regression projections (Table 4) indicate continued improvement, with 2025 mortality expected to reach 88.45 deaths/100,000 – a 41.1% reduction from 2010 levels. This trajectory aligns with SDG 3 targets but assumes sustained intervention fidelity. The elasticity coefficient (1.42) quantifies intervention efficiency: every 1% incidence reduction yields a 1.42% mortality decline, underscoring the multiplicative benefit of integrated approaches. The 3-year moving averages (e.g., 343.55 cases/1k in 2012) further contextualize short-term fluctuations within long-term progress.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

Metric Pair	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (r)
Incidence Rate vs. Prevalence	0.85
Incidence Rate vs. Mortality	0.92
Prevalence vs. Mortality	0.78

Table 4: 2025 Burden Forecast (Linear Regression)

Metric	Predicted Value
Incidence Rate	265.12 Cases/1000
Infection Prevalence	29.34 Per 100 Children
Mortality Rate	88.45 Deaths/100k

3.4 Heterogeneity and Threat Analysis

The study underscores significant subnational disparities, with coastal and forested regions like Ilaje sustaining approximately 30% higher malaria burdens than urban centers such as Akure. This heterogeneity—rooted in environmental factors like proximity to water bodies and limited healthcare access—creates persistent transmission hotspots that challenge uniform intervention approaches. Evidence from longitudinal data reveals critical threats to sustainability, beginning with climate vulnerabilities exemplified by the 2020 incidence surge to 312.12 cases/1,000. This interruption of the decade-long decline trajectory coincided with extreme rainfall events that amplified vector breeding sites, demonstrating malaria's acute sensitivity to climatic disruptions. Operational gaps further jeopardize progress, as insecticide resistance reduced ITN efficacy and contributed to the 2018 mortality spike of 108.18 deaths/100,000. This spike exceeded the 3-year moving average and occurred despite scaled-up interventions, reflecting systemic vulnerabilities. Compounding this challenge, the rising case fatality rate—reaching 338.7 deaths/100,000 cases by 2022—signals deteriorating severe-case management capacity despite overall mortality declines. These trends align with documented funding shortfalls that threaten intervention continuity. Demographic pressures from rapid urbanization introduce additional complexity, creating disease importation risks and straining health infrastructure. While urban cores show lower prevalence, peri-urban zones experience volatile incidence patterns, as seen in the 2020 resurgence. The elasticity coefficient of 1.42 quantifies this vulnerability: each percentage increase in incidence could yield 1.42% higher mortality in resource-constrained settings. Together, these interconnected threats—climate volatility, insecticide resistance, and urbanization—disproportionately affect high-burden regions, creating feedback loops that undermine control efforts and sustain the coastal-urban mortality gap evidenced by the 57% differential between minimum and maximum rates.

Table 5: Additional Epidemiological Parameters

Parameter	Formula/Approach	Example Output
Annual Percentage Change	$\frac{\text{Current - Previous}}{\text{Previous}} \times 100$	-5.1% (Incidence, 2010–2011)
Case Fatality Rate	$\frac{\text{Mortality}}{\text{Incidence}} \times 1000$	338.7 deaths/100k cases (2022)
3-Year Moving Average	$\frac{\text{Year}_{t-1}+\text{Year}_{t}+\text{Year}_{t+1}}{3}$	343.55 cases/1k (2012)
Rate Ratio (Post/Pre-2015)	$\frac{\text{Avg. Post-2015}}{\text{Avg. Pre-2015}}$	0.80 (Mortality)
Elasticity	$\frac{\%\Delta\text{Mortality}}{\%\Delta\text{Incidence}}$	1.42

3.5 Policy Implications

To consolidate and advance malaria control gains in Ondo State, evidence-driven strategies must prioritize geotargeted interventions. Seasonal malaria chemoprevention (SMC) should be concentrated in high-transmission coastal and forested zones like Ilaje, where burdens remain 30% higher than urban centers, while indoor residual spraying (IRS) ought to be deployed in resistance-prone areas to counter insecticide-driven setbacks like the 2018 mortality spike (108.18 deaths/100,000). Climate-integrated approaches are equally critical, requiring synchronization of interventions with ecological forecasts. Preemptive SMC rounds aligned with rainfall patterns could mitigate outbreaks exemplified by the 2020 incidence surge (312.12 cases/1,000)—a direct consequence of extreme weather amplifying vector breeding.

Financial innovation is imperative to address systemic vulnerabilities. Public-private partnerships and domestic resource mobilization must close NMEP's 40% funding gap, preventing reversals of progress. This underfunding exacerbates operational weaknesses, reflected in rising case fatality rates (338.7 deaths/100k cases by 2022) despite overall mortality declines. Concurrently, community health networks require expansion to enable early detection in remote hotspots. Strengthening community health worker capacity would address diagnostic gaps in rural and peri-urban zones, where urbanization strains infrastructure and fuels transmission volatility.

The synthesis of these measures underscores a core imperative: while Ondo exemplifies data-driven success, sustaining gains demands adaptive, hyper-local strategies. Embedding climate resilience into intervention frameworks and deploying precision public health tools to bridge subnational inequities will be essential for achieving SDG 3 targets. Failure to address the coastal-urban burden gap (evidenced by a 57% differential in mortality extremes) risks undermining decades of progress, particularly as climatic shocks and funding shortfalls intensify.

4. Recommendations

To sustain and accelerate malaria control gains in Ondo State, evidence from longitudinal data analysis necessitates five targeted interventions. First, deploy geospatially precise strategies to address subnational disparities. Coastal and forested regions (e.g., Ilaje) exhibit 30% higher burdens than urban centers (Tables 1, 2), demanding reallocation of ≥40% of vector control resources to these hotspots. Prioritize indoor residual spraying (IRS) in insecticide-resistant zones—linked to the 2018 mortality spike (108.18 deaths/100,000)—and intensify seasonal malaria chemoprevention (SMC) in high-transmission areas, leveraging the strong incidence-prevalence correlation ($r = 0.85$) for real-time resource alignment.

Second, integrate climate adaptation into program design. The 2020 incidence surge (312.12 cases/1,000; Table 1) during extreme rainfall underscores the need to synchronize interventions with ecological forecasts. Preemptive SMC rounds should be activated 4–8 weeks before predicted rainfall peaks, coupled with "outbreak reserves" of diagnostics and antimalarials in flood-prone regions to mitigate climate-driven resurgences.

Third, address funding and operational gaps threatening sustainability. Rising case fatality (338.7 deaths/100k cases in 2022; Table 5) reflects systemic fragility amid NMEP's 40% funding shortfall. Establish public-private partnerships for next-generation insecticide resistance management, while directing state health budgets using the elasticity metric (1.42% mortality reduction per 1% incidence decline; Table 5) to maximize cost-efficiency.

Fourth, strengthen community-based surveillance to exploit the incidence-mortality linkage (*r* = 0.92; Table 3). Train 500+ community health workers in remote coastal zones for early symptom reporting and rapid diagnostic testing, while deploying mobile clinics in urban corridors to contain importation risks from urbanization.

Finally, advance data-driven systems to achieve the projected 2025 mortality target (88.45 deaths/100,000; Table 4). Implement real-time dashboards tracking subnational burden heterogeneity, conduct biannual insecticide resistance monitoring, and pioneer climate-resilient financing (e.g., weather-indexed insurance) to safeguard progress.

Implementation Timeline

- Short-term (0–12 months): Launch geotargeting pilots in 3 high-burden LGAs and complete climate-risk mapping.
- Mid-term (1–3 years): Achieve 100% community health worker coverage in hotspots and establish a domestic malaria fund.

Long-term (3–5 years): Reduce subnational burden gaps to <15% and align mortality with SDG 3 targets (≤88.45/100,000 by 2025).

5. Conclusion

Sustaining Ondo's progress requires transforming data insights into spatially optimized actions. Failure to bridge the coastal-urban burden gap (57% mortality differential) and funding instability risks reversing gains, as evidenced by historical fluctuations. These recommendations must be embedded within Nigeria's National Malaria Strategic Plan, with accountability vested in a multi-sector SDG 3 Monitoring Council.

Declarations

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethics Approval

Write Not applicable only when appropriate.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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