

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

Why are Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Important?

Birth and death are the two most fundamental milestones of human lives, and vital statistics on these events are a fundamental element of a national health information system.

Civil registration is the most common and appropriate way of collecting information on vital events and fulfills important legal functions for individuals (e.g., personal identity and inheritance).

Vital statistics systems can be considered as a statistical output of a well-functioning civil registration system and can provide governments with important demographic and health information. They also support and inform proper planning for social and economic development.

The data offer a number of advantages to governments, providing continuous and complete information on births and deaths, including causes of death.

Vital statistics data are particularly useful in providing health information for small geographic areas.

Mortality data are collected using the WHO-recommended Medical Certificate of Cause of Death. Use of this certificate standardizes the way cause of death information is collected and the selection and coding of underlying cause of death using the **International Statistical Classification of Diseases (ICD)**. Mortality data are the oldest and most comprehensive set of health statistics internationally.

What is the status of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Worldwide?

Civil registration and vital statistics systems and data are incomplete or non-existent in many developing countries. It has been estimated that only around one-third of all WHO member countries have systems that are considered to be essentially complete and producing reliable data.¹

Numerous United Nations declarations have called for assistance to developing countries on civil registration and vital statistics.

The United Nations defines civil registration as *“the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events...provided through decree or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements of each country.”*²

Although estimates of the number of births and deaths can also be obtained by other means (such as censuses and surveys or using data collected through verbal autopsy), only civil registration collects this information on a continuous basis and can provide individuals with legal documentation.

Major efforts to assist developing countries with civil registration systems began after WWII and peaked again in the 1970s, yet over the past three decades little progress has been achieved. There are many reasons for the lack of progress, but among the most important are the lack of economic development within developing countries and the failure of governments to recognize the importance of the information obtained through vital registration systems.

Recent developments have set the stage for a renewed effort on civil registration and vital statistics.

First, numerous international organizations recently have recognized the need for vital statistics information in developing countries, including the World Bank, World Health Organization, the Health Metrics Network, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, the United Nations Statistics Division, and UNICEF, among others. In addition, the measurement of Millennium Development Goals for under-5 mortality and maternal mortality requires vital statistics data.

Second, economic development in certain developing countries has put in place an effective

dead and what they died of: an assessment of the global status of cause of death data. Bull World Health Organ 2005; 83: 171-77.

² Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System Revision 2, United Nations, New York, 2001: 50.

¹ Mathers CD, Ma Fat D, Inoue C, et al. Counting the

government infrastructure that can support a civil registration system.

Third, because of the efforts of international organizations and the effects of economic development, government officials in developing countries now have a better understanding of the importance of vital statistics information, whether for economic planning, health improvement, or internal security.

Fourth, alternative approaches, such as sample or sentinel registration systems, in which only a defined portion of the births and deaths are registered, have been shown to work in a variety of developing countries, providing a first step in the development of a complete civil registration/vital statistics system for countries with no system at all.

The use of verbal autopsy techniques has allowed the collection of limited but valuable cause of death data, even in countries where medical certification of causes of death is not routinely possible.

What are the Components of a Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System?

A properly functioning civil registration and vital statistics system is composed of three parts:

- A system for the registration of vital events, which in addition to births and deaths can include fetal deaths, marriages, and divorces. The records created through registration of these events are personal legal documents used by citizens as proof of the facts surrounding the events, such as age and identity.
- A system for the production of certified copies of these documents, as required by citizens. Such a system requires the ability to store and retrieve the registration documents and to prepare certified copies on a timely basis.
- A system for the production and dissemination of vital statistics from the data generated by the civil registration system.

Preparation of vital statistics requires attention to data quality, including the editing of recorded information, querying the source to correct missing or inconsistent data, and the coding and

processing of data, including quality control.

Failures in any one of the three components of a civil registration and vital statistics system can have serious implications for the other parts of the system.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed guidance for a standards-based review of country practices.³ The WHO Guidance Tool can be used to systematically evaluate the quality and functioning of civil and vital statistics systems and identify which processes or aspects of the systems need to be improved.

This document has been produced by the *WHO Family of International Classifications Network* [<http://www.who.int/classifications/en/>].

³ World Health Organization and Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub, School of Population Health, University of Queensland, 2009.