

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS IN COOK ISLANDS

Cook Islands comprises 15 islands and is surrounded by American Samoa and Niue to the west, Kiribati to the north and French Polynesia to the east.



Land area
(km²)
237

2020 mid-year
population estimate
15,300

Population growth
rate (%)
0.4



Pacific
Community
Communauté
du Pacifique



Pacific CRVS
supported by Brisbane Accord Group

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OVERVIEW

This civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) country profile for Cook Islands is part of a series of country profiles for the Pacific Island region. The CRVS profiles consolidate knowledge shared by countries on the status of their CRVS systems in the recent past, including through government websites, published reports, media releases and presentations, and direct engagement between the authors of these profiles and in-country civil registration offices and health information offices. The objective of these CRVS country profiles is to provide a living resource (updated every 2-3 years) and quick reference point on the status and developments in CRVS systems in the Pacific Island region. The profiles provide an overview of the legislative, organisational and management frameworks of CRVS systems, registration processes, levels of completeness of birth and death registration, and the most recent developments towards improving CRVS systems. Whilst civil registration covers many vital events, these profiles focus on the registration of births and deaths, and collation of cause of death information. It is envisaged that these country profiles will serve as a fundamental tool in advocating for further investment in strengthening the coverage and completeness of CRVS systems across the Pacific Island region.

SOURCE OF BIRTH AND DEATH DATA

The source of figures in Table 1 (births) and Table 2 (deaths) is outlined below each table, with the full citation given in the Reference section at the end of the document. All figures were obtained from published sources or through direct contact with in-country civil registration offices and health information offices. The date figures were obtained through direct in-country contact is stated below the tables, and indicates when those figures were extracted from in-country databases.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Pacific Community and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021. Civil registration and vital statistics in Cook Islands. Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information please contact the Statistics for Development Division (SDD) – Pacific Community at: contact-sdd@spc.int; <https://sdd.spc.int/>

CRVS LEGISLATION, ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

Current legal framework governing birth and death registration

The recording and registration of births and deaths in Cook Islands is governed by the Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1973; the Births and Deaths Registrations (Fees) regulations of 1998; the Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act (2007) (repealing provision regarding registration of children born outside of Cook Islands); and the Births and Deaths Registrations (Fees) Regulations (2015).

Agencies responsible for birth and death recording and registration

The Ministry of Health is responsible for the recording of births and deaths in health facilities and the community, with collation of these records at the national level undertaken by the Health Information Section. The Ministry of Justice administers the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1973. The Registry Services division of the Ministry of Justice functions as a civil registration office and oversees the civil registration of births and deaths, and maintains the registries for births and deaths.

National CRVS committee and CRVS action plan

Cook Islands has an informal CRVS committee, comprising the National Statistics Office, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice. While Cook Islands has no specific CRVS plan, CRVS collaboration across government agencies is embedded in the National Cook Islands Strategy for the Development of Statistics 2015–2025 (Stats Office 2015) and the Health Information Plan 2015–2019 (MoH 2015).

National ID systems

Cook Islands is currently developing a national identification policy that will implement a national ID system, led by the Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Prime Minister.

REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS

Recording births at health facilities and registering births at the civil registry

More than 80% of births in Cook Islands occur in the hospital on the main island of Rarotonga. When a birth takes place there, it is recorded in the Health Information System, and a copy of the record is forwarded directly to the Registry Services division. When births occur outside the hospital, the mother and child are brought to the hospital soon after the birth for a medical check, and the event is recorded. Parents must complete the registration process by visiting the Registry Services division, where they validate the facts of the birth, after which the event is registered and a birth certificate is issued. If parents do not attend within the required timeframe, staff from the Registry Services division contact them via telephone. On the main island, the birth registration process is electronic, with events recorded in a Microsoft Access database, whilst on the outer islands the process is paper-based. Each island has a deputy registrar, or a representative of the Ministry of Justice, which receives notifications directly from the local health clinics. Hard copies of these records are provided to the Registry Services division in Rarotonga on a quarterly basis, where they are entered into the electronic database.

Timeframes and costs

According to the law, registration of all births that occur in the country is compulsory and must be conducted within fourteen days of a birth.

Standard, on-time birth registration	no charge
Late registration (> 14 days)	20.00 (NZD)
Birth certificate printed	15.00 (NZD)
Change of name persons aged under 21	40.00 (NZD)
Change of name persons aged 21 or older	75.00 (NZD)

Tasks that require a birth certificate and incentives (financial or other) for completing the birth registration process

A birth certificate is required to obtain a passport, open of bank account, enrol in school, and access free healthcare. A baby bonus of NZD 1,000 is available to new parents who register the birth of their child. This incentive is considered to have contributed substantively to the completeness in birth registration in the country. The payment of the incentive is administered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Registration process for births occurring overseas

It is common for births of Cook Islanders to occur overseas, mostly in New Zealand. These overseas births are not registered in the Cook Islands civil registry, even if the baby and parents return to Cook Islands soon after the birth.

REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF DEATHS

Recording deaths at health facilities and registering deaths at the civil registry

The majority of deaths occur in the hospital on the main island of Rarotonga. If a death occurs outside the hospital, the body is brought to the hospital or to a health centre. A medical officer certifies all medical certificates of cause of death (MCCD). In the outer islands that do not have a resident medical officer, a nurse practitioner completes the MCCD. A copy of the MCCD is sent directly to the Registry Services division, and the details captured in a logbook. Family members are required to attend the Registry Services division to complete the registration process. If families do not attend within a certain period, staff from the Registry Services division contact them via telephone. A funeral director can also facilitate the registration and processing of death certificates on behalf of the family. Deaths in the outer islands are reported to the Deputy Registrar or a representative of the Ministry of Justice, who follows the same procedure as in Rarotonga. Copies of the registration sheets are sent to the Registry Services division in Rarotonga where they are filed, but not collated with the Rarotonga data. Information about deaths on the outer islands is often slow to come in; it may be received at the Registry Services division only when registration books are full. Each registrar is required to keep a copy of the register, and another copy of each book is sent to the Registry Services division in Rarotonga. Deaths that occur overseas are not registered in the Cook Island civil registry.

Timeframes and costs

By law, death registration must be conducted within three days of burial, or after receipt of a coroner's report for unnatural deaths.

Standard, on-time death registration	no charge
Late registration (more than 3 days)	not applied*
Death certificate printed	55.00 (NZD)

*No fee is applied for registration of a death three days after burial.

Tasks that require a death certificate and incentives (financial or other) for completing the death registration process

A death certificate is required for inheritance of land, property and estates of deceased persons.

Registration process for deaths occurring overseas

It is common for deaths of Cook Islanders to occur off-island, mainly in New Zealand. These overseas deaths are not registered in the Cook Islands civil registry, even if the body is returned to the Cook Islands for burial.

COLLATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF CAUSE OF DEATH

Process for coding death certificates

Cook Islands uses the 2016 format of the WHO international death certificate. The completed medical certificate

of cause of death (MCCD) is provided to the Health Information Section where it is coded according to the International Classification of Diseases, 10th edition. The country has one trained medical coder who is responsible for both morbidity and mortality coding. The Cook Islands Vital Statistics Report 1999–2013 analysed the MCCDs for the 502 deaths that occurred during the five-year period between 2009 and 2013 and found that 5% of deaths were classified as ill-defined, or had not been assigned an underlying cause of death (Stats Office, MoH and SPC 2015); which is a low figure for unknown causes of death compared to other PICTs, and demonstrates the strength of the Cook Islands system.

Training and resources for cause of death certification and coding

In 2017, medical doctors from Cook Islands attended a three-day training workshop in Fiji on medical certification of cause of death. The workshop was coordinated by SPC and supported by the Brisbane Accord Group (BAG) partners. In December 2018, two medical doctors from Cook Islands travelled to Tonga to participate in a similar three-day regional training workshop, also coordinated by SPC and supported by BAG partners.

COMPLETENESS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION DATA

Cook Islands is known to have a well-functioning civil registration system. The completeness of birth and death registration can be estimated by comparing the number of births and deaths in the civil registry with the number of births and deaths recorded by the health system, enumerated during national censuses, and estimated by international agencies. In some countries in the Pacific region, the births and deaths of citizens overseas can be registered in the civil registry. When estimating completeness, it is best that these overseas births and deaths are not included in the civil registry figures, since the other sources they are compared to, such as health records, do not include overseas events. In Cook Islands, overseas births and deaths are not registered in the civil registry, and therefore are not included in Tables 1 and 2 below. Please see the sections above on registration of births and deaths occurring overseas for more information about these processes in Cook Islands.

Table 1 shows that, between 2013 and 2018, the completeness of birth registration when compared to health records remained above 100%, except in 2013 when it was estimated to be 88%. Comparison with the 2016 census was not possible, as the census did not ask questions on annual births. Comparison with the SPC projection for 2018 indicates a completeness of around 95%. Further investigation is required to understand why the completeness of the civil registration system exceeds 100% when compared to health records.

Table 1. Completeness of birth registration data

Year	Source of births				Completeness of birth registration compared:		
	Civil Registry ^a	Health ^b	SPC projection ^c	Census ^d	with health	with SPC	with census
2018	240	228	252	-	105%	95%	-
2017	230	231	-	-	100%	-	-
2016	253	243	-	-	104%	-	-
2015	233	218	-	-	107%	-	-
2014	225	223	-	-	101%	-	-
2013	230	261	-	-	88%	-	-
2012	-	292	-	-	-	-	-
2011	-	284	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	289	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: ^aObtained directly from the Ministry of Justice as part of the UNESCAP Midterm Questionnaire on the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. ^bObtained directly from the Ministry of Health, Health Information System on 06.12.2020, and published figures (MoH 2017). ^cCalculated from 2018 crude birth rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). ^dThe 2016 Census did not ask questions on annual births, and therefore could not be used to estimate the completeness of birth registration. Completeness was calculated by dividing «Civil Registry» by «Health» and «Civil Registry» by «SPC projection».

Table 2 shows that, between 2013 and 2018, death registration completeness when compared to health records remained above 100%. Comparison with the 2016 census was not possible, as the census did not ask questions on annual all-age mortality. Comparison with the SPC projection for 2018 indicates a completeness of around 126%. Further investigation is required to understand why the completeness of the civil registration system exceeds 100% when compared to health records and the SPC projection.

Table 2. Completeness of death registration data

Year	Source of deaths				Completeness of death registration		
	Civil Registry ^a	Health ^b	SPC projection ^c	Census ^d	Compared with health	Compared with SPC	Compared with census
2018	147	127	117	-	116%	126%	-
2017	107	92	-	-	116%	-	-
2016	110	101	-	-	109%	-	-
2015	120	118	-	-	102%	-	-
2014	176	131	-	-	134%	-	-
2013	123	112	-	-	110%	-	-
2012	-	113	-	-		-	-
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: ^aObtained directly from the Ministry of Justice as part of the UNESCAP Midterm Questionnaire on the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. ^bObtained directly from the Ministry of Health, Health Information System on 06.12.2020, and published figures (MoH 2017). ^cCalculated from 2018 crude death rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). ^dThe 2016 Census did not ask questions on all-age mortality, and therefore could not be used to estimate the completeness of death registration. Completeness was calculated by dividing «Civil Registry» by «Health» and «Civil Registry» by «SPC projection».

PUBLICATION OF CRVS DATA AND REPORTS

Birth, death, and cause of death data are sent by the Registry Services division to the National Statistics Office periodically upon request. The data are then uploaded onto the statistics database. Each quarter, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management publishes a Statistical Bulletin that contains information on births and deaths; the most recent bulletin includes data for 2020 (MoFEM 2020). Information on annual births and deaths is also periodically published by the Ministry of Health in a National Health Information Bulletin; the most recent includes data for 2016 (MoH 2017). In 2015, Cook Islands produced a comprehensive vital statistics report covering 1999–2013 (Stats Office, MoH and SPC 2015). The report provides key fertility and mortality indicators and is based on a merged dataset that included both civil registration and health data. The country is currently in the process of developing the second analytical report, covering the years 2013 to 2017.

RECENT INITIATIVES AND PLANS TO STRENGTHEN CRVS

1. In order to ensure completeness in vital statistics reporting and to securely manage and close identities, Cook Islands, in collaboration with the government of New Zealand, recently established an information sharing arrangement (through a memorandum of understanding), in which both governments will share information about deaths and name changes occurring in each country.
2. Cook Islands is considering implementation of a new cloud-based system for civil registration, with the aim of improving efficiency in civil registration services and functions, including sharing of information across departments.
3. Cook Islands is in the process of developing the second analytical vital statistics report, covering the years 2013 to 2017.
4. In December 2018, two medical doctors from Cook Islands travelled to Tonga to participate in a three-day regional training workshop on medical certification of cause of death, coordinated by SPC and supported

by the Brisbane Accord Group (BAG) partners.

5. In May 2018, two participants from Cook Islands travelled to Fiji to participate in a two-week regional training workshop on CRVS data analysis and report writing. The workshop was coordinated by SPC and supported by BAG partners.

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