



PROOF OF BIRTH

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CHAPTER 4

Australia's civil registration and vital statistics system

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Knowing how many people live in Australia and what the future of Australia's population might look like has been a critical input into the decisions made by government since this country's settlement.

By the 1820s, the Colonial Office in London required all colonies to complete the Blue Books annually. These were detailed statistical returns of both people and economic matters. ... By the mid 1800s most colonies had introduced registrations for births, deaths and marriages, and as a consequence, had begun producing statistics from them. While the quality of such statistics varied between states, some were of the highest quality.¹

These statistics were used to ensure that services could be effectively supplied to the population of the colonies. In

2014, this continues to be a key use of population statistics by governments.

While arrangements have changed over time, currently in Australia, state and territory governments are legislatively responsible for enabling birth registration and certification. In all jurisdictions, this function is delivered through a Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages overseen by a Registrar or Registrar-General (the Registrars). As well as ensuring that an effective registration system is in place, the Registrars work to encourage and maximise birth registration and certification. At a Commonwealth Government level, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) relies on the administrative data collected and managed by these state and territory registries to produce population estimates, as well as fertility and mortality data and statistics and projections of population growth. This information is critical in the development and monitoring of government policy and programs. It informs resourcing and funding distribution decisions; for example, the annual distribution of Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenues to state and territories by the Commonwealth Grants Commission, as well as to apportioning seats in the House of Representatives to each state and territory. It is also a key input into nationally important medical and health research. In recognition of this, both birth and death statistics have been classified as Essential Statistical Assets for Australia.²

There has been a long-standing relationship between the Registrars and the ABS to support the production of nationally important statistics. Given the criticality of this information to the country, across the past five years these agencies have committed to strengthening their ways of working together in order to further improve data quality, including timeliness of the registration of vital events (that is, births, deaths and marriages). This is in recognition that universal registration is a joint goal of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Using the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system assessment tool,³ the Australian CRVS system has been assessed as strong, with only minor improvements possible.⁴

There is recognition of the need for strong CRVS systems, not only in Australia, but also within the Asia-Pacific region. The Registrars and the ABS consistently provide advice and support to developing countries, and in particular to Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), to improve coverage of birth registrations, death registrations, and the quality of mortality data and statistics. Through membership of the Brisbane Accord Group (BAG),⁵ the ABS has facilitated considerable improvements in the coverage of birth registrations in Kiribati, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and all countries in the region are now on a path to improving their vital statistics systems. This work is informed by a solid understanding of what makes a difference, particularly in engaging with vulnerable people and the communities in which they live.

This chapter outlines some of the key issues to be considered when analysing the extent of coverage of birth registration, as well as some of the key challenges in achieving universal registration. It concludes with an overview of the steps being taken by government to collectively improve the registration of births in Australia, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in particular.

Understanding the extent of birth registration in Australia

Australia's record of registration of vital events is very high when compared with other countries. In order to achieve this goal, the Registrars deal with issues of non- and lagged registration on a regular basis, both in terms of the impact that this has on national statistics and in terms of how the absence of identification can limit a person's ability to participate in society. While it is clear that cases of non- or lagged birth registration do occur across the country, evidence demonstrates the impediments of not having a birth registered are able to be overcome through individuals, government and other key stakeholders working together.

From the outset it is important to separate the issue of under-registration from the absence of identity documentation. While related, these two issues are characterised by different problems, timeframes, stakeholders, benefits and incentives and are best addressed through different strategies. While there are clearly cases where non- or late registration of births continues to

occur, where these are brought to the attention of state and territory government agencies, and the Registrars in particular, registration can be facilitated. Take the case of May Smiler who, through the efforts of her family, her community at Kowanyama in far north Queensland, and staff from the Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages and the Queensland Department of Communities, had her birth registered just in time for her 100th birthday!

Fulfilling the evidentiary requirements for a 1914 birth at Waterloo Station in Cape York was not easy and, not surprisingly, required a lot of research. In May's case, proving that the particulars of her birth were accurate, which is a Registrar's core requirement, involved referencing a wide range of government and non-government information as well as statements from her family and community. But, the point is, it is possible, and was achieved.

In the past five years, May is one of eight Queenslanders older than 80 years of age whose birth was registered by the Queensland Registrar. Circumstances of birth registration like May's are the anomaly. Usually the process is relatively straightforward and involves cross-referencing information supplied by a hospital confirming a birth occurred (a birth notification) to information provided by parents on a birth registration form. In the case of a minority of late registrations, this information may be provided by other members of the person's family, or the person themselves.

Registrars nationally are currently seeking ways to make registration processes more accessible; for example, through enabling registration online and working in partnership with other government agencies and key stakeholders, including community-based organisations, to facilitate birth registration as well as certification. The importance of developing a more effective awareness-raising strategy to explain to parents and children, from all regions and backgrounds, why birth registration is so important, is also clear. Cases like May's, however, show that regardless of the complexity of their particular situations, if parents or individuals ask for help and are adequately supported, no birth should go unregistered. Registrars do not merely implement legislation, they offer a public service, and if notified will do everything possible to ensure a positive outcome is achieved.

Magnitude of under-registration of births in Australia

Last year, according to the ABS, just over 300,000 births were registered.⁶ While it is possible to analyse registration lag in order to establish the quantity of late birth registrations (that is, those births registered in a year after they were born), no Australia-wide study has been undertaken and published that quantifies how many births are not ever registered. This is due to the fact that there are a number of challenges in quantifying under-registration. However, the best measure, based on available information, is the difference between the number of birth notifi-

cations provided by hospitals to the Registrars for a given calendar year, and the number of births registered in that same year.

Some preliminary data, provided by five state and territory registries,⁷ provides an indication of the magnitude of under-registration in these jurisdictions by five and fifteen years of age. It is important to note from the outset that the data reported below is in its early stages of development and has not been adjusted to taken into account any deaths. There would also be clear value in determining the differential between under-registration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. However, to establish this, more complex data analysis, and potentially data linkage, is required. The percentage of births unregistered was calculated using the number of births notified by hospitals to each registry for a given calendar year as the denominator and the number of births registered by each registry for the same year as the numerator.

Since 2009, the percentage of births yet to be registered by 2014 ranged between 3.2% (2009 births) and 3.6% (2013 births). Most importantly, the initial data collated indicates that over time, levels of under-registration are reducing, and only 3.2% of birth notifications of children aged five in 2014, had not yet been registered — this equates to approximately 6,400 unregistered births of children aged five within the five jurisdictions for which data is available. While there are some differences across

jurisdictions, under-registration never exceeded 3.8%. More importantly, this preliminary data also indicates that less than 1% of people 15 years of age by 2014 have not had their birth registered. This confirms that while there is some room for improvement, Australia has a very good track record in achieving birth registration.⁸

The above analysis focused on the ages of five and fifteen, as these are two times in a person's life when proof of identity (in the form of a birth certificate) is required to access a government service. School enrolment (generally at around five years of age) is likely to be the first time, unless a child is travelling overseas at an earlier age, that a parent will be required to provide their child's birth certificate to access a government service in Australia. Up until this time, proof of birth — that is, a parent, usually a mother, providing evidence that she had a baby — is all that most government agencies require. An example of such evidence aside from a copy of the birth notification could include provision of a sticker provided by the hospital. The acceptance of such proof of birth for government services is viewed by the Registrars as a major barrier to timely birth registration; that is, why fill in a form when it gives you nothing and the product it enables (a birth certificate) costs money and is not required to access the service? The age of 15 was also given focus as this is the point in a person's life when the absence of a birth certificate can prevent a person from obtaining a tax file number and therefore impact their ability to participate in the workforce and society.

While the potential negative impact of non-registration of a birth to an individual is clearly recognised, before the age of five years, nationally, the actual impact of non-registration is largely statistical. As a result, adjustments are required to broad population estimates and are made by the ABS. However, at local levels, fully accurate data may not be available for policy makers and service planners. This impact is likely to be more apparent in some regional and remote areas where the rate of under-registration could be higher than overall state and national averages. On that basis, a complete overhaul of Australia's CRVS system is not warranted. What is required is the development and resourcing of targeted strategies to engage the subgroups of the population at higher risk of not registering the birth of a child. These strategies could assist in promoting the benefits that can accrue through birth registration, not only to them as individuals, but also to the communities in which they live — the larger the official estimate of a local population, the more government funding that area is likely to receive. More analysis of this preliminary data could inform the design of such strategies.

The National Civil Registration and Statistics Improvement Committee

In recognition of the possibility of improvements to Australia's CRVS system and the value of working in partnership, the Registrars and the ABS formed the National Civil Registration and Statistics Improvement Committee (NCR SIC) in late 2013. Co-chaired by a

Registrar (currently the Queensland Registrar) and the ABS, the primary responsibility of this committee is to identify and progress the policies and initiatives required to deliver a more seamless, harmonised and robust national CRVS system, working across both Commonwealth and state/territory jurisdictions.

A key aim of the NCR SIC is to improve the quality, coverage and timeliness of birth, death and marriage registrations. In the 12 months since its establishment, the NCR SIC has quickly developed and progressed an action plan to deliver on this aim. In addition to looking to harmonise data collection, the Committee is also working to improve the timeliness in the registration of a person's vital events, and as a result, the timeliness and accuracy of national vital statistics.

Improving the quality and coverage of birth (and death) registration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is a priority for the Committee. The Committee has commenced development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data and Statistics Improvement Strategy, which will highlight examples of good and best practice across Australia in terms of community engagement and awareness-raising that have increased registration and, in some instances, certification. For example:

- In Queensland, community liaison officer roles assist in ensuring the value of timely birth and death registration is promoted with, in particular, remote and regional communities. It is such engagement that led to Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander Queenslanders like May Smiler being identified as in need of assistance to register her birth.

- Partnership between government agencies and hospitals to ensure births are registered, and the importance of identification of the child's mother and father (where paternity is acknowledged) as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin. In the Northern Territory there is virtually no lag in birth registration, as the vast majority of births are notified promptly and finalisation of registration is actively promoted by hospital staff, including nurses.
- Partnership between government agencies:
 - in Western Australia and Victoria, the Registries partner with other government agencies, which visit communities to facilitate provision of birth certificates and thereby enable young people, for example, to obtain a driver's license.
 - New South Wales has a Birth Registration Interagency Working Party, which includes representatives from the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Departments of Police, Health, Family and Community Services, the NSW Child Death Review Team, as well as the Ministry of Police. The intent of this working party is to identify the way government agencies respond when a birth is received by a

New South Wales hospital or midwife, but an accompanying birth registration is not submitted to the Registry within 60 days of the birth.

- the work of the Queensland Registry with the Department of Communities (described earlier in this chapter) is another example of partnership and collaboration with a positive outcome.

The Committee's work will also be informed by the ABS' learnings from achieving improved outcomes in gaining the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to complete the Census in 2011, and to self-identify.

While improved partnerships with key stakeholders (both government and non-government) will undoubtedly assist in delivering on the Committee's action plan, additional resourcing is also likely to be required. In particular, the Registrars could benefit from ongoing funding to support community outreach programs, as well as the development and implementation of a more effective communication program to assist in debunking some of the myths about registration; for example, that it costs money. This communication program could also promote the benefits of both registration and certification to individuals as well as to the communities in which they live. For example, currently, GST revenue distribution is (in part) informed by the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population resident in a state

or territory. It could also raise awareness of the assistance that Registrars can provide where difficulties are being experienced.

The possibility of new partnerships

The NCR SIC recognises that collaboration with other key stakeholders could also help address some of the barriers to timely registration. It is for this reason that Will Winter of the Minimbah Project was invited to present to the Committee in late 2014 on his organisation's work to facilitate birth certification in communities (see chapter 6 for a discussion of the Minimbah project). Since that presentation, Minimbah and the Queensland Registry have been working together in Boggabilla (a small town on the border between Queensland and New South Wales, near Goondiwindi). The Committee is keen to explore what other partnerships or arrangements could be put in place between the non-government, government and philanthropic sectors to leverage goodwill and assist the community in addressing under-registration. To this end, the NCR SIC and the Commonwealth Department of Human Services have recently opened up discussions on ways to work collaboratively to support the registration of all births.

Evidence consistently shows that the key to development of sustainable and effective partnerships is:

- a common vision and goal across all key stakeholders;
- a respect for the role that the different stakeholders play in any given circumstance;

- a recognition that cross-sectoral and cross-agency work can achieve more than simply the ‘sum of its parts’;
- constant communication and a commitment to working through any differences of perspective; and
- ultimately, the building of trust.

The various contributions to the ‘Achieving Universal Birth Registration in Australia Symposium’ organised by the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, Plan International and UNICEF, in Melbourne in late 2014, suggests that there is a broadly common vision and goal across both government and non-government agencies to enable timely birth registration and certification so that all Australians can have their fundamental rights delivered and access services when they need them.

The symposium has assisted in improving understanding of the role that different stakeholders play in Australia’s birth registration process and strengthening the recognition that cross-sectoral/cross-agency work can achieve so much more. While the Registrars’ and ABS’ commitment to improving birth registration and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification is clear, the recognition of the need for improvement is reaffirmed. A desirable outcome of the symposium would be a commitment for key stakeholders to continue to constructively work through any differences of perspective, with a view to achieving a trusting partnership between the non-government and government sectors to the benefit of all Australians. ABS’ work with the registries

and the various registries' work with community-based organisations, as well as researchers, demonstrates that this is more than possible.

For more information regarding the newly established NCR SIC and its action plan, please contact David John, the Queensland Registrar (David.John@justice.qld.gov.au) or Dr AJ Lanyon, ABS (aj.lanyon@abs.gov.au).

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Informing a nation: the evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905–2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 112
- 2 See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Essential statistical assets for Australia, 2013* (Cat. no. 1395.0).
- 3 World Health Organisation, *Rapid assessment of national civil registration and vital statistics systems* (WHO/IER/HSI/STM/2010.1), World Health Organisation Press, Geneva, Switzerland, 2010.
- 4 L Mikkelsen, *Rapid assessment of vital statistics systems: evaluation of the application of the WHO/HIS Hub tool in 26 countries in the Asia-Pacific region* (Working Paper Series, no. 10), The Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub, School of Population Health, University of Queensland, Brisbane, November 2010.
- 5 The BAG is an international consortium of partners who work together to provide support for PICTs to strengthen their CRVS systems. Membership includes the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the ABS, the Pacific Health Information Network, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, University of New south Wales, Fiji National University, the WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, and most recently, the New Zealand Registrar-General as the chair of the Pacific Civil Registrars Network.
- 6 See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Births, Australia, 2013* (Cat. no. 3301.0).
- 7 Data from the Australian Capital Territory, the Northern Territory and New South Wales are not included.
- 8 See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Essential statistical assets for Australia, 2014* (Cat. no. 1395.0) for the most recent quality assessment.