

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS IN VANUATU

The Republic of Vanuatu is a Pacific Island country located in the South Pacific Ocean. The archipelago is of volcanic origin and lies 1,750 km (1,090 mi) east of northern Australia and 540 km (340 mi) northeast of New Caledonia.



Land area
(km²)
12,281

2020 mid-year
population estimate
294,700

Population growth
rate (%)
2.2

OVERVIEW

This civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) country profile for Vanuatu 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 Vanuatu. 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

Civil registration in Vanuatu records the vital events (births, marriages and deaths) of its citizens and residents. The resulting database serves as a basis to create a data source for the compilation of legal vital statistics, which are essential for state planning purposes. It also supports the establishment of a 'legal identity', providing legal documentation to individuals and families for legal and administrative purposes, and can be used to establish and protect the rights of individuals. The recording and registration of births and deaths in Vanuatu is governed by the Civil Status Act of Registration (2006), which is currently under revision; the Civil Status (Registration) (Amendment) Act 2009 (regarding appointment of a registrar general and staff); and the Civil Status (Registration) (Amendment) Act 2018 (regarding name amendments on birth certificates).

With the advent of enhanced information technology, civil registration has been moving from a paper-based system to a more automated electronic system. These technical innovations have so far not been reflected in the corresponding legal framework. While a lot of changes are happening in terms of civil registration, relevant provisions in the legislation are still lacking, both in terms of the Civil Status (Registration) Act, as well as the new National ID Bill. Policies have been developed in an effort to fill some of the gaps, but a comprehensive revision and rewrite of the legislation is required, in particular to provide a proper legal foundation for the national ID card. As the scope widens in the use of civil registration information, the security and confidentiality of information becomes paramount. In the interim, a data access agreement must be signed by all users in order to protect the data and personal information recorded in the database, while consultations are under way to put in place proper legislation that safeguards the civil registration data currently being collected.

Agencies responsible for birth and death recording and registration

The Vanuatu 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 being undertaken by the Health Information Office located in Port-Vila. Responsibility for the civil registration of births and deaths in Vanuatu is held by the Department of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, which is under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Vanuatu also oversees the Department of Immigration and Passports. The civil registration system allows delegation of registration to registrars in subnational offices, i.e., registrars at the sub-national level have authority to issue the birth and death certificates. The Department of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics has also established a partnership with the Ministry of Education through a memorandum of understanding (MOU), with the goal of increasing birth registration through schools. The same partnership was established with the Ministry of Health for introducing on-site birth registration in the main hospitals prior to the discharge of the mother.

Civil registration faces several challenges in Vanuatu. Around 70% of the population live in rural areas and some follow a traditional life style with little interaction with government or health facilities. In addition, data sharing arrangements between government departments are weak, which results in a reliance on families to provide the appropriate information to each individual department. Consequently, several distinct state population databases co-exist. Another barrier to civil registration is the cost incurred by families to travel to a provincial office with a civil status or electoral officer available to support registration. There is a need to share or link the information kept by the different government agencies with the information kept by the civil registry department, in order to save costs and avoid duplication of data.

Since 2008, with government support, the completeness of civil registration in Vanuatu has been increasing. There have, however, been many challenges in recent years, including in 2015 when the country was catastrophically hit by tropical cyclone Pam, and subsequently by other devastating cyclones, including most recently in 2020 by the category 5 tropical cyclone Harold. Whilst the death tolls have been limited, owing to the lessons learned from past experiences, over half of the country's population were affected, with approximately

one third displaced. Recognising the significant impact that cyclone Pam had on the ability of the population to complete civil registration activities, the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Department took action, in collaboration with other national stakeholders, including UNICEF and UNDP. The capacity to process civil registration activities was increased and awareness campaigns and mobile registration operations were rolled out throughout the country. This resulted in more than 250,000 children and adults being issued with a birth certificate, including around 80,000 for the first time. As a result, a mini census conducted in 2016 showed that 85% of the population had a birth certificate.

The large scale response post cyclone Pam built on previous efforts to increase birth registration completeness in the country. Outreach programmes have been organised to increase awareness of the importance of civil registration. The cost of travel being a major obstacle for many families, registration points have been opened in remote islands and 'catch up days' organised in areas that do not have regular contact with government services. Coordination between government agencies has been formalised through MOUs between the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Department and the Ministries of Health and Education, extending the job of registration to midwives and teachers. Further partnerships are still being developed, with the rollout of national ID in 2019 and linking it to voter registration. In recent years, a central civil registration database has been built, with the support of UNICEF and the Australian government. Being locally developed, it has several advantages, such as relying on a system owned by the Government of Vanuatu and better adapted to the specific needs of the country. The database was of great benefit in the post-cyclone disaster registration campaigns, as it ensured accuracy and avoided duplicate registrations.

Updates and improvements to the database to meet growing demand, as well as correcting registration information related to demographic details and photos, are ongoing. Field data validation and verification include use of android applications and mobile devices. The decentralisation of registration services and the issuance of national IDs have been priorities for the government in recent years in order to provide better and the more accessible civil registration services, in line with the overarching aim of the government to bring services closer to the people.

Vanuatu has a custom-built electronic civil registration database (Register-Viz') which is linked to the immigration and passports department database and the electoral roll. The database is available online in each provincial registration office and at the major hospitals. It operates across two main windows, one for data capture and the other for viewing of data. Authorised civil registration officers with access to the system are assigned administrative rights to access all records through the view mode, but cannot make changes to existing records. The National Statistics Office and other government departments have access to the database through the 'view' access only. The database has both on-site and off-site back-up, which is a critical requirement for record security purposes, particularly in situations of national disasters where records and civil registration infrastructure are at a critical risk of loss and damage.

National CRVS committee and CRVS action plan

In 2015 Vanuatu established a CRVS committee which is comprised of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the National Statistics Office, the Ministry of Education, the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs, the Vanuatu Christian Council, and the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination. The committee has not met regularly, but there are plans for quarterly meetings commencing in 2021, with a revised terms of reference for the committee. A CRVS comprehensive assessment was undertaken in 2013, with support from SPC, UNFPA and UNICEF, resulting in the development of a CRVS policy. Since 2014, Vanuatu (represented by the Registrar General) has been a member of the Asia-Pacific Regional Steering Group for CRVS.

National ID systems

In 2017, Vanuatu launched the national ID card, with a unique number assigned for each of the registrants. Simultaneously, the government decided to link the civil registration database with that of the voter registration database collected and maintained by the Vanuatu Electoral Office (VEO), which subsequently resulted in the

launching of a nationwide national ID card registration effort, jointly coordinated by the Department of Civil Status and the VEO. The objective was to ensure that every citizen of Vanuatu is registered and issued with a unique national ID card, and that all cards correspond accurately with the civil and voter registration systems and are in sync with the voter registration database.

REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS

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

In an effort to improve accessibility to civil registration services, since 2014 the Department of Civil Status has established a birth registration service desk in the maternity ward at the main hospital in Port-Vila, and also delegated birth registration authority to health information system officers working in various health facilities across the country. Through these arrangements, new mothers who deliver in health facilities can complete the registration process and have birth certificates issued onsite. This has greatly strengthened the timeliness of birth registration. Further, the department has also established a working arrangement with the Ministry of Education, in which approved head teachers and principals can sign completed birth registration forms and correspond with the Department of Civil Status to complete the registration process, including issuance of birth certificates. In order to access government school grants, the Ministry of Education is required to provide school enrolment lists that are linked to the birth registration. Births that are not captured through these two channels can also be captured during birth registration campaigns that are routinely carried out by the department. Accessibility of registration services within the first year of birth remains a key concern for the country.

Timeframes and costs

Birth registration is free within the first 21 days of a child's life. Whilst there is a provision to enforce a fee for late registration, it is not imposed as it is viewed as a barrier to birth registration.

Standard, on-time birth registration	no charge
Late registration (> 21 days)	not imposed
Birth certificate printed	no charge*
Copy of a birth certificate printed	100.00 (VUV)

* A fee is charged for additional copies.

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

A birth certificate is required for enrolment in school and issuance of a passport.

REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF DEATHS

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

Deaths that occur in the hospital are certified by a medical doctor who issues a medical certificate of cause of death (MCCD), and authorises the removal of the body for burial. In Port-Vila, to be allowed to bury a body it is a mandatory requirement that families present an MCCD to the municipal office in order to obtain a burial certificate. An MCCD is also required at the civil registration office to enable registration of the death. For natural deaths (non-suspicious) that occur at home, the family reports the event to the chief or the pastor, who issues a letter to confirm the occurrence of the death. This letter is presented to the hospital by the family, and the hospital then issues the family with an MCCD. The MCCD is then presented to the Department of Civil Status to facilitate death registration. In the rural areas, it is common for burial to be arranged without formal reporting of the death or obtaining a death certificate. This is generally due to problems of accessibility to civil registration services and other government services such as health centres. The Vanuatu civil registration system is person-based; the civil registry system works on linked births and deaths. For this reason, deaths cannot be registered until the person is registered in the system (registered as a person, not as a birth).

Timeframes and costs

The legally stipulated timeframe for death registration is within seven days of the death. As with births, whilst there is a provision for a fee for late registration, it is not imposed.

Standard, on-time death registration	no charge
Late registration (> 7 days)	not imposed
Death certificate printed	no charge*
Copy of a death certificate printed	820.00 (VUV)

* A fee is charged for additional copies.

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

There is no funeral assistance programme in place in Vanuatu, however, the Vanuatu National Provident Fund is considering the introduction of this type of benefit. A death certificate is required for the transfer of property and other inheritance of a deceased person.

COLLATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF CAUSE OF DEATH

Process for coding death certificates

Deaths that occur in the hospital in Vanuatu are certified by a medical physician. The MCCD used in Vanuatu is not in alignment with WHO standards, as only three lines are included in Part A of the cause of death section of the certificate, rather than four lines. Weaknesses exist in the quality of death certification, which the government is working to improve through providing training opportunities for clinicians as often as possible. There is also a need to streamline the process for certification of deaths that occur outside health facilities (deaths for which there is no medical history maintained) which are a significant number. There are two health information officers who are responsible for coding all causes of death in Vanuatu; these officers are responsible for both morbidity and mortality coding. Causes of death are coded according to the International Classification of Diseases 10th edition. The government is currently looking into separating morbidity and mortality coding functions and centralising coding functions, which are presently conducted at the hospital level.

The Vanuatu Vital Statistics Report 2012–2014 analysed all available cause of death certificates during that three-year period, which were estimated to represent only 52% of the actual number of deaths that would have occurred in Vanuatu during that period. Of the available death certificates analysed in the report, 18% were classified as ill-defined, or had not been assigned an underlying cause of death [DoH and DoS 2016].

Training and resources for cause of death certification and coding

In December 2018, three medical doctors from Vanuatu 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 BAG partners. In 2017, medical doctors from Vanuatu attended a similar three-day training workshop held in Fiji, coordinated by SPC and supported by BAG partners. Verbal autopsy has been considered in Vanuatu, but little progress has been made towards its implementation.

COMPLETENESS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION DATA

Inaccessibility of civil registration services and low levels of awareness of the importance of registration among the public remains a fundamental concern for the performance of the civil registration system in Vanuatu. 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 Island 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 Vanuatu, we have been unable to determine if overseas births and deaths can be registered in the civil registry, and subsequently we have not been able to determine if overseas events have been included in Table 1 and 2 below. If overseas events have been included, the estimates of completeness for the civil registry will be higher than if overseas events were excluded.

Table 1 is unable to provide an indication of the completeness of birth registration in Vanuatu when compared to health records, due to the inability to obtain figures of annual births from health records. It is widely documented that the health system in Vanuatu only captures births that occur in health facilities, not births in the community (DoH and DoS 2016). And if health figures were available, it would be important to take this into account. Comparison of the civil registry with the SPC projection of annual births indicates a completeness of around 59% in 2018. The 2016 mini-census did not ask questions about the annual number of births in Vanuatu, but it did ask respondents if they possessed a birth certificate. Based on this question, it was estimated that 69.4% of children aged below one year, and 77.1% of children aged below five years, possessed a birth certificate (VNSO 2017).

The completeness of birth registration in Vanuatu has also been estimated by periodic population sample surveys. A multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS) was conducted in 2007, and a demographic and health survey (DHS) was conducted in 2013. These surveys asked the mother or caregiver of children aged under five years whether their child's birth had been registered with a civil authority, and the DHS also asked if their child possessed a birth certificate. The 2013 Vanuatu DHS found that, of the 1,583 children aged under five years included in the survey, 75.5% were reported to have had their births registered, and 43.4% were reported to possess a birth certificate (VNSO and SPC 2014). This was an improvement on the 2007 Vanuatu MICS, where, of the 1,634 children aged under five years included in the survey, 25.6% were reported to have had their births registered (MoH and Govt Vanuatu 2008).

Table 1. Completeness of birth registration data

Year	Source of births				Completeness of birth registration		
	Civil Registry ^a	Health ^b	SPC projection ^c	Census ^d	Compared with health	Compared with SPC	Compared with census
2018	4,858	-	8,168	-	-	59%	-
2017	4,364	-	-	-	-	-	-
2016	4,291	-	-	-	-	-	-
2015	4,149	-	-	-	-	-	-
2014	4,348	-	-	-	-	-	-
2013	1,876	-	-	-	-	-	-
2012	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: ^aObtained directly from the Department of Civil Status as part of the UNESCAP Midterm Questionnaire on the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. ^bNot available. ^cCalculated from 2018 crude birth rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). ^dThe most recent full census was conducted in 2009, the 2016 mini-census did not ask questions on births in the household. Completeness was calculated by dividing 'Civil Registry' by 'SPC projection'.

In general, incentives to register deaths remain very low in Vanuatu. Some of the key barriers to death registration include lack of knowledge and awareness of the importance of registration, the lack of immediate need for death certificates, and limited accessibility to civil registration services. As registration offices are mainly located in urban areas, persons residing in the rural areas (70% of the population) have limited access to registration services. Table 2 is unable to provide an indication of the completeness of death registration in Vanuatu when compared to health records, due to an inability to obtain figures of annual deaths from health records.

Comparison of the civil registry with the SPC projection of deaths indicates a completeness of around 18% in 2018. To assist in addressing the low registration coverage in Vanuatu, the government is seeking external support and funding. Integration of the CRVS data that are currently stored across multiple databases is also a priority, in order to validate and improve the completeness of CRVS in Vanuatu.

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	200	-	1,099	-	-	18%	-
2017	153	-	-	-	-	-	-
2016	205	-	-	-	-	-	-
2015	266	-	-	-	-	-	-
2014	267	-	-	-	-	-	-
2013	219	-	-	-	-	-	-
2012	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: ^aObtained directly from the Department of Civil Status as part of the UNESCAP Midterm Questionnaire on the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. ^bNot available. ^cCalculated from the crude death rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). ^dThe most recent full census was conducted in 2009, the 2016 mini-census did not ask questions on deaths in the household. Completeness was calculated by dividing 'Civil Registry' by 'SPC projection'.

PUBLICATION OF CRVS DATA AND REPORTS

The Vanuatu National Sustainable Development Plan 2016–2030 outlined a goal (SOC 9.6) to strengthen research, data and statistics for accountability and decision-making (Govt Vanuatu, 2017). Challenges in achieving this goal include data availability and the compatibility of different data collection systems used in Vanuatu. In 2017 the Department of Civil Status, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, published the country's first ever vital statistics report that was based on civil registration and health records. The production of this report is a milestone for Vanuatu as it provides key stakeholders with evidence to understand the performance of the system and demonstrates the importance of the registration of records in providing a source of vital statistics. The report acknowledges that there are several limitations in the data, including incompleteness in registration.

RECENT INITIATIVES AND PLANS TO STRENGTHEN CRVS

1. The Vanuatu National CRVS Strategic Plan 2017–2030 capitalises on other government initiatives such as the National Decentralisation Policy which aims at bringing the government and its services closer to the people. Under the strategy, there are plans to further devolve civil registration services to the provincial level, such as in Tafea Province. The National ICT Policy, which aims at universal access to ICT in all schools and underserved areas, is envisaged to support and enable remote registration of vital events in the rural areas. Further, the Vanuatu National Bio-Metric Electoral System and ID Card Policy, which requires that all residents are registered for a National ID card, is anticipated to improve civil registration completeness, noting that birth certificates will be a requirement for registration in the ID system.
2. In December 2018, three medical doctors from Vanuatu 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 BAG partners.
3. In 2014, with the support of UNICEF, the Department of Civil Status established a birth registration service desk at the maternity ward of the main hospital in Port-Vila and delegated birth registration responsibilities

to health information system officers working in various health facilities across the country. Through these initiatives, it became possible for new mothers who deliver in health facilities to complete the registration process and have birth certificates issued onsite and free of charge.

4. In 2014, the Department of Civil Status also established a working arrangement with the Ministry of Education in which approved head teachers and principals are allowed to sign completed birth registration forms and to collaborate with the Department of Civil Status for completion of the registration process, including issuance of birth certificates.

5. Vanuatu has embarked on a number of birth registration catch-up campaigns in the recent past, including one that was carried out after Cyclone Pam, where deliberate efforts were made to reissue lost or damaged birth certificates and to facilitate birth registration among adults who had never had their birth registered. During these campaigns, the birth registration database (which is operable in offline mode) is downloaded onto laptops that are transported to the remote islands and used for registration. The records are later re-synced with the national database. During the campaigns, the Civil Status Office enrolls support from volunteers, such as teachers, who are trained on how to collate information from individuals and to complete registration forms. In addition to supporting registration of vital events, the campaigns are also used for advocacy on the importance of civil registration.

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