

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS IN TOKELAU

Tokelau is a dependent territory of New Zealand in the southern Pacific Ocean. It consists of three tropical coral atolls (Atafu, Nukunonu and Fakaofu), with a combined land area of 10 km² (4 mi²).



Land area
(km²)
12

2020 mid-year
population estimate
1,500

Population growth
rate (%)
0.0

OVERVIEW

This civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) country profile for Tokelau 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 Tokelau. 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 Tokelau is governed by the Tokelau Islands Births and Deaths Registration Regulations of 1969.

Agencies responsible for birth and death recording and registration

The Department of Health is responsible for the recording of births and deaths in health facilities and the community. Civil registration functions are undertaken by the Department of Transport and Support Services. In addition to civil registration duties, the civil registrar is also the director of Transport and Support Services, and oversees the transport of goods and services to and from the atolls (Nukunonu, Fakaofu and Atafu). There are four civil registration service points in Tokelau, one on each of the three atolls and one at the national office in Apia, Western Samoa. There is one hospital on each of the three atolls.

National CRVS committee and CRVS action plan

Although there is no formal CRVS coordination committee, the department responsible for civil registration has established close working relationships with the Department of Health, the National Statistics Office, and the legal and IT departments, in order to support civil registration functions.

National ID systems

Tokelau has no current plans to implement a national ID system.

REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS

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

Births should be registered at the office of the deputy registrar nearest to the place where the birth occurred. The deputy registrar receives confirmation of a birth from the hospital on the atoll and from the child's parents, and this information is entered into the Registration of Birth register. All events registered on the atolls must also be registered at the national office in Apia, Western Samoa. Copies of the birth registrations undertaken in the atolls are either transferred by boat to the registrar in Apia, or scanned and sent via email, within ten days of occurrence. At the national office, the paper copies are registered and then allocated a folio number and filed. An electronic copy is also created for backup on a Microsoft Access database. A birth certificate is only issued upon request, and certificates can be issued only by the office in Apia. When requested, these are printed, sealed, and transported back to the deputy registrars for issuance. Although the number of births is small, not all events are captured by the civil registration office on the atolls because in some cases parents do not complete the process. This gap is being addressed through a collaborative arrangement between the Department of Transport and the Department of Health; since 2016, the Department of Transport has been receiving monthly email updates on the births and deaths that occur in health facilities. These have been useful in enabling the Department of Transport to identify and follow up the unregistered events.

Timeframes and costs

According to the law, registration of births should be done within a month of occurrence. However, the Tokelau Births, Deaths and Marriages Office does not regulate or enforce any fee for late registration.

Standard, on-time birth registration	no charge
Late registration (> 2 months)	not applicable*
Birth certificate printed	6.00 (NZD)

*A fee is not charged for birth registrations after two months of the birth.

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

There are limited incentives for birth registration in Tokelau. Unlike other larger Pacific Island countries, a birth certificate is not required to access education, hospital care, or other government functions. Instituting such a requirement does not necessarily make sense in a village environment, where everyone knows everyone else. In the 2011 Tokelau Census, more than 80% of usual residents indicated that they had spent more than six months overseas. Overseas travel is the first tangible incentive for formal birth certification, as it is required for issuance of a passport (TNSO 2013), or when a child enrolls at a university.

Registration process for births occurring overseas

Due to limited medical care available at the hospitals on the atolls, many births to Tokelau residents occur overseas, mostly in New Zealand, through the Tokelau Patient Referral Scheme. There is no provision in the Tokelau BDM legislation to register a birth that occurs overseas, including births that occur through the Tokelau Patient Referral Scheme. Therefore, no overseas events are included in the figures for the civil registry in Table 1.

REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF DEATHS

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

All deaths at home must be notified to the hospital. The attending physician is tasked to inform the deputy registrar of the occurrence and provide particulars of the event through completion and submission of a death registration form, including a medically certified cause of death certificate. The record is entered into the registration of death register, and the attending medical physician is required to sign against the record in the village registration book. All deaths on the atolls must also be registered with the registrar in Apia. Copies of registration forms are transferred to the national office by boat for filing and registration, or they are scanned and sent via email. The national office issues a death certificate to the family, if requested. Families can request a death certificate either at the deputy registrar's office or at the registry office at the Department of Support Services in Apia.

Timeframes and costs

It is a requirement under the law that all deaths occurring within Tokelau are registered within twenty-four hours of death. However, the Tokelau Births, Deaths and Marriages Office does not regulate or enforce any fee for late registration.

Standard, on-time death registration	no charge
Late registration (> 24 hours)	not applicable*
Death certificate printed	6.00 (NZD)

*A fee is not charged for death registrations after twenty-four hours of the death.

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

There are limited incentives for death registration in Tokelau. There are no finance systems requiring proof of death, no land titles to transfer, and at present no electoral roll to be removed from (TNSO 2013).

Registration process for deaths occurring overseas

Many deaths of Tokelau residents occur overseas through the Tokelau Patient Referral Scheme, due to only limited medical care available at the hospitals on the atolls. There is no provision in the Tokelau BDM legislation to register a death that occurs overseas, including deaths that occur through the Tokelau Patient Referral Scheme. Therefore, no overseas events are included in the figures for the civil registry in Table 2.

COLLATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF CAUSE OF DEATH

Process for coding death certificates

The law requires that all death registrations include a medically certified cause of death certificate, completed by the senior clinician who attended the death, or attended the deceased after death. In actual practice, at times there is no senior clinician on the atoll, and there have been considerations of having doctors on-call to assist remotely with certification. Cause of death certification is completed in alignment with the WHO international cause of death certificate. Tokelau adopted the recommended WHO medical certificate of cause of death format in 2014.

COMPLETENESS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION DATA

More investigation is needed to understand and accurately estimate the completeness of the civil registry in Tokelau, due to an indication that both the civil registry and health records have under-enumerated births and deaths in Tokelau when compared with figures from censuses or SPC projections. It has previously been noted that an estimated 50-65% of births of children under age five were not registered in 2012, and death registration was likely to be even less complete. The small population and limited resources were noted as the main barriers to registration. With strong government support and inter-departmental collaboration, Tokelau is now building up its civil registration system (SPC 2015).

Table 1 shows the figures for birth registrations and births recorded in the health system between 2011 and 2018. The estimated completeness between these two sources has not been displayed to avoid presenting a misleading impression of the completeness of the civil registry, due to an indication that both the civil registry and the health system have under-enumerated births in Tokelau when compared with the census and the SPC projection. When compared to the 2016 census, the completeness of the civil registry was estimated to be around 54%, whilst comparison with the 2011 census was around 79%. However, there are indications that births were under-enumerated in the 2011 census and therefore the estimated completeness of 79% should be interpreted with caution. Comparison with the SPC projection for 2018 indicates a completeness of around 61%.

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	19	18	31	-	^	61%	-
2017	9	9	-	-	^	-	-
2016	15	16	-	28	^	-	54%
2015	19	22	-	-	^	-	-
2014	13	14	-	-	^	-	-
2013	13	17	-	-	^	-	-
2012	15	18	-	-	^	-	-
2011	15	12	-	19	^	-	79%*
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: ^aObtained directly from the Births, Deaths and Marriages Office on 16.12.2020. ^bObtained directly from the Ministry of Health on 23.03.2021. ^cCalculated from 2018 crude birth rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). ^dThe 2011 and 2016 censuses reported the number of mothers who had given birth to their youngest child during the 12 months preceding census night (Stats NZ 2012; TNSO and Stats NZ 2017). *There are indications that births were under-enumerated in the 2011 census and therefore the estimated completeness of 79% should be interpreted with caution. Completeness was calculated by dividing, 'Civil Registry' by 'SPC projection', and 'Civil Registry' by 'Census'. ^These estimates of completeness have not been displayed to avoid presenting a misleading impression of the completeness of the civil registry, due to an indication that both the civil registry and the health system have under-enumerated births in Tokelau when compared with the census and the SPC projection.

Table 2 shows the figures for death registrations and deaths recorded in the health system between 2011 and 2018. The estimated completeness between these two sources has not been displayed to avoid presenting a misleading impression of the completeness of the civil registry, due to an indication that both the civil registry and the health system have under-enumerated deaths in Tokelau when compared with the SPC projection. Comparison of the civil registry with the SPC projection for 2018 showed an estimated completion of 36%. Comparison with the 2012 and 2016 censuses was not possible, as they did not ask questions on all-age mortality.

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	5	5	14	-	^	36%	-
2017	3	3	-	-	^	-	-
2016	5	5	-	-	^	-	-
2015	5	5	-	-	^	-	-
2014	0	0	-	-	^	-	-
2013	6	8	-	-	^	-	-
2012	4	4	-	-	^	-	-
2011	1	1	-	-	^	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: ^aObtained directly from the Births, Deaths and Marriages Office on 16.12.2020. ^bObtained directly from the Ministry of Health on 23.03.2021. ^cCalculated from 2018 crude death rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). ^dThe 2012 and 2016 censuses 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 and 'Civil Registry' by 'SPC projection'. ^eThese estimates of completeness have not been displayed to avoid presenting a misleading impression of the completeness of the civil registry, due to an indication that both the civil registry and the health system have under-enumerated deaths in Tokelau when compared with the SPC projection.

RECENT INITIATIVES AND PLANS TO STRENGTHEN CRVS

1. Tokelau recently revised civil registration forms to ensure that they enable collection of vital demographic variables in accordance with international recommendations.
2. The civil registry has established a data-sharing arrangement with the department of health (via email) whereby the national office is informed of all events within the hospital and can therefore follow up cases that are not registered.
3. The civil registry national office in Apia established birth and death registration databases (Microsoft Access) which enables electronic capture of records. This has greatly improved the security of records.
4. The civil registry national office in Apia now has a scanner, which is used to support electronic storage of all registration documents received from the atolls and hence improve document security.
5. In 2017, the registrar of Tokelau participated in a one-week attachment programme in Niue which was aimed at facilitating knowledge and experience-sharing on registration processes and CRVS in general.

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