

# CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS IN TONGA

Tonga is comprised of 169 islands spread out across approximately 800 kilometres from north to south. It is surrounded by Fiji and Wallis and Futuna to the northwest, Samoa to the northeast, Niue to the east and New Caledonia and Vanuatu further to the west.



Land area  
(km<sup>2</sup>)  
**749**

2020 mid-year  
population estimate  
**99,800**

Population growth  
rate (%)  
**-0.3**



Pacific  
Community  
Communauté  
du Pacifique



Pacific CRVS  
supported by Brisbane Accord Group

unicef  
for every child

## OVERVIEW

This civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) country profile for Tonga 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 Tonga. 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](mailto: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 Tonga is governed by the Tonga Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act (1988) 2016 Revised Edition (MoJ 2016); the Maintenance of the Illegitimate Children Act (1926) 2016 Revised Edition, and the Guardianship Act (2004) 2016 Revised Edition.

### *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 Planning and Information Division located at Vaiola Hospital in Nuku'alofa. The Vital Statistics Unit within the Office of the Registrar General of the Ministry of Justice is responsible for overseeing the civil registration of births and deaths, with the national office located in Nuku'alofa. The town and district offices in the Ministry of Internal Affairs are also responsible as informants for the registration of births and deaths.

### *National CRVS committee and CRVS action plan*

The Ministry of Justice serves as the Secretariat for the Tonga CRVS Committee. The Committee is comprised of the Office of the Registrar General and the Judiciary (Ministry of Justice), the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Police, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Training, the Tonga Electoral Commission, the Tonga Statistics Department, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Information Department (Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications), the Immigration Department (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the National ID Office. Tonga does not currently have a CRVS action plan.

### *National ID systems*

Tonga has a national ID system, with the distribution of national ID cards first carried out in 2010 during registration for the 2010 general election (MIC 2010). The National ID cards are not currently linked to birth or death registration, but the presentation of a birth certificate is mandatory for the issuance of a national ID card. The Government of Tonga is in the process of introducing the Tonga Digital Government Project, supported by funding from the World Bank. The objective is to improve the capacity for digital public service delivery, with the third component of the project including an upgrade of the civil registration system and development of civil registration national ID linkage (World Bank 2020).

## REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS

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

The Ministry of Health is responsible for recording births that occur in health facilities and the community. For births that occur in the community, the practice is for the baby and mother to be taken to the nearest health facility to be assessed by a nurse or a doctor soon after the birth. Nurses in the community issue a notification of birth, and health facilities issue a certificate of live birth. These birth records are sent to the national office in Nuku'alofa and entered into a Microsoft Access database, with a paper copy of the certificate also filed. The child's parents, or the town and district officers who are government officials under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, are designated by law as informants of birth, and must present to the civil registry with a copy of the certificate issued by the health facility in order to register the birth. At the national Civil Registry Office in Nuku'alofa, a registry system database is used for electronic capture and storage of birth registrations, whilst paper records are maintained as backup. Births in the outer Islands of 'Eua, Ha'apai, Vava'u and the Niuas can be registered in sub-registries.

### *Timeframes and costs*

The current act for birth registration in Tonga states that every birth must be registered within three weeks of delivery (MoJ 2016). There is, however, a grace period of three months for birth registration within Tongatapu and a grace period of one year for birth registration in the outer islands. This takes into account the difficulty of traveling to sub-registries in remote villages and scattered islands within the legally stipulated birth registration timeframe. A late registration fee is applied only to births not registered within the above-mentioned grace periods.

Standard, on-time birth registration	no charge
Late registration (> 3 months)	36.00 (TOP)*
Birth certificate printed	10.00 (TOP)
Change of name	101.00 (TOP)
Registration of alias name	51.00 (TOP)
Addition of father's particulars	36.00 (TOP)
Legitimisation of birth	36.00 (TOP)

*\*This cost is TOP 16.00 for the late registration application; TOP 10.00 search fee; TOP 10.00 for the affidavit. Late registration requires: (i) certificate of live birth; (ii) marriage certificate of the parents; (iii) letter of late registration application; and (iv) affidavit of reason for late registration.*

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

A birth certificate is required for enrolment of a child in pre-school, primary school, secondary and tertiary school; issuance of a passport; registration of hereditary estates; land registration; issuance of a driver's license; opening a bank account; taking part in the inter-collegiate sports and joining national sport federations; receiving money via Western Union; issuance of a marriage licence; issuance of a national ID card; joining the Recognised Seasonal Employment (RSE) Scheme overseas; issuance of a business license; registration of eligible voters in the electoral roll; scholarship applications; membership of National Retirement Fund Board; public service appointment and the issuance of a police record report from the Ministry of Police. With the support of UNICEF, throughout two periods in 2019 (Phase 1 April; and Phase 2 November) Tonga completed a Birth Registration Amnesty Programme, which was designed to capture births that had been missed during routine registrations, especially for the outer islands, by offering an amnesty period from late registration penalties. Figures from the civil registry show that around 885 additional birth registrations were completed during Phase 1 of the amnesty period, and an additional 221 were completed during Phase 2. A special request was made to Cabinet by the Ministry of Education and Training for the Ministry of Justice to conduct a special amnesty program specifically for students to facilitate the registration of births of school children who currently do not have a birth certificate. This request was granted, and the Special Amnesty Program Phase 3 was conducted in August 2020. The figures of birth registrations during this phase have not yet been finalised.

### *Registration process for births occurring overseas*

Tongan children who are born abroad can apply for a Tongan birth certificate, providing that one of the parents maintained their Tongan citizenship at the time the child was born. Required documents include a letter of application by either parent (where the parents are not in Tonga they may authorise in writing someone in Tonga to act on their behalf); an affidavit of the applicant; the original Tongan passport of the mother or father; the original foreign birth certificate of the child; and the original marriage certificate of the parents where the child was born legitimate. Births occurring overseas are excluded from Table 1.

## **REPORTING AND REGISTRATION OF DEATHS**

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

All deaths are required to have a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death issued and certified by a medical practitioner. A copy of the certificate is issued to the family of the deceased by the health facility, and this document is presented by the family to the civil registration office. It is the key document that initiates the death registration process. There is no requirement for registration of a death before burial.

### *Timeframes and costs*

The current act for death registration in Tonga does not explicitly stipulate the timeframe within which a family member or next of kin must register the death (MoJ 2016) but a late registration fee is applied if the death is not registered within one year of the death.

Standard, on-time death registration	no charge
Late registration (> 1 year)	36.00 (TOP)*
Death certificate printed	10.00 (TOP)

*\*This cost is TOP 16.00 for the late registration application; TOP 10.00 search fee; TOP 10.00 for the affidavit. Late registration requires: (i) a medical certificate of cause of death; (ii) a letter of late registration application; and (iii) an affidavit of reason for late registration.*

### *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; claiming of insurance; and the issuance of a marriage license for widows/widowers. There is a plan in place to initiate an amnesty program to commence in early 2021 for late registration of unregistered deaths that have occurred in Tonga, in order to decrease the number of unregistered deaths in previous years.

### *Registration process for deaths occurring overseas*

The next of kin or family members of Tongan citizens who die abroad may apply for a Tongan death certificate, providing that the applicant can show evidence that the deceased maintained their Tongan citizenship until the time of their death. Required documents include the original foreign death certificate; the original Tongan passport of the deceased (or a verification letter from immigration); and an affidavit by the applicant. Deaths occurring overseas are excluded from Table 2.

## **COLLATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF CAUSE OF DEATH**

### *Process for coding death certificates*

Coding of cause of death is done according to ICD-10 at the national level. Allocation of ICD-10 codes to death certificates is done manually by trained coders. One of the key challenges in mortality coding is the quality of the cause of death information on the death certificate, particularly for deaths that occur outside health facilities and where there is no doctor available. In such cases, the public health nurse at the community level issues a notification of death, which is signed by the town officer at the district where the death occurred. This record is forwarded to the medical records office and a doctor or health officer is required to sign the death certificate. This process limits the quality of cause of death data, noting that the doctor during such instances is likely to have limited information on the causal sequence of events that led directly to the death.

### *Training and resources for cause of death certification and coding*

Tonga has been working towards improving the quality of cause of death certification through training of medical physicians. In December 2018, Tonga hosted and participated in a three-day regional training workshop for medical doctors on medical certification of cause of death, coordinated by SPC and supported by Brisbane Accord Group (BAG) partners. Eight Tongan medical doctors and two senior health information staff attended the training. In 2017, medical doctors from Tonga attended a similar three-day training workshop held in Fiji, coordinated by SPC and supported by BAG partners.

## **COMPLETENESS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION DATA**

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 to

which they are compared, such as health records, do not include overseas events. In Tonga, overseas births and deaths can be registered in the civil registry (see sections above on registration processes for births and deaths occurring overseas). In order to estimate completeness in Table 1 and 2 below, these overseas events have been excluded from the figures for the civil registry.

Table 1 shows that, between 2013 and 2018, birth registration completeness when compared to health records has remained  $\geq 97\%$ . The reason for greater than 100% completeness in 2013 needs further investigation, but could be related to some community births not being captured in health records. Comparison with the estimated number of births in the twelve months preceding the 2016 Tonga census (1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016) indicates the completeness of the civil registry is approximately 100%. Comparison with the SPC projection of births for 2018 indicates a completeness of around 84%.

The completeness of birth registration in Tonga has also been estimated through questionnaire surveys, including the 2016 national census and periodic population sample surveys. These questionnaires ask the mother or caregiver of children aged under one year, or under five years, whether their child's birth has been registered with a civil authority, and if their child possesses a birth certificate. The 2016 census found that, of the children born during the 12 months prior to the 2016 census, 96% were reported to have had their births registered and 90% were reported to be in possession of a birth certificate (TSD 2019). The census also asked this question for children aged less than five years at the time of the census, and found that 97% were reported to have had their births registered and 94% were reported to be in possession of a birth certificate (TSD 2019). The 2019 Tonga Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) found that, of the 1,347 children aged under five years included in the survey, 97.7% were reported to have had their births registered, and 89.3% were reported to be in possession of a birth certificate. (Tonga DoS 2020). The 2012 Tonga demographic and health survey found that, of the 1,749 children aged under five years included in the survey, 93.4% were reported to have had their births registered and 90.5% were reported to be in possession of a birth certificate (Tonga DoS 2013).

**Table 1. Completeness of birth registration data**

Year	Source of births				Completeness of birth registration		
	Civil Registry <sup>a</sup>	Health <sup>b</sup>	SPC projection <sup>c</sup>	Census <sup>d</sup>	Compared with health	Compared with SPC	Compared with census
2018	1,999	2,046	2,380	-	98%	84%	-
2017	2,305	2,310	-	-	100%	-	-
2016	2,463	2,533	-	2,445	97%	-	101%
2015	2,620	2,666	-	-	98%	-	-
2014	2,650	2,644	-	-	100%	-	-
2013	2,676	2,636	-	-	102%	-	-
2012	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Civil Registry (TDS, MoJ and MoH 2021). <sup>b</sup>Health Planning and Information Division (TDS, MoJ and MoH 2021). <sup>c</sup>Calculated from 2018 crude birth rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). <sup>d</sup>The 2016 census estimated the number of children born between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016 by multiplying the indirectly calculated age-specific fertility rates obtained using the Arriaga method, by the enumerated total number of women in each childbearing age group in the census. The census also asked women aged fifteen years or older the date of birth of their last-born child, and from the responses 2,086 births had occurred in the one-year period prior to November 2016, indicating underreporting of births through the latter method. This may be partially due to the 'last child born' question not capturing multiple births (such as twins or triplets), women being out of the country on census date, or inaccurate reporting of their child's date of birth (TSD 2019). Completeness was calculated by dividing 'Civil Registry' by 'Health', 'Civil Registry' by 'SPC projection', and 'Civil Registry' by 'Census'.

Table 2 shows that, between 2013 and 2018, death registration completeness when compared to health records slowly rose from around 60% to around 70%. Whilst the 2016 census did ask a question on deaths in the household in the previous twelve months, the result (382 deaths between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016) is highlighted by the census report to be a significant undercount of the true level of mortality (TSD 2019),



and therefore has not been used to estimate completeness in Table 2. Comparison with the SPC projection of deaths for 2018 indicates a completeness of around 80%.

**Table 2. Completeness of death registration data**

Year	Source of deaths				Completeness of death registration		
	Civil Registry <sup>a</sup>	Health <sup>b</sup>	SPC projection <sup>c</sup>	Census <sup>d</sup>	Compared with health	Compared with SPC	Compared with census
2018	562	806	703	-	70%	80%	-
2017	576	794	-	-	73%	-	-
2016	546	815	-	382 <sup>e</sup>	67%	-	<sup>e</sup>
2015	531	786	-	-	68%	-	-
2014	596	917	-	-	65%	-	-
2013	463	751	-	-	62%	-	-
2012	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Civil Registry (TDS, MoJ and MoH 2021). <sup>b</sup>Health Planning and Information Division (TDS, MoJ and MoH 2021). <sup>c</sup>Calculated from 2018 crude death rate (Pacific Community 2018a) and 2018 population projection (Pacific Community 2018b). <sup>d</sup>The 2016 census asked a question on deaths in the household in the previous twelve months, but the result (382 deaths between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016) is known to be a significant undercount of the true level of mortality (TSD 2019) and therefore has not been used to estimate completeness. Completeness was calculated by dividing 'Civil Registry' by 'Health' and 'Civil Registry' by 'SPC projection'.

## PUBLICATION OF CRVS DATA AND REPORTS

In April 2021, Tonga produced a comprehensive vital statistics report covering 2013–2018 (Stats Office, MoH and SPC 2015). The report provides key fertility, mortality and cause of death indicators, based on reconciled data from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice (civil registry) (TDS, MoJ and MoH 2021).

## RECENT INITIATIVES AND PLANS TO STRENGTHEN CRVS

1. Tonga completed two Birth Registration Amnesty Program periods in 2019 (Phase 1 April and Phase 2 November) and another special amnesty program for school children in August 2020, where late registration penalties were waived for birth registration.
2. In December 2018, Tonga hosted and participated in a three-day regional training workshop for medical doctors on medical certification of cause of death, coordinated by SPC and supported by BAG partners. Eight Tongan medical doctors and two senior health information staff attended the training.

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