

USES OF VITAL RECORDS AND STATISTICS  
FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMS



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There are laws in virtually every country for the registration of vital events. These registered events serve to establish the occurrence of the vital event and provide prima facie evidence of the facts about the event and of the relationship between those involved in the event. As legal documents, the individual records are placed in a permanent repository until such time that there is a request for a copy of the record for various juridical and administrative uses.

At the time of registration, the local registrar will also record various items of demographic and/or medical importance in the case of live births, deaths, and fetal deaths, marriages and divorces for the purpose of compiling national vital statistics. In a number of countries, one record serves both legal and statistical purposes. Additional copies of the statistical record are usually made for administrative or program uses of various government agencies.

The purpose of my presentation is to give an overview of the papers to be given in this session, and to refer to the various uses of vital records and statistics and the role they have played in the lives of individual citizens and in the social and economic development of countries.

Let me first take up the uses of individual records of live births, deaths, marriages and divorces. These documents constitute proof of the fact, the date, and the place of occurrence of the event. Also, they contain other information required for establishing certain relationships such as parentage, legitimacy, dependency and lineage.

I am sure that all of us here have experienced some need for vital records. I know that my parents had to produce a record of my birth to prove that I was old enough to attend grade school. I had to do the same for my children. I needed a copy of my birth certificate as proof of citizenship when I applied for my first passport and when I applied for my civil service position. I needed a copy of my birth certificate as proof of age to qualify for my government pension at my retirement and for my social security benefits. I needed a marriage certificate to show that my wife is legible for survivor 's benefits in the event of my death.

At the time of my death, my survivors will need certified copies

of my death certificate for a number of purposes, such as, stopping payment of my pension and social security benefits, and starting payments of monthly benefits to my wife. Relevant vital records are required before a person can receive an inheritance. A divorce record or a death certificate for the spouse is required for a person to remarry. All these and other uses are in the exercise of our basic civil and human rights.

Vital records are also indispensable for updating official files of various kinds such as population registers, the files of personal identity systems, social security rosters, and electoral rolls. In these uses, the individual birth record constitutes proof of age, that is, when an individual becomes eligible for an identity card, to vote, or to receive certain benefits, etc. The death record is used to purge the system of ineligible individuals to prevent fraudulent use of personal identity cards, illegal exercise of the voting franchise, fraudulent receipt of benefits, etc.

Perhaps the earliest and most extensive use of death statistics has been in the field of medicine and public health by men like John Graunt and William Farr. In modern times, birth records have been used to identify infants to be cared for at well-baby clinics; babies born with birth defects may be referred to a crippled children's program; and all live-born babies may be followed up for immunization against various childhood diseases. A death record makes possible the investigation of certain epidemic diseases to prevent their spread. Also, the death record can be used as the beginning and end points of epidemiologic studies. With respect to statistics compiled from birth and death records, especially the latter, they are indispensable to health programs by providing a quantitative base for the delineation of health problems, for planning and directing a program for improving the public health, and for evaluating health progress. Many participants of the WHO program of Health for All by the Year 2000 are probably painfully aware of the handicap of not having adequate mortality statistics to conduct and monitor programs in connection with Health for All by the Year 2000. We look forward to the paper by WHO for an exposition on the uses of vital records and statistics in public health programs.

Another program of major importance in the developing countries is family planning. Uncontrolled population growth is probably the greatest tragedy of modern time. Certainly, it is one of the greatest obstacles to the economic development of a country. Here, vital statistics provide the basic data for measuring the magnitude of population growth, and fertility statistics will identify the segment of the population with the greatest need for a family planning program. For information on the use of, and

knowledge about, contraceptive methods, one can conduct follow back surveys on the registered births, or conduct an independent knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) study.

The planning for the economic development of a country is inextricably bound up with the future size and geographic distribution of the population, and frequently with the age composition of the population. The construction of public utilities for a community such as water supply, sewage disposal systems, gas mains, and power supply require reasonably accurate estimates of the future population in order that the facilities will have sufficient capacity to serve future populations. There are other problems such as providing needed community services such as hospitals and health centers. Because vital statistics constitute the components of natural population growth, adequate vital statistics are needed for population projection purposes. There needs to be planning for the construction of schools and training of teachers for these schools. These require projections of the birth rate in order to estimate the numbers of children of school age to be anticipated in future years.

Then, there are those interested in demography, the study of population. Their needs for data encompasses all aspects of vital statistics, that is, fertility statistics, mortality statistics, marriage statistics and divorce statistics, usually in some demographic and geographic detail. It is also important that the registration data be complete so that the trends and differentials can be interpreted with some confidence. For countries where registration of vital records is deficient, this presents a dilemma. One possible way out of this dilemma is to aggregate the data from areas where registration is known to be satisfactory. This so-called tabulation area approach should certainly be explored.

In countries like the United States, there is considerable demand for vital statistics from the private sector. The baby food and infant formula manufacturer would like to know the size of the market for their products. The baby clothing manufacturer would also like to know the annual number of births. The furniture manufacturer would like to know about new family formation. And, the undertaker and the casket manufacturer are interested in the deaths that occur each year in their area. The pharmaceutical firms are concerned about the market for new drugs being developed for the treatment of certain diseases, and they look to cause-of-death statistics for information on this point.

These are some of the uses that have been made of vital records and statistics. It is hoped. that this session will give you some appreciation of the importance of the uses that can be made of vital records and statistics. To a large extent, the rate of development of the civil registration and vital statistics systems will be determined by the uses made of vital records and statistics. Without the awareness on the part of the public of the need for and the importance of these needs, there will be little incentive on their part to register vital events. Without

the demographic, public health and other uses of vital statistics, there would be little justification for the establishment and maintenance of a vital statistics system. Vital records and statistics are not ends in themselves, but are administrative and research tools to be used. The uses to which they are put, or can be put, must justify civil registration and vital statistics as a government function. The value of this function will, of course, depend greatly upon the completeness of registration and the quality of statistical information. For statistical purposes, the International Standards call for 90 percent or more completeness of registration. This is the goal of the International Program.

The International Program for the Accelerated Improvement of Vital Statistics recognizes the importance of uses of vital records and statistics and calls for the participation of the major users or consumers in the reform of the civil registration and vital statistics systems. The representatives of government agencies such as public health, personal identification, and economic planning should serve on the central advisory committee. Nongovernmental organizations will be, or should be, given every opportunity by the advisory committee and staff to make known their needs. In addition, every effort should be made to promote the use of vital records and statistics in the country. The importance of this point cannot be overemphasized in any program for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics.