

Birth Registration for
Every Child by 2030:
Are we on track?

unicef 
for every child



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A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a person's hand holding a white piece of paper. The background is a light-colored, textured wall. The hand is positioned in the lower half of the frame, with the fingers gripping the edge of the paper. The paper appears to have some faint, illegible markings on it.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Birth registration and sustainable development | 6 |
| 2. Progress and challenges in data availability and quality..... | 12 |
| 3. Where we stand today | 14 |
| 4. Barriers and disparities | 24 |
| 5. Assessing progress and looking to 2030 | 26 |
| 6. Realizing every child's right to be registered at birth | 34 |
| Technical annex | 36 |
| Endnotes | 41 |

Society first acknowledges a child's existence and identity through birth registration. The right to be recognized as a person before the law is a critical step in ensuring lifelong protection and is a prerequisite for exercising all other rights.

A birth certificate is proof of that legal identity, and is the basis upon which children can establish a nationality, avoid the risk of statelessness and seek protection from violence and exploitation. For example, proof of age is needed to help prevent child labour, child marriage and underage recruitment into the armed forces. A birth certificate may also be required to access social service systems, including health, education and justice.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015¹ placed birth registration firmly on the international development agenda. It included a dedicated target (16.9) under Goal 16: provide legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030. Complementing this is target 17.9, which calls for support in building the statistical capacity needed for strong national civil registration systems. Such systems produce vital statistics, including those on birth registration, which are foundational for achieving sustained human and economic development.

In accordance with the SDGs, UNICEF seeks to fulfil the promise of universal birth registration, and a legal identity for every child, by 2030.

One in four children under age 5 (166 million), on average, are not registered. And even when they are, they may not have proof of registration. An estimated 237 million children under age 5 worldwide are currently without a birth certificate. The reasons are all too common: a lack of resources and investment in accurate and comprehensive civil registration systems, coupled with barriers in accessing birth registration services, along with policy, regulatory and institutional obstacles.

The last two decades have seen a rise in birth registration levels globally, with about 3 in 4 children under age 5 registered today compared to 6 in 10 around 2000. However, progress has been uneven and additional investments will be needed to achieve universal birth

registration. The rate of progress in one in three countries, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa, will need to accelerate if they are to meet the SDG target by 2030.

That said, simply raising birth registration levels is not enough. Improvements are also needed to enhance the quality of civil registration systems to achieve universal coverage along with continuity, confidentiality and regular dissemination of data.² Civil registration records must be continuously maintained so they can be easily retrieved by individuals. Lapses in registration often mean that certificates, including birth certificates, are not issued by civil registration authorities. This, in turn, can deprive children of the opportunity to exercise their rights. At the same time, the registration process itself must be easily available and accessible to all.

UNICEF recommends five specific actions to fulfil the promise of birth registration for every child (see page 35).

The scope of this report

This publication presents the latest available country data and global and regional estimates of the number of unregistered children. It also assesses progress over time and presents evidence for the amount of effort that will be needed – at both global and regional levels – to achieve universal birth registration by 2030.

Since birth registration ideally takes place immediately after birth, estimates of the number of unregistered children are provided for both those under 5 years of age and under 1 year of age. Estimates are also provided for the number of children and infants without birth certificates.

The publication draws from some 400 data sources spanning a period of nearly 20 years. Its findings are intended to inform the development of related policies and programmes. The publication also seeks to raise awareness of the need to strengthen civil registration systems as the most effective strategy to achieve universal birth registration and to ensure that every child is given a legal identity from birth.



Legal identity

is operationally defined as the basic characteristics that comprise an individual's identity, including name, sex and date of birth.³

The primary vehicle for obtaining a legal identity is through the birth registration process.



Birth registration

is the official recording of the occurrence and characteristics of a birth by the civil registrar within the civil registry, in accordance with the legal requirements of a country.

This establishes the existence of a person under the law and provides legal proof of his or her identity.⁴



Birth certificate

is a vital record, issued by the civil registrar, that documents the birth of a child.

Because it is a certified extract from the birth registration record, it proves that registration has occurred – making this document the first, and often only, proof of legal identity, particularly for children.⁵



Birth certificates are often required to access health care, education and other social services. In Viet Nam, for instance, birth certificates are required for enrolment in both preschool and primary school.⁶ Having legal identification is also critical in protecting children from violence and exploitation. Proof of age can be used to prevent child labour (through the enforcement of minimum age of employment laws), recruitment into the armed forces, prosecution as an adult in criminal proceedings and child marriage. Moreover, birth certification is legal proof of one's place of birth and family ties. Thus, it is necessary for establishing a nationality and preventing the risk of statelessness. Later in life, birth certificates may be required to obtain social assistance or a job in the formal sector.

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