

CERTIFY HOPE

unicef 
AUSTRALIA
for every child

**Birth certificates
for every child
in Australia**

The current
situation and the
case for change





UNICEF is the United Nations Children's Fund, the world's leading organisation for children and families. We work in more than 190 countries and territories around the globe. Our mission is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to survive and thrive – regardless of who they are, where they live, or what they believe.

UNICEF Australia's vision is a fair chance for every child. As an Australian NGO we work in partnership with Governments, local organisations, and the private sector to protect and enhance the rights and wellbeing of children here in Australia and around the world.

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UNICEF Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country of the land and communities across Australia in which we work. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

An introduction to birth registration

Birth registration is a child's first right. It is their passport to protection, establishing their existence under the law and allowing for their full participation in society over the course of their life. With birth registration comes access to a birth certificate, a pivotal document that allows a child, a young person, and then an adult, to access other documentation needed to take part in society.

Without a birth certificate there is no passport, driver's licence, tax file number or bank account, and without these essential things, access to employment, health care, education, training, and welfare support, all become difficult if not impossible. This creates profound disadvantage which cascades and compounds over a lifetime – no access to training can lead to unemployment, unemployment can lead to reliance on welfare support, no access to welfare support can lead to poverty, poverty can lead to poor health outcomes amongst others. Birth registration is a key protective factor for children, which is why UNICEF has been a key player in this space for over 30 years.

UNICEF has worked around the world to help governments strengthen their birth registration systems, however, our attention turns now to a country in which few people know birth registration is even an issue – Australia.

While Australia enjoys a high rate of 98% of births under the age of 5 years registered with a civil authority, birth registration rates are much lower within particular populations including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples¹ and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.²

The true extent of under-registration is currently unknown but pockets of data provide an indication – a study in Queensland revealed that 15-18% of births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were not registered compared to 1.8% of births to non-Indigenous mothers.³ Similar research in Western Australia found that 11% of births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were not registered between 1980 and 2010.⁴



≈18% OF FIRST NATIONS BIRTHS GO UNREGISTERED*



≈2% OF NON-INDIGENOUS BIRTHS GO UNREGISTERED*



UNICEF's work in birth registrations

One in four children globally under the age of 5 years (166 million) on average do not have their birth registered, and an estimated 237 million children under the age of 5 years are without a birth certificate.⁵ The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015⁶ placed birth registration firmly on the international development agenda. It included a dedicated target under Goal 16:

By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration.

For over 30 years, UNICEF has been working to address this issue and in just a single year we collaborate with governments and communities to register over 16 million births and issue birth certificates to over 13 million people.

Our work focuses on helping governments strengthen their civil registration systems. This includes increasing the number of service points where children can be registered, developing or updating birth registration legal and policy frameworks, innovations in registration technology, and increasing community awareness about birth registration.

We also work with other sectors, such as health and education, to integrate birth registration into their work. This includes increasing birth registration in hospitals and health centres, including birth registration in immunization drives, and linking birth registration systems to national cash transfer systems and student databases.

Despite UNICEF's efforts, and even with the progress seen over the last two decades, the world is not on track to meet the target of providing legal identity for all, including birth registration, as set out in the 2030 SDGs.



Why it matters

Without birth registration a child is invisible under the law. That right to be recognised, as per Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁷ is an essential step in ensuring lifelong protection for children and is a gateway to access all other rights.

In the global context, a birth certificate establishes nationality, helps children avoid the risk of statelessness, and enables them to seek protection from exploitation and violence. From the moment of birth, the presence of a person under the law ensures the government is able to plan and deliver services for them, be it education, healthcare, or any other services which are essential for the wellbeing of babies and children.⁸

Birth registration and the legal identity that comes with it allows people to access travel documents, to vote, and to run for public office.⁹ These impacts extend beyond the individual – strong legal identity systems enable travel document security and border integrity, reducing the likelihood of exploitation for unlawful purposes like trans-national crime or terrorism.¹⁰ At the nation-wide level, an effective birth registration and legal identity system allows governments to access trustworthy demographic data, helping to ensure that policy making is guided by evidence and targeted to need.¹¹

For many countries including Australia, the birth certificate has become a pivotal document which unlocks access for a person to all those things needed to participate fully in society including identification, the right to work, access to education, healthcare, and government supports. Without access to their full entitlement of rights,

children and young people face cascading disadvantage which compounds over their lifetime. With no birth certificate, a young person will not be able to obtain the identification needed to enrol in a training course, which will in turn make it difficult to secure employment. They are also unable to obtain a driver's licence, preventing them from driving to their place of education or taking the risk of driving without a licence. At its worst, research has shown a lack of birth certificate can place a person on a trajectory to criminal justice involvement and even imprisonment, due to driving without a licence for which a birth certificate is a prerequisite.¹²

The effects of low birth registration compounds disadvantage for people who are already experiencing it. A young person without a birth certificate may struggle to find employment and thus require unemployment support, but be unable to access it without identification documents, further entrenching their disadvantage. This can also transcend generations – parents without birth certificates will struggle to provide the documentation needed to register their children, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage which sees children face the same access barriers in life as their parents. For UNICEF Australia, we are witnessing these effects first-hand through our work across Australia.

Kirby's experience without a birth certificate

Kirby is a devoted mother of three from Canberra. For far too long, Kirby was left uncounted and invisible in many ways, her birth was not registered depriving her of all the opportunities that a birth certificate can unlock.

A birth certificate is a foundational piece of our identity. Without one, everyday things like enrolling in school, opening a bank account and getting a driver's licence, become nearly impossible. Kirby knows all too well the impacts of not having a birth certificate, which made things difficult for her when trying to find a job.

Some of the barriers when registering a birth can include financial limitations or difficulties in accessing registration services due to living in remote locations.

But the consequences of an unregistered birth affect many aspects of life through a person's lifetime.

Sadly, Kirby's story is not uncommon – there are many documented experiences of children, young people and adults in Australia without birth certificates, who have similarly been unable to engage in training and employment.¹³

In October 2022, Kirby attended the Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program roadshow, supported by UNICEF Australia, where she was supported through the process to be able to get a birth certificate for herself and her children. Kirby can now pursue her goals in finding a job that's right for her and work with the youth in her community.

"I WANT TO WORK WITH MY YOUTH, I WANT TO BE A ROLE MODEL FOR MY YOUTH WITHIN CANBERRA."

KIRBY





How birth registration works

The barriers to birth registration are multiple, complex, and they exist within the context of a regulatory environment which is important to understand.

In Australia, responsibility for birth registration sits primarily with States and Territories, performed through the appointment of Births, Death and Marriage Registrars, and supported by Offices of Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDMs). BDMs generally work as independent agencies within government departments and fall under the responsibility of the Attorney-General.

While there are slight differences across jurisdictions, the process of registration usually begins in hospital with notification of the birth sent to the BDM, and registration forms provided to the parent/s and/or carers. The forms must be completed (in paper or online) and submitted to the BDM, with the option to also purchase a birth certificate at a cost which varies by jurisdiction. Fees for certificates can be waived in some jurisdictions in certain circumstances, for example, for people facing financial hardship. Births must generally be registered within 60 days, with potential penalties for late registration. A person can apply for a birth certificate later in life if they are without one, which generally also includes an application form, a fee, and the need to provide proof of identity documents. While most Registrars acknowledge the need to do more targeted work with particular communities, there are differences between jurisdictions in terms of the resources provided to do so.

This is the context within which a multitude of co-occurring and overlapping barriers are contributing to the under-registration of births in pockets of Australian society.

Barriers to birth registration



COST

The first and often easiest to identify barrier is the role that cost plays in preventing registration.

While birth registration is free, obtaining a birth certificate is not. As the two processes are taken as one at birth, the cost of the certificate may be confused with the cost of registration,¹⁴ and for people facing financial hardship, this can act as a deterrent.

While fee waivers are offered by some BDMs, it is not always clear and applying for a fee waiver itself can be overly complex.¹⁵

Additionally, whilst fines and penalties are rarely imposed in practice, the mere presence of them can be a deterrent to someone registering their or their child's birth at a later date.¹⁶



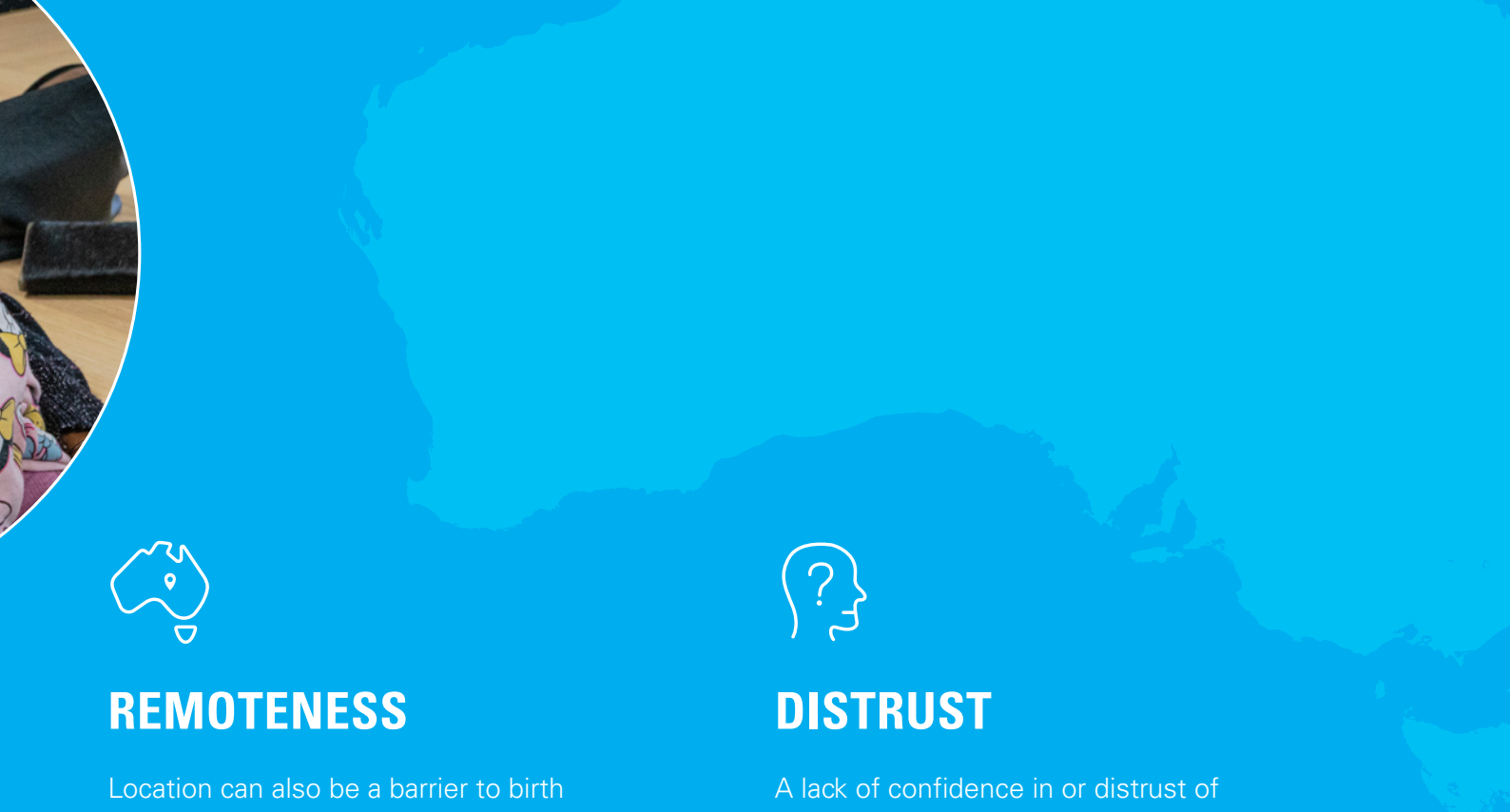
COMPLEXITY

The complex process of birth registration presents as another significant barrier and many Australians will be familiar with how difficult it can be to navigate government services.

Some jurisdictions require each parent to provide multiple forms of proof of identification, placing a further burden on parents, particularly as a birth certificate is a prerequisite to acquiring the required documents for the parent, such as a passport or driver's license, thereby perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage.¹⁷ For a person applying for a certificate well after birth, say as an adult, this same identification barrier exists.¹⁸

Some mothers are not always able or willing to provide the name of the father, and although both are not actually required, the presence on the form can suggest otherwise, and some jurisdictions require explanation as to the father's absence.¹⁹ The risk of family violence is one such example of why a mother might not be willing to provide the father's details.²⁰ Registration forms also require complex information which may not readily available, such as the baby's weight or details of the supervising doctor.²¹





REMOTENESS

Location can also be a barrier to birth registration, particularly for people living in remote communities for whom the time and cost of travel to a service centre may be prohibitive.²²

Additionally, technology-based solutions for remoteness, such as applying online or via post, can fail to meet their needs should they require hands-on support, or if they do not have a credit card to pay online.²³

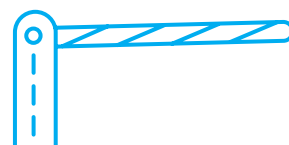


DISTRUST

A lack of confidence in or distrust of authorities also presents as a barrier,²⁴ particularly for Australians who have had negative past experiences when engaging with government services.

Combining all of these barriers with low awareness of the benefits of birth registration, results in the continued and unacceptable under-registration of births in one of the most developed countries in the world.

Identifying barriers is, in some ways, the simpler part of the birth registration equation – it is relatively straight forward to recognise when something is not working well. Removing barriers is markedly more challenging and Australia is only just beginning to grapple with this issue. UNICEF Australia wants to begin this important conversation – there is much work to be done to achieve universal birth registration in Australia.



Identifying Solutions



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CONSULT

Our approach to breaking down barriers must begin with a genuine desire to work in consultation with community.

It is a wasted enterprise to design solutions without first speaking with those affected by this issue. In this regard, efforts need to be made to engage with affected communities to break down barriers, identify solutions, build trust, and provide services that are culturally appropriate and responsive to the needs of community.

Victoria's *Coolamon Strategy 2019-21* is an oft-cited example of an effort that does this well and improves birth registrations by working with community.



RAISE AWARENESS

An area that we know requires attention is education and awareness-raising on the benefits of birth registration, primarily to encourage parents, adults, and the services they interact with, to give the process the importance it is due.

It is crucial that awareness-raising efforts are developed in partnership with affected communities to better understand the barriers to registration, and ensure communications are culturally appropriate and targeted to need.²⁵

Here, organisations like UNICEF Australia have a role to play in helping raise public awareness of the issue.



REDUCE COST

At the individual or micro level, we know that the cost of a birth certificate can act as a deterrent for people facing financial hardship.²⁶

At the macro or nation-wide level, one of the most impactful levers at our disposal might be making the first birth certificate free for all children.

Acknowledging that this could come at a significant financial cost to Government, a staged approach could be considered, where the first birth certificate is made free for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia.²⁷

Re-thinking penalties and fines for late registration may also be an effective method to promote birth registration.



SIMPLIFY

Removing complexity from the system and an over-reliance on birth certificates as a necessary form of proof of identity stands to bring substantial benefit.

Coupled with this, improving coordination and information sharing between government departments and agencies, both within and between jurisdictions, should help reduce procedural barriers and duplication, and save time, effort and resources.



RESEARCH

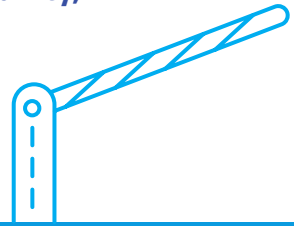
Another piece of the puzzle that needs addressing is a nation-wide data project to understand the true extent of the under-registration of births.

Currently, we are left to rely on pockets of data and research, but to fully appreciate the scale of the issue, and to ensure our policy making and funding decisions are based in evidence, a data undertaking is required to outline how many births go unregistered every year in Australia.

The more granular this research can be the better, so that our responses can be targeted to where the need is greatest.

Continued research into technology-based solutions like online registration, digital proofs of identity, and the use of blockchain to secure individual-owned digital identities, should also be explored.

Whilst more barriers are sure to be identified as we continue on this journey, we know there is an immediate need to help people who do not have their birth registered to obtain a birth certificate. This is where outreach initiatives that go into community, build relationships and trust, and provide the support needed to facilitate registration, have an important and immediate role to play.²⁸



Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program

Pathfinders delivers the National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program (PNABC), an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander initiative that aims to address birth under registration by conducting sign-up days in areas where there are significant numbers of people without birth certificates. Since the program's inception more than 12,000 people have gained access to their birth certificate.

Pathfinders has a long history of commitment to providing appropriate and accessible services for First Nations Australians and consults extensively with local communities when planning services to ensure their response is targeted to need. The PNABC Program increases the rate of birth certification and registration in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by:

i) actively assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients with registering their births or the births of their children;

(ii) raising general awareness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of the importance of birth certification and registration; and

(iii) developing strong partnerships with community organisations, particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations, that can support the continued goal of assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with their birth certification and registration on an ongoing basis.

The Program is run by an Aboriginal team which helps make the service welcoming and culturally appropriate. The staff have the knowledge, skills and networks to ensure that the Program is delivered with respect and within a safe, trusted environment. They provide 'street level' access, delivering the program face-to-face with support from local Aboriginal health and legal services, Justices of the Peace, and volunteers.



The way forward

UNICEF Australia has a vision for an Australia in which the birth of every child is registered, enabling them to fully enjoy all of their rights throughout their lives.

We also understand that the pathway to realising that vision is a long one, and that we are only at the beginning of the journey.

We offer this contribution to put the issue of birth registration in Australia on the map, to start a conversation about the issues presented in this paper, and to build a community for action. We hope that together we can identify a pathway towards counting every child, unlocking access for children to all their rights, with the ultimate goal of improving both their wellbeing and the wellbeing of society more broadly.





SPEAK

Every child counts – count me in! Use your voice by joining our community of allies at www.unicef.org.au/birth-certificate



SHARE

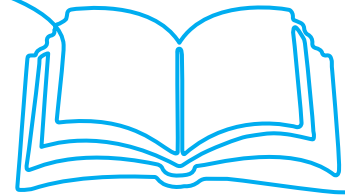
Help us **raise awareness of the importance of birth registration** as an issue by sharing with your network. Learn more at www.unicef.org.au/birth-certificate



LEARN

We're just getting started! To learn more about the issue, the people impacted, our program partners and our ongoing advocacy, visit www.unicef.org.au/birth-certificate

UNICEF Australia stands ready to mobilise national action and work with all involved to make our vision a reality, putting us on a pathway to achieving universal birth registration and unlocking the potential of every Australian child.



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AUSTRALIA
for every child

Australian Committee for UNICEF Limited
ABN 35 060 581 437
PO Box 488 Queen Victoria Building NSW 1230
Phone: 1300 884 233
Email: unicef@unicef.org.au
www.unicef.org.au

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