Putting Data and Evidence into Action: Target Groups for Addressing Disparities in On-Time Birth Registration

Background

Birth registration gives individuals a legal identity and rights to access benefits and legal protections afforded by the state. These include access to education and medical care, the ability to open a bank account and obtain a passport, and the right to vote. Birth registration in Fiji is governed by the Fiji Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act of 1975 which stipulates that children should be registered within two months of birth. However, birth registration is considered 'on-time' if completed within one year of the child's birth. In Fiji, it is the mother's responsibility to register the birth of her child, and a birth cannot be registered without the mother present.[1]

Disparities often exist in on-time birth registration among different population groups. The magnitude of the disparity, however, is often unknown due to a lack of birth registration data disaggregated by, for example, the child's sex, ethnicity, geographic location, or maternal age and marital status. Identification of population groups with delayed birth registration can help inform policies and programmes aimed at alleviating inequalities in birth registration awareness and access, thereby facilitating all mothers in Fiji to give their child the human right of on-time birth registration.[2]

From August 2018 to July 2020, the Fiji government implemented a financial incentive tied to on-time birth registration called the Parental Assistance Payment Program (PAPP). It was highly effective at improving on-time birth registration whilst it was available, and the success of the PAPP among different population groups has been described in detail.[3] However, when the PAPP was discontinued in August 2020, on-time birth registration deteriorated sharply, and the Fiji Government has not outlined plans for reinstatement of the PAPP in the near future. This profile therefore aims to identify and determine the magnitude of disparities in on-time birth registration among population disaggregations in Fiji when financial incentives tied to on-time birth registration are not available.

1 In the case a mother is deceased, the father or legal guardian is permitted to register the child without the mother present upon presentation of the mother's death certificate.

2 Article 7.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name and the right to acquire a nationality.

3 Linhart C, Singh N, Nadakuca M, Saumaka V, Congdon C, Serrao S, et al. Improving the timeliness of birth registration in Fiji through a financial incentive. 2024 [UNDER REVIEW].

Get every one in the picture

Key findings

Complete (≥95%) birth registration data for children born from January 2016 to July 2018 shows:

- Non-iTaukei children were almost twice as likely to have their birth registered on-time (84% on-time) compared to iTaukei children (48% on-time).
- Married mothers were 24% more likely to register their child on-time (63% on-time) compared to single mothers (39% on-time).
- Older mothers aged 20+ years were 14% more likely to register their child on-time (58% on-time) compared to younger mothers aged 10-19 years (44% on-time).
- No sex-specific disparity in on-time registration was present in male children compared to female children (57% on-time registration in both sexes).

Preliminary birth registration data for children born in 2021 (≠61% complete) indicates that emerging disparities in on-time birth registration by population disaggregations are evident and are similar to those identified for children born during 2016-2018, prior to the introduction of the PAPP.

Key recommendations

Identify and address barriers to on-time birth registration among target groups; iTaukei population, single mothers, and young mothers

Barriers to on-time birth registration need to be better identified and addressed among target groups. For example, geography may play a part if target groups live in more rural and remote areas, with greater transport barriers in accessing civil registration offices. Wealth quintile may also affect on-time birth registration. However, the intersection between wealth quintile and different population characteristics in Fiji (namely ethnicity) are currently not well known. Interventions need to be gender-sensitive and facilitate equity in access to birth registration.

- The Civil Registry birth registration dataset contains variables for 'facility of birth' and 'registration place'. These free-text variables cannot be analysed in their current form. Historical datasets (i.e. 2023 and prior) should be analysed following standardisation of these variables to the Health Facility and the Civil Registration Services lists. Concurrently, the data entry platform for birth registration should be updated to change geographic data entry from free text to drop-down standardized lists.

Proposed timeframe:	By December 2024, analysis of geographic variables in historical datasets (initially 2015-2023) to be completed, and data entry platform to be updated.
Lead organisation(s):	Civil Registry

- Mobile birth registration campaigns should be considered for rural and remote areas where target groups for delayed birth registration are identified.

Proposed timeframe:	By December 2024, mobile birth registration campaigns to be implemented and run periodically based on identification of target groups.
Lead organisation(s):	Civil Registry

- Birth registration data collected by the 2021 Fiji MICS has yet to be published by ethnic-specific disaggregations (iTaukei and non-iTaukei). A profile of birth registration characteristics (including maternal wealth quintile and education) based on 2021 MICS data disaggregated by ethnicity should be published.

Proposed timeframe:	By October 2024, analysis and publication to be completed.
Lead Organisation(s):	Fiji Bureau of Statistics

- The reinstatement of incentives tied to on-time birth registration should be considered to address direct and indirect costs associated with birth registration. Even small financial incentives, or coupons to exchange for items required to care for a newborn, are likely to have a positive impact and should be explored.

Proposed timeframe:	March 2025, a form of incentive(s) to be available.
Lead organisation(s):	Civil Registry

Implement targeted and gender-sensitive birth registration awareness campaigns for the iTaukei population to reduce inequities

The largest disparity in on-time birth registration was among iTaukei children compared to non-iTaukei children. Interventions need to be gender-sensitive and address inequities.

- Targeted birth registration awareness campaigns should be in the iTaukei language and include a variety of modes for dissemination (primarily radio, television, and social media).

Proposed timeframe:	By October 2024, implemented in an ongoing format.
Lead organisation(s):	Civil Registry and Ministry of iTaukei Affairs

Strengthen data validation between the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Civil Registry

It is stipulated that a birth certificate is required to register a child with iTaukei Affairs. However, the number of children registered with iTaukei Affairs is higher than the number of iTaukei children whose birth has been registered with the Civil Registry for the same period.

- The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs needs to review its business processes to ensure a birth certificate is always presented before a child is registered with iTaukei Affairs. Routine data validation processes between iTaukei Affairs and the Civil Registry should be established.

Proposed timeframe:	By October 2024, assessment of current processes completed and data validation system with Civil Registry established; data validation should be routine and ongoing.
Lead organisation(s):	Civil Registry and Ministry of iTaukei Affairs

Strengthen linkage between birth data from the health system and the Civil Registry

Accurate estimation of on-time birth registration by population disaggregations (e.g. child sex and ethnicity) requires the total number of births in each disaggregated category to be used as the denominator. Currently, the most complete source of birth data in the Fiji health system is the hard-copy birth ledger in each health facility. However, only the monthly aggregate number of births in these ledger books has been digitized (i.e., not by child sex and ethnicity, or maternal age and marital status). During 2023, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBoS) provided ad-hoc support to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) to digitize the aggregate number of births by the aforementioned categories (sex, ethnicity, etc.) from the 2021 birth ledger books.

- The support provided by FBoS should be continued, and possibly formalized in an ongoing manner, to facilitate timely digitisation of health system birth data. The MHMS electronic unit record data system is currently being reviewed and upgraded. Digitisation of birth ledger books would only be required until the electronic unit record system can produce complete and timely disaggregated birth denominators.

Proposed timeframe:	By October 2024, digitisation of 2021, 2022 and 2023 birth ledger data completed, further years to be digitized as required.
Lead organisation(s):	Fiji Bureau of Statistics and Ministry of Health and Medical Services

Methods

Accurate evaluation of on-time birth registration by population disaggregations is reliant on the completeness of birth registration data. When the completeness is high (≥95%), on-time birth registration can be accurately determined, but when completeness is lower, on-time registration is often overestimated because a large number of late birth registrations are missing from the dataset. For this reason, analysis of Fiji birth registration data was primarily limited to children born during January 2016 to July 2018, where completeness was ≥95%, and prior to the introduction of the PAPP in August 2018.

Birth registration data for children born from January 2016 to July 2018 (50,152-unit records) was obtained from the Civil Registry within the Fiji Ministry of Justice. The proportion of children whose births were registered on-time during this period was determined by: (1) sex of the child (male and female); (2) ethnicity of the child (iTaukei and non-iTaukei);[4] (3) maternal age (10-19 years and 20+ years);[5] and (4) maternal marital status (single; married; and divorced/widowed).

Preliminary analysis of on-time birth registration for children born during 2021 (12,865-unit records; estimated completeness ≠62%) was undertaken to identify emerging disparities by population disaggregations during the first full calendar year after Fiji discontinued the PAPP. It is important to note that disparities identified in 2021 are likely to further increase over time, as the estimated 38% of children born in 2021 who are currently unregistered become registered. To reduce misinterpretation, exact figures for preliminary estimates of on-time birth registration for 2021 are not provided, and instead broad patterns in emerging disparities are outlined.

4 Ethnicity of the child had a valid entry for all unit records; mother's ethnicity was incomplete; fathers' ethnicity was not recorded.

5 Mean birth-to-registration interval was found not to differ significantly by 10-year age group among mothers aged 20-49 years, and these age groups were combined.

Results

On-time birth registration among children born January 2016 to July 2018 (pre-PAPP)

Among children born during January 2016 to July 2018, the largest disparity in on-time birth registration was by ethnicity of the child, with non-iTaukei children almost twice as likely to have their birth registered on-time (84% on-time registration) compared to iTaukei children (48% on-time registration). The next largest disparity was by marital status of the mother, with married mothers almost 25% more likely to register their child on-time (63% on-time registration) compared to single mothers (39% on-time registration).[6] Disaggregation by maternal age identified that older mothers aged 20 years and above were 14% more likely to register their child on-time (58% on-time registration) compared to younger mothers aged 10-19 years (44% on-time registration). No sex-specific disparity in on-time registration was identified among male children compared to female children (57% on-time registration in both sexes) (**Figure 1**).

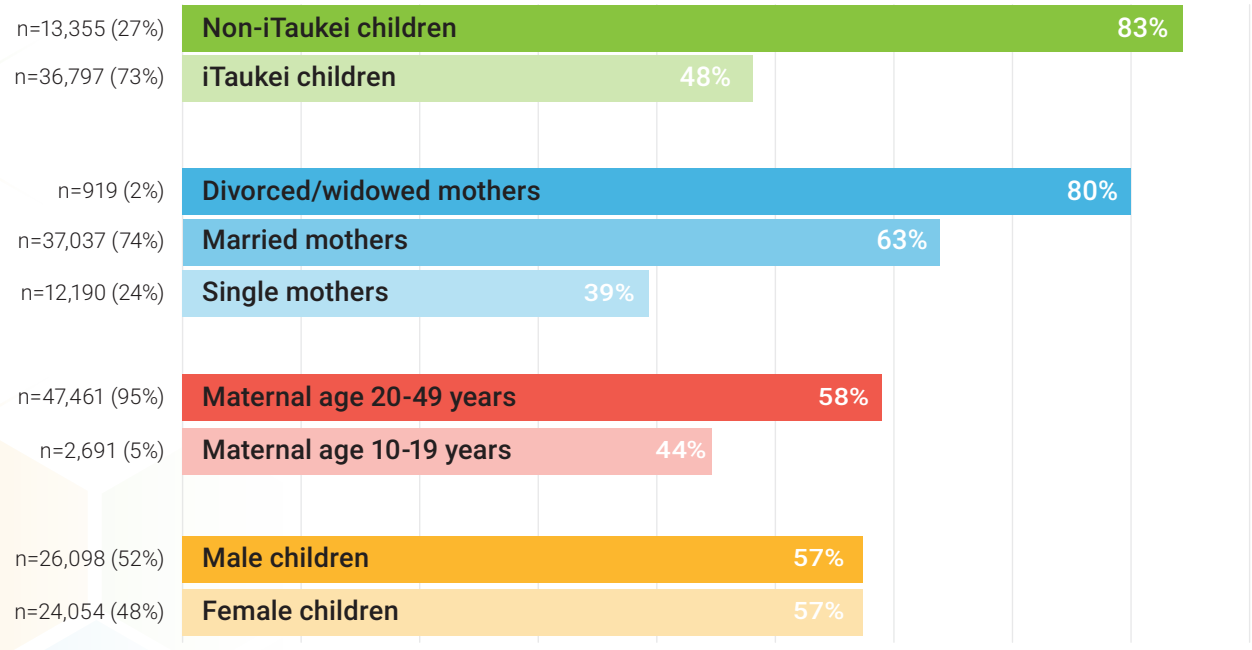
6 Data for divorced/widowed marital status is based on very small numbers and should be interpreted with caution, as explained in detail in Linhart et al. 2024. [see footnote 3].

Preliminary birth registration analysis for children born during 2021 (post-PAPP)

Among children born during 2021 who have had their birth registered (≠62% of all births), disparities in on-time birth registration by population disaggregations are evident and are similar to those identified for children born during 2016-18. Among children born during 2021, non-iTaukei children are more likely to be registered on-time compared to iTaukei children; married mothers are more likely to register their child on-time compared to single mothers;[6] and older mothers (20+ years) are more likely to register their child on-time compared to younger mothers (10-19 years). A very small sex-specific disparity was also identified, with male children more likely to be registered on-time than female children.

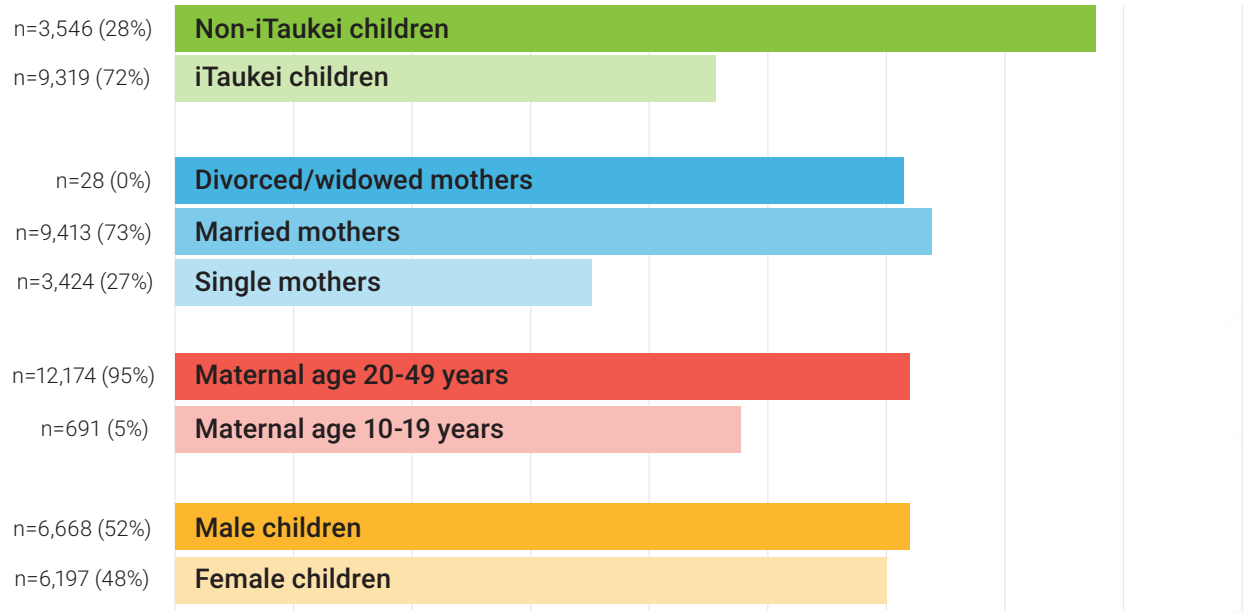
During 2021 Fiji spent several months in COVID-19 lock down, with restrictions on domestic and international travel and access to many services. Although Births, Deaths and Marriages Offices remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, on-time birth registration is likely to have been negatively impacted. It is possible that birth registration in particular population disaggregations (e.g., by ethnicity, maternal age) were more affected than others, however, the pandemic is unlikely to explain all of the emerging disparities which are evident **(Figure 2**).

Figure 1. On-time birth registration (≤365 days) by population groups, children born 2016-2018, Fiji



n = number of birth registrations, and the percentage distribution within each disaggregation; 6 marital status records were blank.

Figure 2. Preliminary on-time birth registration (≤365 days) by population groups, children born 2021, Fiji*



* To reduce misinterpretation, exact percentages for preliminary estimates of on-time birth registration for 2021 are not provided.
n = number of birth registrations, and the percentage distribution within each disaggregation.

This policy brief was developed as part of an ESCAP-led project on '*Using CRVS-related evidence to inform gender-sensitive policies*' or Evidence-to-Action (E2A) and is the outcome of a series of in-country consultations and a national workshop held in Fiji in September 2023 involving national stakeholders and development partners. The research and compilation of this policy brief was led by Christine Linhart (Consultant, ESCAP) in consultation with Meli Nadakuca (Senior Statistician, Fiji Bureau of Statistics) and Sharita Serrao (Statistician, ESCAP Statistics Division). Valuable inputs throughout the process were received from Treta Sharma (Administrator General, Ministry of Justice, Fiji), Neel Singh (Registrar General, Ministry of Justice Fiji), Varanisese Saumaka (Senior Statistician, MoHMS) and Iliesa Tulagi (Senior Administration Officer, Vola ni Kawa Bula). The graphic design was developed by Warren Field (Consultant, ESCAP).