

WHO-UNDESA Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment
Working Group 3:
Death registration and reporting systems: Lessons from the pandemic

Background

The United Nations recommended model for civil registration and vital statistics calls for every country to establish a reporting and registration system, whereby every birth and death occurring in a health facility must be reported by that facility to the civil registration officer, whose responsibilities include: (a) ensuring the accuracy of the recorded information about a newborn and parents (in the case of birth) and about a deceased person (in the case of death); issuing legal tenders (certificates) that confirm the occurrence of the event; and submitting the necessary information to the national statistical office, which is responsible for producing vital statistics on a regular basis. Simultaneously, in the case of death, the certifying physician in the health facility has the sole authority and responsibility for assigning the cause of death based on WHO standards and completing the appropriate form, which is then transmitted to both the health authorities and the statistical office.

In the context of the work of the Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment, jointly established by WHO and UN DESA, Working Group 3 on Death registration and reporting systems: Lessons from the pandemic will focus on the registration of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, in a number of countries and areas, the pandemic has had an adverse impact on the functioning of the civil registration system, in particular for the registration of deaths and issuance of death certificates, due possibly to pre-existing deficiencies in registration systems or to the breakdown of such systems during the pandemic. These deficiencies have resulted in data gaps that constrain the timely and reliable assessment of numbers of deaths and of levels and patterns of mortality. Simultaneously, national health systems, facing a once-in-a-century pandemic and stretched to their limits, have had difficulties in maintaining regular functions, such as the reporting of deaths and causes of death to the civil registration system, which ultimately has resulted in discrepancies between sources concerning numbers of deaths caused by COVID-19.

Objectives

The Working Group will focus on discussing and identifying the most appropriate methods for quantifying the number of deaths not recorded in civil registration systems and therefore missing from official records and accompanying vital statistics. Likewise, it will also review the functioning of reporting channels between health facilities and the civil registration system during the pandemic. The Working Group will develop a set of recommendations for eliminating gaps in the registration of deaths, including specific measures that countries can implement to achieve this goal.

The Working Group will also provide advice and recommendations to WHO and UNDESA on strategies to improve data interoperability for information coming from civil registration, identity management, health institutions, and other sources of official statistics. The recommendations of the Working Group

will provide guidance for countries with incomplete or unreliable civil registration and vital statistics systems on means of estimating the true death toll from COVID-19.

In the long run, the recommendations of the Working Group are intended to be used in the build-up of nimbler, more resilient and holistic registration and statistical systems that will produce comprehensive, accurate and timely vital statistics based on universal registration of vital events and in conformity with existing international standards.

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