

Registered or Unregistered: Registration and Certification of Births in Ghana

By

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Abstract

The birth of a child is a vital event that needs to be registered yet an estimated 40 million births go unregistered annually. All births need to be registered and issued with a birth certificate. This paper examines the factors that influence the registration and certification of births in Ghana. This paper uses data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey conducted in 2011. The analytic sample consist of 4,113 children and their mothers. Differentials in birth registration and certification were examined using bivariate and multivariate techniques. Birth registration and certification was lowest among children born to young mothers, children whose mother have no formal education, mothers who reside in rural areas and mothers in the poorest wealth quintile. Home births are less likely to be registered or issued a birth certificate. Efforts aimed at improving birth registration in Ghana need to target groups of children and mothers with low registration.

INTRODUCTION

Registering the birth of every child that is born is not only a basic and fundamental human rights issue but also has legal implications. Birth registration gives children the right to a name, an identity, citizenship and protection against violation of their rights. Protecting the rights of a child through birth registration has long since been recognized as a key issue as enshrined in Article 7 of the Convention on the rights of the child (1989) and other international treaties ^(1,2). The issue of birth registration has become a topical issue in the international community, among funding agencies and development partners including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Plan International and the World Health Organization (WHO). In spite of the increasing recognition of the importance of birth registration, the births of an estimated 230 million children have never been registered ⁽²⁾. Sub-Saharan Africa is reported to be the region with the highest proportion of children not registered at birth with countries like Tanzania and Zambia having the lowest registration rates in the region ⁽³⁾.

The laws of Ghana as mandated by the Registration of Births and Deaths Act of 1965 (Act 301) requires that all births and deaths that occur in Ghana are registered ⁽⁴⁾. Birth registration in Ghana has seen a mixed pattern of increase and decline over the years. In the last decade, through the intervention of agencies like UNICEF and Plan International and their partnership with government agencies such as the Births and Deaths Registry and the Ghana Health Service, registration of children under the age of five has increased. In spite of this success story ⁽⁵⁾ an estimated 1.2 million Ghanaian children under the age of five are not registered in any official document ⁽⁶⁾.

While it is necessary to ensure that all births are registered, the registration process is not complete if a birth certificate is not issued following registration. Without a birth certificate the legal protection, identity and rights of the child is not guaranteed even though the birth of the child is registered. Also, the child may be denied certain social services e.g. enrolling in school if the child does not have a birth certificate. It is therefore of utmost importance that a birth certificate accompanies every birth that is registered.

This study examines factors associated with birth registration and certification in Ghana. The paper also examines the characteristics of children and mothers of children whose births are registered with a birth certificate, those whose births are registered without a birth certificate and those whose births are not registered at all.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses data from the 2011 Ghana Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). The MICS is a nationally representative sample survey conducted every five years. Respondents for the survey are selected using a multi-stage sampling technique and data is collected on various demographic and health indicators including maternal and child health, birth registration, female genital cutting and child labour. This study focuses on using data from the birth registration module and the sample is restricted to women aged 15-49 years who have had a live birth in the last two years prior to the survey. This selection criterion was used because one of the key components of this study is to assess the relationship between delivery characteristics (place of delivery and assistance at delivery) and birth registration status. Data on these delivery characteristics was only available for women who had live birth(s) in the last two years prior to the survey.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is birth registration status. Two questions from the survey were used to construct the dependent variable. The questions are: (1) does (name) have a birth certificate? and (2) has (name)'s birth been registered with the births and deaths registry? Based on the responses from these two questions the variable birth registration status was generated. Birth registration status is treated as a categorical variable with three categories: (1) birth not registered (children who do not have a birth certificate and whose birth has not been registered with the births and deaths registry), (2) birth registered with birth certificate (children whose birth has been registered with the births and deaths registry and have a birth certificate) and (3) birth registered without a birth certificate (children whose births have been registered but do not have a birth certificate).

Independent variables

The independent variables considered in this study are grouped under four main categories which are (1) child's characteristics (age and sex), (2) mothers characteristics (age, marital status, level of education, religion, ethnicity and wealth status), (3) geographic location (type of place of residence and region of residence) and (4) delivery characteristics (place of delivery and assistance at delivery).

Methods of analysis

Descriptive statistical tools including frequencies and cross tabulations were used to examine the characteristics of mothers and children by birth registration status. A multinomial logistic regression analysis was used to examine the factors associated with birth registration status.

RESULTS

Variations in birth registration status by child and mothers characteristics, geographic location and delivery characteristics

The results reveal no significant differences in birth registration status among male and female children. Close to half of the children who were reported to be registered but did not have a birth certificate were less than a year old (Table 1). Similarly, about 2 in 5 of the children who have not been registered were less than a year old. Only about a quarter of the children who were registered with a birth certificate were less than one year old.

The results did not show much difference in birth registration status by mothers' age. The birth of a child is less likely not to be registered when the mother has a high level of education but more likely to occur when the mother has no formal education (Table 1). Births are also more likely not to be registered or to be registered without the issuance of a birth certificate when the mother of the child belongs to the poorest wealth quintile.

Among children whose births are registered with a birth certificate, more than half have mothers who are Christians. Similarly, 42% children whose births have been registered with a certificate have mothers who are Mole-Dagbanis. About an equal proportion (42%) of children

whose births have been registered but who don't have birth certificates have mothers who are of the Mole-Dagbani ethnic group.

The results indicate that births going unregistered is a more common occurrence in rural than in urban areas (Table 1). Similarly, birth registration without the issuance of a birth certificate is more likely to occur in rural than in urban areas. A little over one-fifth of the births which are registered with a birth certificate were in the Northern region which was the highest proportion followed by the Upper West region. The results also reveal that close to half of birth registration without the issuance of a birth certificate occurred in the Northern region. In spite of the relatively high registration of births in the Northern region, about a third of unregistered births also occur in the Northern region. Only about 2.5% of the unregistered births occurred in the Greater Accra region which is the most urbanized region in Ghana.

More than half of the births that were not registered were births that occurred at home (Table 1). On the other hand, a little less than two-thirds of the registered and certified births were births that occurred in a health facility. Compared to the other birth registration categories, a higher proportion (29.83%) of the births that were not registered were births that were attended by "other" people including friends and relatives.

Table 1: Variations in birth registration by child and mothers' characteristics, geographic location and delivery characteristics

	Birth registered with a birth certificate	Birth registered without a birth certificate	Birth not registered	Total (%)
Childs characteristics				
Age of child				
0	24.77	44.89	41.85	33.50
1	36.09	28.10	26.01	31.19
2	6.75	4.74	6.24	6.39
3	16.32	11.31	13.31	14.69
4	16.08	10.95	12.58	14.22
Sex of child				
Male	51.48	52.92	51.85	51.74
Female	48.52	47.08	48.15	48.26
Mothers characteristics				
Age				
15-19	3.58	3.65	4.78	4.11

20-24	13.94	13.50	16.80	15.15
25-29	27.39	26.64	24.16	25.94
30-34	27.68	24.45	23.37	25.60
35-39	17.53	19.34	18.60	18.11
40-44	6.95	10.95	9.33	8.24
45-49	2.91	1.46	2.98	2.84
Marital status				
Currently married	92.91	94.89	92.64	92.92
Formerly married	2.67	1.82	3.43	2.94
Never married	4.42	3.28	3.93	4.13
Level of education				
None	45.36	61.68	59.10	52.39
Primary	19.52	13.50	20.45	19.52
Middle/JSS	24.04	19.71	16.74	20.59
Secondary+	11.07	5.11	3.71	7.49
Religion				
Christian	56.63	48.91	54.10	55.02
Moslem	34.14	32.48	23.99	29.64
Other	6.27	12.41	15.51	10.67
No religion	2.96	6.20	6.40	4.67
Ethnicity				
Akan	28.70	19.71	25.00	26.50
Ga-Dangme	3.74	1.46	2.53	3.06
Ewe	6.56	5.84	8.26	7.25
Guan	3.40	2.19	4.33	3.72
Mole Dagbani	42.01	42.70	32.25	37.83
Other	15.59	28.10	27.64	21.64
Wealth quintiles				
Poorest	37.45	56.57	57.58	47.43
Second	20.11	18.25	20.22	20.03
Middle	15.40	13.50	11.24	13.47
Fourth	14.08	6.57	6.91	10.48
Richest	12.97	5.11	4.04	8.58
Geographic location				
Type of place of residence				
Rural	64.59	79.93	83.54	73.81
Urban	35.41	20.07	16.46	26.19
Region of residence				
Western	4.42	4.01	8.20	6.03
Central	15.25	8.03	12.64	13.64
Greater Accra	7.72	1.82	2.53	5.08

Volta	3.74	4.74	6.35	4.94
Eastern	3.98	3.65	5.34	4.55
Ashanti	7.58	3.28	5.56	6.42
Brong Ahafo	4.27	6.93	6.07	5.23
Northern	22.78	47.45	29.94	27.52
Upper East	11.66	5.11	13.09	11.84
Upper West	18.60	14.96	10.28	14.76
Delivery characteristics				
<i>Place of delivery</i>				
Home	38.32	50.00	55.39	46.49
Health facility	61.68	50.00	44.61	53.51
<i>Assistance at delivery</i>				
Medical personnel	64.21	52.19	46.29	55.65
TBA	18.41	23.36	23.88	21.1
Other	17.39	24.45	29.83	23.24
Total (N)	2,059	274	1,780	100.0

Source:2011 Ghana MICS

Factors associated with birth registration

The results reveal that the chances of a child being registered without being issued a birth certificate decreases as the child grows older (Table 2). Births that occur in the Volta and Brong Ahafo regions were about 4 times more likely to be registered without being issued a birth certificate compared to births that occur in the Greater Accra region. The odds of a birth being registered without the issuance of a birth certificate was even much higher for births that occurred in the Northern region compared to births that occur in the Greater Accra region. Moslem mothers are less likely to have the births of their children registered without being issued with a birth certificate.

The sex of a child was not significantly related to whether a birth is registered or not but the likelihood of a child not being registered decreases as the child grows (Table 2). Compared to births that occur in rural areas, births that occur in urban areas are less likely not to be registered. Births that occur in the Western and Eastern regions are two times more likely not to be registered compared to those that occur in the Greater Accra region. Births that occur in the Upper West region on the other hand are less likely to go unregistered.

Compared to mothers who are Akans, mothers of the “Other” ethnic group (Gurma, Grussi, Mande and non-Ghanaians ethnic groups) are significantly more likely not to register the births of their children. The results with regards to mothers level of education and birth registration status shows that births that occur to mothers who have some level of education are less likely not to be registered with the chances being lowest when the mother has obtained secondary or higher level of education. Compared to the richest mothers, mothers in the poorest wealth category are about 4 times more likely not to have the births of their children registered. Births attended by people other than qualified medical personnel including traditional birth attendants, relatives or friends are more likely not to be registered.

Table 2: Predictors of child registration status

	Birth registered without a birth certificate	Birth not registered
	Odds ratio (standard error)	Odds ratio (standard error)
Age of child	0.73 (0.04)***	0.78 (0.02)***
Sex of child		
Female ^[Male]	1.00 (0.13)	1.02 (0.07)
Place of residence ^[Rural]		
Urban	0.74 (0.16)	0.72 (0.08)**
Region ^[Greater Accra]		
Western	2.21 (1.32)	2.20 (0.54)**
Central	1.33 (0.74)	1.07 (0.24)
Volta	3.54 (2.20)*	1.38 (0.37)
Eastern	2.68 (1.57)+	2.10 (0.52)**
Ashanti	1.10 (0.67)	1.01 (0.25)
Brong Ahafo	3.93 (2.27)*	1.29 (0.34)
Northern	5.14 (2.92)**	0.78 (0.19)
Upper East	0.76 (0.48)	0.61 (0.16)+
Upper West	1.45 (0.86)	0.31 (0.08)***
Age of mother ^[15-19]		
20-24	1.02 (0.41)	1.13 (0.23)
25-29	1.14 (0.44)	0.98 (0.19)
30-34	0.97 (0.38)	0.85 (0.17)
35-39	1.23 (0.49)	0.97 (0.20)
40-44	1.47 (0.63)	1.12 (0.25)
45-49	0.45 (0.29)	0.82 (0.23)
Marital status ^[Never married]		

Currently married	1.15 (0.45)	1.10 (0.21)
Formerly married	0.91 (0.55)	1.53 (0.41)
Religion ^[No religion]		
Christian	0.58 (0.18)+	0.69 (0.12)*
Moslem	0.36 (0.12)**	0.46 (0.09)***
Other	0.74 (0.26)	1.18 (0.24)
Ethnicity ^[Akan]		
Ga-Dangme	0.60 (0.34)	0.66 (0.16)+
Ewe	0.69 (0.26)	1.05 (0.18)
Guan	0.35 (0.18)*	0.97 (0.21)
Mole Dagbani	0.91 (0.30)	0.85 (0.14)
Other	1.18 (0.39)	1.39 (0.23)*
Education ^[No education]		
Primary	0.76 (0.16)	0.77 (0.08)*
Middle/JSS	1.18 (0.27)	0.59 (0.07)***
Secondary +	0.85 (0.31)	0.48 (0.09)***
Wealth index ^[Richest]		
Poorest	2.19 (0.96)+	3.67 (0.81)***
Second	1.40 (0.58)	2.04 (0.41)***
Middle	1.50 (0.59)	1.50 (0.29)*
Fourth	0.89 (0.36)	1.26 (0.25)
Place of delivery ^[Home]		
Health facility	1.26 (0.53)	1.32 (0.30)
Assistance at delivery ^[Medical Personnel]		
TBA	1.10 (0.47)	1.47 (0.35)+
Other	1.19 (0.51)	1.81 (0.42)*

Source: 2011 Ghana MICS

[]: Reference Category N=4113

+ P<0.10 *P<0.05 **P<0.01 ***P<0.001

DISCUSSION

The finding from this study with regards to age and birth registration status suggests that children are less likely to be registered in the first year of life. Birth registration and certification are thus more likely to be late rather than early. This may probably be because having a birth certificate becomes more useful as the child gets older and accesses services like getting a passport or a driver's license. This trend of acquiring a birth certificate later in life may negatively affect the chances of births being registered early.

The results of this paper also reveal that there is an unmet need for birth registration and certification in rural areas and there are several probable reasons for why this may be so.

Principal among these is staffing and logistics constraints⁽⁷⁾. The population distribution in rural areas is dispersed and the roads in these areas are mostly inaccessible. Accessing such rural communities with birth registration services poses a major challenge and thus affects the delivery of birth registration services. Challenges with logistics have been cited as a major challenge to birth registration in the northern region of Ghana⁽⁸⁾ which is the region with the highest likelihood of having uncertified registered births as was found in this present study.

The results also seem to suggest that birth registration is low in the southern part of Ghana compared to the northern part. This is probably because of a concentration of intervention and research efforts in the Northern region by numerous organizations⁽⁹⁾ including UNICEF, Plan International, John Hopkins University and the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research. While this concentration of research and interventions in the North may lead to less concerted efforts towards birth registration in the South, it could also lead to increased birth registration coverage in the North. More importantly, efforts should be directed towards ensuring that births that are registered in the North are also issued with a birth certificate. This is necessary because the results of this study show that births in the Northern region are more likely to be registered without the issuance of a birth certificate.

The results also indicate that the socio-economic status of mothers plays an influential role on whether or not the births of their children are registered. The education of mothers for example could influence birth registration status through a number of mechanisms. Firstly, education creates awareness of the importance of birth registration and thus probably explains why educated mothers are more likely to register the birth of their children. Secondly, being educated improves the socio-economic status of mothers and thus takes away the economic challenges associated with registration. As demonstrated in this study, poor mothers are less likely to have the birth of the children registered, suggesting that poverty is an obstacle to birth registration.

The cost involved in registering a birth is an important issue that needs to be critically reviewed. The cost may not only be the financial cost involved in obtaining a birth certificate but also the financial and the time cost involved in travelling to a registration center or paying for a birth certificate especially in the case of late registration. These costs may serve as deterrents to

mothers registering the birth of their children. Delivery outside a health facility and delivery being assistance by unqualified persons does not only pose potential health challenges but in this instance increases the likelihood of a birth not being registered. While it is necessary to discourage home deliveries, it is more important to encourage the registration of births that occur at home.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that there is a propensity for late rather than early registration. This presents a challenge as well as an opportunity. While there is the need for concerted efforts towards early registration, the benefits of having a birth certificate later in life could result in increased late registration. Additionally, addressing the socio-economic barriers and reducing the unmet need of birth registration in rural areas could result in more births being registered and certified.

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