Population Characteristics

With population characteristics and processes both the drivers and results of social and economic development processes and outcomes, it is imperative that a good understanding of a country's population dynamics provide the basis for informed decision-making, policy development and planning.

While population and housing censuses provide the backbone of this information in most countries, the provision of a snapshot, and often only every 10 years, is clearly insufficient to inform policy and allow regular monitoring of development progress.
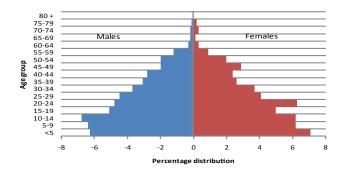
Regular household surveys, such as the 2007 Nauru Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), address this data and information gap by providing high quality and up-to-date statistics and information in their own right, as well as providing the basis for the calculation of important development indicators. This survey provided more than a hundred such indicators, covering many development features relevant to both national and international development agencies and conventions. At the national scale, Pacific island countries' own national development plans and frameworks are of greatest relevance; internationally, key conventions refer to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the International Conference on Population and Development's Programme of Action (PoA), the conventions pertaining to both the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and to the Rights of the Child (CRC), and to the United Nations General Assembly Special session (UNGASS) on HIV/Aids.

The population of Nauru

A census is held in Nauru every 10 years. The most recent Census was in 2002 with a mini-Census held in 2006. The 2007 Nauru DHS hence provides a rich up-to-date account of how the country is progressing in key areas of social and human development.

Nauru has a young population, with 39% of the population younger than 15 years of age. The broad population base pattern, illustrated in the population pyramid, indicates that the population is growing rapidly and this trend will continue when those currently aged younger than 15 years enter into their reproductive years. Less than 2% of the population is older than 60, which indicates a low life expectancy.
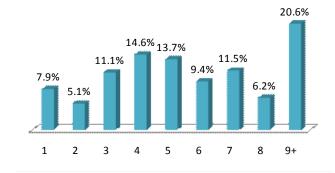
Figure 2.1 Percentage distribution of de facto household population by age and sex, Nauru 2007
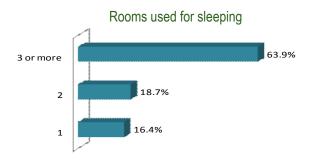

Household composition

The average household in Nauru comprises of 6.1 members and households tend to be headed by men (69%). While one in five households has more than nine members, which could indicate some overcrowding, more than two thirds of all households reported having three or more bedrooms.

Household composition
Number of usual household members

Rooms used for sleeping

The high number of people living in each household may, in part, be due to the large number of children who are fostered in Nauru. More than one third of all households reported caring for orphaned children on a permanent or temporary basis. Nearly 16% of children younger than 18 years of age reported that they did not live with a biological parent and around 8% reported that one or both of their parents were dead.
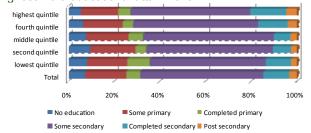
The 2007 Nauru DHS provides useful information concerning socio-economic background characteristics which may explain key demographic and health outcomes. These include education (such as attainment levels), economic well-being (illustrated through wealth quintiles) and basic household amenities, such as access to safe water, sanitation and household characteristics. All of these factors are of critical importance, especially to infants and young children.
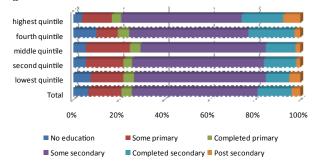
Educational level

Most people attend school in Nauru and only 6% of males and 4% of females reported that completing primary school was their highest level of education. This trend does not vary markedly across the wealth quintiles. While most people completed some years of secondary education, completion rates are quite low (11% of males and 15% of females). Primary and secondary school is compulsory and free between ages 6 and 16.

Highest male educational attainment

Highest female educational attainment

Net attendance ratio (NAR) measures the number of school age children who attend school. According to the Nauru DHS 2007, the primary school NAR is 88%, while the secondary school NAR is only 60%. The data concerning primary school attendance indicate a considerable change from the 2002 census, in which primary school attendance was only 60%.
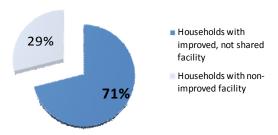
Economic well-being

Household information on assets allows the calculation of a wealth index, which provides a useful proxy measure describing the long-term standard of living of a household. It is not an absolute measure that can tell us if a household suffers hardships or lives in poverty. What it can tell us, however, is that a person living in a household in the highest wealth quintile has a better socio-economic status than someone in the lowest quintile and a worse socio-economic status than someone in the middle wealth quintile.

Access to safe water and sanitation

Poor sanitation coupled with unsafe water sources can increase the risk of waterborne diseases and illnesses due to poor hygiene. Households without proper toilet facilities are more exposed to the risk of diseases like dysentery, diarrhoea, and typhoid fever than those with improved sanitation facilities.

Household sanitation facilities

Data collected in the 2007 Nauru DHS concerning household characteristics are similar to the findings of the 2002 census. Almost all households in Nauru have electricity and about seven in ten houses use improved toilet or latrine facilities.

Access to safe drinking water

Almost all respondents (90%) reported that their house had access to an improved water source and this tended to be rainwater. Most households treat their water to ensure it is not contaminated prior to drinking, although 23% of households do not apply an appropriate treatment for their drinking water. The most commonly used treatment method is boiling drinking water.