

Vanishing data in routine perinatal collections: missing, truncated and downsized

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The relative ease with which large amounts of data can be stored and analysed, compared with 10 years, let alone 40 years, ago is difficult to believe if you were a researcher before photocopiers or hand-held calculators. Yet the potential gains are not always apparent in routine data systems. While major efforts to increase the use of birth data linked to other sources continue in some countries, others do not count a 'birth' unless the pregnancy has reached at least 28 weeks gestation. Some States or Provinces in highly developed countries do not contribute their birth data to national systems because too many of their birth registrations are delayed or missing. Identification of Indigenous births is often incomplete, in many countries, and twins may be also. Birth anomalies are rarely recorded in detail, despite public concerns about environmental causes.

Do these inconsistencies matter? A closer look at specific problems suggests they do.