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Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean



TRIP REPORT

VITAL STATISTICS ASSESSMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMME

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS, JULY 11-19, 1985

Prepared by

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Demographer

I visited the British Virgin Islands from 12-19 July to undertake a review and assessment of the state of vital statistics in that territory and wherever possible/necessary to work with personnel there towards improving the systems of data collection, collation and output.

The primary contact in the BVI was Dr. Penelope Forde. Statistician in the Statistics "Arm" of the Development Planning Unit, Chief Minister's Office. Dr. Forde officially vacated this post on 31 July. At the time of my visit, a successor had not yet been identified.

**A Vital Statistics Report for the British Virgin Islands 1970-1982:**

Occasional Publication No. 2 was the work of Dr. Forde's unit. ECLAC (Port-of-Spain) is in possession of several copies of this report which served as the focus of my interaction with the Statistics Unit. In preparing this document, the first of its kind for the BVI, Dr. Forde was assisted by Mr. Eldred Cox (Statistical Officer), Mrs. Joyce Leslie (Executive Officer of the Statistics Unit), Mr. Raymond Phillips (Assistant Statistical Officer) and Miss Margaret Forbes and Mr. Michael Malone (Clerical officers/trainees). This was in fact, the composition of the Statistics unit at the time of my visit. Its responsibilities include statistical work on tourism, vital statistics and the preparation of statistical abstracts on a variety of subjects for the territory of the British Virgin Islands.

The Statistical officer will be leaving the BVI shortly for a 1 year study/training stint with the U.S. Bureau of the Census in Washington D.C.. He had previously been trained at the Central Statistical Office in Port-of-Spain and had attended the 6 week

ECLAC/CELADE training course in Demography held in Port-of-Spain in 1983. The Assistant Statistical officer is currently in training at the C.S.O in Port-of-Spain and is scheduled to return to the BVI in late September. The Executive officer of the Statistics Unit has also benefitted from the Trinidad C.S.O course and one of the clerical officers has attended a 2 week course in tourism statistics held in St. Kitts in 1981. All members of the unit have also benefitted from a two-week in-house course in introductory statistics.

Apart from work with personnel in the Statistics Unit, meetings and discussions were held with:

Stanley Gordon (Permanent Secretary, Chief Minister's Office) - he has responsibility for both the Statistics Unit and the Immigration Dept.

Lorna Smith (Assistant Secretary, Chief Minister's office, but at the time of my visit, functioning in an acting capacity as Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Natural Resources and Labour)

Marion Romney (Senior Immigration Officer, acting for the Chief Immigration officer)

Maudlyn Penn & (Trainee Immigration Officers, Dept. of Immigration)

Pennie Donovan

Wendell Potter (Acting Commissioner of Labour but formerly Deputy Chief Immigration Officer)

Alton Rose (Acting Registrar-General)

Jeanette Maduro (Clerks in the Registrar-General's office)

& Loris Penn

Cecilia Stoutt (Medical Records Officer, Peebles Hospital)

Dr. Orlando Smith (Chief Medical Officer, Ministry of Health)

Nadine Battle-Blake (Family Life Educator)

Dr. Peter Bulle (Resident Medical Officer, Virgin Gorda)

Malvin Flax (Government Agent and District Registrar, Virgin Gorda)

In addition, I engaged in a number of informal discussions with BVI residents regarding birth and death registration and peculiar problems of birth occurrence and registration consequent on the relationship between the British and U.S. Virgin Islands. Migration procedures and recording of entries and exits were also observed during my entry in Tortola, exit to St. Thomas and return to Trinidad and Tobago.

This report summarises the information obtained during my meetings and work with the officials identified above, and observations made during my visit to the BVI.

#### Availability of Vital Statistics

As noted earlier, A Vital Statistics Report for the British Virgin Islands 1970-1982, was the first such report prepared in and for the BVI. This vital statistics report was compiled from information contained in

the records of both the Registrar General's office and Peebles Hospital (one of two in the BVI and the only one which is government run) where practically all births are reported to take place. For all intents and purposes, Peebles Hospital is the hospital in the British Virgin Islands.

A review of the vital statistics report indicates that most of the tables suggested in the guidelines for evaluation are included in the BVI publication, though with some minor variations in coverage or detail. Because of the population size of the British Virgin Islands (10,980 according to the 1980 census) it was felt that a number of tables, such as children by legitimacy/illegitimacy or by details of father, could generate problems of confidentiality. For example, during my review of the births register at the Registrar's office and discussions with one of the records clerks, I learnt that determination of marital status was fairly easy, even if unreported, because some of the mothers were known to her. Confidentiality was apparently also an element in the political decision not to ask fertility questions in the 1980 census of the BVI population. Similarly, confidentiality considerations have also delayed a decision on whether to provide information on such matters as cause of death by profession.

A visit last year by Mr. Jacques Brenez, a U.N. officer in the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, resulted in the recommendation that three tables be added to any forthcoming report.

These are:

- (i) Births x Age of Mother x Legitimacy (at Peebles Hospital)
- (ii) Births x Order of Births

(iii) Birth Order x Occupation of Mother

These tables will be included in the forthcoming vital statistics report for which drafts have already been prepared. Data are now being verified and readied for release of the publication later this year. These three additional tabulations are the only significant modifications to the vital statistics report published in 1984. The new release will cover the period 1974-1984 and, as noted in the first vital statistics report, it is the intention of the BVI to publish vital statistics biennially, even though the data are collected and tabulated annually and can be made available to those desirous of analysing them.

The following summarizes the availability of vital statistics tables vis a vis the suggested national tables.

Suggested National Tables

A1 Population at Census Dates  
by age and sex

A2 Estimated mid-year population  
by age and sex; most recent  
5 years

BVI Vital Statistics Report

Table 1: Population at Census  
dates by sex, 1871-1980

Chart 1: Age-sex Population  
Pyramids 1946 and 1960

Table 2: Mid-year population  
estimates 1972-1982 (with cal-  
culations of natural increase,  
net change in population, annual  
percent change and sex ratios

B1 Livebirths by sex and Age of  
Mother

Table 10: Livebirths at Peebles  
Hospital by age of mother 1969-  
1971 and 1979-1981

B2 Livebirths by Sex and Age of  
Father

Table 6: Births, Deaths and  
Natural Increase by sex, 1971-  
1982

Does not exist. Information on  
father generally viewed as per-  
sonal and private, especially  
where legitimacy is an issue.  
Provision for age of father in-  
formation is made on hospital  
records but is not a legal re-  
quirement; hence some fathers  
are not identified and others do  
not give their age

B3 Age-specific (mother) birth  
rates, for at least the most  
recent 5 years; Also calcul-  
ations of general and total  
fertility rates

Not published, but information  
exists for their calculation.  
Table 7 provides general popul-  
ation birth rates for the 1971-  
1982 period.

B4 Livebirths by place of resid-  
ence of mother and legitimacy

Table 9: Livebirths at Peebles  
Hospital and at home for se-  
lected years: 1969-1971 and  
1979-1982 period

Table 10: Livebirths at Peebles Hospital by Age of Mother, 1969-1971 and 1979-1981. Data on place of residence are recorded for the following districts:

1. Tortola (a) Road Town  
(b) East End  
(c) West End
2. Virgin Gorda (a) Valley  
(b) North Sound
3. Jost Van Dyke
4. Anegada

Data are for area of birth and not for area of residence of mother. Births outside the 4 islands listed above are included with those for Tortola but are generally assumed to be few in number

B5 Live and Still Births by  
Place of Occurrence and  
Person in attendance

Tables 9 and 10 as above. No output on still births, though the occurrence is recorded in the documents of the registrars office. No information is recorded on person in attendance for births at home or in places other than at Peebles Hospital



B6 Live and Still Births by  
Age of Mother and Parity

Parity information will be included in the forthcoming Vital Statistics Report, though for live births only. See also reference to Table 10 for age of mother information

C1 Deaths by Sex and Age;  
single years of age for  
ages 0-4 and 5 year age  
groups thereafter

Table 11: Deaths by Age and Sex  
1982. Detail available as suggested

C2 Infant Deaths by Sex and  
Age

Table 11, with slight variation from the recommended breakdown consequent on a total of 10 infant deaths in 1982

C3 Deaths by cause of death  
age and sex

Table 11 and Table 12: Deaths by cause, 1982. Tabulation in the recommended form is available but not published. It was recommended to the statistics office that this information be compiled by the Medical Records Officer at Peebles Hospital and not by the staff of the statistics office since considerable problems were experienced in in-

interpreting and classifying causes of death from the doctor's certificates.

C4 Deaths by cause and place  
of residence

Not available. However, the practice of recording "tourist" (as opposed to deaths occurring in the BVI) deaths as BVI deaths is questionable since this constitutes an artificial depletion of the BVI population.

C5 Deaths by cause and  
occupation

Not available. Problem of confidentiality outlined earlier.

D1+D2 Migration

The BVI Vital Statistics Report contains no information on migration though completion of E/D cards is a "requirement" for non-belongers of the British Virgin Islands. (See section on Migration)

Chapter 239, Registration of Births and Deaths Ordinance, of the Laws of the Virgin Islands, 1st January 1959, provides the legal basis for the registration of vital events. A copy has been deposited with the Documentation Centre of UNECLAC, Port-of-Spain. Registers of births and of deaths are kept by registrars who also serve as government agents for tax collection and other purposes in the following districts:

- Anegada
- North Sound, Virgin Gorda
- Valley, Virgin Gorda
- East End, Tortola
- Road Town, Tortola, which also records vital events occurring in West End, Tortola

The Registrar General's Office in Road Town receives birth records quarterly and death records monthly from the District Registrars and maintains files on the vital events which occur anywhere in the territory of the British Virgin Islands. Birth and death certificates are issued by the various district registrars. Specimens are included as Appendices A and B.

Registration of Births: ~~Clauses 13 and 14~~ of the BVI Ordinance note:

13. Every District Registrar shall inform himself carefully of every birth which shall happen within his district and register particulars relating to such birth in the Register Book of Births.
14. (i), The father and mother of every child born, and in default of the father and mother, the occupier of the house or tenement in which the child is born, or any person present at the birth, or the person having charge of the child, shall give to the Registrar, within twenty one days next after the birth, information of the particulars required to be registered concerning such birth, and in the presence of the Registrar shall sign the register.

Births are usually recorded well within the twenty one day requirement and the smallness of territory and population size have meant that there are few possibilities for births to go unregistered. In addition, from all reports, it seems that the district registrars have been performing their duties from time immemorial and are fully cognisant of the requirements of the Registration of Births and Deaths Ordinance. The Birth Registers contain 12 columns of information one more than that in Appendix C. My review of the birth registers indicated that Columns 3, 5 and 8 were not always completed. As is perhaps obvious, Column 11 would tend to be empty since its completion is contingent on a name not being given at birth or before registration of the birth. For Column 12 the assumption was apparently made that future Road Town births would occur at Peebles Hospital since that location had already been entered in the register even though no birth had yet been recorded. It was suggested that this practice be ceased and that information be entered only when it is received.

The undocumented and unquantified but well-known practice of British Virgin Islanders going to the U.S. Virgin Islands to give birth for 'green card' purposes complicates the vital events registration system somewhat. The complexities are added to by a similarly undocumented practice of U.S. Virgin Islanders going to Peebles Hospital to give birth because of lower hospital costs. The former occurrence, though technically not resulting in BVI births, generates additions to the BVI population through other than a route which is captured by the vital events registration system. The latter, if unadjusted, could easily result in misleading interpretations of the impact of births on population change in the BVI.

Most persons in the BVI with whom I had contact were of the opinion that practically all births on Tortola occur at Peebles Hospital. There is little to suggest that this is inaccurate. The Delivery Room Record Book at Peebles Hospital can therefore serve as a source of information on Tortola births. This Record Book contains 22 columns of information (see Appendix D) not all of which are relevant to vital statistics output. Nonetheless, it may be a positive strategy to use these hospital records as the primary source of birth information for Tortola, with compilation done by the Medical Records Office in accordance with the system and pattern currently used by the Statistics Unit. The Statistics Unit could then verify this information against the Registrar General's records to determine the accuracy of transfer from Peebles Hospital to the Registrar General's Office, slippage, the occurrence of births at home, etc.

The use of hospital records permits the retrieval and output of some information (e.g. age of mother) which is unavailable from the Registrar General's records. All the information which is available from the latter source is, however, also available from the former. One minor problem to be solved is the status of B.B.A. births (born before arrival at Peebles Hospital). In order to reduce/eliminate the possibility of double counting, these should not be recorded in the Delivery Room Record Book because they did not occur in the delivery room. They may however be recorded as births occurring elsewhere. Care must also be taken in distinguishing between number of births and number of deliveries, and it is the former which is of primary interest within the vital statistics registration system.

It is felt that the two tiered approach to birth recording/registering and output (i.e. compilation by the Medical Records Office and verification/output by the Statistics Unit) would reduce the risks of error in output. A few minor cases of improper numbering were detected in my review of registered births and these were pointed out to the records clerks for correction.

Deaths - As for births, the registration of deaths is within the jurisdiction of the District Registrar's Office. The number of deaths occurring each year is small and individuals seem to be aware of the legal requirements concerning receipt of death certificates and permits to dispose of the dead. The smallness of territory and of population size again mean that the occurrence of a death in the BVI is usually known to a number of persons including the district registrar and there is little potential for ~~slippage in~~ registration of such events.

Cause of death is determined by a medical officer who issues a death certificate. These certificates are supposed to be lodged with the registrar by relatives of or someone connected to the deceased or aware of the occurrence of the death. From all available evidence, this works as intended and registrars issue permits to dispose of the body based on receipt of the death certificate. Once a death certificate is received by the registrar, the occurrence of death, including cause(s), is entered in the death register. This death register forms the basis for compilation of information on deaths as published in the Vital Statistics Report.

As pointed out earlier, the Statistics Unit had some difficulty in deciphering or determining cause of death from the information at their

disposal. The ready solution to this may lie with the Medical Records Office which collates the same data annually for submission to PAHO. Since this must be done anyway and since the approach is a professional and carefully considered one, it is easy to recommend that the final product of this system form the basis of information on deaths for the Vital Statistics Report. The Statistics Unit would therefore only verify numerical information against the backdrop of the Registrar General's Statistics and not be overly concerned with categorising causes of death.

Migration - The following notes are made in the BVI Vital Statistics Report.

"It has not been possible to put together a series on net migration ... While it may be possible to obtain estimates on immigration, data on outmigration are non-existent".

"The mid-year population estimates are based solely on natural increase and do not take into account net migration, because of the difficulty of obtaining accurate data".

It may in fact be more appropriate to submit that difficulties are encountered in having any migration data at all. Though entry/departure (embarkation/diseembarkation) cards are used by immigration authorities, no collection and/or analysis is made of the information collected, including the matching of arrivals and departures.

A number of reasons may be ventured for the absence of migration data; some are given below.

- (i) the unavailability of personnel (in both the Immigration Dept. and the Statistics Unit) for data collation, and the apparent lack of interest in this activity.
- (ii) the lack of training of some Immigration Dept. personnel
- ~~(iii)~~ the heavy premium placed on tourism and the desire not to offend tourists/others who complete cards inaccurately or partially
- (iv) the "free" flow of persons between the British and U.S. Virgin Islands

Comments on some of these are perhaps in order.

Training: Junior Immigration Officers/Trainees had in the past received some training in immigration procedures and records maintenance/analysis at courses offered in Trinidad and Tobago. This has not happened in the last several years. After a brief (2 week) office orientation period in which some information on the various segments of the E/D card and on the general administration of the Immigration Dept. is passed on to trainees, they are deemed 'ready for the field'. Senior immigration officials attended courses offered in the U.K. but they too no longer benefit from these. It is felt that some effort must be made to ensure that the Immigration Dept. personnel are trained in all aspects of immigration procedures and the importance and relevance of proper immigration statistics. These should be maintained for analysis by and the use of the statistics Unit.

Tourism: with innumerable opportunities for illegal entry into the British Virgin Islands. It was brought to my attention that in the peak tourist season, the immigration personnel are overwhelmed by the flow of tourist traffic and are generally lax in the execution of proper immigration procedures.



**BVI - USVI Relationships:** Ferries ply regularly between Tortola (BVI) and St. Thomas (USVI), as do a number of aircraft, private yachts and sailboats. I did the ferry trip early one morning for a scheduled meeting in the USVI. The stub (portion B of the E/D card--see Appendix E) was requested by an individual who did not appear to be an immigration officer (no uniform or visible identification) who also requested travel documents. My documents (an identification card) were recorded as being in order but no stub was surrendered, as I indicated that I would be back the same day. There was little evidence that the loss of or failure to surrender this stub (I did not produce any) would create problems for re-entry or departure. Entry into St. Thomas was relatively routine - a wave of a U.S. passport (only few examinations of this document), or of a work permit or the flash of a smile. Indeed, it has been suggested that more BV Islanders live in the USVI than in the BVI.

The following notes from a BVI government publication (Tourism in the British Virgin Islands 1984: A Statistical Analysis) are also instructive. Residents - cover all those who were born in the BVI (belongers), those who have attained status and those expatriates who are permitted to live and/or work in the B.V.I.

Immigrant - a non-belonger who is permitted to take up residence in the B.V.I. A passenger is only classified as an 'Immigrant' on his initial entry into the territory.

Emigrant - a non-belonger who has been resident in the B.V.I. and who leaves for a destination outside the B.V.I., with the intention of taking up residence in another territory. Due to the difficulties posed by the proximity of the USVI, the large number of British Virgin Islanders resident in the USVI and the magnitude of the traffic between the BVI and USVI, belongers can not be classified as immigrants or emigrants - always as residents - and do not have to complete Exit cards.

#### Marriages and Divorces

No investigations were done of the recording of marriages and divorces.

Apart from the B.V.I. Vital Statistics Report, a number of other documents containing information on or of some relevance to vital statistics collection and dissemination have been lodged with the ECLAC Documentation Centre. These are:

- British Virgin Islands Public Health Dept. Annual Report 1982 (the latest available issue).
- Statistical Abstract of the British Virgin Islands 1980 No.2
- Census of the British Virgin Islands, 12 May 1980 (Provisional)
- The Family Tree Family Planning/Family Life Education Annual Report 1984. Excerpts from some of these documents are included here as Appendix F. Examination of these reveals that there are some slight differences from the totals in the Vital Statistics Report for the same events for the same year, as is evident from the following table.

	Births					Deaths				
	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
- Vital Statistics										
Report	203	216	272	231	235	63	61	69	53	67
- Public Health										
Annual Report	202	211	<del>258</del>	231	224	65	67	79	63	54
- Statistical										
Abstract	203	210	261	239	-	67	63	78	63	-

Despite the notation in the Vital Statistics Report that "Problems with the series on Live Births and Deaths have been solved", nowhere is it clear what these problems were. It is interesting to note as well that figures from the several sources are sometimes higher and sometimes lower than those in the Vital Statistics Report, suggesting that there may be more than one reason for the discrepancies.

## SUMMARY

It is felt that there are few significant problems with either the registration process or the accuracy of statistics generated from the registration of vital events in the British Virgin Islands. The smallness of territory, population size and the number of vital events which occur annually in the territory are undoubtedly contributing factors to this.

Nonetheless, some problem areas are especially noteworthy. These are:

(i) births occurring in St. Thomas and casually "filtering" into the BVI population without record.

(ii) births occurring in Tortola and conversely "filtering" out of the BVI

(iii) an inability to assess the impact of net migration.

The first two areas require some study to determine their magnitude and implications for the current and future population situation. The third requires, at the outset, some training and work with the immigration department towards increased awareness of the importance of migration statistics. In this connection, it is relevant to note that during courses in introductory statistics held over the past few years in the BVI, there were no representatives from the Immigration Department.

Though it is recommended that birth and death statistics be compiled by the Medical Records Officer, their dissemination after verification should continue to be the responsibility of the Statistics Unit in the Chief Minister's Office. The proposed biennial publication

of a Vital Statistics Report is an appropriate mechanism for this. Consideration should also be given to compilation and publication of the information noted as missing or not existing in comparison of the BVI Vital Statistics Report with the suggested national tables.

Though no follow-up visit is scheduled for the immediate future, ECLAC will endeavour to maintain its contact with the Statistics Unit of the BVI and is looking forward to receipt of its forthcoming Vital Statistics Report 1974-1984.