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# **COVID-19 and CRVS in New Zealand:** The Show Must Go On

by Jeff Montgomery



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# COVID-19 and CRVS in New Zealand: The Show Must Go On

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## INTRODUCTION

This article outlines the Government of New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 crisis from a civil registration perspective. It examines the initiatives the government took to reduce the effects of the pandemic on health and civil registration services and highlights the long-term benefits of the emergency response efforts put in place at the onset of the crisis. The paper is based on a 22 June 2020 presentation at the Asia-Pacific Stats Café Series: Asia and the Pacific CRVS Systems' Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis.<sup>1</sup>

## KEY MESSAGES

- It is important to categorize civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) in government emergency plans and legislation as an essential service during times of crisis.
- It is essential to ensure that business continuity plans are always up to date.
- Online and cloud-based systems are resilient in a time of crisis and should be considered an important tool in building resilient systems.
- Administrative data that can provide information quickly is valuable and popular with the public in times of crisis.

- There is opportunity in a crisis: longer-term systemic gains have been achieved during times of crisis for processes that might otherwise have been difficult to change.

## THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

New Zealand is a small island country in the southwestern Pacific with a total population of 5 million. A young country, it was founded in 1840 through the Treaty of Waitangi between the British Crown and the Indigenous Maori. On 1 January 1848, an ordinance, following similar British acts, allowed the fledgling government to record births and deaths that occurred in the colony. This also established the office of the Registrar-General.

Every year, an average of 60,000 births, 30,000 deaths, and 30,000 marriages are registered in New Zealand.

In 1995, legislation was passed that allowed for more than 10 million old records to be digitized and for all future registrations to be computerized. In 2015, parents were able to complete the registration of their children online. This was replaced in 2017 by an integrated tool that provides new parents with advice and access to a range of government services through

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1 [unescap.org/sites/default/files/The\\_Show\\_Must\\_Go\\_On-COVID\\_CRVS\\_Jeff\\_Montgomery\\_NZ\\_StatCafe\\_4th\\_22Jun20.pdf](https://unescap.org/sites/default/files/The_Show_Must_Go_On-COVID_CRVS_Jeff_Montgomery_NZ_StatCafe_4th_22Jun20.pdf)



Photo: Jonathan Borba / Unsplash

electronic sharing of birth registration details. In 2019, it became possible to order birth, death, and marriage certificates online.

Over the last seven years, civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) efforts in New Zealand have focused on moving toward digital birth and death registration systems. Today, 95 percent of births and 95 percent of deaths are notified entirely online, without the need for paper forms or signatures. Medical Certificate Cause of Death (MCCD) reporting became a fully online system in 2019.

### COVID-19 in New Zealand

From the beginning of the pandemic to the 22 June 2020, the country recorded 1,560 COVID-19 cases and 22 deaths.

- The first COVID-19 patient was reported on 25 February 2020.

- Borders closed on 19 March 2020, except to New Zealand citizens and permanent residents.
- A national lockdown was implemented on 25 March 2020; it lasted until 27 April 2020.
- On 8 June 2020, all restrictions related to COVID-19 were lifted, except for border controls.
- As of 15 June 2020, New Zealand had not reported any new cases of COVID-19 transmission within the country. Any new cases have been identified through quarantine processes for New Zealanders returning from overseas.<sup>2</sup>

## NEW ZEALAND'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Government of New Zealand adopted a “flattening the curve” strategy to reduce the speed of the outbreak. The aim was to avoid inundating key hospital and funeral services with a large number of deaths in a short period of time, as seen in other parts of the world.

### CRVS in the time of COVID-19: Maintaining high registration levels during the COVID-19 lockdown

The Government of New Zealand considers civil registration to be an essential service in any emergency situation, from natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis to health emergencies such as pandemics. Also, New Zealand civil registration already had in place a business continuity plan – a process that creates systems of prevention and recovery to handle an emergency. The plan was updated in February 2020 to ensure it was suited to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

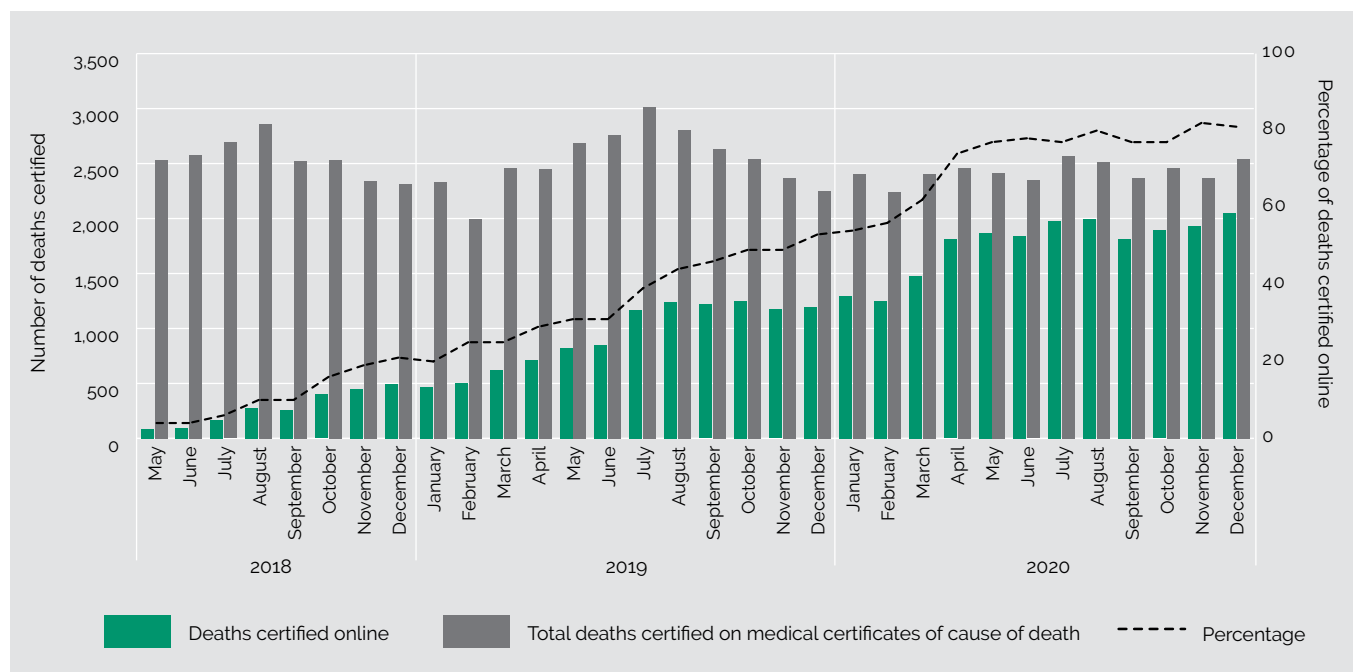
<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health – Manatū Hauora. [health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-current-cases#summary](https://health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-current-cases#summary)

Another key asset earned through advance planning was a good understanding of the staffing capacity needed to maintain core CRVS services: these included birth and death registration, which were identified as a top priority. Much effort was put into clearing work queues before the start of the national lockdown. Also, civil registration staff were split into two teams: each took separate three-day work shifts while respecting a 2-metre desk distance. Stakeholders and customers were encouraged to use online services, and all non-essential work was halted. Together, these various interventions allowed civil registrars to stay open

and continue to provide full services during the lockdown period.

One key element of the successful crisis response was promoting the use of the online Medical Certificate Cause of Death (MCCD) system (Figure 1). The use of this online tool has grown rapidly since it was introduced in 2018 as a pilot program and launched in 2019. During the national lockdown in April 2020, 74 percent of all deaths certified were done through this online platform. A large increase was seen in April and May 2020, as general practitioners and hospitals were encouraged to use the online service.

**Figure 1:** Growth of certificates completed online on the Medical Certificate Cause of Death system.



Total deaths for October 2020 is an estimate based on October 2019 deaths

## New Zealand's business continuity plan for CRVS

A business continuity plan pinpoints the most important parts of a civil registration operation, identifies potential risks to these critical pieces, and prepares for a quick and easy recovery. It acts as a plan B and should cover all types of disruptions, such as natural disasters, loss of key staff or locations, equipment breakdowns, or loss of a supplier. The New Zealand civil registration business continuity plan was developed many years ago and is updated regularly.

The plan documents key systems, staff, and supplier contact details, location of materials in offices, and alternatives. Scenarios covered by the plan include loss of primary office locations, loss of IT infrastructure, loss of the capital city, and loss of key staff or a high percentage of the team. This final scenario was modified at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and became the basis for operating during this time. The plan outlines steps to be taken right away when an incident occurs and lays out a strategy to follow should the event continue for days, weeks, or months. It also details the services to be prioritized and key lines of communication.

## The importance of a business continuity plan to maintain CRVS systems during an emergency

When a country faces an emergency, it is crucial to ensure that there is a formalized and documented process that is backed by the civil registration legislative and policy framework. This involves setting up key stakeholder relationships and communication channels, including with the public. Business process maps are useful for identifying specific activities that different

stakeholders would need to do at various stages of the disaster (before, during, and after) to ensure that the civil registration system is fully efficient. Contingency plans are living documents. This means they should be updated regularly, especially after disasters, where additional learning can improve the plan substantially. It is also important to do regular exercises to test the implementation of the plan.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of New Zealand, a business continuity plan for CRVS operations is often used during minor interruptions, such as temporary office closures or IT outages. It has also been used during more significant events, such as the Kaikoura earthquake in Wellington (2016), Christchurch mosque terrorist attack (2019), and Auckland Convention Centre fire (2019). The plan is updated once a year or when there is a major change in the operating environment. It is also reviewed after any major event to reflect lessons learned from carrying out the plan.

The main benefit of having a business continuity plan during an emergency is that an organization can respond quickly to the situation without needing to seek approval for each step to be taken. Also, those who are responding to the event have all the information they need at their fingertips, including whom to contact for more support.

## The role of CRVS in New Zealand's COVID-19 response

The civil registration system is integrated into the New Zealand government's overall response to the COVID-19 crisis. The Registrar-General is a key member of the COVID-19 Mass Fatality Response Team, which is based in the National Response Centre for the pandemic. The team works closely with the national police, who manage the situation in the community.

3 Pacific Civil Registrars Network (PCRN). 2017. [spccfpstore1.blob.core.windows.net/digitallibrary-docs/files/df/df51f162833e837ea8b8f7d00c3e65f5.pdf?sv=2015-12-11&sr=b&sig=G5%2FaCPjHo6QFTUL9tJ3lBmLDs3xDiWJWZ%2FgIOBx23SQ%3D&se=2021-04-06T08%3A03%3A56Z&sp=r&rscc=public%2C%20max-age%3D864000%2C%20max-stale%3D86400&rsct=application%2Fpdf&rsd=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22PCRN\\_2017\\_Workshop\\_final\\_report.pdf%22](https://spccfpstore1.blob.core.windows.net/digitallibrary-docs/files/df/df51f162833e837ea8b8f7d00c3e65f5.pdf?sv=2015-12-11&sr=b&sig=G5%2FaCPjHo6QFTUL9tJ3lBmLDs3xDiWJWZ%2FgIOBx23SQ%3D&se=2021-04-06T08%3A03%3A56Z&sp=r&rscc=public%2C%20max-age%3D864000%2C%20max-stale%3D86400&rsct=application%2Fpdf&rsd=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22PCRN_2017_Workshop_final_report.pdf%22)

An early priority of the country's COVID-19 response was to account for the number of hospital beds available to care for severe cases, as well as the availability of storage facilities for those who died. Decision-makers at the time were working with a worst-case scenario that forecasted as many as 7,000 COVID-19 deaths, which would have put the entire system under immense pressure.

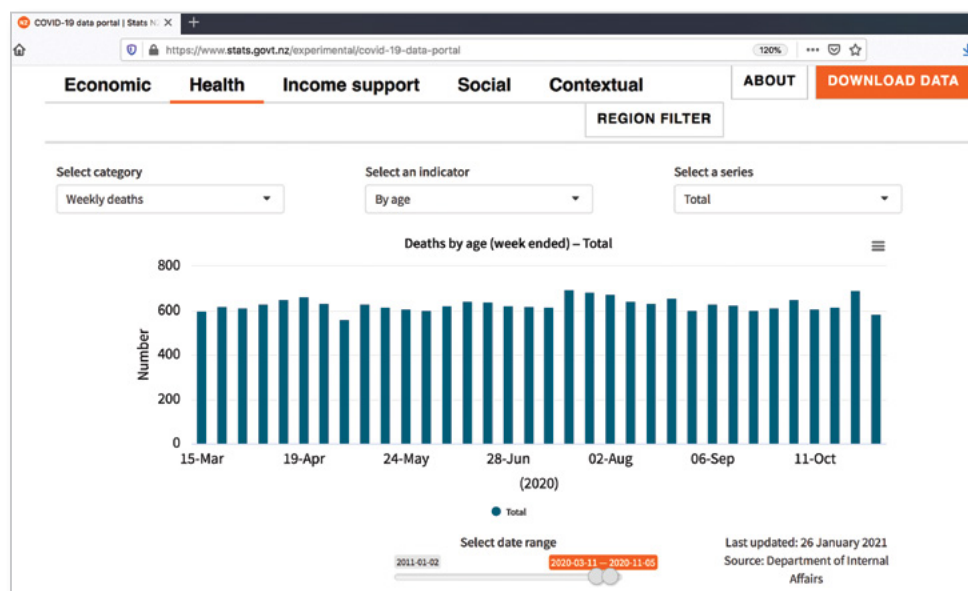
In response to this need, the CRVS system initiated the daily reporting of deaths to the Mass Fatality Response Team. This ensured a timely and accurate assessment of storage capacity and anticipation of any capacity issues. To support this objective, a new database of funeral directors was created. This database, which was also updated daily, contained more detailed information on funeral facilities, including the quantity and temperatures of refrigeration units and staff availability. Funeral directors were informed regularly of various processes through an electronic newsletter, which was another

platform for aggressively promoting the online MCCD reporting tool.

The data from the online MCCD tool informed the daily death reports to the Mass Fatality Response Team. The daily death reports, in turn, informed the new weekly death statistics that Statistics New Zealand published.<sup>4</sup> This data has been very popular with the New Zealand public during the crisis. Public access to this timely data allows people to keep themselves informed of the COVID-19 situation in the country through an unbiased, data-based source.

In part due to concentrated media attention on every single COVID-19 fatality in the country, many were alarmed by what they perceived to be rapidly increasing death rates due to the virus in New Zealand. These publicly available weekly death statistics allowed people to see how death trends in New Zealand during the pandemic were not different from death trends before the pandemic (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Example of weekly death statistics portal.<sup>5</sup>



4 Statistics New Zealand. COVID-19 data portal. [stats.govt.nz/topics/covid-19](https://www.stats.govt.nz/topics/covid-19)

5 Statistics New Zealand. COVID-19 data portal. Figure 2 is a screenshot of New Zealand's weekly death statistics, available in English only and updated regularly on the Statistics New Zealand website: [stats.govt.nz/experimental/covid-19-data-portal](https://www.stats.govt.nz/experimental/covid-19-data-portal).



## Longer-term benefits

Longer-term benefits have emerged as a result of these crisis response efforts, especially in the area of data availability and digitization.

Weekly deaths statistics are now available on the Statistics New Zealand website; in the past, they were published every three months. Now a broader community has greater access to up-to-date data than ever before.

A complete dataset of all funeral directors and their storage capacities is also now available. It is updated regularly through the industry body.

Finally, from an operational perspective, there has been a significant increase in online death reporting through DeathDocs<sup>6</sup> as well as important, permanent changes in the way civil registration services are delivered. Following the lockdown, the decision was made to maintain services through appointments only (these can be made online) and to go cash-free in order to limit person-to-person contact.

## CONCLUSION AND KEY LESSONS

Despite a mild resurgence of COVID-19 in New Zealand following a period of no cases earlier in 2020, the country was successful in flattening the curve. Hospital and funeral systems were not severely impacted as planned, and a return to normal life was possible within a short time.

The New Zealand government's initiatives were successful in containing the coronavirus outbreak, and the government was able to keep providing vital registration services to its population. In the post-emergency period, the following key lessons learned were identified to ensure the most effective response for future emergencies:

- It is important to have civil registration categorized as an essential service in emergency plans and in legislation.
- It is essential to ensure that business continuity plans are always up to date to prepare for an adequate and effective response.
- Online and cloud-based systems are resilient in a time of crisis and should be seen as an important tool in building resilient systems.
- Administrative data can be provided quickly when necessary and is of great value to the public, who are able to stay informed.
- New Zealand was able to make permanent changes to service delivery in CRVS, which may not have been possible if not for this crisis situation. Thus, it is important to never miss an opportunity that a crisis may bring.

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6 Death Documents. [deathdocs.services.govt.nz](https://deathdocs.services.govt.nz)

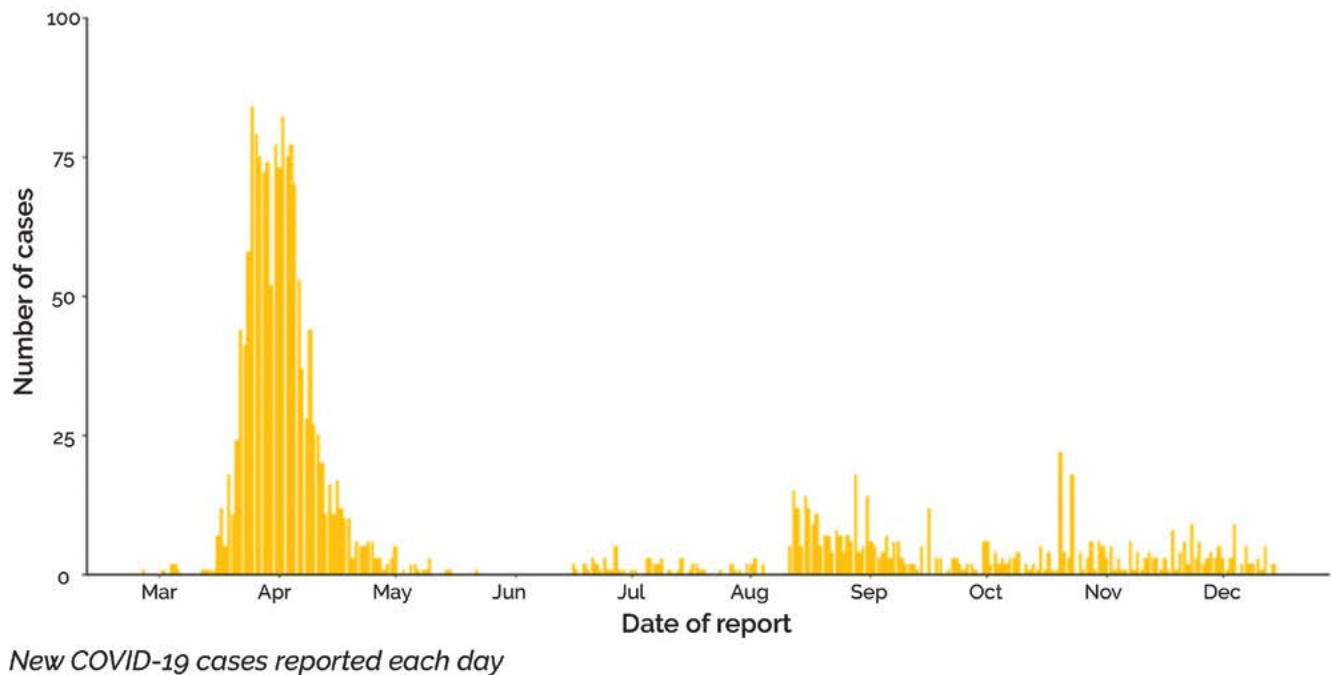


## RESURGENCE OF COVID

Since the original draft article was written, there has been a mild resurgence of COVID-19 in New Zealand (Figure 3). As of 17 December 2020, there were 43 active cases, 2,032 recovered cases, and

25 deceased. All 43 active cases were in managed facilities. The sources of active cases included 41 (of the 43) who travelled internationally and were diagnosed in managed facilities at the border. Two people were in close contact with someone who caught COVID-19 overseas.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 3:** Daily confirmed and probable cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand as of 17 December 2020.



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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Health – Manatū Hauora. [health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-current-cases](https://health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-current-cases).

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