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Improvement of Civil Registration System in India : Issues for Urgent Consideration

Efficient Civil Registration System is Essential

The two major sources of data on population are census and vital registration system. While the former gives a cross-sectional picture of people at a point in time, the latter is a moving canvas of additions and exits of people in a well-defined geographical area. Thus they are complementary to each other. It is of paramount importance for a large developing country like India to have both systems of data working efficiently. The census which enumerates each and every individual at a reference point and in the whole geographical area of a country has more or less been working at acceptable standards of efficiency in most of the countries. But the vital registration system especially those derived through the civil registration is still pretty weak and is not able to give data of desired accuracy in a large number of developing countries including India. Undoubtedly, the count of people for demarcation of constituencies for legislative purposes is important but utility of civil registration system to continuously assess changes in population and maintaining a permanent record of the vital events is also extremely important for need-based development planning. The latter has particularly become important in this modern era where success of all socio-economic programmes is measured and monitored by getting indicators partly based on records of the vital events. In this situation, it is hard to understand why many developing countries inclusive of India are not laying enough emphasis to improve their civil registration systems.

Three basic uses for data from civil registration system are: (i) maintenance of permanent records on births and deaths as legal documents, (ii) assessment of continuous changes in population, and (iii) evaluation of success of socio-economic programmes through indicators based on births, deaths and size of population. As a matter of fact, requirement of this system

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as legal proof of births and deaths should in itself be strong enough reason for any country to have a fully operational civil registration system, in India, the registration of vital events and the administrative machinery for this purpose has been in existence for more than a century. It has been working under diversified Acts and executive instructions and thus making it unsuited for the Independent India. In the year 1969 Registration of Births and Deaths Act (RED) was passed which replaced the diverse laws by a uniform Act all over the country. This year thus becomes a landmark in the civil registration system in Independent India. The registration of births and deaths was made compulsory; it has become mandatory on the part of head of the household or his representative to report and register domiciliary vital events, for medical officers in charge of hospitals, health centres, maternity or nursing homes or other similar institutions in respect of births and deaths occurring in these institutions, for jailor-in-charge of a jail in respect of births and deaths occurring in jails. They are called informants in the vocabulary of the civil registration scheme (CRS). The Act also provided for the statutory authority at Centre, State, District, Town and Village or a group of villages at periphery level. It prescribed definitions, principles, personnel and penalties connected with enforcement of the Act. It enabled the Central Government to promote uniformity in registration procedures and bring out comparability in vital statistics registered in different parts of the country.

At the national level, the civil registration system is administered by the Registrar General of India (RGI); he is empowered to issue general directions and take steps to coordinate and unify the activities of Chief Registrars of States who are the chief executive authority in the States for executing the provisions of the RED Act, 1969 and the rules and orders made thereunder. They were responsible for coordinating, unifying and supervising the work of civil registration system within their respective States.

Sample Registration System was Initiated as a Stop-Gap Arrangement

In spite of several efforts, improvement in civil registration system in the vast and diverse country like India was slow. The planners and policy makers had felt need for the dependable estimates of vital rates and growth of population to plan for various socio-economic development programmes. These vital rates were also needed to assess the impact of these developmental efforts. It was, therefore, felt that some alternate system for getting more reliable estimates of vital rates should be evolved to serve the *immediate* need as a *stopgap* arrangement till the CRS gets its roots established and starts providing dependable estimates of vital rates on a regular basis. The Sample Registration System (SRS) was thought of as a plausible solution for such a need. Essential features of SRS are well documented. A recent overview is available in (Sinha, 1993, 1994).

The Sample Registration System (SRS) was initiated by Registrar General of India on a regular basis in randomly selected samples of rural and urban areas throughout the country in 1969-70 after carrying out several pilot surveys during 1964-66. The SRS is based on a large scale demographic sample survey using dual recording system of births and deaths. The main components of SRS are:

- (i) *Baseline Survey* of the sample units to obtain *usual* resident population of the same sample areas.

- (ii) *Continuous enumeration* of vital events pertaining to *usual* resident population by the enumerator, (iii) An independent *half-yearly survey* for recording births and deaths which occurred during the half-year period under reference and updating the houselist and household schedule by the supervisor, (iv) *Matching* of events recorded during continuous enumeration and those listed in the course of half-yearly survey; and (v) *Field verification* of unmatched and partially matched events to reconcile the observed discrepancies.

The sample size for each state was so determined as to provide reasonably good estimates of vital rates for all major states as well as at the national level separately for rural and urban areas. In the absence of reliable CRS data the demographic data based on SRS are being used for working out various other measures of fertility and mortality often required by planners and policy makers for the last two decades. SRS data are also being used by the Registrar General of India for preparation of abridged life tables and carrying out other analytical studies pertaining to population planning. While carrying out such research activities due attention has not been paid in some cases on the adequacy of sample size of SRS to provide acceptable estimates of various demographic characteristics. Another weakness of SRS is fixity of the sample areas over a long period of time; this is expected to lead to biased estimates. The Registrar General of India is aware of this problem and had replaced once to the sample all over the country. Unfortunately this is not being done at regular intervals presumably due to financial and other constraints under which SRS is currently operating in the country.

The limitation of data from SRS is being keenly felt with the growing realization that meaningful planning has to be undertaken at district level and below. State is too high a level for drawing up action programmes of development at local levels; planners and policy makers have, therefore, started asking for district and block level estimates of vital rates. Instead of finding ways and means and making serious efforts to improve CRS to meet this growing need, discussion many times focusses on whether and how to expand SRS to meet this need. This argument perhaps assumes hopeless situation in regard to CRS and vast majority of data users feel that there is little scope for its improvement. They see SRS as the only feasible solution to get district level data. The authors of this paper have strong reservations against manifold increase in the sample size under SRS to arrive at district and lower level estimates. A technical review of the potential expansion of SRS to give district level vital rates carried out in Planning Commission and the Central Statistical Organization in mid-eighties revealed that the number of sample units under SRS have to be increased many times to achieve the objective. This would not only increase cost of SRS several fold but it could also become administratively unmanageable on a sustained basis. We feel that it will not, therefore, be advisable to depend on SRS for obtaining district and lower level estimates of vital rates; the CRS is the only potential source. To get estimates of vital rates at district and lower levels for effective planning and assessment of the programmes, we have to make all out efforts to improve CRS. We feel that serious and sustained efforts for improving

CRS have not been made in most of the states in our country. It is high time that adequate resources and additional inputs in certain areas are provided to improve the quality of vital rates under CRS. In recent years estimates of district-wise vital rates were worked out by demographers because of their need for district level planning; these estimates varied quite a good deal because of the assumptions made (RGI, 1994). In the absence of local level data it is well nigh impossible to vouch which series would provide more reliable estimates and be better suited for local level planning and policy making. In these circumstances their use becomes very difficult; they basically remain an exercise without being used for planning purpose. The controversies on their correctness could be avoided and they could have been used only if an efficient vital registration system becomes operational in the country. This would call for much greater emphasis to be laid on improving the quality of CRS in our country than what has been attempted so far in a sporadic manner. It would, therefore, be appropriate at this stage to examine carefully the root causes of deficiencies in the CRS so that practical measures could be taken to operationalise and improve CRS. Such efforts have additional advantages of proper maintenance of statutory birth and death registration records.

Status of Civil Registration System in India

As mentioned earlier, the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969 was the beginning of the process of improving CRS in the country. But time of implementation of this Act in the states varied greatly, from July 1970 to February 1982 (RGI, 1989). Though the overall responsibility of coordination of the system has been given to the Registrar General of India at national level, there is variation in the registration organization at state level. The Chief Registrar of Births and Deaths at state level, an honorary position, could be Director of Health Services, Director of Economics and Statistics or Director of Panchayats. He has under him a small unit dealing with Vital Statistics headed by a full time Deputy Director or Assistant Director. In a few states, an Additional Chief Registrar or Deputy Chief Registrar from another department has also been appointed to ensure better supervision, coordination and control where registration hierarchy at lower level involves more than one Government departments. This position is also honorary. All the functions of CRS at the state level are looked after by this small Vital Statistics cell.

At the district level, the organization is headed by District Registrar. The District Medical and Health Officer or District Statistical Officer are ex-officio made District Registrar and have one or two full time statistical personnel to help them in carrying out the assigned tasks. Generally, District Registrar belongs to the department which has Chief Registrar at the state level. Like state, district may also have, sometime, Additional/Deputy District Registrars to ensure better supervision, coordination and control where registration hierarchy at lower level involved more than one Government department.

At the field of local level, there are registrars for registering the particulars of births and deaths occurring in their respective jurisdictions. In several states the area under the charge of a local Registrar is quite large particularly in rural areas. To tackle this problem sometimes sub-registrars are also appointed for assisting the local Registrars for registering vital events in an area allotted to him by the Registrar within his jurisdiction. They are all honorary

positions. Each local registrar maintains an office for the purpose of registering births and deaths. He has to register all information on births and deaths which take place in his jurisdiction. The prescribed birth register contains information on the following items: (i) date of occurrence/registration, (ii) place of birth, (iii) sex of child, (iv) age of mother, (v) order of birth, (vi) religion, literacy and occupation of parents, (vii) type of medical attention at birth. In the case of death, the register contains information on: (i) date of occurrence/registration, (ii) place of death, (iii) age, (iv) sex, (v) marital status, (vi) religion, (vii) occupation of deceased, (viii) cause of death, whether medically certified, and (ix) kind of medical attention received. The registers of births and deaths have been prescribed by Registrar General of India to cover information on the above items.

To help the Registrar in getting prompt intimation about vital events, the Notifier System has been introduced in most of the states. The RBD Act, 1969 provides for appointment of any person as a Notifier who is expected to be well informed of the vital events occurring in a specified area/community irrespective of whether or not they attended or were present at such births/deaths. These Notifiers are not informants and the vital event cannot be registered on the basis of Notifier's information alone. Their main task is to feed the local Registrar with information regarding occurrence of vital event within his/her area of jurisdiction. The local Registrar has to check accuracy of information and also event that has already been registered. The Notifiers are generally drawn from para-medical personnel such as Multipurpose Health Workers, Village Health Guides, Auxiliary Nurse Mid-wives, Dais etc. as well as from other organizations like village chowkidars, Anganwadi workers, pastor of churches, etc. Although the Notifier system has been soundly conceived but is not working satisfactorily. Its revamping may be required.

The Registration of Births and Deaths Act provides time limit for reporting of vital events. It also provides for delayed registration with payment of late fee depending on the period of delay. The information in respect of birth is to be given within 14 days and in respect of death within 7 days without any penalty charges. System has been prescribed for registration of event beyond the prescribed period on payment of some penalty and in case of large delays after taking permission of some prescribed authority.

Although efforts are being made after enforcement of RBD Act 1969 to improve civil registration work, the quality of data of civil registration has not shown much improvement. Statement I at the end shows three indicators of CRS reporting for the major states. These indicators are:

Reporting Efficiency (%): Regularity in submission of monthly returns from periphery to headquarters and has been worked out in terms of number of returns received as percentage of total returns due for various months of the year.

Recording Efficiency (%): It is a measure of extent of completeness of registration and has been worked out in terms of CRS vital events as percentage of vital events estimated in the Sample Registration System which is supposed to be more accurate and complete.

Recording Efficiency Adjusted for Non-response: It attempts to define recording efficiency in only those records which are received at the headquarters. That is, total

events reported in CRS are related to expected number of SRS events in the reported areas of CRS.

On the basis of these indicators, the states may be divided in three groups. The first group is where reporting efficiency (as defined earlier, col. 2 in Appendix Table 1) is poor but the recording efficiency for the reporting areas is good, the second group consists of those states where quality of data of the reported units is not good (Cols. 5 & 6 in the Table) though their reporting efficiency is good and the third group is composed of the states which are poor in reporting and poor in quality of reported data. The first category state is Andhra Pradesh (efficiency less than 75%). This state needs a careful look at the machinery which prepares reports on the events and then transmits it from one level to the next. The units there are sluggish in sending reports and need to be coaxed to send reports in time. The units which still do not send reports regularly need to be pulled up. The second category of states are Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. These states under-report the events though quite a large proportion of them send reports. These units need to be visited on a regular basis and reasons for under-reporting should be carefully examined. The machinery there may not be functioning, they may have too large an area to cover or the Notifiers there are not adequately motivated to carry out their responsibilities. The third group of states are Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh where, both efficiency of reporting and efficiency of recording, are poor¹. These states are to be analyzed from both these perspectives; their systems need to be reviewed for reasons of deficiencies in reporting as well as recording. This example suggests a thorough review of functioning of CRS in each state and the state specific measures to tone up the system. *It is suggested that a three-member team can be appointed, with two outsiders and one internal person to look at the system in each state and make state and even district specific recommendations.* It should be done without losing anymore time.

Underlying Causes of Poor Quality of Civil Registration Data

A comparative review of the civil registration system in India was made by Seal (1988); he came up with the following major causes:

1. Low priority assigned to the CRS at higher levels: The efforts for improvement in CRS are limited to conferences of Chief Registrars or those of District Registrars where discussions are held on the problems of registration. Some efforts are also made to publicize importance of registration to make people aware of its need and importance. Even some encouragement is given in the form of rewards to districts with better registration. Since different departments and organizations are involved in the work of civil registration system at different levels, the control of the Registrar General of India is limited. Besides, the Registrar General is not able to devote enough time because of his heavy responsibilities with the census work-publication of data from the previous

Information on Jammu and Kashmir and Karnataka is not available.

census and then planning for the next census. He can only emphasize importance of better registration and persuade those who are involved in this task. He cannot penalize in case he does not find improvement even after repeated suggestions. *It may be desirable that responsibility of the CRS may be given to a sufficiently senior level officer with an independent charge.* He should directly report and be answerable to a senior level officer in the Ministry of Home Affairs. The officer in the Home Ministry may be made answerable for smooth progress of the CRS so that this system gets due attention both at the implementation level and at the review and monitoring level. This review for the work at the state and district level will receive more attention of all those concerned. Some system needs to be devised to reflect their performance in regard to the coverage of CRS in their Annual Confidential Reports (ACR). Continuous monitoring of CRS at the highest level and reflection of performance in regard to CRS in the ACR of the officer will go a long way to draw full attention of the staff involved in this work in perspective of the fact whether they are ex-officio or full time. Serious involvement of the highest functionary at the state level will set example for their juniors to take full interest in the work.

2. *Organizational and infrastructural deficiencies are affecting supervision and control:* Two issues are relevant in this respect. In the first, involvement of different departments at different levels weakens the supervisory and control mechanism and, in the second, large areas of coverage under local Registrars make reporting an arduous task for the household. Both these issues are to be suitably addressed. The three-member assessment team suggested earlier may look at this dimension for each state and make suitable recommendations. For the first, an effort should be made to decide how unilinear registration system could be made functional and which and how different departments could be made to take the task of registration seriously. In the second, the individual households responsible for registration of events should be made to realize loss he is likely to suffer if he/she does not register the events. The penalty may be raised; the process of affidavits which are given in the absence of birth/death certificates should be made more cumbersome and expensive. This is, on the part of the household. On the part of registration system, there is need to simplify the registration system by bringing office of the local Registrar closer to the client by involving Panchayats and Pradhans. Their interest can be further enhanced by creating healthy competition in the form of additional developmental grant for better registration to the Panchayats.
3. *Inadequate publicity:* Public awareness of the importance of vital registration and of the rules and procedures is generally quite poor. Disadvantages for not registering the vital events promptly are not clear. People tend to wait when need for documented evidence is required. If the process of getting document at the time of need is made cumbersome and people are adequately informed about it, perhaps lukewarm attitude of people may change. Recently, some efforts are being made to step up publicity of civil registration by TV and radio. This effort should continue; besides, the word of mouth through Panchayat members, Pradhans, school teachers and other formal/informal leaders in the village community is very much needed.

4. *Lack of training:* The full-time, part-time and ex-officio staff involved in CRS are frequently changed by transfers or superannuation. It is, therefore, noticed that many staff members involved in registration do not have adequate knowledge of rules and regulations. Such status not only reduces their interest and commitment in the registration but also leads to deficiencies in reporting and recording the vital events. It is, therefore, very important that a mechanism should be evolved to train/orient any new incumbent (full-time, part-time and even ex-officio) before his/her placement in the system. *One solution could be that each state along with the Registrar General of India should organize quarterly training/orientation to train new and old staff.*
5. *Non-availability of printed forms and registers:* One important cause of poor interest by the staff and poor emphasis by the household in registration is non-availability of necessary registers and forms. Adequate funds should be allocated for such printing or the Office of the Registrar General of India should get the material printed and supplied to local registrars in adequate number. Such printing needs to be done on good quality paper which is lasting for record keeping. If latter is the decision, then transportation of registers and forms from the printing press to the offices of the local registrar should receive special attention. *It is often noticed that printed forms often get stuck at certain level and do not reach the level where they are needed.* This is a serious problem and should receive adequate attention if decision is taken for centralized printing.

Steps Required for Improvement of Civil Registration System

Some steps are implicit from various reasons cited for deficient CRS in the above section. They are: (i) according high priority to Civil Registration at the highest level by (a) giving independent charge of CRS with answerability to a senior officer in the Ministry of Home Affairs², and (b) making the officer in the Home Ministry solely answerable for the smooth functioning of the system. This will facilitate prompt ensure implementation of the decisions taken at the review meetings, (ii) a review should be done of the CRS machinery in each state by a three-member team as suggested earlier to (a) make it a unilinear agency's task, wherever possible³, (b) reduce the areal coverage of the local Registrar's office so that both Registrars and Informants find registration easy, and (c) make people aware of the need for registration of vital events and make delayed or later registration more difficult and expensive, (iii) greater awareness amongst the public in regard to rules and regulation of the RED Act and place of registration by widespread publicity on TV, radio and word of mouth of the formal/informal leaders, and (iv) availability, at the local registrar's office, of the registers

² Though the Registrar General of India himself is a senior level officer but he gets burdened with other responsibilities of census, Sample Registration System, Cause of Death Statistics and other jobs of the position affecting his attention on the improvement of the civil registration system. Time left for full attention to CRS is limited and not enough. Since the CRS requires special and full attention, therefore independent charge has been suggested. It will help in full time attention to CRS.

³ The idea of recommending a uni-linear agency is that quality of supervision, in this case, will be better than in multi-linear system because staff of the same agency are involved at all levels. The seniors will have better control over juniors of the same department. Currently, the effectiveness of both these agencies (uni- and multi-linear) may not be much different at present but this is because the CRS is not getting enough attention anywhere.

and prescribed forms in adequate number for recording birth and death events without delay. The following additional steps are also expected to further help in improvement of the CRS:

1. *Enforcement of compulsory production of birth/death certificates.* Production of birth certificate should be made compulsory at the time of (i) addition of name of a newborn child in ration card, (ii) first employment in public sector establishments, and (iii) issue of driving license and passports etc. Death certificate should be made compulsory before entertaining any property inheritance claim or any other facility which government may give to the concerned deceased person. The procedure of affidavit in their absence (birth and death certificate) should be made more cumbersome and expensive.
2. *Simplification of rules and procedures for registration.* The rules and procedures for registering births and deaths should be made as simple as possible so that these events can be registered within a short time by the person responsible. The items like occupation, literacy and religion which are required for analytical studies may be deleted. Only minimum paper work may be kept rather than a large number of statements which are to be transmitted to higher authorities. Detailed analytical studies should be attempted only on a sample basis wherever it is considered essential. A careful review of the system in this regard will be required for this purpose.
3. *Involvement of Notifiers.* The RED Act envisages an important role of Notifiers who are expected to report the occurrence of events to local registrars. Then the local registrar has to visit the place and get all the details recorded and then ultimately give them the certificate. The CRS could improve in coverage if Notifier system could be made to function well. For this purpose, motivation of Notifiers could be enhanced by acknowledging their contribution in some fashion and giving them a small honorarium for the events they report. The operational steps about how the Notifiers will notify vital events to the local registrars, how their good work will be acknowledged and how they will receive honorarium should be worked out and explained in writing at all levels so that their operational steps actually get implemented. Effective Notifier system could be a backbone of the steps for strengthening CRS in the country. Therefore some experimentation on how the Notifier system should be made effective need to be conducted.
4. *Reconciliation of CRS and SRS vital statistics:* Comparison of CRS figures with SRS on a regular basis in the publication of the Registrar General of India will give information where CRS machinery needs to be strengthened and where CRS could replace SRS. Since SRS estimates are being compared to the CRS it is necessary that they should be comparable conceptually. For this purpose, *de facto* or place of actual occurrence concept of CRS should be changed to *de jure*, or place of normal residence concept of SRS. This change may make more sense as tabulation by place of residence has greater utility for planning. For this purpose, instead of "Permanent Residential Address" recorded in the CRS forms, the item should be "Normal Residential Address"; alternatively, both may be coded. This change will permit grouping vital events in rural/urban areas and in the district to which event normally belongs. This will make rural/urban vital rates from CRS comparable to SRS. Fairly simple methodology is also available (Seal, 1988) for

working out reasonably good estimates of '*defacto*' vital rates from '*dejure*' population recorded in SRS for making a comparative study. The idea of comparability is important to use these two sources to assess accuracy. The suggested changes should preferably be carried out based on the recommendation of an expert group keeping in view the feasibility factor.

For those states where adjusted CRS (for the *de jure* concept) and SRS rates broadly tally, the CRS may be considered as quite efficient. The district level data on these rates, after some scrutiny, could be used for planning and policy making. Such use of the data from CRS will tend to further improve it. On the other hand, the states which do not show CRS reliable (compared to SRS), need to be monitored and reviewed closely to ascertain factors which need to be addressed. This type of exercise, in itself, will draw more attention on CRS and will ultimately tend to improve it. Less attention of those involved in CRS is really a problem which is greatly responsible for deficient CRS. It is noteworthy that the CRS has also the potentiality to detect errors in coverage under the SRS. Although efforts are made by the Registrar General of India to make SRS free from omission of any birth or death, in-depth reviews of SRS made in the past have revealed an overall omission rate of about 3% a few years ago (RGI, 1992). Once the CRS take a firm root in our vital registration system, it could as well be used as a cross check of the 100 per cent coverage of vital events under SRS in the selected sampled areas in states. This in-built cross-checking mechanism of CRS and SRS data, if taken up seriously by RGI for implementation, the vital registration system in our country is expected to improve the quality of population and demographic statistics at grassroots levels—this is, as mentioned earlier, a *sine qua non* for effective planning, policy making and implementation of various development programmes at the local levels.

5. *Provision of minimum essential staff:* It will be desirable to undertake a review of the minimum positions required under civil registration system so that the system can be adequately (a) supervised, (b) monitored, (c) data analyzed, and (d) published and disseminated. Such requirement should be met even if it means creation of more positions—full-time or part—time-keeping in view the urgent need for improving CRS for local level planning.

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Appendix

TABLE I: REPORTING EFFICIENCY, RECORDING EFFICIENCY AND RECORDING EFFICIENCY FOR NON-RESPONSE IN CRS FOR MAJOR STATES IN INDIA.

State (1)	Reporting Efficiency (%) (2)	Recording Efficiency (%)		Recording Efficiency Adjusted for Non-reponse (%)	
		BR (3)	DR (4)	BR (5)	DR (6)
Andhra Pradesh	31.8	30.6	25.7	96.2	80.8
Assam	46.6	15.8	4.9	33.9	10.5
Bihar	97.5	21.7	30.5	22.3	31.3
Goa	100	107.3	91.2	107.3	91.2
Gujarat	84.4	91.4	61.4	108.3	72.7
Haryana	100	60.8	62.5	60.8	62.5
Himachal Pradesh	68.9	46.2	32.9	67.1	47.8
Jammu & Kashmir	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Karnataka	NA	58.5	50.4	NA	NA
Kerala	100	104.9	83	104.9	83
Madhya Pradesh	99.4	48.2	46.3	48.5	46.6
Maharashtra	88.4	84	64.3	95	72.7
Orissa	100	67.1	49.2	67.1	49.2
Punjab	100	84.3	80.7	84.3	80.7
Rajasthan	62.1	20	23.5	32.2	37.8
Tamil Nadu	92.5	87.9	74.4	95	80.4
Uttar Pradesh	71.2	27.6	18.9	38.9	26.9
West Bengal	76.1	29.2	22.7	38.4	29.8

Source: Registrar General of India. Registrar General's Report on working of the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969. 1992. Note: It is noteworthy that CRS Reports events on the basis of *de facto* system while SRS reports on the basis of *de jure* system. The two rates are not strictly comparable unless some adjustments are made. The terms defined in the title are defined in the text.