

PERINATAL STATISTICS SERIES

Number 16

# **Australia's mothers and babies 2003**

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**December 2005**

AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit  
Sydney

AIHW cat. no. PER 29

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This report has been peer reviewed and is published as part of the AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit's Perinatal Statistics Series. A complete list of the Institute's publications is available from the Business Promotion and Media Unit, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, GPO Box 570, Canberra ACT 2601, or via the Institute's web site <<http://www.aihw.gov.au>>.

ISSN 1321-8336  
ISBN 1 74024 519 9

### **Suggested citation**

Laws PJ & Sullivan EA 2005. Australia's mothers and babies 2003. AIHW Cat. No. PER 29. Sydney: AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit (Perinatal Statistics Series No. 16).

### **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**

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Dr Richard Madden

Published by the AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Unit

Printed by Pirion

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# Acknowledgments

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare National Perinatal Statistics Unit (NPSU) is a formally affiliated institution of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and is linked to the School of Women's and Children's Health. We would like to acknowledge the support of NPSU by the School of Women's and Children's Health, UNSW and the Sydney Children's Hospital.

The NPSU values the time, effort and expertise contributed by all states and territories in the collection and provision of the data used in this report. We would like to acknowledge the staff members of the state and territory health authorities who provided data and reviewed the tables for this report:

Lee Taylor and Kim Lim, Centre for Epidemiology and Research, NSW Department of Health.

Odette Taylor, Perinatal Data Collection Unit, Department of Human Services, Victoria.

Sue Cornes, Joanne Bunney, Vesna Dunne and Meegan Snell, Health Information Centre, Queensland Department of Health.

Vivien Gee, Maternal and Child Health Unit, Department of Health, Western Australia.

Annabelle Chan, Kevin Priest and Joan Scott, Pregnancy Outcome Statistics Unit, Department of Health, South Australia.

Peter Mansfield, Divisional Support Unit, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania.

Maureen Bourne, Population Health Research Centre, ACT Health.

Sonya McNellee, Cherie Forbes and Margaret Stewart, Department of Health and Community Services, Northern Territory.

Samanthi Abeywardana, Australian and New Zealand Neonatal Network, provided data and reviewed the chapter on babies in neonatal intensive care units.

This publication was externally reviewed by:

Dr Michael Davies, Senior Research Fellow, Research Centre for Reproductive Health, University of Adelaide.

Dr Barbara Vernon, Executive Officer, Australian College of Midwives.

Dr Mark Tracy, Acting Director and Newborn Intensive Care Specialist, Nepean Hospital and Clinical Lecturer, Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Sydney.

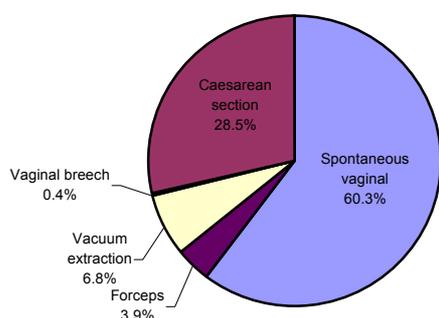
Within the NPSU, Narelle Grayson reviewed the report and Jishan Dean assisted in database management. Within the AIHW, Ainsley Morrissey and Cecilia Burke coordinated the printing and publication process.

# Highlights

*Australia's Mothers and Babies 2003* is the thirteenth annual report on pregnancy and childbirth of women in Australia, and their babies. This section provides an overview of the main findings of the report based on the National Perinatal Data Collection.

## Mothers in 2003

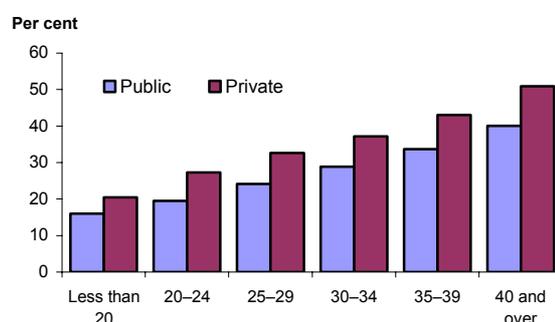
- There were 256,925 babies born to 252,584 mothers in 2003 reported to the National Perinatal Data Collection.
- The average age of all mothers was 29.5 years, and for first-time mothers, 27.6 years, continuing the upward trend seen in maternal age in recent years. There were 11,617 mothers aged less than 20 years (4.6%).
- One in 25 mothers intended to give birth outside of a conventional labourward setting in 2003 (4.0%). Only 2.8% of mothers actually did so, giving birth in places such as birth centres or at home.
- Of women who gave birth, 60.3% had a spontaneous vaginal birth and 0.4% had a vaginal breech birth (Figure 1). Forceps delivery occurred in 3.9% of mothers, while deliveries by vacuum extraction accounted for 6.8%.



**Figure 1: Method of birth, all mothers, 2003 (per cent)**

- The increase in caesarean sections continued with 28.5% of mothers having caesarean section deliveries in 2003, compared with 19.4% in 1994.

Over the same period, instrumental deliveries decreased from 11.7% to 10.7%. Caesarean section rates were higher among older mothers and those admitted to private hospitals (Figure 2).



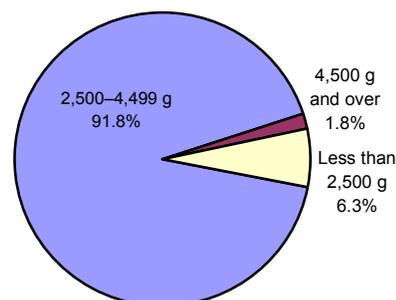
**Figure 2: Caesarean section deliveries, by maternal age and hospital sector, 2003 (per cent)**

- Of multiparous mothers who gave birth, 23.1% had previously had a caesarean section. Mothers with a history of caesarean section were likely to have another caesarean section in 2003 (81.4%), while 14.9% had a spontaneous vaginal birth, and 3.5% had an assisted vaginal delivery.
- Of mothers having an operative delivery (caesarean section, forceps or vacuum extraction), one third had an epidural or caudal anaesthetic administered, and approximately half had a spinal anaesthetic. A general anaesthetic was administered for 6.2% of operative deliveries. Proportions of mothers having spinal and general anaesthetics were higher for caesarean section deliveries than for assisted vaginal deliveries.

- There were 8,857 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women who gave birth, making up 3.6% of all mothers in Australia in 2003. Over one-third (38.6%) of births in the Northern Territory were to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers.
- The average age of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers who gave birth was 24.8 years, compared with 29.7 years for other mothers.
- Caesarean section deliveries occurred in 23.3% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers, compared with 28.8% of other mothers.
- The proportion of mothers who were born in a country other than Australia was 22.4%.
- Multiple pregnancies accounted for 1.7% of all pregnancies and included 4,179 twin pregnancies, 76 triplet pregnancies and four quadruplet pregnancies. The twinning rate was 16.5 per 1,000 mothers.

## Babies in 2003

- Of the 256,925 births in Australia, 20,243 (7.9%) were preterm (less than 37 weeks gestation). The average gestational age of all babies was 38.9 weeks in 2003.
- Babies of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers were more likely to be preterm (14.1%), compared with 7.6% of babies of other mothers.
- Low birthweight (less than 2,500 grams) occurred in 16,086 (6.3%) liveborn babies (Figure 3). The proportion of liveborn babies of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mothers that were low birthweight was 12.9% compared with 6.0% of babies of other mothers.



**Figure 3: Birthweight, live births, 2003 (per cent)**

- Of babies with breech presentations at birth, 87.3% were delivered by caesarean section.
- Male births exceeded female births, accounting for 51.5% of all births. The national sex ratio was 106.1 male births per 100 female births.
- The median length of stay in hospital for babies born in hospital was 4.0 days. The proportion of these babies with a length of stay of less than 5 days was 68.5%, and those with a length of stay of 5 days or more was 31.5%.
- In 2003, 5,345 babies were admitted to level III neonatal intensive care units in Australia. This equates to a rate of 21.0 per 1,000 live births. Of these babies, 46.8% had a gestational age of less than 32 weeks and 39.7% had a birthweight of less than 1,500 grams.
- Using state and territory perinatal data, the fetal death rate was 7.1 per 1,000 births; the neonatal death rate was 3.0 per 1,000 live births; and the perinatal death rate was 10.1 per 1,000 births.
- The main categories of perinatal death, as classified by the Perinatal Society of Australia and New Zealand Perinatal Death Classification were unexplained antepartum deaths, congenital abnormalities and spontaneous preterm births. These three groups of causes accounted for over half of all perinatal deaths.