

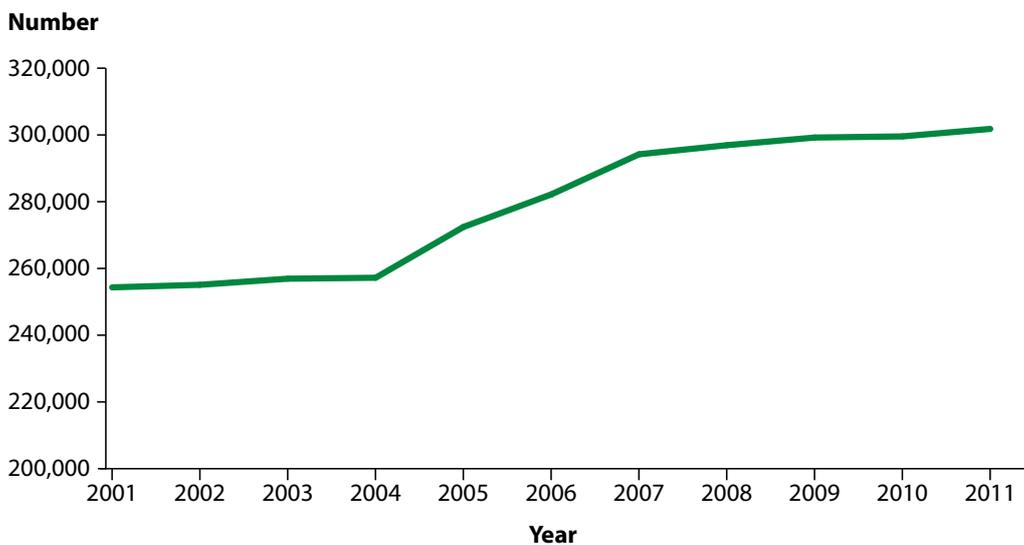
6.3 Australia's babies

Every year around 300,000 babies are born in Australia. The health of a baby at birth is a key determinant of subsequent health and wellbeing. A key national objective is that 'Australians are born healthy and remain healthy' (COAG 2011). This snapshot focuses on key indicators of babies' health, including gestational age, low birthweight and perinatal mortality.

How many births?

- The number of babies born each year continues to increase. In 2011, there were 301,810 births to 297,126 mothers. Of the births, 299,588 (99%) were live births and 2,220 were stillbirths (1%) (Figure 6.6).
- In 2011, Australia's total fertility rate (TFR) was 1.92 babies per woman, a decrease from a 30-year high of 2.02 in 2008 but higher than the low of 1.74 recorded in 2001. Since 1976, the TFR has been below the population replacement level, currently estimated at 2.1 babies per woman (ABS 2012).
- In 2011 the rate of still births (or fetal death rate) was 7.4 per 1,000 births. This has increased since 2002 (when it was 6.7 per 1,000 births), to a maximum of 7.8 per 1,000 in 2009.
- Males accounted for 51.4% of all live births.
- About 4% of women who gave birth (11,895 women) identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Figure 6.6



Note: Provisional data were provided by Victoria for 2009 and 2010.

Sources: Australia's mothers and babies reports 2010 and 2011.

Number of births in Australia, 2001–2011

Gestational age

Gestational age is the duration of a pregnancy in weeks. A pre-term birth is before 37 completed weeks of gestation, and is associated with a higher risk of adverse neonatal outcomes. In 2011:

- The mean gestational age for all babies was 38.7 weeks, and most babies (91%) were born between 37 and 41 weeks.
- About 14% of babies born to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were born pre-term compared with 8% of babies of non-Indigenous mothers. These rates have remained within 1% of these values for the last decade.

Birth outcomes

Birthweight is a key indicator of infant health and a principal determinant of a baby's chance of survival and good health. Babies may be small due to being born early (pre-term) or be small for gestational age, which indicates a possible growth restriction within the uterus. Low birthweight is when the baby weighs less than 2,500 grams.

- In 2011, 6.3% of babies were of low birthweight. This rate has remained relatively stable since 2006 (6.4%).
- In 2010, babies born to Indigenous mothers were twice as likely as those born to non-Indigenous mothers to be of low birthweight (12% compared with 6%) (AIHW 2013).
- Babies born in *Remote and very remote* areas were more likely to be of low birthweight (8.1%) than babies born in *Major cities* (6%).
- Babies born in the lowest SES areas were also more likely to be of low birthweight (7.2%) than babies born in the highest SES areas (5.4%).

Perinatal mortality

A perinatal death is the death of an unborn baby (at least 400 grams or 20 weeks' gestation) or of a baby which is born alive but dies within 28 days.

- In 2011, there were 2,992 perinatal deaths, equating to a rate of 9.9 perinatal deaths per 1,000 births). Of these, 74% were fetal deaths (stillbirths).
- The rate of perinatal deaths increased from 8 deaths per 1,000 births in 2002 to a high of 10.3 deaths per 1,000 births in 2006 (*AIHW mothers and babies*, multiple years).
- Higher rates of perinatal deaths were reported for babies of teenage mothers and of Indigenous mothers.
- The most common causes of perinatal death were congenital anomalies (27%), spontaneous pre-term birth (21%) and unexplained fetal death before the onset of labour (16%).

What is missing from the picture?

The AIHW has been developing a set of national core maternity indicators to monitor the quality of maternity care in Australia. Ten indicators have been developed to date in the areas of antenatal care, normal and operative birth, and baby's postpartum health. A further 8 indicators are being developed for which data will progressively become available for reporting.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on mothers and babies and core maternity indicators is available at www.aihw.gov.au/mothers-and-babies/. The latest edition (and previous editions) of the annual publication *Australia's mothers and babies* and the *National core maternity indicators* are available for free download.

References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2012. Births, Australia, 2012. ABS cat. no. 3301.0. Canberra: ABS.
- AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2013. Children's headline indicators data portal. Canberra: AIHW. Viewed 11 March 2014, <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/chi/>>.
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- COAG (Council of Australian Governments) 2011. National Health Care Agreement 2011. Canberra: COAG.