

# Sources for the historical demography of The Netherlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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In the past, as well as today, every system of population administration was informed by preconceived notions of social reality, notions that are reflected in the categories created to simplify and structure relations and behaviour. For example, individuals were supposed to belong to one specific household; each household had to have an official 'head' and members of households were ordered administratively by their 'relation to the head'. Also, every individual needed to have one official place of residence, even when he or she was an itinerant worker or was living on a boat. The categories and definitions employed in records and registers ensued from the purposes that the administrations served. For what legal, political or scientific goal were they actually recording, counting and categorizing people? This question is relevant for those who seek to distil knowledge on family life in the past from bureaucratic records. They have to be aware of the potential conflict between simple categories and complex realities as well as of the biases inherent in any system.

This chapter discusses the most important sources for family historians and historical demographers in The Netherlands. These are the vital or civil registers (certificates of birth, death and marriage) that were initiated in 1811, the population registers, initiated in 1850, and the ten-yearly censuses held from 1829 to 1971. For each source, I will discuss its origin and function, describe its content as well as potential biases and finally remark on its accessibility for researchers.

## **The civil registers**

As a consequence of the annexation of the Netherlands by the French Empire, French civil law was introduced in 1810. The *Code Napoléon* provided for the compulsory, standardized recording of vital events by means of certificates. These certificates served a legal function by recording the changes in individual status occurring through birth, marriage, divorce, and death. They were and are crucial documents for settling disputes concerning inheritance. Also, vital registers played an important role in the control and regulation of marriage, as will be discussed below.<sup>1</sup>

The certificates had to be drawn up in the municipality where the vital event occurred. Persons who declared a birth or death, or couples who declared their intention to marry, presented themselves to the registrar. The registrar would note the required information in a preformatted document, which was to be signed by the declarant(s) as well as by witnesses. The witnesses did not make any declaration themselves. They simply had to present when the declaration was made in front of the registrar and, afterwards, when the certificate was read aloud. In a strict legal sense the witnesses did not bear testimony to the truth of the declaration itself. Obviously, in the case of a birth, they were not expected to have been present at the delivery. Yet, to a certain extent they were supposed to affirm the contents of a declaration. The registrars were therefore urged to take care that witnesses were friends or relatives of the informants. They could refuse untrustworthy persons. In practice, however, and particularly in the case of birth certificates, the witnesses were frequently either clerks or other municipal officials, or even persons who made a living of signing certificates for a small fee.

The registrars had to note the names, ages, occupations and (actual) place of residence of the informants and witnesses. This information served the correct identification of individuals. Of

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is based on Vulsma, *Burgerlijke Stand en bevolkingsregister*.

other persons mentioned in the certificates, the required information was less detailed. For instance, it was not necessary for the registrar to state the age of parents in a birth certificate.

### *The birth certificates*

Each birth had to be reported to the Registrar of the municipality in which it had taken place. The birth had to be declared within three days, the day of the delivery itself not included. After this time limit, no notification could take place, unless an authorization was granted by the public prosecutor. In addition, a considerable fine had to be paid.

The declaration ought to be made by the father, or, in his absence, by the midwife or someone else who had been present at the delivery. In the certificates the name, occupation, place of residence, and age of the declarant are mostly mentioned first. The Registrar asked the declarant for information on the day and hour of birth, the place within the municipality in which the child was born, sex, and Christian name of the child. For the parents, items to be recorded included surnames and Christian names, occupation and municipality of residence. The names and marital status of the parents had to be registered in such a way that the legal status of the child was clear. Until 1935, a person who declared a new-born child to the Registrar had to be accompanied by two witnesses, which means that their ages, addresses, and occupations were recorded as well. The witnesses and the persons who declared the child were obliged to sign the certificate. In case they could or would not sign, the reason for this had to be made explicit.

*Illegitimate* children are children born outside legal marriage. Their mothers were generally unmarried or their former marriage had ended at least 300 days before. Children resulting from adultery of a married woman were registered as legitimate, unless her husband had refused the notification and had started a complicated procedure to dispute the legitimacy of the child. The birth certificates of illegitimate children differed in important respects from those of legitimate children. The registrar was not entitled to state the name of the father, unless the father officially *recognized* the child. He could only do so when he could show a document proving that the mother consented in the recognition. The recognition was a voluntary act on the part of a begetter of an illegitimate child, creating legal ties between him and the child. The father acknowledged his paternity, thereby admitting his obligation to provide for the child. The child received its father's last name and could from then on inherit from him, albeit only a third from what it would have received if it had been legitimately born. Only 'natural' children could be recognized, that is, children whose parents were both unmarried. Children begotten in incestuous or adulterous relationships could never be recognized. Until 1947 children could in principle be recognized only by their biological father. Recognized children were automatically *legitimated* (that is, become equal to legitimate children) when their parents married. Often, the recognition took place just prior to the marriage celebration and was stated in the marriage certificate. The fact of recognition had to be noted in the margin of the birth certificate. Because legitimation of recognized children automatically ensued from the marriage of their parents, no specific mention of this fact needed to be made on the birth certificate. This means that the information on legitimations is less complete than on recognitions.<sup>2</sup>

### *The death certificates*

Deaths had to be reported to the Registrar of the municipality in which it occurred. The notification could only be done by someone who had personal knowledge of the death of the

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<sup>2</sup> See also Kok, *Langs verboden wegen* and the chapter by Gates, Kok and Wang in this volume.

person concerned. In the nineteenth century, the declarant was generally a relative or an acquaintance of the deceased. Later on, notifications were mostly done by undertakers. For each deceased person, Christian names and surname, age, occupation, municipality of birth and residence and hour and day of death were recorded. The age was generally expressed in (completed) years; however, for persons younger than two at the time of death, ages were expressed in months, for persons younger than two months in weeks, and for those younger than two weeks in days, and for children less than two days old in hours. Stillbirths are also recorded in the death certificates.

The place of residence was usually expressed with a detailed address, which was required by the collector of death duties. In case the deceased was married or widowed, the name of husband and wife had to be mentioned. Until 1935, this concerned only the present or last partner of the deceased. After 1935, all former partners were to be mentioned in chronological order, without the reason of marriage dissolution. Christian names and surnames, occupation and place of residence of the parents of the deceased were to be mentioned as well. If they were deceased, only their names and the fact that they had died were mentioned. Before the introduction of the population register (see below), information on the parents of the deceased was often incomplete.

The law did not stipulate a time period within which notification had to take place. But no burial could take place without a written permission from the registrar, who was not entitled to give this permission before 36 hours after the death had occurred. Because it was most convenient to deliver the permission at the time of notification, registrars were strongly advised not to register a death before the 36 hours had passed.

### *The marriage certificates*

To comply with Dutch family laws, couples that intended to marry had to provide detailed information on themselves and their relatives. This makes the marriage certificates a rich source for family historians. First of all, the law fixed minimum ages of marriage. From 1838 these minimum ages were 18 for boys and 16 for girls. Persons were only allowed one marriage at a time and they were not allowed to marry relatives in the ascending or descending line, which applied for in-laws as well. This means that, for instance, a man could not marry his cousin (or even second cousin) and a widow could not marry her brother-in-law, at least not without dispensation. Finally, until 1922 one was not allowed to remarry the partner one had been divorced from. After that, only one such “marriage of reparation” was allowed.

Perhaps more important than the legal minimum age, was the required consent to the wedding, which had to be given by the parents and which was to be noted on the certificate. A distinction has to be made between persons who had come of age and those who had not. The Dutch Civil Law of 1838 stated that persons who had come of age (23 years) had to ask permission to marry until their thirtieth birthday. A refusal of (one or both of) the parents would lead to a case before the cantonal judge. If they still persisted in their refusal, the wedding could not take place before three months after the session. Persons younger than 23 always needed their parents' consent. If both parents had died, the grandfather on the father's side would be consulted, in his absence the grandfather on the mother's side and so on. An illegitimate child needed the consent of its mother, and of its father as well when he had recognized it.

In order to be sure that no illegal marriages were contracted, intended marriages had to be proclaimed publicly on two Sundays following the couple's giving notice of their marriage. This was done by reading aloud the proclamation in front of the town hall. The proclamations

had to be made in the place(s) of residence of bride and bridegroom, even in those where they had lived less than six months before.

Because of these regulations, the registers contain information on numerous persons. The couple had to come up with excerpts from their own birth certificates, as well as of the (eventual) death certificates of parents, grandparents, or previous partners. In the registers, we find the Christian and surnames of bride and bridegroom, their ages, occupations and places of residence. It is also specifically mentioned whether they had reached the age of majority or not. Further, the names, ages, occupations and place of residence of living parents are given or the names of already deceased parents. When both parents had died, consent to the marriage had to be given by the grandparents. For the wedding ceremony, at least four witnesses were required in the period 1811-1913. Their names, ages, occupations and places of residence were given as well as the (family) relationship between the witnesses and the bride or groom. Finally, when the marriage ended in a divorce, this had to be noted in the margin of the marriage certificate. Until the late nineteenth century, it was very difficult to get an official divorce in The Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>

By and large, the civil registers are a very accurate recording of vital events in the Netherlands. Apparently, people were well aware of the troubles caused by not declaring. Underregistration of births was significant only in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Complying with the administrative regulations was difficult for itinerant workers and immigrants. Indeed, some couples chose to live in consensual unions as a way to avoid bureaucratic trouble, at least temporarily.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding their accuracy, civil records still pose problems to the unwary researcher. For instance, the common method of estimating social mobility from comparing occupations of grooms and their fathers is problematic because only living fathers can be included.<sup>5</sup>

Almost every certificate of birth, marriage and death ever made in the Netherlands is still available, because each was made in duplicate. The original remained in the municipality and the copy was sent to the registry of the county court after the closing of the register on December 31st. The duplicates have been assembled in the provincial archives, at least for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The certificates have been made accessible by alphabetical indexes on birth, deaths and marriages that occurred in each municipality per ten-yearly period. Thus, the research method of family reconstitution is quite feasible, provided one is satisfied with a local study.<sup>6</sup> However, in particular in the western part of the Netherlands many municipalities were small in size, causing a great loss of research persons through out-migration. Even more serious, strong out-migration diminishes the quality of the calculations of demographic rates for the sedentary population as well.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, the ongoing digitization of the indexes – stimulated by a surge of popular interest in genealogy – will allow researchers to expand the search for out-migrants enormously. We expect that within a few years all Dutch marriage certificates in the period 1811-1922 can be traced and even linked automatically using the names of the parents. Very likely, the automatic indexation of birth and death certificates will follow suit.

The civil records are an indispensable source for historical demography in The Netherlands. The Dutch contributions in this volume are either based primarily on the civil records

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<sup>3</sup> Van Poppel, *Trouwen in Nederland*; Van Poppel, 'Family breakdown'.

<sup>4</sup> Kok, "Passion, reason and human weakness".

<sup>5</sup> Delger and Kok, "Bridegrooms and biases".

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Noordam, *Leven in Maasland*; Hendrickx, *In order not to fall into poverty*.

<sup>7</sup> Ruggles, "Migration, Marriage, and Mortality".

(Engelen) or on combinations of population registers and civil records (Kok). A number of recent studies already experiment with the automatic indexes on the marriage certificates.<sup>8</sup>

### **The population registers**

Population registers record the same vital events as the civil registers. Obviously, this spares the researcher the trouble of linking certificates of birth, marriage and death. Even more important for the family historian is that people are recorded in their primary social surrounding, that is within their household or family. And last but not least, the registers record migration as well. Thus, it is in principle possible to trace persons in their subsequent domiciles and even to reconstruct their entire life courses. This type of administration is rare for historic populations. And although the system certainly has its shortcomings, it is one of the best sources for historical (micro-)demography in the world.

In Europe, historical population registers exist only in Belgium (from 1846), The Netherlands (from 1850) and Italy (from 1864). In part, this occurrence can be explained by the personal influence of the famous Belgian astronomer and statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1874). In the Kingdom of the Netherlands (which comprised Belgium as well during the period 1815-1830), he laid the foundation for the ten-yearly censuses, which began in 1829. The decrees actually suggested, but did not stipulate, that the censuses would be kept up-to date by recording changes. Quetelet was also a key figure in the International Statistical Conferences. The Italian representatives to these Conferences adopted Quetelet's ideas for the administration of their newly unified state. Not accidentally, all three countries had been occupied by the French and had chosen to retain French civil laws and bureaucratic principles of a centralized state. In these countries, the relations between local and central government were organized along the same lines, allowing the population registers to perform a double function as a local bureaucratic tool and a provider of aggregates statistics. Ironically, the French themselves rejected the implementation of population registers, although they were already prescribed in a revolutionary decree of 1791.<sup>9</sup>

Quetelet was devoted to an accurate population administration because this would allow social scientists to study the propensities of the average man (*l' homme moyenne*) and, eventually, to discover the laws regulating society. In his view, recognizing and acting upon these laws was essential for good government. In the Netherlands, the system was introduced on the eve of municipal reform (1851). The registers were to provide the population data needed to calculate the franchise and the local shares of conscripted soldiers. In due course, the population registers were to become indispensable in the implementation of social policies at the *individual* level. For instance, they would be used to note disablement, pensionability et cetera. The accuracy of its knowledge of individual citizens was increasing constantly. Although this did lead to some protests that individual privacy was violated, no one foresaw what a dangerous tool the registers could become in the hands of a totalitarian regime. During the Second World War, the occupying German forces could locate the Dutch Jews with deadly efficiency.

In the course of its existence, the administrative principles of the population registers were changed several times. At first, the system recorded people on the basis of the *legal* place of residence. This was meant to alleviate the administration of the poor relief, which was based on legal domicile. However, recording people who were not actually residing in a particular

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<sup>8</sup> Bras and Kok, "They live in indifference together", Van Poppel, Monden and Mandemakers, Intergenerational transmission of age at marriage.

<sup>9</sup> Randeraad, "Negentiende-eeuwse bevolkingsregisters".

place soon proved impractical, and the system was dropped already in 1862. Since then, people were registered in the municipalities where they actually lived. The municipalities were free to choose how they organized the registers: in alphabetical order by family name or by address. Also, the revision of 1862 allowed for separate registers for the extremely mobile domestic servants who were overburdening the main registers. However, (residential) mobility remained a formidable administrative burden, requiring the constant crossing-out of persons or whole families and entering them elsewhere. Already in the late nineteenth century, officials began to propose a loose-leaf system of cards for individual persons that could be ordered by families. Although this was rejected, many municipalities changed their registers around 1910 into a system of loose cards for (nuclear) families. In 1939, these cards were replaced by a system of personal cards that lasted until 1994, when a fully automatic administration system was introduced.

The population registers contain a wealth of information. For each individual the registers provide the surname and Christian name(s), sex, date and place of birth, relation to the head of the household, date of entry in the register, civil status (unmarried, married, widowed or divorced) and changes therein, church affiliation, occupation, date and municipality of provenance, date and destination of out-migration, place of legal residence, and, finally, date of death.<sup>10</sup>

The quality of the registers was safeguarded in various ways. First of all, the registers were crosschecked with the results of the census, which was held every ten years. Generally, the census formed the starting point of the new register. In quite a few instances, we find persons deleted because they were no longer present at the census date or entered because they had apparently in-migrated without registering. In the period between the censuses, the local authorities were responsible for the upkeep of the registers. In Amsterdam, for instance, this job was consigned initially to 263 unpaid wardens who kept registers for their own neighbourhood. However, already in 1855 the wardens were replaced by paid officials. Since then, full-time clerks and inspectors were responsible for the Amsterdam administration.<sup>11</sup> In the countryside, checking and correcting the registers was often assigned to the constables. Registering a residential move was obligatory and neglect could be fined. However, a legal basis for the system was not provided until 1887 and indeed, people often shirked reporting their new place of residence. In particular, head of households neglected to report the coming or going of their servants. Since the servants did not pay taxes, the officials were not very diligent in rectifying these omissions that were often only noticed at the time of the census. Thus, estimates based on the registers tend to underestimate the mobility of working adolescents. Also, their information on occupations is of limited use, because changes in occupation were not (systematically) recorded. Generally, vital events were recorded as accurate in the population registers as they were in the civil registers. However, in some areas this was not the case. Particularly in the northern provinces birth were added only when the family was entered on a new page. Using the registers for family reconstitution would result in an underestimation of both infant mortality and fertility. Finally, the researchers have to be aware of the changes in the administrative units. Until 1862, entire household were recorded, including servants. The household – without the servants – remained the administrative unit until 1910, when it shifted to (nuclear) families. Often, this was strictly limited to married couples and their children. In the city of Rotterdam, for instance, co-residing relatives were moved to their own cards. In fact, even unwed mothers and their children were not considered

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<sup>10</sup> Knotter and Meijer, *Gemeentelijke bevolkingsregisters 1850-1920*.

<sup>11</sup> Meijer, “De negentiende-eeuwse ‘papierens mensch’”, 383.

a family and thus recorded on separate cards. Reconstituting households is feasible, but very time-consuming.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding these biases and problems, the population registers have been used extensively for family and migration history.<sup>13</sup> They are kept in the municipal archives and freely accessible until 1940. In addition, for those persons deceased between 1939 and 1994, the personal cards can be retrieved from the Central Bureau of Genealogy, albeit without information that might infringe on privacy. Currently, the popularity of the registers is even increasing, due to advances in computer technology. On the one hand, local archives are improving the accessibility of their population registers by publishing indexes on the web and by scanning or even digitizing the entire registers. On the other hand, researchers are avidly exploring new opportunities, for instance by creating public-use sets of historical micro-data. The most important initiative in this respect is the Historical Sample of the Netherlands. This database, under construction since 1992, will contain the complete life courses of about 40,000 randomly picked individuals. These individuals are traced from birth to death in all their subsequent households across the country.<sup>14</sup> Several Dutch contributions to this volume make use of the first completed parts of the Historical Sample.

## The censuses

The goals of the ten-yearly censuses were to check the information in the population registers and to collect statistical information on the size and composition of the population. Soon, they were also combined with other censuses, on respectively occupations (from 1849 onward) and housing (from 1899 onwards). Although the original census forms were not preserved, most of the information on individuals and families can be found in the population registers.

The population censuses were primarily interested in the demographic structure of municipalities and provinces. That is, for (subdivisions of) municipalities, we find numbers of persons by sex, civil status and age. We also find a division between households and single persons. Thus, we can calculate the average size of households. The definition of household was based on the (economic) criterion of house keeping unit. This means that the censuses were less fixated than the population registers on kin or marital relations.<sup>15</sup> From 1849 onwards, persons living in institutions such as convents or prison were counted separately. Thus, in the censuses around 1900 we find the following categories: heads of households, spouses, children, other relatives, employed persons, other households members (boarders, lodgers), single living persons and persons in institutions. The censuses also recorded and tabulated place of birth and nationality, as well as religious affiliation.

In a number of censuses, additional information was requested that, unfortunately, can no longer be traced to the individuals involved. This includes questions regarding physical handicaps (blindness, deaf-muteness, clubfeet), level of education, and marital fertility. The latter implied that married women were asked when they had married, how many children had been born alive in the existing marriage and how many children under six years had died. This

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<sup>12</sup> See Gordon, *The bevolkingsregisters*.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. De Vries, *Landbouw en bevolking*; Janssens, *Family and social change*; Kok, "Choices and constraints";

<sup>14</sup> Mandemakers, "Historical Sample of the Netherlands", see also <http://www.iisg.nl/~hsn/> and <http://www.lifecoursesincontext.nl/>.

<sup>15</sup> Van Maarsseveen, "Volkstellingen 1795-1971", 34.

information has been used in a number of demographic studies, as well as in the contribution of Engelen to this volume [XX?]<sup>16</sup>

Even for historical demographers primarily interested in micro-data, the censuses contain indispensable information. They are needed to place individuals and families in their proper contexts. On the basis of the census, one can answer questions such as: what is the population size and density of a particular locality, what is the level of isolation (what part of the residing population was indigenous), what is the dominant religion, what is the sex ratio of the unmarried etcetera. By using subsequent censuses, long-term trends can be determined as well. The occupational census provide important information on the labour market of a given locality or region.

Currently, scientific access to the data contained in the censuses is strongly improved. A public-use database with a selection of census data (such as church affiliations per municipality per census-year) is available.<sup>17</sup> Also, all censuses are being digitized which implies that the original tables can be downloaded in a format that allows the researcher to perform his combinations and calculations.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Van Poppel, Differential fertility; Van Poppel, "Late fertility decline"; Engelen en Hillebrand, "Fertility and class".

<sup>17</sup> Beekink et al, *Nederland in verandering*.

<sup>18</sup> See the website <http://www.volkstelling.nl/nl/>.