MIGRATION STATISTICS: FOCUS OF FUTURE WORK

Note by the Steering Group on Migration Statistics

> *At its October 2022 meeting, the UNECE Group of Experts on migration statistics expressed strong support for launching new methodological work on measuring emigration.*
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> *Taking into account the recent discussions by the CES Bureau about the importance of improving the timeliness of official statistics, the Group of Experts also supported "improving the timeliness of migration statistics and their communication" as an alternative topic for new work on migration statistics.*
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> ***The CES Bureau agreed to establish a task force on measuring emigration. The United Kingdom will chair the task force. The terms of reference for the task force will be submitted to the October 2023 meeting of the Bureau.***

I.   BACKGROUND

1.   At its October 2022 meeting, the meeting of the UNECE Group of Experts on migration statistics (chaired by Italy) discussed about possible topics for future work and expressed strong support for launching new methodological work on measuring emigration.

2.   On that occasion, the experts were informed of the discussions by the CES Bureau in October 2022 about the importance of improving the timeliness of official statistics. The experts discussed about the importance of timeliness with regard to migration statistics and proposed *improving the timeliness of migration statistics and their communication* as a possible topic for new work, alternative to *measuring emigration*. Considering the current capacity in the UNECE secretariat and in the community of migration experts in national statistical offices, it was considered feasible to focus on one such project at a time.

3.   The two topics proposed by the experts for possible new work are presented briefly in this note, for consideration by the Bureau and to inform the discussion about which topic should be selected for future work by a new task force.

II.   MEASURING EMIGRATION

4.   Measuring international migration is one of the main challenges of official statistics. Traditional data sources, such as population and housing censuses, household surveys and administrative records are used to provide data on different aspects of international migration,

but all these sources have their strengths and limitations. Integration of data from different sources is promoted[1] as a way to enrich data and reduce problems with coverage and accuracy.

5.   Most of the work done to improve the production of international migration statistics has focused on immigration data. One of the reasons for this is the high policy relevance of immigration in many countries. Moreover, emigration is traditionally more difficult to measure than immigration, because the emigrant population is no longer resident in the country, and therefore cannot be measured directly using censuses or surveys. Administrative sources are used in several countries to produce estimates for emigration, but in most cases the figures are underestimated because many emigrants do not register their departure, although they are generally expected to do it. Even in jurisdictions where border-crossing data is comprehensive, allowing for a direct estimate of the levels of emigration, attributes, such as the destination of emigrants remain elusive.

6.   To overcome these problems and produce better statistics on emigration, researchers and national statistical offices have developed various techniques over the years, including residual methods, indirect estimation, sampling methods, and statistical modelling. In 2013, a CES working group on migration statistics[2] produced a review of those methods[3], discussing the relative strengths and limitations of each approach. Since then, more administrative data have become available in many countries. Some countries have been able to make use of new data sources[4]. Administrative data or new data sources, for instance, can be used to identify emigrants who have not communicated their departure. Data integration and other methods suitable for measuring emigration data have significantly developed. For instance, in Austria social security data are linked at unit record level to the population register to identify persons who emigrated without communicating their departure. In Israel, border control data are integrated with the population register to calculate the length of stay abroad and then identify emigrants and return emigrants. In Canada, where there is no population register, emigrants are estimated by using data from the Child Tax Benefit programme and the Canada Revenue Agency, but also from the US Department of Homeland Security with regard to emigration to the United States.

7.   Countries make significant efforts to improve the quality of emigration statistics because of the very high importance of this information for policy making in various areas. In particular, emigration has demographic effects and is a significant factor in demographic accounts. In the United States, for instance, emigration data are required for the postcensal population estimates, population projections, and coverage evaluation programs at the Census Bureau. The Census Bureau for decades used a residual method on information from decennial censuses to indirectly measure emigration of residents who are foreign born. However, this method has some weaknesses, and alternative methods have been developed to improve emigration estimates[5].

8.   Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of understanding emigrant populations, from the perspective of the source jurisdictions. As borders closed, and populations that had limited access and rights in host countries were exposed, source jurisdictions did not have good information on their citizens living outside their borders, in order to offer sufficient support or pathways back to the source nation.

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[1] UNECE 2019. Guidance on data integration for measuring migration. Geneva, United Nations
[2] Task force on improving migration and migrant data using household surveys and other sources (also known as "Suitland Working Group")
[3] A Review of Methods for Estimating Emigration
[4] UNECE 2022. Use of new data sources for measuring international migration. Geneva: United Nations
[5] United States Census Bureau methods for estimating emigration of the foreign born

9.   Considering the high policy relevance of emigration statistics, the progress made in the last few years, and the fact that there is still room for improvement in this field, it would be timely to review the data sources and methods available for the production of emigration statistics, in particular to identify good practices that could lead to improvement. New work could entail the review of existing data sources (since 2013 work), methods for each source, and key indicators to produce from each source.

III.   IMPROVING THE TIMELINESS OF MIGRATION STATISTICS AND THEIR DISSEMINATION

10.   The CES Bureau at its October 2022 meeting discussed strategic developments in official statistics and identified the need to improve the timeliness of official statistics as one of the big challenges, and as a requirement to maintain the relevance of official statistics and statistical offices.

11.   On that occasion, the Bureau noted that timely data with sufficient granularity are needed to measure the economy, society and environment, for evidence-based decision making by citizens and policy makers. In the current competitive environment, if official statistics do not provide timely and relevant data, other data providers may fill the gaps with lesser quality and provide insight even if the data are not fit for this purpose. Additionally, with such providers, there is little guarantee that transparently informing the citizenry and decision makers, for the public good will remain a driving principle of data and insights provision.

12.   The quick reaction of many national statistical offices to the Covid-19 pandemic showed that statistical surveys can be speeded up considerably if needed. These improvements need to be sustained, spread to different areas of statistics where not yet present, and to countries that are lagging behind. Several national statistical offices also demonstrated the rapid deployment of insights gained from alternative data sources, and often at high frequencies.[6]

13.   The Bureau also noted that data on population is one of the cornerstones of official statistics but the concepts, timeliness, coverage and granularity of these data are not meeting the needs. The official definitions (e.g. resident population, migration) often do not reflect the reality.

14.   The above considerations of the Bureau were discussed at the October 2022 UNECE meeting of the Group of experts on migration statistics. The experts agreed that those considerations fully apply to the domain of migration statistics, and noted that communication is also a key aspect that has to be improved to maintain the relevance of official statistics.

15.   Communication with policymakers must explain what official statistics can offer for society, highlighting in particular its usefulness and quality compared to what can be offered by data providers outside official statistics. Communication towards the general public is important for the social acceptability and trust, getting community engagement and improving the response rates.

16.   Especially in emergency situations like those experienced in the last years (pandemics, war, natural disasters) it is very important that official statistics respond in a timely way to the requests for data on migration and migrants. At the same time, it is crucial to communicate in a clear way to the various categories of users all relevant information on the data sources and

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[6] For example, see the COVID-19 Data portal produced by Statistics New Zealand
(https://www.stats.govt.nz/experimental/covid-19-data-portal)

methods used, especially if they are different from those that are used in the regular statistical production process.

17.   The experts suggested that new work could be launched on improving the timeliness and communication of migration statistics, with two objectives:

(a) identify and review initiatives and innovations aimed at improving the timeliness of official migration statistics, either in response to emergency situations or in the regular statistical production, highlighting in particular good practices that could be considered for adoption by other countries;

(b) discuss specific aspects of the communication of official migration statistics, also in relation to the timeliness of the production of those statistics, and identify good practices that could possibly serve as examples for other countries.

IV.   ACTION REQUESTED FROM THE BUREAU

18.   The Bureau is invited to discuss and decide on the topic of future work to be pursued by a task force.

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