

Migration Statistics User Forum – Tuesday 16th September 2014 – Breakout session C: Use of administrative data in measuring migration

During this session, the chair, Jonathan Tinsley (ONS) introduced two presentations from ONS colleagues. These are available on the RSS website alongside plenary session presentations that have been highlighted to attendees.

1. The first presentation (by Ann Blake, ONS) gave users an update on the Beyond 2011 Programme. This explained what the main work areas in the programme will be through to 2021 and beyond since the National Statistician's recommendation¹ earlier in 2014 for:

- An online census of all households and communal establishments in England and Wales in 2021 as a modern successor to the traditional, paper-based decennial census. ONS recognises that special care would need to be taken to support those who are unable to complete the census online.
- Increased use of administrative data and surveys in order to enhance the statistics from the 2021 Census and improve annual statistics between censuses.

Research within the programme has and will continue to develop an understanding of the patterns by which immigrants and emigrants with different characteristics enter, interact with, and are removed from, different administrative systems e.g. GP patient registers.

Questions from the floor included:

What's driving the push to discontinue the Census after 2021?

The Government's response² to the National Statistician's recommendation explains this as follows:

'We agree with the recommendation for an online census in 2021 as a modern successor to the traditional paper-based decennial census, with support for those who are unable to complete the census online. We welcome the increased use of administrative data in producing the census in 2021 and other population statistics, and to improve statistics between censuses, since this would make the best use of all available data and provide a sound basis for the greater use of administrative data and surveys in the future. We welcome ONS plans for further research to determine the most appropriate blend of methods and data sources for the 2021 census. However, our support for the dual running of an online (decennial) census with increased use of administrative data is only relevant to 2021 and not for future censuses. Our ambition is that censuses after 2021 will be conducted using other sources of data and providing more timely statistical information. However, any final decision on moving to the use only of administrative data beyond 2021 will be dependent on the dual running sufficiently validating the perceived feasibility of that approach. In the period up to 2021 UKSA's plans should include ensuring that adequate research into the use of administrative data and surveys is carried out to enable a decision about the future methodology for capturing population and census data.'

¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/beyond-2011-report-on-autumn-2013-consultation--and-recommendations/national-statisticians-recommendation.pdf>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/letter-from-rt-hon-francis-maude-mp-to-sir-andrew-dilnot---180714.pdf>

How will small area and characteristics statistics be produced without a Census?

Ongoing work to develop alternative methods for estimating the population will include the feasibility of producing estimates for small geographic areas and of producing statistics on the different characteristics measured by the Census. The 2021 Census will allow an evidence based assessment of the robustness of any methods developed. There will also be extensive user consultation and both will inform decisions about how we proceed after 2021.

2. The second presentation (by Louise O'Leary) gave a short update on research looking at the data quality of a semaphore (previously e-borders) data extract shared with ONS by Border Force. This will feed into updating ONS' view on the feasibility of using semaphore data to improve migration statistics, which will take the form of a research report to be released before the end of 2014.

Questions from the floor included:

What is the coverage of the semaphore data?

By the end of the data extract being analysed (late 2012), coverage had increased significantly but there were still some gaps and this remains the case. Coverage will be an important factor in the utility of the data: If individuals can enter, leave (or both) by a method not covered then even if estimates of migration could be produced, the uncertainty around them will be too great to make them useful.

Can the semaphore data be combined with other data sources (e.g. visa data) to help better estimate migration (at least for non-EU migration)?

In theory, yes. From a Beyond 2011 research point of view, semaphore data may be useful. For example, by linking to other data sources to help confirm whether an individual has emigrated if it appears they are inactive on health or employment databases. For measuring migration more directly, the ONS does not currently have access to visa data. ONS acknowledges the theory of using a combination of visa and semaphore data to produce estimates of non-EU migration, even if a different method is still required for EU migration. Our work on the quality and coverage of the semaphore data, and how these are changing or improving over time, is necessary to inform if and when research into such uses are likely to be worthwhile.