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Coverage

United Kingdom

Theme

Population and Migration

Task Force sets out plan for improving migration statistics

National Statistician Karen Dunnell is leading the government's efforts to improve measurement of the numbers of people taking up residence in or leaving the country, following publication today of the report of the Inter-Departmental Task Force on Migration Statistics.

Understanding migration is vital to estimating the size and distribution of the population and how it is changing. Better information is needed to manage the economy, develop policies and allocate resources for services such as health, education and housing, nationally and locally.

The report of the Task Force, set up by Karen Dunnell, recommends a range of actions designed to get better information about the complex area of migration and to deliver more timely, comprehensive statistics covering both long and short term migration.

Responding to the report, Karen Dunnell said:

"For the last few years migration has been the main factor affecting population numbers in this country. However, there is now a broad recognition that available estimates of migrant numbers are inadequate to meet all the purposes for which they are now required"

"It is an immense challenge and there is no one, quick fix. Work undertaken by ONS in recent years has identified some improvements that can be made quickly. These will be reflected in population figures to be published in 2007. If the recommendations of the Task Force were then to be fully implemented across Government, they would lead to further, progressive improvements between 2008 and 2012 in our ability to track trends in migration and assess its impact.

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“From the recommendations, I will now explore the priorities and costs and, working with our partners within and outside Government, agree a programme of improvements. It is intended that work will start on this in 2007. I will issue a full response to the report at that time”

In a period of rapid change, meeting this statistical need has become more difficult with the available methods, sources and definitions.

Migration is often a complex process. For example, becoming a long-term migrant, that is, changing your country of usual residence for at least a year, is dependent not only on the person’s intention when entering a country but on what happens after entry, that is, whether that intent is later realised. This has made it difficult to use a single source of information to measure international migration.

The Task Force recommends improvements to the current definitions, methods and sources, with the aim of providing:

- A more coherent picture of UK migration.
- More reliable estimates of population and migration at regional and local levels.
- Information on short-term migrants (those who change their country of usual residence for less than a year) that is comparable to that available on long term migrants. At present, migration estimates do not include figures on short-term migrants.
- Statistics that more accurately relate intentions at entry to actual behaviour (on length of stay and area of residence) and to experience and outcomes once in the country (for example, patterns of employment, having a child).
- More comprehensive, timely and accurate figures on key migrant groups living in the country (for example, short term migrant workers).
- More timely and robust indicators of trends in migrant numbers.



The key improvements that will make a difference to short and long term migrant information are:

- **Port surveys.** Migrants, particularly people leaving the country, need to be better identified. The Task Force has suggested a review of survey methods and designs to achieve substantially larger samples of short and long term migrants. To do this effectively will require bringing forward some elements of the Home Office initiative on electronic borders (such as passport scanning on arrival). Better information from the landing card and other proposed entry-monitoring systems (for example, point-based entry) will also be needed. Improvements could be delivered in two to five years.
- **Population surveys and the Census.** To provide more comprehensive and timely information about migrants living here, all migrants need to be covered by ONS's large household surveys and the 2011 Census and asked questions relating to their migration. Improvements to surveys could be delivered in three to six years.
- **Timely access to administrative information.** This is required to improve coverage of migrants in statistics (for example, using national insurance, tax, school, patient register and other registration records). Improvements could be delivered in two years.
- **Better links between information from administrative sources.** By carrying out linkage for statistical purposes, migrant information at entry to the UK could be associated with subsequent actions. This would provide statistics that more accurately relate intentions at entry to actual behaviour, experience and outcomes once in the country. Improvements could be delivered in one to three years.



- **Better statistical techniques.** Bringing together this wider range of information should make it possible to provide more timely and robust indicators of trends. To achieve this will also require more sophisticated statistical models than are used at present and greater use of expert interpretation of the most up-to-date position on UK migration statistics. As there is currently no single official source of migrant statistics, bringing together all the statistics collected across Government on migration and migrants in a single UK-wide report will provide a more coherent picture. Improvements could be delivered in one to two years.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. The full report of the Inter-departmental Task Force is available on the National Statistics website:
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/methodology/specific/population/future/imps/updates/default.asp>
2. The Task Force was set up in May 2006 to identify improvements that could be made to estimates of migration and migrant populations in the UK, both nationally and at local level, in advance of those that might flow from long-term strategic systems such as e-borders. Departments included ONS, Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and Skills, Department of Health/Information Centre, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Devolved Administrations.
3. For its international migration statistics, ONS uses the UN recommended definition of an international long-term migrant: that is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence for a period of at least a year, so that the country of destination becomes the country of usual residence. This definition excludes visitors and short-term migrants (those who change their country of usual residence for three months to a year).
4. There is no single, all-inclusive system in place to measure movements of population into or out of the UK. Tracking changes in the pattern of migration in a timely fashion (particularly those resulting from globalisation and EU expansion) has proved difficult using existing sources, methods and definitions because:
 - No systematic register exists of all people entering or leaving the country.
 - Population and migration statistics are currently based solely on the UN definition of a long-term migrant (broadly speaking a person who migrates for over 12 months).



- Limited data are available to separately identify short-term migrants (3-12 months) or seasonal workers and even fewer statistics are routinely published about these groups.
 - Information on intended length of stay collected at ports (for example, in the International Passenger Survey) may differ from that obtained in-country.
 - Administrative registers (e.g. NHS patient registers) only collect residence information on migrants once they have registered (by which time they may have moved address several times).
 - No information on intended stay is recorded and actual duration in the country is not well documented. These factors make it difficult to estimate geographic distributions of international migrants or to link length of stay to employment patterns.
 - Most administrative sources that identify new arrivals in the country or record place of residence for all those registered (e.g. NHS, Worker Registration Scheme, NI registration), have little or no direct information on emigration.
 - At present, the only reliable source of information on emigration is the International Passenger Survey. The number of emigrants interviewed in this survey each year is relatively small.
5. A considerable amount of work has been done since 2003 to identify improvements that need to be made to international migration statistics. The following will make modest improvements by 2008:
- Improving passenger survey estimates of migration by boosting the sample of emigrants in the International Passenger Survey from January 2007.
 - Revising the assumptions in the mid-2006 population estimates on numbers of international migrants whose actual length of stay differs from their stated intentions (to be published in summer 2007).
 - Improving estimates of the geographic distribution of international migrants at regional level, by combining Labour Force Survey (LFS) and IPS data, for inclusion in the mid-2006 population estimates (to be published in summer 2007).
 - Reporting shortly on the feasibility of estimating, in 2007, numbers of short-term migrants, covering those arriving and departing from the UK and those living here.
6. More substantial improvements are also planned in 5-10 years (for example, full coverage by e-Borders in 2014 and better coverage of migrants and other populations in the 2011 Census).
7. However, the existing work has not provided an indication of how, in the next five years:
- Information collected at entry and departure for both short and long term migrants can provide, with sufficient accuracy, the level of detail on flows currently needed (for example for local areas).
 - Comprehensive, timely coverage can be provided of the different types

of migrant in-country, at the level of detail and accuracy currently needed.

- Better information can be produced relating intentions at entry to actual behaviour (on length of stay and area of residence particularly) and to experience and outcomes once in-country (e.g. patterns of employment and childbearing).
 - More timely, robust key indicators of migrant trends can be produced.
 - Information from the wide range of disparate information currently available can be presented to provide a more coherent picture of migration.
8. To achieve these aims requires fundamental solutions based on statistics that track more effectively the complex processes that comprise international migration, as outlined in the Task Force's recommendations.
 9. The annual mid-year population estimates are an estimate of the usually resident population. In calculating the England and Wales population estimates, a number of components are used. These include: births, deaths, prisoners, school boarders, home and foreign armed forces, internal migration and international migration. International migration includes information from the International Passenger Survey, movements to and from Ireland, asylum seekers and people who change their status from visitor to migrants and vice versa. It is important to remember that short-term international migrants are not included in the mid-year population estimates which only include long term international migrants (based on the UN definition), to ensure that only usual residents are included in the estimates.
 10. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the press office.
 11. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference. © Crown copyright 2006.