Local migration statistics matter

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Summary

In the UK we are not measuring migration well at a local (or national) level; existing government data that could help local government researchers and policy staff is difficult to get hold of and planned improvements are slow. This is not just an academic problem; there are social consequences. The lack of even approximate numbers for local migrants makes anticipation and planning a lot harder for those whose job it is to manage rapid and unexpected local change.

This short article is not academic – I am not a demographer, and I have deliberately limited references to footnotes. Instead, I write from the perspective of local authorities, who have to make practical and pragmatic decisions in response to events – and who need evidence to inform responses. What interests me is the interface between a statistical problem and local social and policy concerns. Here the statisticians have failed the practitioners. A methodological problem that was not addressed in time has meant less effective local responses to change. In a rapidly changing world, we need to be able to react faster than this.

Should radical statisticians care?

Poor local statistics influence public policy – or the lack of it. People who are not counted don't exist in grant formulas or in strategic plans. If there are a lot of them, there may be some extra demands on local services; if there is no associated increase in grant it doesn't help those trying to improve relevant local services. Many strategic plans use medium term population estimates. For example, housing strategies include estimates of new housing need, which are partly based on assumptions about population growth. If plans are too far out of line with reality, then they are not going to meet real local needs.

Migration is a major area of public debate. Research shows that the general public over-estimates the extent of migration; this can fuel

local tensions. Rumour, anecdote and prejudice can take over in the absence of good estimates and accurate information. You cannot counter such over-estimates with out of date data that clearly underestimates recent change.

We know from history and current debates how easily 'outsiders' can become society's scapegoats; a lack of accurate data does not help people to counter the myths that fuel this.

Last but not least, those new arrivals who are least likely to be counted by our current systems are often those who are relatively the poorest. They are more likely to suffer from exploitation. So there is a social justice implication to undercounting. Illegal migrants, or those working in the grey economy, are not a popular cause. If they are not measured, then difficult questions - about destitution, people trafficking, undercutting, overcrowding, exploitation and the black economy - are more easily ignored.

All this means that finding ways of improving local estimates and understanding local change matters; and the most affected local areas want better information as soon as possible. The ONS recognise the problem, and now have a programme of improvement[1]; but this does not help those wanting some kind of data to help with improved guesstimates *now*. The scheduled package of improvements will not all feed into published local estimates until seven years *after* the EU expanded.

A quick background to the current problems

While migration flows have shifted quite quickly in recent years, measuring methods have not kept pace. Migration is perhaps the hardest aspect of population change to measure and to predict – yet statistics that we do have show that international migration is now the major driver of UK population growth, so measuring it has become, relatively, *more* important.

Measurement is not easy. Millions move in and out of the UK every year; we travel more often. The number of routes and operators has increased; methods of measuring change have not evolved as fast. Free movement within the European Union makes inter European

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[1] Improving migration and population statistics (IMPS) project – up to date details available through ONS website.

migration particularly difficult to track. Our increasingly flexible and changing free market economy requires an increasingly flexible labour force. Our universities and colleges actively encourage foreign students, who fund much of their work; numbers are still rising annually, and many students are also part time migrant workers. Many of the individuals who migrate for work are young people, who are perhaps least likely to see any need to inform the authorities of their activities. They are not interested in filling in forms and ensuring they get on to official lists. For example, most will be healthy – why bother with a doctor's registration? Some may actively avoid authorities because of the situation in their countries of origin.

There is also a lot of evidence that recent migrants from Eastern Europe haven't decided whether or not they will look for a job in the UK when they arrive – and certainly not how long they will stay. One report on Polish migration to London describes current intentions as 'intentionally unpredictable.' And current migration patterns are dynamic and constantly changing, making it difficult to establish consistent flows from or to particular areas and project these forwards. For example, are Eastern European nationals replacing Portuguese nationals - or supplementing them – or does it depend on the area and the job type?

Traditional methodologies for measuring migration are inadequate. Many new migrants are young, fit and do not have children with them; they often do not (and need not) register with a GP. So using GP registration changes to measure migration, especially some of the shorter term migration, will not work. Labour Force Survey statistics under represent the poorer end of the private rented sector, particularly caravan sites, hostels and some houses in multiple occupation – although this should improve after 2008.

The private sector has reacted much faster than the public sector

Why did we allow our methods to get so out of date? The increasing importance of migration to population statistics didn't happen overnight – it was steadily rising before European enlargement accelerated the change. Others respond to change; supermarkets

have worked out what and how many new delicacies and beers to stock; employers and landlords have rapidly changed their recruitment practises and letting arrangements. With honourable local exceptions, the public sector has lagged behind the private.

The public sector has not done what it could with the data that *does* exist

Why did we not make better use of partial information that does exist to provide useful local information about change, rather than waiting for statistical perfection? An example is the delay in making available proxy data on new arrivals. Arrival information without comparable leaver information does not give local population numbers – but it does help identify trends and change. New National Insurance numbers issued to foreign nationals help to identify those arriving to take up jobs, and annual figures at local authority level have been available from ONS for some time. The Home Office Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) started in May 2004 provides more detailed and up to date information on newly arriving workers from the eight new Eastern European members of the EU. Of course this data is not perfect, and of course it can be misquoted. But it is a lot more useful than nothing, and local agencies can use it as a starting point. The data has been usefully analysed at a national and regional level every six months[2]. Yet it has taken three years (June 2007) for relevant WRS data to be made available for local authorities without the need for time consuming freedom of information requests.[3]

The elephant in the room

Poor statistics for legal migration are bad enough. There is no local information on illegal migration. [4] We know it exists; we know that national numbers are not insignificant; but we don't know enough about local numbers or local change, and because of the political

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[2] Accession Monitoring Reports – available from Home Office website.

[3] Now available for authorities at authority level, via the Local Government Analysis and Research (LGAR) website

[4] One study carried out for the Home Office estimated national levels.

sensitivity we don't routinely include this category in local estimates. This is not (as it is often portrayed) principally an issue of border control. We know that some people still enter the UK illegally, but more 'overstay'; a recent House of Commons Select Committee concluded[5] that the majority of illegal migrants probably entered the country legally – as students, on fixed term schemes or with fixed term visas, on holiday, as asylum seekers. It is likely that the number of illegal migrants varies considerably by area, depending on local population mix, relevant available work and whether or not an area is used to house asylum seekers. (This last is an issue because asylum seekers who fail to gain leave to remain are not automatically removed from the country.)

There are, of course, many other sources of confusion. For example, there are illegal migrants, undocumented migrants and legal and documented migrants who are *working* illegally, or, at least, outside the restrictions on their visas.[6] Local studies of the grey economy in areas with large numbers of migrants, and various local surveys and research studies of migrant workers, consistently record a significant minority (20% plus) as working without a national insurance number. This does not necessarily mean that these people are illegal migrants, but does raise questions about how many are officially counted.

Conclusion

The speed and scale of recent changes in migration, especially those linked to the accession of ten new states to the European Union in 2004, took everyone by surprise. And many of these new arrivals have moved to areas outside traditional urban centres of migration, so that the speed of change is more noticeable. Some of these areas do not have a history of diversity and change, and do not have the experience or community infrastructure to deal with the strains and challenges that rapid local change can bring. While good local authorities and their partners are taking actions to address challenges, and can take local action to get a broad idea of local change, it is harder to plan and predict well without reliable data. And poor data is a convenient excuse for delay at a local and

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[5] Home Affairs Select Committee, Immigration Control – Fifth report of session 2005-06. Stationary Office.

[6] For example, students can only work part time in term time; au pairs are not supposed to take on other jobs.

a national level, and makes it easier to turn a blind eye to difficult issues like exploitation by unscrupulous landlords or employers.

So migration statistics matter.

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