

**PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SELECT COMMITTEE (PASC) PROGRAMME OF
WORK ON STATISTICS
Fifth study: Migration statistics**

Submission by the British Society for Population Studies (BSPS)

The British Society for Population Studies (BSPS) comprises persons with a scientific interest in the study of human populations. Its main objectives are to further the scientific study of biological, economic, historical, medical, social and other disciplines connected with human populations and to contribute to the public awareness of them. BSPS contact email: pic@lse.ac.uk

Summary

The statistics on migration to and from the UK and its constituent parts are inadequate not only for social scientific inquiry but also for monitoring the effectiveness of measures designed to implement government policy.

This remains the case despite the significant improvements in data coverage and accuracy achieved by the UK's three national statistical agencies over the past decade following the

this key driver of UK population change and to measure its impacts, especially at the local-area scale. Therefore they still cannot be deemed to meet their users' needs adequately. This situation is unlikely to change without further investment in the IPS system or the adoption of e-Borders or an alternative system of better measuring the total numbers of people moving into and out of the UK.

Answers to PASC's specific questions

1. Do the published migration statistics – at the national, regional and local levels – meet the full range of their users' needs, namely:

a. Are they easily discoverable and accessible to all users?

3. The recently revamped ONS website is a distinct improvement on the previous version. Even so, it is not easy to negotiate for an experienced professional user, let alone for an interested layperson. Moreover, Google Search can sometimes get more directly to the data that one is searching for than using the ONS website's own search facility.

b. Are they easy to use and understand?

4. The international migration statistics published by ONS constitute a large suite of different data sets which are easy for the experienced statistician to use and understand but have the potential to wrongfoot the unwary.

5. Most straightforward are the total long-term international migration estimates which are published as part of the 'components of change' statistics released with the annual population estimates down to the local authority scale. Even so, it is not easy to switch between data, methodology and interpretation. It is recommended that an interface be developed along the lines of the Neighbourhood Statistics where data can be accessed in raw format and the metadata is placed alongside.

6. The less experienced user needs to be aware that those published migration statistics which are based on data derived solely from the IPS do not provide the full picture of this long-term migration. There is also the potential for confusion arising from the ONS's attempts – prompted in large part by the rise of labour migration from the EU's new Accession States from 2004 – to measure short-term international migration, defined as people moving into and out of the UK to live for between 3 and 12 months. However, wisely ONS has been careful to keep these separate from its main statistics on international migration and out of the annual population estimates, giving central government the ability to allow for these separ

9. In addition, a substantial body of users – notably in local administration and planning but also in social science research – requires these types of details for small areas rather than just for the UK as a whole. For these, despite the a

these including skilled and unskilled labour migration, student migration, retirement migration, refugees and asylum seekers, and family reunification. The responsibility for providing this sort of intelligence to the public lies beyond the remit of the statistical agencies. The main question for the latter is whether the published statistics are correct, i.e. provide an accurate record of what is actually happening (see below).

4. Is the degree of uncertainty surrounding estimates of migration properly reported and widely understood? Is the degree of uncertainty surrounding estimates of migration acceptable or should it be reduced? If so, how could it be reduced?

15. While the ONS website provides clear guidance on the degree of uncertainty that is attached to its estimates of international migration, this is not nearly so evident in the summary publications that are most accessible to the media and the public at large. If it were, then surely there would have been greater pressure placed by the electorate on government to improve the quality of the statistics on international migration. This is because the average person would find the scale of uncertainty difficult to comprehend.

16. As an illustration, the latest edition of ONS's Migration Statistics Quarterly Report (November 2012) contains one paragraph on uncertainty, specifically to say that confidence limits have been introduced to accompany the migration estimates based on the IPS. Using the web link given there and then being directed through several further web pages, it is found that the central estimate of net international migration for 2011 is put at 199,600. The 95% confidence limit, given as 35,400, indicates that it is very likely that the true figure lies between 164,200 and 235,000, with a 1 in 20

the quality of these statistics. The best way of doing this is to compare – for the UK as a whole and for each local authority area – the results of the 2011 Census with the population estimates rolled forward from the 2001 Census. This should use both the original population estimates series and the one produced with the recent methodological improvements in order to see how much each of these deviates from the best estimate provided by the latest Census. The discrepancies, broken down by sex, age, country of birth and other personal characteristics, will provide pointers as to the source of any remaining problems and the actions needed to address them.

21. Even before the results of these checks are known, it can confidently be stated that the key problem with the quality of these migration statistics is the reliance on the IPS for the main element of the total numbers of immigrants and emigrants. Therefore the most obvious way of improving their quality is by reducing the degree of uncertainty surrounding the IPS-based estimates, which requires greatly increasing the number of migrants interviewed from its current level of around 12 a day.

22. The idea of using e-Borders is potentially a very attractive one, if it provides a full count of people entering and leaving the UK and also allows the matching of records over time in order to identify the actual length of time that individual people have stayed in or out of the UK. While this system would not provide the richness of information obtained via the IPS, it could be used in conjunction with the IPS to produce improved counts for the IPS-derived information to be grossed up to.

23. The other options relate to intensification of efforts to use other statistical sources to check and,