

United Nations Expert Group Meeting on
International Standards for Civil Registration
and Vital Statistics Systems
27 – 30 June 2011
New York

The Population Register as a source of Vital Statistics¹

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¹ The text is presented without formal editing.

Introduction

1. Civil registration is recognised at the foundation of a legal system for establishing the rights and privileges of individuals. Records from that system are also often the main and preferred source of continuous vital statistics on births, foetal deaths, marriages, divorces and deaths. Mortality statistics are one of the principle sources of health information and in most countries; they are regarded as the most reliable source of health data on the whole population. They together with birth statistics, are an essential component for many, in the production of population estimates and projections of the number and characteristics of the population.

2. It is important to distinguish between the data required (vital statistics) and the systems for producing these statistics (civil registration, population registers or other administrative sources). Each data source will have strengths and weaknesses, both for the individual (whose aim is to record life events, prove identity and access services), and for the aggregate statistics themselves.

3. Within the fields of population statistics, there is an increasing need and demand for more frequent and detailed information about the population. At the same time, falling response rates to traditional surveys and censuses are presenting producers of population statistics with increasing challenges. New and innovative methods for producing statistics are required.

Population Registers

4. Population registers are used to continuously record information relating to the resident population of a country or area. They make it possible to ascertain timely information about the size and the condition of the population, as necessary. Population registers usually contain information on the usually resident population, both in terms of a record of the people that reside in the area and also information about their demographic characteristics such as age, sex, date and place of birth, address or place of residence and a unique personal identifier to provide a valuable spine for linkage with other data sources. They often also contain more detailed information such as ethnicity, citizenship and language. The register in some cases may also contain other socio-economic and demographic data. Generally, population registers are updated by the civil registration system recording births, deaths marriages and divorces, combined with information on people moving into and out of and within the country in question – migration information.

5. One of the main functions of a population register is to provide information to support government in its planning of services such as schools and hospitals and assist in decisions to allocate resources to run these services. Population registers are also used to issue unique and personal identification numbers to the population so that identity can be established for electoral, health, welfare, pension, police and military service purposes. One of the main uses of the administrative population register is for statistics, in particular the production of population estimates and projections and for the planning and management of censuses and other household surveys. They are also used as a means of assessing the accuracy and completeness of such censuses and surveys and maybe used in any bias or coverage correction.

Population registers and the production of vital statistics

6. For some countries there is both a population registers and a civil registration system. They maybe run by separate agencies and the production of the vital statistics maybe a further separate function. Often the vital events recorded as part of civil registration are used to update any population register. Information is often shared and compared. Information on vital events may then be provided to those responsible for the production of statistics.

7. Where these activities are carried out by a single agency, there is more likely to be good coordination and accordance between civil registration, the population register and the production of statistics related to vital events. If these activities are carried out by separate agencies, there maybe potential to lose that coordination and care is needed to ensure that consistent information is shared.

8. A population register and a civil registration system will have common elements and the results of both can be used to produce vital statistics.

Position in the UK

Production of Vital Statistics

9. The UK while having a multitude of administrative data sources does not have a population register with which to measure its population. Instead the UK makes use of the civil registration system for the production of vital statistics. The civil registration system is managed by the General Registers Office in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England and Wales, this is separate from the statistics function and data are shared under legislation to allow the production of statistical information about the number and condition of the population. Much of the information collected at registration of births, marriages, deaths and still births in the UK is used in the production of National Statistics and in medical and social research. Statistics on all topics are laid before parliament. Statistics on births and deaths are also an essential component in counting the changes that occur in national and local populations. They feed directly into mid year population estimates and projections. These data are used directly by central and local Government for planning services and allocating resources. Clearly vital registration has a range of purposes including evidence of identity and parentage. However the statistics arising from registration are absolutely essential for monitoring the population, trends in health and other key policy areas. The production of such key statistics must be seen as an essential part of registration and not a by-product.

10. The demand for statistical information continues to increase. In particular, emphasis is currently placed on the need to combine administrative data sources to measure population change. There is a wide range of additional information that could be collected at registration that would enhance the statistical value of that information for analysis and policy purposes. Historically, ONS has been keen to establish a 'Through Life' record which would link an individual's own birth, marriages/Civil partnerships, births and deaths. This would be invaluable for research purposes without any additional burden to respondents. Ideally such a record would

also link in re-registrations and other amendments made to records, and would have the ability to be able to be linked to other administrative sources too (such as divorces and civil partnership dissolutions) for statistical purposes only. Indeed, the through life record [coupled with address and change of address and whether absent from the country], may then provide the basis for a population register for those born here. Additional information on those arriving here from abroad, would of course be needed to form a full population register.

The use of Population Registers

11. ONS is heavily reliant upon the data that are collected at the time of registration in the production of national statistics. The UK, unlike other countries, does not have a population register. Efforts have been made in the past to investigate the practicality of developing a register based system. For example, several years ago, ONS investigated the potential of developing an Integrated Population Statistics System – a comprehensive statistics database, which could be updated over time and enable the ongoing production of statistical information. ONS also ran the Citizen's Information Project (CIP) to encourage the sharing of information across Central and Local government which was integrated into the National Identity Register project. With the change of government last year, this initiative was cancelled. There is still a widespread view that to improve the quality of population statistics, the development of a population register is required.

The future - Beyond 2011 Programme

12. The UK Statistics Authority has now set up the Beyond 2011 programme to establish and test alternative models for meeting future needs for census type statistics and consider the wider implications associated with the development and implementation of a new system for the provision of population and socio-demographic statistics. This will investigate if there are other ways of providing information which will meet user needs in the most cost-effective way. The Beyond 2011 project is at an early stage and it is not yet possible to say what approach will be taken. Some countries have already shown that it is possible to move away from carrying out a traditional Census to using administrative databases to accurately count the population. Therefore, the quality and accuracy of the administrative sources will be an important factor in determining whether existing databases can be linked to provide an accurate count of the population. The investigation will examine: the use of alternative data sources including administrative data; making more efficient use of the data that already exists and an examination of household surveys - both existing ones and the development of new surveys.

13. Consultation with stakeholders and users will be a key component of this work. This consultation is likely to include Ministers and Government officials; user representatives from central and local government, the health service, commercial sector, charitable and voluntary organisations; relevant academic and other experts and the general public. The Beyond 2011 Programme will assess the viability of a range of options before making any recommendations about the way forward. ONS will be working with international experts and representatives from other national statistical institutions to understand and, where appropriate, take account of the work that has been done in other countries.

Conclusion

14. It is important to distinguish between civil registration and population registers as sources of vital statistics. They are benefits of both approaches and for many the civil registration system maybe used as a mechanism for maintaining an up to date population register and so they are intrinsically linked. For others, the development of a population register could be an alternative and replacement to civil registration as a source of statistics.