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Migration statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2013/235. It provides an overview of data sources of international migration statistics and data availability at the international level. It also summarizes recent activities undertaken by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and partner organizations to improve the collection and availability of statistics on international migration. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the report, which is submitted for information.

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I. Introduction

1. International migration continues to increase in scope, scale and complexity. Economic, social, demographic and technological transformations have fuelled the increase in population mobility across borders worldwide. Today, virtually all countries in the world are affected by international migration, whether as countries of origin, destination or transit.

2. Over the years, international migration, especially its linkages with development, has received growing attention as an emerging global issue. The General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council have regularly considered the issue of international migration and development, as well as the human rights of migrants. Furthermore, in order to address migration-related challenges in a holistic manner and offer a venue for Member States to discuss them at the intergovernmental level, the Assembly has convened two high-level dialogues dedicated to international migration and development, the first in 2006 and the second in 2013.

3. While international migration has moved to the forefront of the global agenda, the availability of data on the scope of migration and its multiple impacts on development remains deficient. Various General Assembly and Commission on Population and Development resolutions¹ have drawn attention to the lack of accurate, timely and detailed migration statistics. Broadly speaking, the Assembly and the Commission have requested that further action be taken to improve the availability, quality and comparability of migration data, to disaggregate migration data by age, sex and other key characteristics, to strengthen statistical capacity and promote cooperation among relevant stakeholders and to develop common methodologies and indicators to assess the contribution of migrants to development in countries of origin and destination.

4. In addition, Member States have called for the evidence base on women migrant workers to be strengthened, including with respect to violence against women migrant workers, and for common methodologies and indicators to be developed to assess the extent and impact of trafficking in persons. With remittance flows to developing countries often exceeding the level of official development assistance, Member States have also expressed interest in improving the quality of the estimates of migrant remittances. In parallel, the Global Forum on Migration and Development — an informal, State-led, voluntary process established to promote dialogue and cooperation on migration and development — has also repeatedly recommended that the evidence base on migration be improved.

5. As a priority, the statistical capacity of countries to collect, disseminate and analyse international migration data should be improved. In his report to the second High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, held on 3 and 4 October 2013, the Secretary-General identified the improvement of the migration evidence base as one of eight thematic priorities (see [A/68/190](#), para. 119). In particular, the Secretary-General stressed the need to create a dedicated capacity-building initiative to assist countries in improving the collection of migration data through population censuses, administrative data sources and

¹ See General Assembly resolutions 65/170, 65/190 and 66/128 and Commission on Population and Development resolutions 2006/2 and 2013/1.

dedicated surveys. He also noted that measurable targets and indicators for monitoring the protection of migrants and violations of their rights should be promoted. In the same report, the importance of recognizing the contributions of migrants to countries of origin and destination was highlighted. In the Declaration adopted at the High-level Dialogue, representatives of States and Governments emphasized the need for reliable statistical data on international migration and recognized that migration issues should be adequately considered in the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda.

II. Sources of migration statistics

6. In order to enhance the statistical bases for an effective discussion on international migration, it is important to understand the sources of information that can generate data on the topic. Sources of international migration statistics can be grouped broadly into three categories, namely, population censuses, sample surveys and administrative records.

A. Population censuses

7. Population censuses are major sources of data on the international migrant stock, which can be enumerated either as the foreign-born population or as the foreign population, that is, the number of foreign citizens in a country. It is also possible for population censuses to capture information on where people were residing one or five years before enumeration, thus making it possible to obtain the number of international migrants who arrived during the period considered and who remained in the country until the time of enumeration. In addition, estimates of net immigration can be derived for the intercensal period by using census data on the total population, taking into account the number of births and deaths that occurred during the same period.

8. Population censuses are a good way to measure international migration for several reasons. Universal coverage ensures better coverage of the migrant population. Relative uniformity in the formulation of questions ensures better data comparability across censuses. Censuses used to collect a variety of sociodemographic information imply that there is a potential for characterizing international migrants in terms of certain basic demographic and socioeconomic characteristics included in the census questionnaire.

9. On the other hand, the use of censuses also presents a number of limitations in measuring international migration. First, data are less frequently available, usually once every 10 years. Second, because censuses can accommodate only a limited number of questions related to migration, they cannot provide the detailed information needed for a meaningful analysis of either the causes or the consequences of international migration. Third, the information on international flows of people, obtained either directly by asking questions or indirectly by using the census component methods, is usually incomplete and fragmented. Lastly, population censuses, by their very nature, cannot provide reliable information on emigration from a country.

B. Sample surveys

10. Two types of sample surveys are currently being used to measure or study international migration: household sample surveys and passenger surveys administered at the border. The two surveys serve very different purposes.

11. Some household sample surveys include specialized international migration surveys while others do not focus solely on international migration but, rather, include questions on that topic. The strength of household sample surveys in studying international migration is the wealth of information that they collect compared to other data sources. The information collected through household sample surveys allows for in-depth analyses of the likely causes of international migration and its consequences for the persons involved. Another advantage of using household sample surveys compared to other sources is their flexibility, which makes it possible to capture information on the group of migrants of most interest to the study. It should be noted, however, that because of the low percentage of international migrants present in most countries, the sample size of a survey needs to be reasonably large. Only with enough migrants is it possible to carry out a meaningful analysis.

12. Certain surveys on international migration directly target persons who cross or are about to cross national borders. Such surveys are carried out through face-to-face interviews with a sample of passengers as they enter or leave a given country. A route or a port is sampled, on a given day and within a given period. During that period, certain passengers passing through are systematically chosen for interview. A few countries have been fairly successful in using passenger surveys to identify international migrants. This data collection mechanism seems to be more appropriate for island countries, which do not have land borders with other countries. A major challenge in obtaining data at border crossing points is the sheer volume of movements that take place and the fact that the vast majority of people crossing the border do so for purposes other than to change residence. Hence, it is difficult to distinguish migrants from travellers. In addition, passenger surveys lack an appropriate sampling frame.

C. Administrative records

13. Administrative records that can be used for the study of international migration can be grouped into three major categories: administrative registers, border collection data and other administrative sources.

14. Administrative registers include population registers, registers of foreigners and other special types of registers covering particular groups of persons, such as asylum seekers. Administrative registers can provide information on certain groups of persons who change country of usual residence and thus qualify as international migrants.

15. Border collection data are collected at ports of entry and departure of a country, regardless of whether those ports are actually located at the border. They include airports and other sites at which persons formally enter or leave a national territory. Statistics derived from border collection data have the advantage of reflecting actual moves with a high degree of accuracy in terms of timing, mode of transport and the port of entry or departure. However, the task of gathering

information from all persons arriving in and departing from a national territory is beyond the means available to many countries.

16. In addition to registers, there are other administrative sources of data on inflows or outflows of particular groups of international migrants. For example, statistics derived from the issuance of residence permits may refer to inflows of foreigners to a country; statistics derived from the issuance of work permits can refer to inflows of foreign migrant workers; and statistics derived from the official clearance of departing citizens to work abroad can be a proxy of labour emigration.

17. All of the above-mentioned administrative sources share a common trait: the statistics derived from them usually refer to administrative records rather than to people. Thus, the number of residence permits issued over a year may not be equivalent to the number of persons admitted over that year, if a person receives more than one residence permit in a year or if the permit granted to the head of a family covers his or her dependants. Similarly, the number of deportations carried out over a period may be higher than the number of persons involved if those deported keep on returning and are sent back several times during the period. And the number of asylum applications filed can understate the number of asylum seekers involved when a single application is filed on behalf of a family.

18. Another drawback of using the administrative sources is that sometimes permits are issued not only to foreigners newly arriving in a country but also to foreigners who have resided in the country for a period of time and who request either the renewal of or a change in the type of visa. The statistics generated from those administrative records may not, therefore, reflect the actual influx of migrants.

III. Availability of migration statistics and barriers to making data available

19. Two types of measures of international migration are commonly used: one measures the stock of international migrants and the other measures flows. An overview of the availability of statistics on the international migrant stock and on flows, respectively, are set out in sections A and B below. In section C, barriers to making migration data available at the international level are discussed.

A. Available data on the stock of international migrants

20. Given that they have been conducted in most of the countries of the world, population censuses can yield the most internationally comparable information on international migration. Population censuses typically include questions on the following three topics, which can generate information relevant to international migration: country of birth, citizenship and year or period of arrival in the country. The inclusion of these topics in a census questionnaire has been encouraged in international statistical standards such as the United Nations *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2*,² which list them as core topics.

² United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.XVII.8.

21. Table 1 shows the availability of data on the migrant stock, derived from population censuses, at the international level. Those data are collected through the Demographic Yearbook census questionnaire of the United Nations.³ From censuses conducted in the 2000 round, 130 countries and areas reported data on their migrant stock (foreign-born or foreign population) to the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, while 64 countries did so from censuses conducted in the 2010 round, as at December 2013. It is expected that the number of countries and areas that report to the Division might increase in coming years, as planned censuses are completed and the tabulation of data that might have been given low priority is finished. Table 1 also indicates that the availability of data on the migrant stock declines when additional information, such as the country of origin, is requested.

Table 1
Number of countries and areas providing data on the stock of international migrants from population censuses, by census round

<i>Data on stock of international migrants (foreign-born or foreigner)</i>	<i>2000 census round</i>	<i>2010 census round</i>
Total stock	130	64
Stock by country of origin	106	47

22. Table 2 illustrates the gap between the migration statistics collected and those made available. In theory, if a census includes questions on country of birth and/or citizenship, data on foreign-born and/or foreigners should be available. In practice, however, this is not always the case. For the 2000 round of population censuses, only 76 per cent of the countries that included questions on country of births and/or country of citizenship reported data on the stock of international migrants (foreign-born or foreigner) to the Statistics Division. For the 2010 round, the reporting rate remains low (47 per cent), as at December 2013.

Table 2
Countries and areas that collected and reported data on the stock of international migration from population censuses, by census round

<i>2000 census round</i>			<i>2010 census round</i>		
<i>No. of countries/ areas that collected data</i>	<i>No. of countries/ areas that reported data</i>	<i>Percentage of countries/areas that reported data</i>	<i>No. of countries/ areas that collected data</i>	<i>No. of countries/ areas that reported data</i>	<i>Percentage of countries/ areas that reported data</i>
170	130	76	137	64	47

³ Census questionnaires sent to countries are available from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dybquest.htm>.

B. Available data on international migration flows

23. Various data sources, such as administrative sources and sample surveys, are used at the national level to collect data on international migration flows. The Statistics Division resumed in April 2011 the collection of data on annual migration flows through the Demographic Yearbook data collection system by sending a questionnaire on international travel and migration statistics³ to national statistical offices.⁴ Table 3 shows the number of countries and areas that have provided data at least once since 2011 for each table in the questionnaire. Countries that report data to Eurostat are not included so as to avoid duplicating the data collection effort. In brief, the number of countries and areas that could provide statistics on international migration flows to the Division remains extremely low.

Table 3
Number of countries and areas that provided statistics on international migration flows at least once in 2011-2012

<i>Inflows</i>	<i>No. of countries/areas providing statistics</i>
Annual inflows by reason for admission and sex	29
Annual inflows by purpose of stay abroad and sex	14
Number of incoming international migrants by citizenship status, age and sex	24
Number of incoming foreign migrants by country of citizenship and sex	23
Number of incoming international migrants by previous country of usual residence and sex	16
<i>Outflows</i>	<i>No. of countries/areas providing statistics</i>
Annual outflows by status at time of departure and sex	21
Annual outflows by purpose for going abroad and sex	16
Number of departing international migrants by citizenship status, age and sex	18
Number of emigrating citizens by future country of usual residence and sex	14

C. Barriers to making migration statistics available at the international level

24. The above analysis on the availability of data reveals that there are gaps in migration statistics, on both stocks and flows, at the international level. Data availability can depend on a number of factors, such as the coordination mechanisms within the national statistical system, the availability and accessibility of data, the timeliness of data and resource constraints.

25. In many countries and areas, different government offices produce statistics that are derived from respective administrative responsibilities. This is mostly true for the collection of statistics on migration flows, where the responsibility lies with line ministries rather than national statistical offices. The absence of coordination mechanisms among different agencies involved in producing and disseminating

⁴ The questionnaire has been sent to all countries but the Eurostat countries.

migration data may result in a lack of consistency in the definitions used and the comparability of the statistics, as well as in the limited dissemination of statistics.

26. The data produced by the different agencies comprising the national statistical system have to be available in an accessible format. For a variety of reasons, such as low technical capacity, specific policy interest or data needs, the collection and dissemination of statistics on international migration may not be of the utmost priority in many countries. Even when the data are collected, they may not be readily available. For example, while information on the arrival of international migrants are recorded by border control agencies, such information is often not processed as statistical data.

27. One important role of the Statistics Division is to collect comparable national data and disseminate them internationally. The time lag between the collection and release of census results in some countries and areas is such that even years after the census has been conducted there is no response to the questionnaires that have been sent out. International migration statistics collected from population censuses are often accorded lower priority than statistics on other topics and therefore take longer to disseminate.

28. Finally, there are costs associated with responding to the Demographic Yearbook questionnaires. The magnitude of the burden experienced by countries is a function of the budget and the size of the relevant national statistical office and the demands on the limited resources, including the number of questionnaires and other data requests to which the office must respond. As many national statistical authorities grapple with the issue of limited resources, both human and financial, completion of questionnaires sent by international organizations can be viewed as burdensome, a drain on resources and a low priority. This might be one reason why migration data are not made available to the Statistics Division despite being available to the national statistical office.

IV. Work on international migration statistics by international organizations

29. In recent years, the international community has intensified its efforts to improve the availability, quality and comparability of available data on international migration. These efforts often include collecting, estimating and disseminating international migration statistics disaggregated by relevant demographic and social characteristics, and developing guidelines and methods for collecting, estimating and disseminating international migration statistics.

30. The Statistics Division is currently mandated to collect regularly statistics on the stock and flows of migrants from more than 230 national statistical offices. It has done so since the early 1950s. In 2011, the Division expanded the scope of data collection on international migrant stocks by adding a dimension on the educational attainment of migrants. In addition, a revised questionnaire on international migration flows was introduced to reflect the latest international standards and to improve the availability of data.³

31. The Statistics Division also issues guidelines and recommendations on concepts and methods to help countries in the collection and dissemination of migration data. The recommendations were developed with a view to improving the

quality of data on international migration and promoting the application of common definitions and concepts by countries to enhance the comparability of data at the international level. Two recent United Nations publications are related to the collection of data on international migration: *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1*,⁵ and *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2*.² To help countries adopt the international recommendations, a handbook is currently being prepared on the use of population censuses and sample surveys to measure international migration. That handbook will provide practical guidance on how data on migrant flows and stocks can be captured using population censuses and sample surveys, focusing on a core set of variables to measure international migration and providing examples of how countries have successfully used specific data sources or a combination of sources to measure migration.

32. The Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs has developed the Global Migration Database,⁶ in collaboration with the Statistics Division, the World Bank and the University of Sussex. The database comprises a large volume of data on the stock of international migrants, gathered from a wide range of sources, including population censuses, population registers, nationally representative surveys and other official statistical sources.

33. Building upon those datasets, the Population Division has produced estimates of migrant stock disaggregated by age, sex, origin and destination, for 232 countries and areas in the world. The latest estimate was published in 2013.⁷ The Population Division also publishes time series data on international migration inflows and outflows, by country of origin, for over 40 countries of destination, and produces estimates and projections of the contribution of net international migration to overall population change worldwide.

34. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has developed a system to collect data on refugee stocks, flows and characteristics, including sex, age and country of citizenship, covering more than 150 countries and improved the estimates of stateless persons. It also regularly produces detailed information on flows of asylum seekers.⁸ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization established a database containing information on internationally mobile tertiary students by country of origin and country of study.⁹

35. Several other initiatives have been made to strengthen the collection of migration data. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the United Nations Population Fund have produced a practical guide to facilitate the production, dissemination and use of statistics on international migration in countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.¹⁰ In addition, ECE has published, jointly with Eurostat, guidelines on exchanging data to improve emigration statistics.¹¹

⁵ Statistical Papers, No. 58, Rev.1 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98.XVII.14).

⁶ Available from <http://esa.un.org/unmigration/>.

⁷ See <http://esa.un.org/unmigration/migrantstocks2013.htm>.

⁸ See <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>.

⁹ See http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx?IF_ActivePath=P,50.

¹⁰ Available from www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/International_Migration_Practical_Guide_ENG.pdf.

¹¹ Available from http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/publications/Guidelines_improve_emigration_statistics.pdf.

36. Several international organizations have sought to gain better insights into the relationship between migration and development. The World Bank has added migration and remittance modules to a number of household surveys and carried out household surveys focusing specifically on migration and development, while the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Bank have included migration-related questions in existing household survey programmes. Outside the United Nations system, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has significantly improved the analysis of migration data from censuses in OECD countries and carried out studies to assess the impact of migration in countries that receive migrants.

37. Efforts are under way to improve collaboration on the collection and processing of migration data. The Global Migration Group,¹² an inter-agency group comprising 15 entities of the United Nations system and the International Organization for Migration, has created a working group on data and research that seeks to promote inter-agency cooperation and reduce the duplication of effort. Likewise, at an annual inter-agency coordination meeting on international migration convened by the Population Division, efforts are made to identify gaps and synergies in migration data collection and analysis and to showcase recent initiatives on migration research.

V. Conclusions and the way forward

38. Considerable efforts have been made within the United Nations system to improve the collection and availability of statistics on international migration. To improve the availability of migration statistics at the international level, more needs to be done to encourage the tabulation and dissemination of census data on international migration, to foster coordination within national statistical systems so that data generated from administrative sources are provided to national statistical offices and to provide technical assistance to enhance the capacity of countries (such assistance would involve both national statistical offices and ministries that collect international migration statistics).

39. During the second High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, over 50 Member States called for the inclusion of migration in the post-2015 development agenda. Given the heightened attention of Member States to strengthening the benefits of migration for development and to addressing migration challenges at the national, regional and global levels, the international statistical community may wish to develop a global initiative to improve migration data for evidence-based policymaking. Given, in particular, the volume of migration occurring between developing countries and the significant impact that migration has on countries of origin and destination, the international statistical community should consider establishing a dedicated capacity-development programme to improve the collection, processing and analysis of migration data for policy planning. Such a programme should address all the sources of migration data listed in the present report.

40. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the report.

¹² See www.globalmigrationgroup.org/.