

**Suggested questions on international migration  
(based on country practices)  
Guidance note<sup>1</sup>  
for the use in population censuses and household surveys  
March 2021**

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> seeks to ensure that “no one is left behind”. To monitor progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for vulnerable groups, including international migrants, SDG 17.18 calls for the disaggregation for data, including by migratory status.<sup>3</sup>

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration<sup>4</sup> calls on Member States to strengthen international migration data by improving the collection, analysis and dissemination of accurate, reliable, comparable data, disaggregated by sex, age, migration status and other characteristics. The Global Compact also calls for integrating migration-related topics in national censuses (objective 1, action g), “*such as country of birth, country of birth of parents, country of citizenship, country of residence five years prior to the census, most recent arrival date and reason for migrating.*”

In response to the demand for accurate migration data, this note provides guidance for improving the quality and comparability of international migration statistics collected through national population censuses and household surveys. It was prepared on the basis of a comprehensive review of national census questionnaires<sup>5</sup> for the 2010 round of population and housing censuses. While this guidance note draws primarily from experience of national censuses, much of its content also applies to household surveys.

As an output of the United Nations Expert Group on Migration Statistics, the note has been reviewed by experts in the Group.

Questions on international migration

The following questions are covered in this note:

- A. *Country of birth*, identifying foreign-born population;
- B. *Country of citizenship*, identifying population of foreign citizens;
- C. *Acquisition of citizenship*, distinguishing citizens by birth from naturalized citizens;
- D. *Country of birth of parents*, identifying population who have foreign-born parent(s);
- E. *Household members who have ever resided abroad*, identifying potential returned migrants;
- F. *Household members (or former household members) currently residing abroad*, identifying potential emigrants;

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by the Statistics Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) under the guidance of the [Expert Group on Migration Statistics](#).

<sup>2</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

<sup>3</sup> For a definition of migratory status in the context of the SDGs, see: [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2017/new-york-egm-migration-data/EGM%20Recommendations\\_FINAL.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2017/new-york-egm-migration-data/EGM%20Recommendations_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.un.org/pga/72/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/07/180713\\_Agreed-Outcome\\_Global-Compact-for-Migration.pdf](https://www.un.org/pga/72/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/07/180713_Agreed-Outcome_Global-Compact-for-Migration.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/document-resources/>

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- G. *Year or period of arrival in the country*, distinguishing international migrants who have recently arrived from those who arrived many years ago;
- H. *Reason for migration*, measuring main reasons for people migrating into the country that can be asked to foreign-born persons or foreign citizens, or sometimes returned migrants.

More detailed guidance on each of the questions here; as well as statistics and indicators that can be produced based on the above questions are available in Chapter VIII of the *United Nations Handbook on Measuring International Migration through Population Censuses*<sup>6</sup>.

### Additional observations

“Country of birth”, “country of citizenship” and “year of arrival (for foreign-born population more specifically)” are considered core topics for censuses, according to the *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, rev. 3*. “Citizenship acquisition” is considered an additional topic in the same *Recommendations*. “Ever-resided abroad” or “reason for migration”, are only included in the regional Recommendations (*Conference of European, Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing*), or in the most recent draft of the *International Recommendations on Refugee Statistics*<sup>7</sup>.

“Emigration of household member residing abroad” is not addressed in any international or regional recommendations. As discussed in the *United Nations Handbook on Measuring International Migration through Population Censuses*<sup>6</sup>, there is an intrinsic challenge in using censuses to measure emigration. However, given that close to 40 per cent of the countries or areas in the world have collected data on emigration through censuses in the 2010 census round, a clear guidance is needed to improve reliability and comparability of the data collected.

The above questions should be considered a menu of options from which countries can choose, based on their national priority. Factors to help countries in deciding which question(s) to incorporate in their censuses include (a) the needs of policy makers and other data users; (b) the burden on respondents, (c) technical competence of enumerators, (d) resources availability, and (e) whether data are already available from other data sources. All questions proposed here should be thoroughly reviewed, tested and adapted to national circumstances.

Annex 1. Suggested questions on international migration

Annex 2. Proposed flow chart for international migration questions

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<sup>6</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/48th-session/documents/BG-4a-Migration-Handbook-E.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Approved by the United Nations Statistical Commission, 49<sup>th</sup> Session, 2018. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/49th-session/documents/BG-Item3m-RefugeeStat-E.pdf>.

**Annex 1. Suggested questions on international migration**

**A. COUNTRY OF BIRTH**

➤ For countries defining place of birth as the geographic unit in which the birth actually occurred:  
Where was (person) born?

- This country, specify province [or state, region] and municipality [or national-relevant second-level civil division]
  - Province: \_\_\_\_\_  province unknown
  - Municipality: \_\_\_\_\_  municipality unknown
- Another country, specify country according to present borders:
  - Country: \_\_\_\_\_
- Unknown
- Country of birth unknown

➤ For countries defining place of birth as where the mother of the individual resided at the time of the person's birth:

Where did \_\_\_\_\_'s mother reside when she gave birth to him/her?

- This country, specify province [or state, region] and municipality [or national-relevant second-level civil division]
  - Province: \_\_\_\_\_  province unknown
  - Municipality: \_\_\_\_\_  municipality unknown
- Another country, specify country according to present borders:
  - Country: \_\_\_\_\_
- Unknown
- Country of birth unknown

**B. COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP**

What is (person's) country of citizenship?

- (This country) \_\_
- (This country) and another country (or other countries), specify according to present borders:
  - The other country(countries) \_\_\_\_\_
- Another country (or countries), specify country according to present borders
  - Country \_\_\_\_\_
- Country unknown
- Country of citizenship unknown
- No citizenship (Stateless)

**C. ACQUISITION OF CITIZENSHIP**

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### FOR CITIZENS OF (THIS COUNTRY) INCLUDING DUAL CITIZENS:

1. Have you had the citizenship of (this country) since birth?  
 No  Yes → Skip next 3 questions
2. How did you obtain the citizenship of (this country)?  
 By marriage  By naturalisation  By option  Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
[Note: The above response categories should be adjusted to include those appropriate to the country.]
3. What was your previous citizenship [Specify according to present borders.]  
Country \_\_\_\_\_  Country unknown
4. In what year did you acquire the citizenship of this country?  
Year \_\_\_\_\_  Year unknown

### D. COUNTRY OF BIRTH OF PARENTS

#### ASK OF PERSONS WHO WERE BORN IN THE COUNTRY

Where was each of (person's) parents born?

(a) (Person's) father

- (This country)  
 Another country [Specify name of country according to present borders.] \_\_\_\_\_  
 Country of birth unknown

(b) (Person's) mother

- (This country)  
 Another country [Specify name of country according to present borders.] \_\_\_\_\_  
 Country of birth unknown

### E. EVER RESIDED ABROAD

#### ASK PERSONS OVER ONE YEAR OLD and WHO ARE CITIZENS OF THE COUNTRY (OR BORN IN THE COUNTRY) WHERE DATA ARE BEING COLLECTED

1. Has (person) ever lived outside (this country) for a period of at least 12 months\*?  
 Yes  
 No → Skip next 2 questions  
 Don't know → Skip next 2 questions
2. When did (person) last arrive to live in (this country) for 12 months or more\*?  
Year \_\_\_\_\_ Month \_\_\_\_\_  Don't know
3. In which country did (person) last live? [Specify country according to present borders.]  
Country \_\_\_\_\_  Don't know

\* In capturing returned migrants, countries may also choose to use other duration threshold per national practices.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The United Nations recommend that countries apply a threshold of 12 months when considering place of usual residence according to one of the following two criteria: (a) The place at which the person has lived continuously for most of the last 12 months (that is, for at least six months and one day), not including temporary absences for

**F. HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS RESIDING ABROAD**

ASK OF THE HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD OR REFERENCE PERSON

1. In the last five years<sup>9</sup>, has any former member of this household left to live abroad for at least 12 months and is still living abroad now?
  - Yes → please list them by name and proceed with the next questions for each
  - No → end of emigration module
2. How many have left to live abroad for at least 12 months and are still living abroad now?
3. For each person identified as emigrant, specify:

Person name	Sex	Age (in completed years) at departure	Year and month of departure		To which country did the person move to live for at least 12 months (specify country according to present borders) <sup>a</sup>	What is the person's main reason for leaving the country to live abroad? <sup>b</sup>	Highest level and grade or year of school the person has attended at departure (for persons 10 and older at departure), optional <sup>c</sup>	Occupation at departure, optional
			Year	Month				

<sup>a</sup> A pre-coded list of countries may be used if the destination is concentrated in a few countries. In such a case, a category "Other, specify \_\_\_\_" should be included in the list.

<sup>b</sup> Response categories for reasons should reflect the main reasons applicable to the country. Keep consistent categories as the question on "Main reason for migration"

<sup>c</sup> Use national standard classification for the answering categories.

**G. YEAR OR PERIOD OF ARRIVAL IN THE COUNTRY FOR FOREIGN-BORN PERSONS OR RETURN MIGRANTS**

holidays or work assignments, or intends to live for at least six months; and (b) The place at which the person has lived continuously for at least the last 12 months, not including temporary absences for holidays or work assignments, or intends to live for at least 12 months. United Nations (2015), *Principals and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 3*

([https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/seriesM/Series\\_M67rev3en.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/seriesM/Series_M67rev3en.pdf))

<sup>9</sup> If emigration is relatively a rare event, a period of 10 years could be used, keeping in mind that the longer the reference period, the more likely people are likely to have recall errors.

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For countries where immigrants have the right to free movement in and out of the country after having obtained permanent or legal residence status:

ASK OF PERSONS BORN IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

1. On which year and month did (person) first arrive in (this country) and has lived or intend to live in the country for at least one year?

Year \_\_\_\_\_ Month \_\_\_\_\_ Unknown

For countries where people migrate into more than once, whether at different life stages or in a circular way such as for work:

ASK OF PERSONS BORN IN ANOTHER COUNTRY OR OF RETURN MIGRANTS

1. On which year and month did (person) last arrive in (this country) and has lived or intend to live in the country for at least one year?

Year \_\_\_\_\_ Month \_\_\_\_\_ Unknown

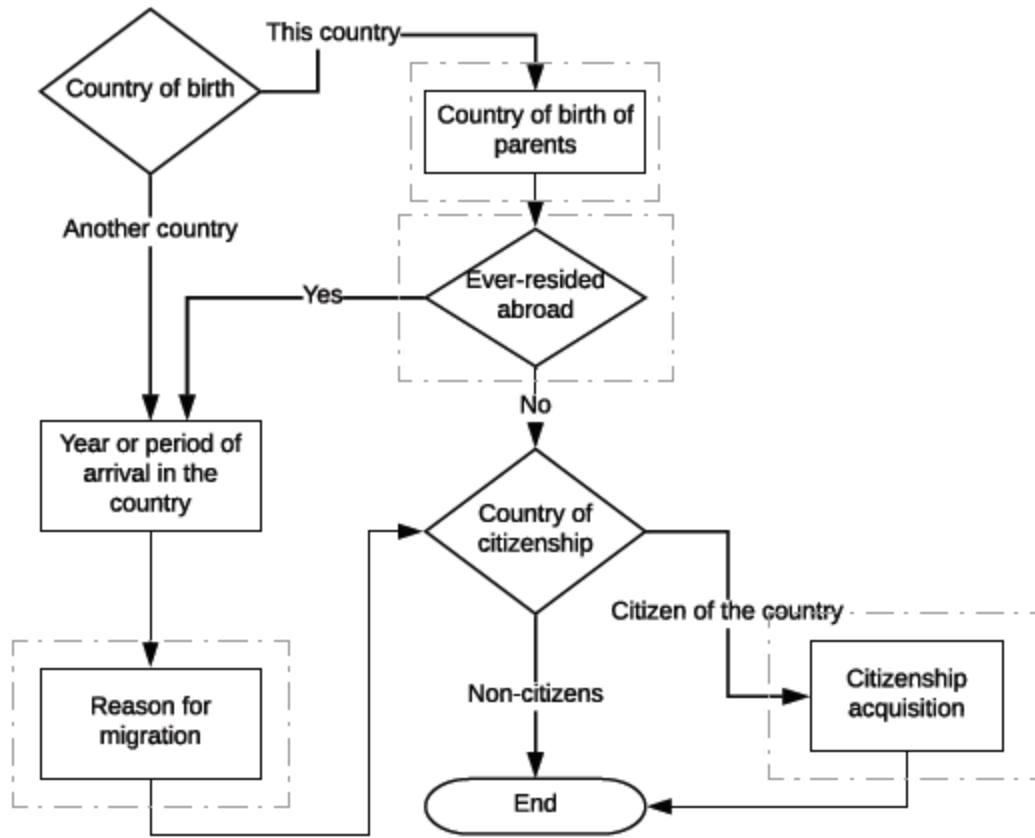
**H. MAIN REASON FOR MIGRATION (OR LEAVING THE COUNTRY FOR RETURN MIGRANTS)**

What was the main reason\* (NAME) came to live in this country?

- Employment (including military service)
- Education or training
- Marriage, family reunification or family formation
- Forced displacement (refugees, asylum seekers, temporary protection, etc.)
- Other reason (specify)\_\_\_\_\_

\* The question should be carefully reviewed and tested by countries before adapting proposed categories and language in censuses or surveys.

Annex 2. Proposed flow chart for international migration questions



Note: Questions in dotted boxes are optional