Improving estimates of international migration in Northern Ireland, and between the UK and Republic of Ireland

Introduction

This document outlines changes to the methodology used by ONS to estimate international migration to and from Northern Ireland, and between the UK and Republic of Ireland. The background to these changes is discussed, followed by the new methodologies including their benefits, limitations and impacts, and the quality assurance which has been undertaken on the resulting estimates.

Background

Northern Ireland

Until now different methods have been used by ONS and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to estimate international migration to and from Northern Ireland. By moving to use the health card estimates already used by NISRA ONS will use the best data source available and ensure consistency for users. Health card data contain records for individuals who were previously resident outside the UK and register with a GP in Northern Ireland. Further information on how international migration estimates are calculated from health card data can be found on NISRA's website: http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp18.htm

Republic of Ireland

With any change in estimating migration to and from Northern Ireland, it is sensible to review the methodology for measuring migration to and from the Republic of Ireland to ensure that migration over the land border is accounted for.

New methodologies

Northern Ireland

Until now the International Passenger Survey (IPS) has been used to estimate migration to and from Northern Ireland. NISRA have concerns over the reliability of these estimates primarily because no ports in Northern Ireland were surveyed by the IPS. NISRA use health card data to identify international immigrants and emigrants for their population estimates. ONS has incorporated these NISRA estimates into its estimates of long-term international migration for 2008 onwards. As a result of this

change estimates of international migration to and from Northern Ireland will be the same as those produced by NISRA.

One of the main limitations with this method is that short-term migrants cannot be distinguished from long-term migrants in health card data so short-term migrants are likely to be included. As a result of this, the distributions of some variables differ from the distributions shown in the IPS. For example, the IPS records fewer migrants from A8 countries[1] than from health card data. However the benefit of having the same estimate for the Northern Ireland component of UK long-term international migration estimates and in the Northern Ireland population estimates produced by NISRA is considered to outweigh these concerns.

Republic of Ireland

Historically ONS has used data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Ireland to estimate migration flows between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Their data were used because there were no routes between the two countries surveyed by the IPS. However, evidence suggests that the CSO estimates of flows from the Republic of Ireland to the UK were underestimated. Although IPS flows have not been used in the past, the data have in fact been captured on routes between the UK and Republic of Ireland since 1999. ONS has been monitoring these flows and comparing both sources of data and now considers the IPS to be the better source. As a result ONS will cease to use data from the CSO to measure international migration between the UK and Republic of Ireland from 2008, and start to use the IPS to measure these flows.

Impacts

These changes have been implemented for 2008 onwards, and research shows that between 2001 and 2006, changing both methodologies together would have made an average increase of 10,000 immigrants to the UK per year, and an average decrease of 2,000 emigrants. This results in an increase of 12,000 in net migration. The annex provides a list of the tables published and their source data.

Quality assurance

ONS has worked closely with colleagues in NISRA throughout the research of the methodology to estimate migration to and from Northern Ireland, to ensure that methods are robust. In addition, Methodology Directorate in ONS has quality assured both methods for release. In 2009 the IPS started to sample passengers migrating at Belfast International Airport and ONS intends to review both methodologies once data from Belfast are available for a full year.

Further information

International migration estimates, and full details of this new methodology can be found at http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=507.

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[1] These are the eight Central and Eastern European countries that acceded to the EU on 1 May 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia)

Annex

Table names	Description	Source data for international migration to and from Northern Ireland	Source data for migration between the UK and Republic of Ireland	Website link
1 series	Components of Long-Term International Migration and IPS non-response	IPS for 1975-2007, NISRA for 2008 onwards	Excluded for 1975-1991, CSO Ireland for 1991-2007, IPS for 2008 onwards	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=15053
2 series	Estimates of Long-Term International Migration by single variable	IPS for 1975-2007, NISRA for 2008 onwards	Excluded for 1975-1991, CSO Ireland for 1991-2007, IPS for 2008 onwards	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=15053
3 series	IPS estimates of long-term international migration by two variables	IPS for 1991 onwards	Excluded for 1991-2007, IPS for 2008 onwards	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=15054
Provisional IPS estimates	Provisional IPS estimates of long-term international migration	IPS for all years	IPS for all years	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=15240