

The Comparability of International Migration Statistics Problems and Prospects

By Georges Lemaitre

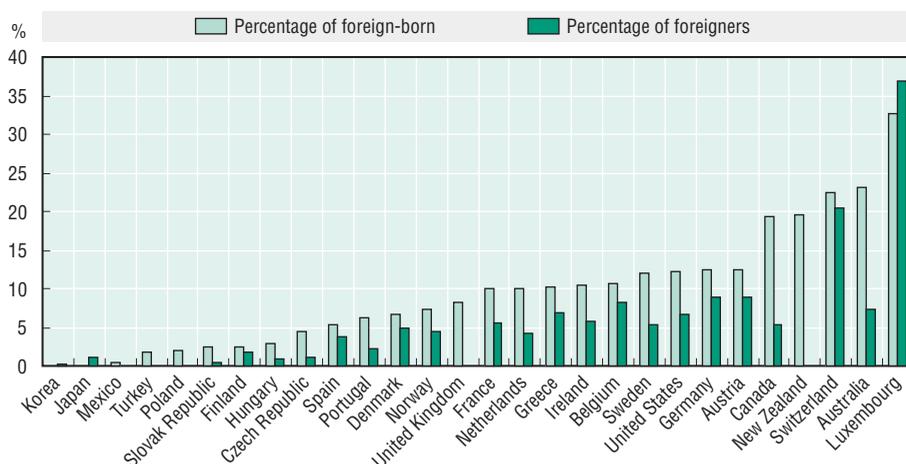
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Since the end of the 1990s, issues related to international migration have received increasing attention from policy-makers. This reflects, among other reasons, the increasing international movements that have taken place following the fall of the Iron Curtain and the growing globalisation of economic activity. In addition, demographic imbalances between developed and developing countries and large differences in real wages have tended to encourage, today as in the past, the movements of workers from economies where they are in surplus to those where they are most in need. Despite these increased movements and the heightened policy interest in this area, however, the quality and comparability of international data on migration have scarcely kept pace.

In particular, data that are generally available on international migration flows do not provide a clear idea of the relative scale of movements across countries. The lack of comparability of international migration statistics is well known. It was with this in mind that the revision of the UN recommendations on international migration statistics (UN 1998) was undertaken in the mid 1990s, little progress having been achieved in harmonisation over the previous twenty years. Still, despite the rather pragmatic approach adopted for the 1998 revision, progress in improving the comparability of the statistics of migration flows since then remains limited.

Chart 1. Percentage of foreign-born persons and of foreigners in the total population in OECD countries, 2001



Source: OECD database on immigrants and expatriates

On the other hand, there has been a significant improvement in the availability of comparable migration stock data. For the 2000 census round, virtually all OECD countries have identified both the foreign and foreign-born resident populations in their censuses. As a result it is now possible to compare on a common basis the size of the immigrant populations in OECD countries, as well as the extent of expatriation within the OECD area (see Dumont and Lemaitre (2004) and Chart 1). Why is it so difficult to get the international picture right with respect to the extent of migration flows? This Brief, which deals only with legal migration, as measured in the statistics of the receiving countries, explains the reasons and proposes some practical steps that could be taken to improve the situation.

The regulation of international migration movements

All OECD countries regulate the movements of non-nationals to a greater or lesser extent. Nationals enjoy the right of free movement, both with respect to entry into or departure from their home country. This right, however, does not preclude the registration of their movements, such as is commonly done in countries where there exist population registers (see below). In almost all countries, certain non-nationals are accorded the right of free entry and of stay for short periods, as part of reciprocal agreements between countries. Most other non-nationals require an entry visa before they can enter the territory of a receiving state. The visa generally only accords the right to stay in the country for a short period of time, often three months. The right of free entry and stay may be extended, both in time and in scope, to include the right of residence and the exercise of an economic activity, either as part of regional agreements (Australia/New Zealand, the Nordic countries) or broader supra-national political or economic unions (the European Union).

The right of a non-national to stay or reside in a country for a more extended period manifests itself through the granting of a residence permit. The criteria considered in assessing whether or not to grant a permit generally include the candidate's reasons for wishing to stay in the country, which can vary from extended visit, study, family reunification or formation, protection from persecution, employment or settlement. Persons granted a permit for reasons other than employment or settlement may or may not be authorised to exercise an economic activity in the country or may be authorised to do so on a limited basis.

The duration of a residence permit will vary depending on the circumstances and/or reason for migration and the permit itself may or may not be renewable. Permit durations can vary from as short as three months for seasonal workers in some countries and one year for students or unskilled workers to more extended stays for the highly qualified or immigrants admitted for humanitarian reasons and to indefinite duration in the case of settlement migration. However, the permit durations for the same category of migrants are not necessarily the same from country to country and the permit held by an immigrant may change over time. In short, the range of possibilities across countries and situations is exceedingly broad. The statistics available in countries will tend to reflect the national regulatory framework, a phenomenon which complicates the possibilities of harmonisation.

How is migration defined internationally?

The 1998 UN recommendations on the statistics of international migration define an international migrant as any person who changes his or her country of usual residence. A long-term migrant is a person who does this for a period of at least one year. A short-term migrant, on the other hand, is a person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least three months but less than one year, except in cases where the movement to that country is for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends and relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage. The nature of the duration measure – whether it is the expected duration of stay, the duration of the permit granted upon entry or the actual duration of stay in the host country – is not specified. Indeed, all are allowed in the Framework for the Compilation of Migration Statistics presented in the recommendations.

The one-year duration threshold is clearly not a fundamental one, but rather a pragmatic one which happens to coincide with the reference period most commonly used for demographic measures of population change. The views of the receiving state as to what reasons or durations define long-term movements or as to whether the movement is intended to be permanent or temporary do not enter into the definition.

Although the reason for a migration movement is not an explicit part of the definition, it is a necessary element for understanding the nature and composition of international migration. Migration can occur for the purpose of settlement, employment, family reunification and formation, study or

training, or to find refuge from persecution, among other reasons. The international recommendations include a detailed classification of entries and departures by reason for migration. In what follows, the focus will be initially on the characterisation of migration by duration, which is how most statistics are currently generated, before returning in the final section to the possibilities for describing (and indeed, harmonising) migration movements in terms of the reasons for movement.

National statistics on international migration

In almost all countries there exists a duration threshold that identifies who is to be considered a migrant in statistical estimates of migration inflows and outflows. The fundamental problems with respect to harmonisation of the statistics of international migration are that the threshold varies from country to country, that permit durations for the same type of migration may differ across countries and that in many cases it appears extremely difficult to adapt or change national data sources to allow for the production of international statistics using a common threshold.

In what follows, attention will be focused largely on the immigration of persons of foreign nationality. Migration involves both inflows and outflows, but because outflows are generally unregulated, the problems in their measurement tend to be even greater than for inflows. Likewise, migration involves not just movements of non-citizens (foreigners) but also of citizens (nationals) and a complete picture needs to take these latter flows into account as well. For the most part, however, it is the immigration of foreigners that tends to be most closely monitored in OECD countries and which is the object of most policy concerns. Indeed, it is statistics on the movements of foreigners which are published regularly in the OECD's *Trends in International Migration* (OECD 2004). If a focus on the immigration of foreigners seems a restricted one, the harmonisation of the statistics for just this group would be a significant step forward towards the development of migration flow statistics that are consistent, complete and internationally comparable.

Inflows from population registers

In many OECD countries (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden), immigrant statistics are generated from a population register, which is a file of persons residing in the country that is generally maintained at the municipal level. To be registered, a person entering from

outside the country must intend to stay in the country for more than a specified minimum period and generally have a residence permit (if required) of at least the minimum duration. In some countries (Germany), the minimum period is one week, in others (Belgium, Japan) it is three months, in still others one year (Sweden, Finland). In some countries, therefore, virtually all movements that are not related to tourism, business visits or very short-term stays are counted as migration. There is no distinction made between short- and long-term migration in the statistics and indeed, in some countries (for example Finland and Sweden), notably those for which the criterion for entry into the register is an intended stay of more than one year, short-term stays are not counted.

Note that under certain population register entry criteria, flows of very different durations (for example, of seasonal workers and family members) can be considered as immigration. The focus is on a minimum duration of stay rather than on the long-term intentions of the migrant or the perspective of the receiving state. Statistics on residence permits exist as well in countries with population registers, but tend to be used sparingly, if at all, for statistical purposes. Moreover, even if the holding of a residence permit is generally a requirement for entry onto the register, information on the nature of the permit or on the reason for the presence in the host country is not entered onto the register. As a result, it is generally not possible to determine directly if a person from a particular country, for example, entered the country for study, for work or is a refugee.

It is clear that countries for which the duration threshold for entry into a register is lower will count more short-term movements than countries where it is higher. How big a difference can this make? One study (Grundström, 1993) covering the Nordic countries has shown that some 90-95% of persons intending to stay for more than one year (in Finland and Sweden) actually remained for more than a year, but that when the intended stay period was three months (Denmark), the corresponding figure for persons staying more than one year was only some 60-70%. The difference clearly relates to persons entering for short periods and who must register in Denmark but not in Finland or Sweden.

Inflows from residence permit systems

In other OECD countries, immigration statistics are based on residence permits and count the number of persons who were awarded residence permits of a certain

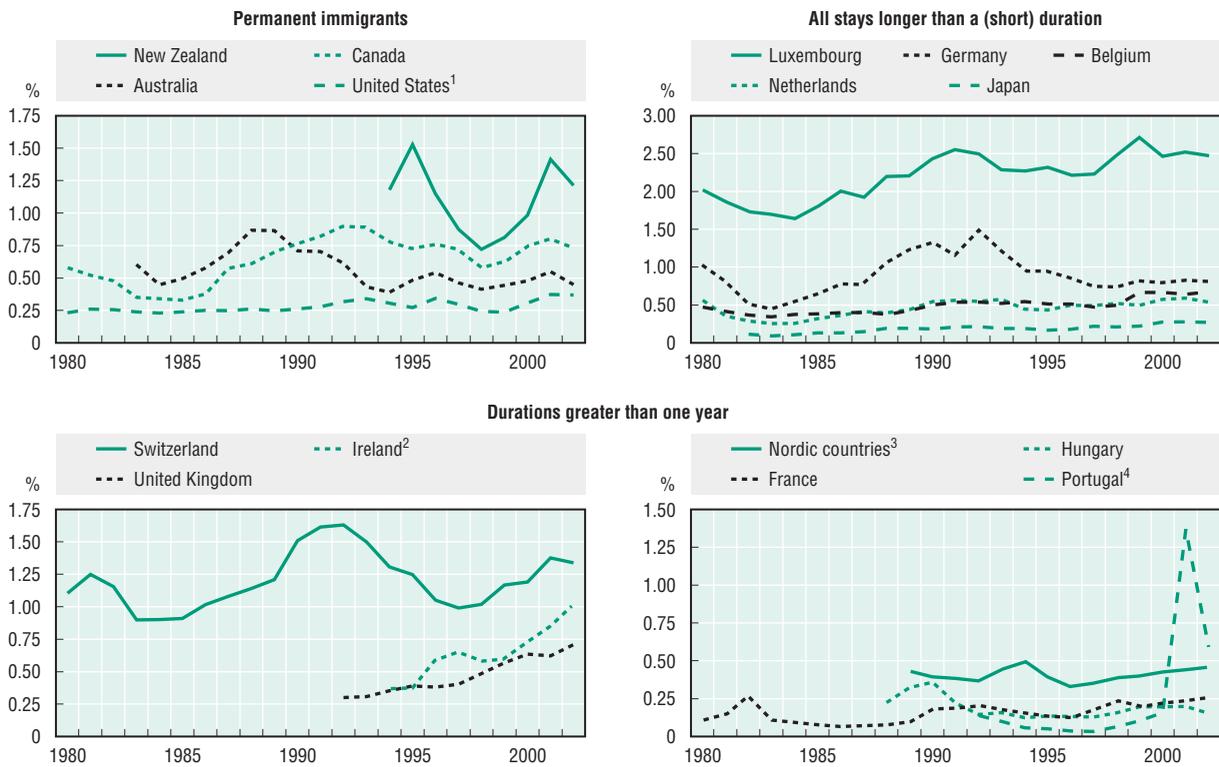
minimum duration during the year. This minimum duration can vary from one year in France and Switzerland to unlimited duration in some of the so-called settlement countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States). In some cases, persons receiving permits of unlimited duration may have entered in a previous year under a temporary permit and changed status to a permanent one during the current year. In recent years, over half of the persons receiving “green cards” in the United States, for example, were already present in

the country, having entered previously under another (temporary) status.

The granting of a permanent residence permit to an immigrant upon entry is unusual in most OECD countries, except perhaps for refugees resettled under the Geneva Convention (*i.e.* those that are transferred from UNHCR refugee camps for settlement into receiving countries). Indeed, outside of the settlement countries, most residence permits granted by OECD countries upon

Chart 2. **Inflows of non-citizens, selected OECD countries, 1980-2002**

Percentage of total population



Note: Data for the United Kingdom have been revised and come from the International Passenger Survey. For New Zealand, data refer to residence approvals. For Australia, Canada and the United States, data relate to new permanent immigrants. For France and Southern European countries, data are from residence permits. For all other countries, data are based on population or foreigners' registers. The reference period is the fiscal year for Australia (July to June of the given year) and the United States (October to September of the given year).

1. Excluding immigrants legalised in the United States under the IRCA regularisation programme.
2. Data are estimates on the basis of 1996 and 2002 Census results.
3. Including Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Norway figures cover expected stays of more than six months.
4. The large increase is due to the fact that the 2001 and 2002 figures include respectively 126 901 and 47 657 permits which have been delivered under the 2001 programme of regularisation.

Sources: National Statistical Offices. For details on definitions and sources, refer to metadata for Table A.1.1. of the Statistical Annex, *Trends in International Migration*.

entry are of limited duration. Certain types of temporary permits may be more or less automatically renewed, for example if the holder is working or looking for work, and a longer term permit obtained after several years in the country, but the legal right of permanent residence may be granted only after a long stay in the country or indeed upon the acquisition of the nationality of the country in question.

Although initial residence permits in a particular country may all be of limited duration, this does not imply that all migration is viewed as temporary in the first instance. Certain types of temporary permits place the recipient on a “track” that could eventually lead to permanent residence and are recognized as such. In France and Switzerland, for example, persons receiving one-year permits upon entry are often referred to as “permanent immigrants” or “permanent residents”. The residence status of persons on such a “permanent track” is different from that of, say, international students or seasonal workers, who also receive temporary permits, but whose stay is intended to be temporary and whose permits are renewable a limited number of times, if at all.

Chart 2 shows immigration inflow rates for persons of foreign nationality, where countries have been grouped together according to the expected duration of stay or the

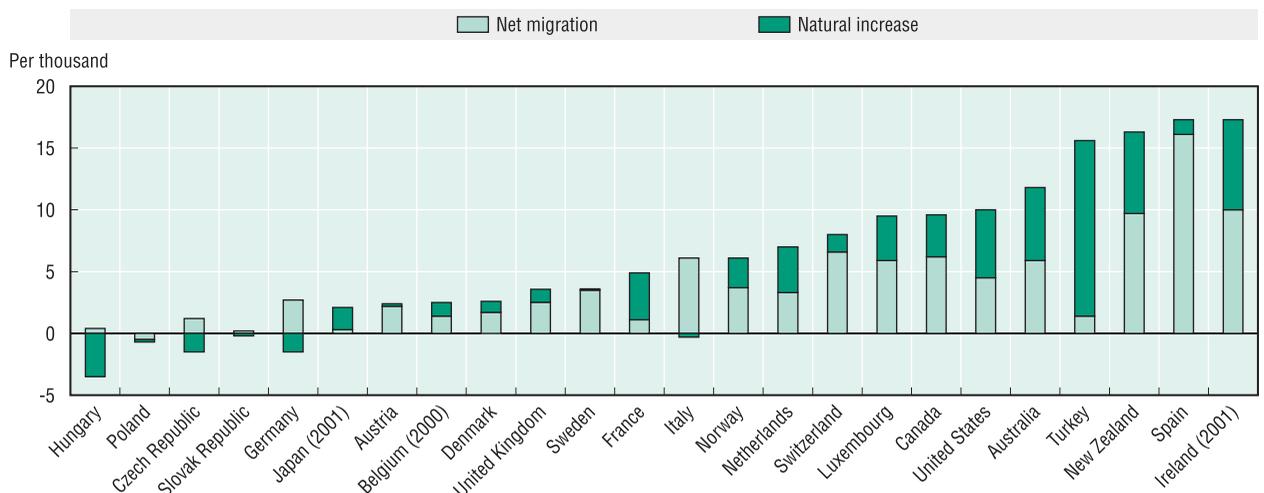
duration of the residence permit. The first group relates to countries in which inflows refer to permits of unlimited duration; the second to countries for which the inflows concern all movements longer than a specified (short) duration; and the third and fourth, to those for whom the duration is one year or more.

In countries which only count persons granted permanent residence permits as immigrants, international students, for example, would not be considered immigrants. By contrast, in countries where immigrants are persons intending to stay for more than a short period, international students typically fit this bill and would be counted as immigrants. The numbers here are not small. For example, for the United States close to 234 000 new visas were issued in 2002 to students from abroad, whereas in Germany the figure for new foreign students was 68 000. In principle, none of the former would be counted as immigrants in the statistics commonly reported for the United States, whereas all of the latter would be counted as immigrants in German statistics.

The harmonisation of national statistics

All countries produce statistics on net international migration for use in producing current estimates of the total resident population. Because arrivals of non-citizens tend

Chart 3. Population growth and its components, selected OECD countries, 2002



Source: OECD database on immigrants and expatriates

to be regulated, there are generally good sources available to measure their inflows. However, this is not necessarily the case for inflows of citizens and for outflows in general. Nonetheless, estimates for both of these are produced in various ways (see OECD 2004) and a figure for net migration is generated on a regular basis in practically all countries. From these statistics, one can see, for example, that migration in most OECD countries accounts for a high proportion of current population increase (Chart 3).

Note that there are rarely any questions raised about the comparability of the statistics of net migration. The reason is that because net migration is obtained by subtracting outflows from inflows, differences between countries with respect to the duration of the minimum presence in, or absence from, the host country in order for a migration flow to be counted, tend to be “netted out”. In other words, measures of net migration tend to be reasonably comparable across countries (provided that outflows are properly recorded or estimated). This is not the case for measures of inflows and outflows.

If OECD countries measure migration on the basis of different duration measures, why not simply apply a uniform duration to produce internationally comparable statistics on migration flows? The solution would normally be to harmonise the population register entry criteria or adapt the information collected on persons registered and to apply the same duration threshold to register countries and permit countries. For a number of reasons, however, this solution has turned out to be extremely difficult to implement.

First of all, population registers are generally maintained at the municipal level and were introduced for administrative, fiscal and planning as well as demographic purposes. National Statistical Offices are at best secondary users of the registers. In practice, it has proven to be exceedingly difficult to bring about the required changes to data collection and processing in order to produce statistics according to international guidelines, especially since the statistics currently produced are generally considered adequate for national needs.

Secondly, implementing a common duration length does not address the problem that receiving states do not necessarily grant permits of comparable duration for the same type of movement. Possibilities of permit renewal may make shorter term permits for a particular kind of migration in one country similar to longer term permits for the same type of migration in another country. In

countries which grant the right of permanent residence upon entry, one-year (and even multi-year) permits may be granted for stays that are intended to be temporary, such as recruitments of temporary (and often highly skilled) workers, intra-company transfers, academics on exchange programmes, traineeships, international students, etc.

In short, the same permit duration threshold may encompass migration flows of very different character in different countries. International statistics which ignore or take no account of this basic fact will tend to be of questionable comparability.

Prospects for the future

The above summary of the current state of affairs with respect to the statistics of international migration flows does not appear to point to prospects for significant progress in the near future on the basis of current methods. As we have seen, population register operating procedures appear difficult to change. Moreover, because the registers themselves seem such an ideal data source nationally, able as they are to track population movements (of both citizens and non-citizens) in a comprehensive way, there is often little incentive to explore other possible data sources that might be more amenable to international harmonisation but that risk producing a “competing” estimate of entries nationally. Finally, the fact that the registers contain no information on the reason for migration makes it problematic to envisage the inclusion or exclusion of certain migrants from the scope of a hypothetical definition based on the nature of their movements (for example, seasonal workers). Still there are reasons for optimism. There are a number of measures which could be taken to improve comparability in the short-term. Two that could be particularly important are described below.

The first of these involves the application of an actual-stay duration criterion *ex post* in order to identify the flows that would be counted as long-term migration, that is to say, persons would be considered long-term immigrants only if they stayed in a country for at least one year. The assumption underlying this approach is that the differences in the criteria for entering a population register, for example, only affect the registration of short-term movements and that an actual-stay criterion would eliminate this source of non-comparability. Long-term outflows would be measured in a corresponding fashion. This approach would involve no additional data collection, no new data sources and no changes to operating procedures, but

rather different tabulation of data from population registers and other sources.

The second measure involves limiting the scope of the statistics, in the first instance, to the regulated flows that are the main object of policy interest. Since such flows, by virtue of being regulated, tend to leave a “paper trail”, they should in principle be more amenable to tracking than movements of citizens and persons with the right of free movement. The obvious sources for doing so are the permit data systems in countries. Because permit durations, as we have seen, may be problematic for defining long-term movements, harmonisation would be based on a categorical approach to describing migration, with standard categories encompassing, for example, permanent-type worker migration, the accompanying family of an entering worker, entry of spouses and/or children of a resident, international study, intra-corporate transfers, seasonal work, etc. These are recognised categories that exist in virtually all OECD countries. This approach would involve a more systematic processing and use of data based on permits.

The first of the measures above would address the needs of demographic accounting and provide a comprehensive measure of long-term inflows and outflows affecting population change. The second would provide a rich disaggregation of migration entries that would help observers to understand the nature and composition of (regulated) international migration. Neither measure by itself would be adequate to satisfy all needs, but together they would constitute a significant advance on currently available statistics of international migration. ■

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