

The International Migrant Stock: A Global View

United Nations Population Division

International migration is increasingly recognized as an important issue in the modern world where economic globalization has led to the growing interdependence of countries and conflicts in many areas of the world have increased the potential for forced migration across national borders. The realization that a better understanding of international migration, its causes and consequences requires reliable data on international migration has increased the demand for such information. In response to that demand, the Population Division of the United Nations released in 2002 estimates of the number of international migrants in each country of the world as of 1990 and 2000 (United Nations, 2002). The Population Division is now in the process of extending the estimates to 1960 so as to produce a comparable time series of estimates spanning the last 40 years of the 20th century. This note discusses the sources of data used to derive the estimates available, the quality and coverage of such data, and the methodology used in producing the estimates. It also presents an overview of global and regional trends in the international migrant stock since 1960.

Who is an international migrant?

It is generally agreed that international migration involves a geographical move from one country to another. In estimating the migrant stock, the Population Division has defined international migrants as persons born in a country other than that in which they reside, that is, international migrants are equated with the foreign-born.

The most common source of information on the number of foreign-born persons present in a country is the population census. Censuses that record the country of birth of persons enumerated can produce information on the number of persons born abroad. The United Nations recommends that censuses be carried out at regular intervals, usually ten years in length. Although many countries lack a complete series of decennial censuses for the period 1950-2000, a sufficiently large number of countries have several censuses producing relevant information on the foreign-born population so as to provide a basis for the estimation of the number of international migrants.

In some countries, however, the censuses have not recorded the country of birth of persons enumerated. Instead, information on the country of citizenship of those enumerated has been gathered. For those countries, the information on citizenship has been used to identify the number of foreigners and that number has been the basis for the estimation of the number of international migrants, even though it is recognized that foreign citizens are not necessarily persons born abroad. Thus, according to the nationality law of certain countries, children born to foreigners are foreigners even if the children were born in the country of enumeration and had not migrated from the country of citizenship. Furthermore, the naturalization of foreigners can reduce the foreign population in a country without involving their movement across international boundaries. Yet, despite these drawbacks, in the absence of data on the foreign-born population, data on the foreign population were considered as the best alternative indicator of the number of international migrants in a country.

Sources of data

Data on the foreign-born were available for the majority of countries. Thus, out of the 228 countries and areas for which the number of international migrants was estimated, 158 had data based on place of birth; 52 had data based on citizenship, and for a further 18 that lacked data altogether, the estimates presented were the result of imputation (table 1). At the regional level,

about half of the countries of Asia had only data based on citizenship as did a third of those in Africa and about a fourth in Europe. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern America and Oceania, in contrast, only 4 countries out of 75 reported data on the basis of citizenship.

In total, data for 913 censuses were used as input for the estimation of the number of international migrants. The censuses considered took place from 1945 to 2001. As table 2 indicates, nearly 42 per cent of them referred to the period 1975-1994, 33 per cent referred to the period 1954-1974 and only 13 per cent referred to the most recent period, 1995-2001. That is, for the majority of countries the estimates for 2000 represent extrapolations of data referring to earlier periods. The best coverage for the recent period was found in Europe, where 24 per cent of all census or population register data considered referred to 1995-2001 and the majority of countries had some recent source of data. In Asia recent data were available for about half of the countries in the region. For earlier periods the most complete series of data is found in Latin America and the Caribbean and in the market economies of Europe and the overseas countries of immigration. Data for earlier periods are particularly sparse for the former communist countries, especially those in Europe.

Methods of estimation

Given the nature of the data available and the extent of their coverage, estimation was based on observed trends. For countries having information on the international migrant stock for at least two points in time, interpolation or extrapolation was used to estimate the international migrant stock on 1 July of the reference years, namely 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Information on the international migrant stock for at least two points in time was available for 164 of the 228 countries or areas constituting the world in 2000, that is, for 72 per cent of all countries or areas in the world.

For 47 countries only one observation was available. Those countries included the 15 successor States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In the case of those successor States, estimates for 2000 were derived by taking account of the migration flows that occurred among them during 1990-2000, and by considering the number of persons enumerated in the different Republics of the former USSR but born in other Republics of the former USSR according to the 1989 census of the USSR. For all other countries with only one observation as well as for the former USSR until 1990, estimates for the reference years were derived assuming rates of growth or decrease for the migrant stock in the years preceding or following the only observation available.

For 18 countries or areas, no information about the international migrant stock was available. This group includes China and several countries that have been affected by conflict, most of which were not expected to attract large numbers of international migrants. For these countries a model was used to estimate the international migrant stock assuming that the proportion of international migrants in the total population would vary inversely with the size of the total population, as was observed in countries with data available¹.

In preparing the estimation of the world migrant stock, particular attention was paid to the existence of refugee population. In principle, persons granted refugee status by a country become part of that country's population and there is no reason to expect that they would be explicitly excluded from census enumerations. However, in countries where refugees are kept in camps or

¹ Specifically, the following equation was used to estimate the number of international migrants in countries lacking information altogether: $F = 0.345(P)/\exp(\log_{10} P - 2)$, where P is the total population in the country and F is the foreign-born population considered equivalent to the international migrant stock.

where they remain largely isolated from the local population, it is not certain that censuses include them. Furthermore, in many of the developing countries hosting sizeable numbers of refugees, censuses have not been carried out as regularly as in other countries. Consequently, in order to make adequate allowance for the presence of refugees, their numbers for the reference years as reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA) were added to the estimates of the international migrant stock for developing countries where they were likely not to have been included in the census data available. No such adjustment was made in the case of developed countries where censuses and population registers usually reflect already any refugees present.

Trends in the international migrant stock

The above-mentioned procedure yielded the results presented in table 3. The number of international migrants in the world rose from 79 million in 1960 to 175 million in 2000. The growth was particularly notable during the 1980s, mostly due to the break-up of the former Soviet Union and subsequent independence of the new Republics. It should be noted that much of increases in the foreign migrant stock in the world in 1990 occurred because of creation of new national borders, thus without involving actual moves of people. Two-thirds of the growth of the world migrant stock between 1990 and 2000 took place in Northern America. Despite continuing increases in the number, international migrants comprised only 3 per cent of the world population in 2000. Refugees, accounting for 9 per cent of the world's migrant stock, were an important component of population movements.

The number of international migrants in developed countries as a proportion of the world total migrant stock kept increasing over the last four decades. Before 1980, the less developed regions had attracted a higher share of international migrants than the more developed regions. By 2000, however, three-fifths of the world's migrants were found in the more developed regions. At the regional level, Europe was the largest host of international migrants, with 56 million migrants in 2000, followed by Asia, and Northern America. Indeed, these three regions hosted most of the international migrants (84 per cent) in the world.

At the country level, the United States hosts the largest international migrant stock, with nearly 35 million migrants in 2000. It was followed by the Russian Federation (13 million) and Germany (7 million), Ukraine (7 million). The four top countries with the highest percentage of international migrant stock in the total population were the United Arab Emirates (74 per cent), Kuwait (58 per cent), Jordan (40 per cent) and Israel (37 per cent), all located in Western Asia.

The latest estimates also suggest that the volume of international migration is nearly equal for men and women, as women were some 49 per cent of all international migrants in 2000. The proportion of women rose only slightly since 1960 when it recorded 47 per cent. However, the differences between developed and developing countries have grown over time, in terms of representation of women in migrant stock, as the proportion of women continued to increase in the developed regions. At the regional level, the number of female international migrants exceeded that of men in Europe. The presence of women was noticeably low in Asia, where women comprised 42 per cent of the regional migrant stock in 2000. Migrant women were as numerous as men in Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern America and Oceania.

Challenges of estimating the world migrant stock

The estimation of world migrant stock is a continuous process. It is envisaged that the efforts will continue to improve the goodness of the fit with recent trends and to make the information more meaningful as a tool for migration policy making and management.

The major challenges encountered in producing the estimates of world migrant stock have been the lack of information and the comparability of the data gathered. Having the data on the foreign-born population enumerated at the country level as bases for the estimate, the quality of the estimates of world migrant stock heavily depends on the availability and type of data produced by each country.

Our experience shows that countries are not always able to provide needed international migration statistics. Although population censuses are carried out in many countries at regular basis, dissemination of information generated has often been limited, or been slow if it is ever released. This is often the case of developing countries where two-fifths of the world's international migrants reside. There has been often a lack of funds to produce needed information on international migrants and of expertise to make the information internationally comparable. In addition to such operational problems, political considerations sometimes influence whether or not, and how, migration statistics are reported in a number of countries.

Tackling such challenges requires concerted efforts. As the primary responsibility of data production will still be at the country level, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of relevant national offices to collect, produce and disseminate the migration data. Governments are also encouraged to improve the cross-national comparability of the statistics that they produce, while understanding the importance of seeking a common framework for the identification and classification of international migrants. All these efforts should be guided by a mutual trust among Governments in sharing the migration statistics and by the spirit to manage international migration as a global priority issue.

Source:

United Nations (2002). *International Migration Report 2002*. Sales No. E.03.XIII.4. New York:

Table 1. Distribution of countries and areas according to the type of data available for the estimation of the number of international migrants

	<i>Criterion used</i>		
	<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Citizenship</i>	<i>Imputed</i>
Total	158	52	18
More developed regions	35	12	5
Less developed regions	133	40	13
Africa	34	17	5
Asia	23	20	7
Europe	31	11	5
Latin America and the Caribbean	45	1	0
Northern America	5	0	0
<u>Oceania</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>

Source: United Nations International Migrant Stock 2002.

Table 2. Number and distribution over time of the censuses used to estimate the international migrant stock

<i>Census date</i>	<i>Africa</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Americas</i>	<i>Oceania</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Number</i>						
1945-1954	11	15	28	48	14	116
1955-1964	23	27	24	50	21	145
1965-1974	28	26	27	48	27	156
1975-1984	41	28	41	47	28	185
1985-1994	35	39	61	41	20	196
1995-2001	12	25	57	12	9	115
Total	150	160	238	246	119	913
<i>Percentage</i>						
1945-1954	7.3	9.4	11.8	19.5	11.8	12.7
1955-1964	15.3	16.9	10.1	20.3	17.6	15.9
1965-1974	18.7	16.3	11.3	19.5	22.7	17.1
1975-1984	27.3	17.5	17.2	19.1	23.5	20.3
1985-1994	23.3	24.4	25.6	16.7	16.8	21.5
1995-2001	8.0	15.6	23.9	4.9	7.6	12.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3. Estimates of migrant stock by region, proportion in the world migrant stock and proportion of women in migrant stock, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000.

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
A. Migrant stock (in 1,000)					
World total	78,842	84,620	103,034	154,005	174,948
More developed regions	35,026	41,376	50,978	81,425	104,119
Less developed regions	43,816	43,244	52,056	72,580	70,829
Africa	8,977	9,863	14,076	16,221	16,277
Asia	29,281	28,104	32,313	49,985	49,948
Europe	16,957	21,798	25,415	48,438	56,100
Former USSR	2,942	3,093	3,251	-	-
Latin America and the Caribbean	6,039	5,750	6,139	7,014	5,944
Northern America	12,513	12,986	18,087	27,597	40,844
Oceania	2,134	3,028	3,755	4,751	5,835
B. Proportion in the world migrant stock					
World total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
More developed regions	44.4	48.9	49.5	52.9	59.5
Less developed regions	55.6	51.1	50.5	47.1	40.5
Africa	11.4	11.7	13.7	10.5	9.3
Asia	37.1	33.2	31.4	32.5	28.6
Europe	21.5	25.8	24.7	31.5	32.1
Former USSR	3.7	3.7	3.2	-	-
Latin America and the Caribbean	7.7	6.8	6.0	4.6	3.4
Northern America	15.9	15.3	17.6	17.9	23.3
Oceania	2.7	3.6	3.6	3.1	3.3
C. Proportion of women in migrant stock					
World total	46.8	47.3	47.3	47.9	48.6
More developed regions	48.7	48.9	49.9	51.3	51.4
Less developed regions	45.3	45.7	44.7	44.1	44.6
Africa	42.3	42.7	44.2	45.9	46.7
Asia	46.4	46.6	44.4	42.9	43.3
Europe	48.5	48.0	48.5	51.7	52.4
Former USSR	48.5	48.0	48.5	-	-
Latin America and the Caribbean	44.7	46.8	48.2	49.9	50.2
Northern America	49.8	51.1	52.6	51.0	50.3
Oceania	44.4	46.5	47.9	49.1	50.5

Source: United Nations International Migrant Stock 2002.