Introduction

Reliable information about emigration is important for a number of reasons. It is a significant component of population change in many countries. For this reason, robust information is needed on the demographic characteristics of people leaving the country each year, to make accurate population estimates when using cohort component methods. This includes the age, sex and area of residence of the migrant when they left the country. Information on emigration is also required to gain a better understanding of migration trends and the cumulative effects of migration on the composition of the country and the distribution of migrants abroad. For example, intended length of stay in the destination country, reason for emigration, nationality of emigrants and their occupation can help to inform the drivers of emigration, how long people are likely to stay away and the potential economic implications for both countries of their move.

Population estimates and projections, which draw on migration estimates, are essential for planning, resource allocation, business decisions and a broad range of public policy purposes. Population statistics also provide essential contextual information, in grossing-up surveys and in calculating key social and economic indicators, e.g. life expectancy, gross domestic product per head of population. However, in this country the migration component is the most difficult to estimate accurately because of the lack of direct information that is available about migrants and migration, particularly emigration. By contrast, recording of information on the other main component, natural change (that is births minus deaths), is considered to be reasonably complete.

Currently the International Passenger Survey (IPS) is the main source of information used to estimate migrants entering and leaving Great
Britain. This is a large multipurpose port survey that interviews a 0.3 per cent sample of travellers.3,3 Approximately 1 per cent of those sampled are migrants and less than half of these are emigrants. For this reason, the number of migrants interviewed by the port survey each year is currently relatively small and the resulting estimates of migration are not sufficiently robust for all the uses to which they are put.

However, a port survey is considered essential, as other potential sources such as registration with and de-registration from administrative systems do not generally provide unbiased estimates. They do not record usual residence on the same basis as population estimates, may be subject to list inflation (failure to de-register), record date of registration rather than migration (which may differ by several months or years) and some record only inclusion or exclusion from the register rather change of address.

A recommendation of a review of international migration statistics in 2003 was that the sample size of the IPS be boosted in a similar way for emigration as was already done for immigration. This recommendation was implemented from January 2007. In addition to that enhancement, alternative sources and approaches need to be found which can both provide more information about emigration and emigrants and also improve the quality of the estimates that are made. Drawing on international experience, a pilot study was conducted to assess the feasibility of running questions on emigration in household surveys in Great Britain. This article reports on the findings of that pilot.

International experience

Before conducting the pilot study, research was carried out into the experience of other countries, to see what could be learned from international practice. This work focused on the United States of America (US) and Ireland, the latter in particular where household surveys are used to help inform the estimation of migration.

The Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland conducts a number of surveys which inform their estimates of international migration. Of these, the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS), which is the Irish equivalent to the Labour Force Survey conducted in the UK, is used to produce estimates of emigration. The QNHS asks the following questions on emigration:

“Is there anyone who usually lived in this household on April 30 (in previous year) now living abroad?”

If yes:
- How many persons?
- What gender?
- What age?
- In what country are they now living?
- In what month did they leave?

The results from the QNHS are used to produce estimates of emigration from the Republic of Ireland to the rest of the world, and estimates of emigration to the UK are fed into ONS’s international migration estimates. The emigration estimates from the QNHS are checked against other data including NISCR flows, the Continuous Country of Residence Inquiry and information on visas issued to young adults travelling to Australia.

The QNHS estimates of emigrants are revised upwards by around 6 per cent, this upwards revision is intended to allow for the emigration of non-Irish citizens and whole households. Comparisons, between the 2006 Census and the 2006 population estimates that are based on estimating population change annually since 2002 for the Republic of Ireland, showed close agreement. This provides confidence in the net migration estimates made during the intercensal period in the Republic of Ireland.

It does not ratify the gross migration flows completely as either the in or out flows could be mis-estimated but it would need to be to the same extent on both flows for there to be no impact on the estimation of net flows. In the past, emigration from Ireland has tended to be dominated by Irish nationals, especially young adults. Emigration of foreign nationals has been more likely from the UK, where 7.4 per cent of the population at the 2001 Census were born outside the UK and the Irish Republic, compared to just 4.0 per cent of the Irish Republic population as measured by the 2002 Irish Census. However, data from the most recent Census in Ireland show that the number of non-Irish people living in the Republic has grown between 2002 and 2006. Final Census 2006 figures that were published at the end of March 2007, show that 8.2 per cent of the Irish Republic’s population were born outside the UK and the Irish Republic.

Other countries experiences of measuring emigration through surveys

While the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) use information from the QNHS to estimate emigration to the Republic of Ireland, their estimation of emigration to the rest of the world and to Great Britain is based on health de-registrations and Health Card Transfers respectively. However, NISRA are currently testing questions on emigration with a view to using them in household surveys. The questions tested by NISRA were similar to those piloted in the GB Omnibus Survey, but are worded more simply. Feedback on the questions was generally positive although some respondents were suspicious of the reason for the questions.

Surveys to measure the emigration of family members, using multiplicity informant sampling methods, have been tested in the US. However, the results were not as useful as anticipated due to the small sample size of respondents with emigrant relatives. A recent review in the US, drawing from several studies about emigration levels and return migrants for 1950–2000, suggested that a number of strategies might be possible to augment population statistics in the US. Canada and the US are working together to develop ways to improve their estimates of international migration through sharing data on people who have migrated from the US to Canada or vice versa. Their work has concluded that such data sharing is beneficial. However, the methods they are developing are not based on using surveys to identify emigrants and thus have only marginal relevance to the research that is being reported in this article.

The test in Great Britain, using the Omnibus Survey

To assess the effectiveness of using a survey to capture information about emigrants and emigration from Great Britain, the Omnibus Survey was used to pilot some questions. The Omnibus Survey is a multi-purpose survey run by ONS and is based on interviews with a sample population of approximately 1,800 adult individuals (aged 16 or over) in private households in Great Britain each month. The survey uses the Postcode Address File (PAF) of ‘small users’ as its sampling frame, which is a list of residential postal addresses. The Omnibus Survey comprises a number of modules of questions on a variety of different subjects, together with a core module of questions to obtain the characteristics of the adult respondent and the household in which they live. It provides a way of achieving quick results from a relatively short and simple set of questions and can be used to test the viability of proposed questions on a new topic, such as, in the case of GB, emigration.

Sample size

Table 1 outlines the sample sizes and response rates for the module in December 2005 and January 2006. From an original sample size of 2,025 and 2,027, the response rate for December 2005 and January 2006 was 65 per cent and 68 per cent respectively. This is in line with the response rate for the Omnibus which usually falls between 65 and 70 per cent.
Questions were tested in the Omnibus Survey in Great Britain, in the modules for December 2005 and January 2006, on the following:

- emigration: whether someone who was resident in the household has emigrated in the last 12 months
- intended emigration: whether someone who is resident in the household intends to emigrate in the next 12 months
- previous immigration: whether someone who is resident in the household has ever been usually resident overseas

The questions are shown in Box 1. They were tested for two months and a further slot had been booked for May 2006. However, following an analysis of the data for December and January it was concluded that the cost of an additional slot did not justify the small number of additional migrants that would be identified, although the possibility of further testing later has not been ruled out.

The question used in the Omnibus Survey on emigration was based on the questions in the QNHS conducted in the Republic of Ireland, which asks the current household whether people who were usually resident in the household have moved abroad. The previous immigration question was based on the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) recommendations for the next 2010 round of Censuses for capturing immigrant information. For each migrant, information was collected on their country of residence overseas (or their country of previous residence for immigrants), their reason for moving, their nationality, age and sex.

**Definition of a migrant**

The objective of the investigation reported in this article was to identify emigrants and to collect information about their characteristics. The ONS migration statistics are based on the UN definition of a long-term migrant which is:

“A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence. From the perspective of the country of departure the person will be a long-term emigrant and from that of the country of arrival the person will be a long-term immigrant.”

**Findings**

Table 2 shows the number of migrants identified. Overall, the survey captured only 22 emigrants, as well as 85 people expressing an intention to emigrate and 54 immigrants. Although these data are analysed further, a note of caution needs to be sounded about the robustness of any wider inferences that can be drawn from these analyses due to the small numbers of migrants on which they are based. Results for December and January are combined in these analyses.

### Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selected addresses</td>
<td>2,025</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2,027</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineligible addresses</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible addresses</td>
<td>1,801</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>1,843</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refusals</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-contacts</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews achieved</td>
<td>1,169</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>1,252</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Box one**

The migration questions included in Omnibus Survey, December 2005 and January 2006

The following questions ask about people who have lived in your household and left the UK to live abroad.


1. Yes
2. No

How many people who lived in this household on December 1st 2004 are now living abroad?

Intentions to Emigrate: The following questions ask about people who live in your household currently who intend to live abroad in the future:

1. Yes
2. No

Does anyone who usually lives in this household intend to leave the UK during the next year for a continuous period of twelve months or more?

1. Yes
2. No

Previous Immigration: The following questions ask about people who live in your household currently but have previously lived abroad:

1. Yes
2. No

Characteristics of migrants:

Where migrants were found by the survey, the following information was recorded for each appropriate person (“Person X”)

- Is ‘Person X’ male or female?
  1. Male
  2. Female
- How old was ‘Person X’ when they left the country (arrived in UK for immigrants)?
  1. Under 18
  2. 18-24
  3. 25-29
  4. 30-39
  5. 40-49
  6. 50-59
  7. 60-69
  8. 70 or older
- What is ‘Person X’s nationality?
  1. British
  2. British and other
  3. Other
  4. Don’t know
- In which month did ‘Person X’ leave the UK? (emigrants only)
  1. January
  2. February
  3. March
  4. April
  5. May
  6. June
  7. July
  8. August
  9. September
  10. October
  11. November
  12. December
- In which year did Person X arrive in or return to the UK from their most recent period of at least 12 months spent abroad? (immigrants only)
  1. 2004
  2. 2005
  3. 2006
  4. 2007
  5. 2008
  6. 2009
  7. 2010
- Which country is ‘Person X’ now living in for the majority of his or her time? (where they living in prior to coming or returning to the UK for immigrants)
  1. America
  2. Australia
  3. Canada
  4. China
  5. France
  6. Germany
  7. Italy
  8. New Zealand
  9. Portugal
  10. Spain
  11. Sweden
  12. Switzerland
  13. Turkey
  14. Ukraine
  15. Vietnam

What was the main reason why ‘Person X’ left/intends to leave the UK (or came to UK for immigrants)?

1. To study
2. For employment or to seek employment
3. Voluntary work overseas
4. For family or friend reasons
5. To travel
6. Other reason (Please state)
7. No specific reason – just wanted to leave the UK (e.g due to politics, weather) (Spontaneous only)
8. Don’t know (Spontaneous only)
The number of migrants identified in the Omnibus Survey compared to the International Passenger Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Omnibus Survey</th>
<th>International Passenger Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 2005</td>
<td>January 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emigrants</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended emigrants</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants – in 2005</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although a higher number of intended emigrants were identified than actual emigrants, it is possible that some of these people, who say they intend to emigrate in the following year, may not actually do so. The question which asked about intended migration was very general and did not probe respondents to get a clearer picture of how firm their intentions were. For instance, they may have been asked what steps they had taken such as obtaining the necessary visas or making travel arrangements. Without more concrete evidence it is possible that some of these responses reflect aspirations rather than real intentions.

To gain an approximate number of migrants expected to be captured during a year, the number of migrants captured in each survey month has been grossed to an indicative national figure using the household projections for 2006. On this basis the Omnibus estimates of emigrants who have left GB during the last 12 months (112,000 in December and 192,000 in January) are lower than the IPS grossed flows. To capture a larger number of migrants, the sample size would need to be increased significantly from the current size. It should also be noted that by carrying out an informant survey, any entire households that emigrate could not be captured. This should be borne in mind when considering the results.

Whilst being mindful of the small sample size on which these data are based, some comparisons have been made with IPS data in terms of the types of migrants identified by each survey.

Emigrants

Emigrants are defined as anyone living in the sampled household one year ago who when surveyed, was living abroad. In total, 22 emigrants were identified. The sample size of 22 emigrants is extremely small and so it is not possible to draw any strong conclusions from the following comparisons. However, the key findings can be summarised as follows:

- The number of emigrants identified in the survey in December and January was 8 and 14 respectively, 22 in total.
- The emigrants identified were mainly aged between 15 and 44, with similar proportions of males and females. This does not reflect the IPS distribution which captures more emigrants who are in younger and older age-groups. Children and their parents are more likely to emigrate as part of a family unit and thus to leave no household members in Great Britain to report on their emigration. The youngest adult age-group contains people who have not yet formed their own families and who are more likely to travel alone leaving household members in Great Britain.
- The distribution of reason for emigration in the Omnibus Survey is similar to that identified in the IPS data, with most migrants leaving for employment and only a small proportion leaving for study.
- There is a greater proportion of British emigrants identified in the Omnibus Survey than in the IPS data, which may reflect the source of bias in this method that it is less likely to find emigrants who are foreign nationals returning home than it is to find British emigrants who are more likely to leave other family members behind. Approximate grossed Omnibus Survey estimates of the number of British emigrants is 125,000 which when compared to the 2005 IPS estimate of 174,000 British emigrants is much closer than for Non-British nationals, where the Omnibus grossed estimate is 27,000 compared to the 2005 IPS estimate of 154,000.

- The distribution of country of next residence is similar to that identified in the IPS.

Intended emigrants

Intended emigrants are defined in the survey as anyone living in the sampled household who intends to leave the UK during the next year for a continuous period of 12 months or more. In total, 85 intended emigrants were identified, although as explained above, the extent to which they had firm intentions was not explored in this test. The key findings can be summarised as follows:

- The number of intended emigrants identified in the survey in December and January was 38 and 47 respectively, 85 in total.
- The age distribution of intended emigrants broadly matches the age distribution of actual emigrants identified in the IPS data in 2005. This would suggest that the Omnibus is able to identify whole households that are considering emigration as well as individuals.
- There was a lower proportion of intended emigrants leaving London, South East and South West than in the actual emigrants in the IPS data. This might be a spurious finding due to the small sample size or it might suggest that the intended migrants are not necessarily representative of actual emigrants.
- The split of citizenship between British and non-British for intended migrants is similar to the citizenship profile of actual migrants in 2005 IPS data. This would suggest that the Omnibus is successful at picking up overseas nationals as well as British citizens considering emigration.
- The distribution of country of next residence was similar in the Omnibus and IPS data.

The comparisons show that the distributions for intended emigrants are more similar to the IPS than the distributions for actual emigrants. Unlike a port survey which covers all people travelling, surveys of the resident population can only identify emigrants once they have left the country if there is someone left behind to report about them. Thus it is to be expected that surveys of the resident population would cover a subset of emigrants covered by the IPS. In particular the IPS would be able to cover emigrants even where whole households have emigrated and it would also be expected to be more likely to cover overseas nationals when they return home than a survey of the resident population.

This article reports that a question on previous immigration was asked as well as the ones on emigration. As with actual and intended emigrants discussed above, the small number of contacts makes conclusions drawn on the basis of the immigration question subject to a high level of uncertainty. It is possible that some of the feedback comments received about the questions (see below) relate more to this question than to the questions on emigration.

Feedback received on the questionnaire

Feedback was provided by the interviewers who carried out the module and can be summarised into three main areas:

- Introduction – Some interviewers felt that the module lacked an explanatory introduction. Some respondents were suspicious of the nature of the questions given the potentially sensitive nature...
The research reported in this article was a pilot study that was conducted to assess the feasibility of running questions on emigration in household surveys in the UK. Questions on emigration, intended emigration and immigration were tested in the Omnibus Survey to establish whether emigrants in particular can be captured using a household survey. However, the number of emigrants identified by the Omnibus Survey in December 2005 and January 2006 was low. The question remains as to whether or not a sufficiently large sample could be achieved from a larger household survey, such as the Labour Force Survey (or the Integrated Household Survey – IHS). The IPS, the port survey that is the only current direct source of estimates of emigrants, interviews between 700 and 800 emigrants each year. Grossing up the emigrant sample size achieved in the Omnibus Survey indicates that a larger household survey such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) might feasibly achieve similar emigrant sample sizes to the IPS, although it should be noted that this estimate does not take account of differences in survey design.

The pilot has resulted in useful feedback about the feasibility of asking questions about emigration in a survey. Feedback from interviewers suggested that the questions could have been worded more simply. Possible confusion over the questions and the sensitive nature of the survey topic may also have had an impact on the number of migrants captured.

Comparisons made between the distributions of those reporting actual or intended emigration in the pilot and the distribution of actual emigrants in the IPS suggest real differences. While the Omnibus Survey may have captured intended emigrants of whole households and both British and overseas citizenship, it has not captured the same range of actual emigrants. There appears to be a shortfall of emigrants of whole households and overseas nationals. Thus estimates of emigration based on a survey of the resident population would need some adjustment to improve their completeness. Thus such a potential source would be seen as complementary to the only other source currently available (the IPS) rather than as an alternative. This conclusion is in line with the findings of the Task Force into international migration which concluded that a suite of sources and methods is needed to capture the complexity of migration adequately.

It is not possible to draw any other conclusions about the characteristics of the emigrants identified in the Omnibus Survey, due to the very small sample size.

**Conclusions**

A significantly larger sample of households would need to be sampled to establish the value of emigrant information from a household survey and to validate the information about intended emigrants and immigrants. The Inter-departmental Task Force on Migration recommended more questions about migration on the IHS and ONS will need to assess emigration questions alongside other possibilities.

**Key findings**

- In a pilot study conducted in December 2005 and January 2006, using the Omnibus Survey to test questions on emigration from Great Britain, the number of emigrants identified was low.

- A larger household survey such as the Labour Survey might feasibly achieve reasonable sample sizes that are similar to the emigrant sample size achieved by the Port Survey - the International Passenger Survey.

- However, a significantly larger sample of households would need to be sampled to establish the value of emigrant information from a household survey.

- The Omnibus pilot provided useful feedback on the questions tested and indicated that estimates of emigration from Great Britain based on a household survey are likely to need some adjustment to improve their completeness and they would be complementary to other sources rather than an alternative source of information on emigration from Great Britain.

**Acknowledgements**

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References


