Issues Arising for Immigration Research and Data

by

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This presentation reviews several issues related to immigration research and data. In the interests of time, I am going to focus on immigration. Although migration within Canada – such moving within a local community or moving to a different province -- is an important topic and deserves discussion, I am going limit my remarks to international rather than internal migration.

I organize my short presentation around three big immigration policy questions (see Figure 1). I will highlight some important issues and mention some research and data that I think require our attention.

First, who immigrates to Canada? This question involves two types of selection: (a) the selection of potential immigrants: who decides to actually migrate and why do does someone decide to immigrate to Canada and (b) the selection of immigrants from those that apply to immigrate to Canada: which ones are selected by the Canadian government? The first type is the self-selection by immigrants themselves and the second type is selection by Canada’s immigration authorities.

Second, how do immigrants and their children do after arrival in Canada? This is a topic that receives a great deal of research.

Third, what are the effects of immigration, on both countries of origin and destination? There is limited work on this question and most focuses on the effects of immigration on receiving countries.

WHO IMMIGRATES

The first big question is who immigrates to Canada? The United Nations periodically releases recommendations on international migration statistics for collection and publication by national governments. For the most part, Canada does well on immigration statistics. A review shows that Canada collects and publishes virtually all the statistics recommended by the U.N. But there are omissions in our statistics. Like many other countries, Canada collects and publishes little information on Canadians who emigrate or live seasonally outside of Canada, such as snowbirds or the increasing number of elderly who have retired to countries such as Mexico and Panama. In short, we have less comprehensive data emigration, or the outflow of migrants.
With the collection of administrative data on international inflows, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has an active and useful program of administrative data publication and on record linkage to improve data needed to address immigration policy issues. This work should be encouraged and supported. For example, linkage of data on international arrivals on student visas with subsequent possible conversion of permanent residence and naturalization is needed in order to understand immigration policies related to recruitment of highly-skilled immigrants.

Administrative records, however, do not include information of many topics of interest for immigration research. Additional survey data would be useful to collect on immigrant arrivals, possibly through a survey of new permanent immigrants or other special categories of international arrivals.

**IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION**

The second big research question concerns immigrant progress or integration, which receives a great deal of attention. We are interested in two types of progress: the success of immigrants themselves and the achievements of their children.

Data on the foreign-born provides information on the progress of immigrants as they spend time in Canada. Data on their children indicates progress toward integration between the first and second generations.

For immigrants, three variables are essential to include in censuses and surveys: country-of-birth, date of arrival, and current citizenship.

In addition, important immigration policies often require that we know immigrant status. Whether an immigrant entered or currently has a temporary or permanent resident, or refugee, for example, is an important variable. Although immigrant status is seldom available in survey data, immigrant status can be included in surveys, which would greatly enhance the usefulness of the survey for immigrant research.

**Integration of Immigrants Over Time**

An important research topic is the progress of immigrants with duration of residence in Canada. Progress varies over time and may also vary for different immigrant cohorts. That is, immigrants arriving
during good economic times may have more rapid progress than immigrants arriving during a recession. This means that we needed repeated censuses or surveys in order to collect data on immigrant cohorts. Moreover, some indicators of progress, such as homeownership, take place over a 20 to 40 year period, so it is important to analyze time over several decades.

The key variable in virtually all models of integration is an indicator of time spent in Canada. But, there are serious limitations to this single variable. Many immigrants may not be arriving for the first time and many immigrants have prior residence in Canada before becoming legal permanent residents. Thus, the quality and quantity of new legal immigrants exposure to Canada varies widely by pathway. If our data on limited to single survey question such as “when did you arrive in Canada” this introduces serious measurement error and unknown bias in our study of immigrant progress. A major improvement would to ask survey questions: when did you first arrive in Canada and how many years have you actually lived in Canada. These two questions distinguish separately the arrival time and exposure time on Canadian residence.

**Intergenerational Integration**

Intergenerational progress is the other key topic of study for immigrant progress.

Measuring intergenerational progress requires data on immigrant parents and their children. Minor children of immigrants are easily identified as long as they remain in the household of their parents. Adult children of immigrants, however, must be identified using a separate question on the birthplace of their mother and father.

In order to examine data on children of immigrants over their entire lifetime, we need to ask all respondents about parental nativity: that is, where is the birthplace of their father and mother. A question on parental nativity is a critical question to include in Canada’s surveys because it constitutes the single largest barrier to studying the intergenerational integration of immigrants. If our censuses and surveys lack a question on parental nativity, we lack the data for analysis of intergenerational progress. An even better improvement, I should note, is to include one or two questions about the education and occupation of parents, which provides individual data on intergenerational mobility.
Sufficient Sample Size

There is another important issue for the study of immigrant progress, which is the need to have sufficient cases to study in available surveys. In general, only Canada’s censuses have a large number of cases for the study of detailed immigrant groups.

Adequate sample size is a persistent challenge in data for large immigrant-receiving countries. Having a sufficient number of immigrants requires over-sampling in national surveys, which obviously increases survey costs. Moreover, when we analyze immigrants, we often want to look separately at immigrants by country-of-origin and year of arrival. Sufficient sample sizes for analysis by country-of-origin and year of arrival, however, requires even larger sub-samples of immigrants. Unfortunately, very few of our most useful national surveys have sample sizes that permit analysis by country-of-origin and year of arrival.

Effects of Immigration

The effects of immigration on Canada’s population and the economy have received some study. Although immigration has other effects, such as on businesses, scientific innovation, or the diversity of theatre and the arts, these other effects have been less studied.

Demographic effects are documented in excellent Statistics Canada studies, most recently using Demosim microsimulation for the study of immigration on ethnic and religious diversity.

The effect of immigration on the labour market has also received considerable study by labour economists and sociologists.

Fiscal effects, however, have had only a few studies and, to date, have dealt with cross-sectional data. I have not seen any Canadian studies of the lifetime fiscal effects of immigration. That is, we so far lack studies of the fiscal effects of immigrants, over their lifetime, on local, provincial, and federal revenues and expenditures.

Finally, a neglected area of attention for future study is the relationship of immigration and population ageing. The fastest increase in the elderly population over the next twenty years will be
elderly Chinese, South Asian, and Arab, although there has been little attention to how this may reshape policies for the elderly.

This concludes my brief presentation on three critical issues for immigration policy research and data. I look forward to our discussion in this session.