

Australian Bureau of Statistics' response to the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper "Geographic Labour Mobility"

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is Australia's official national statistical agency. The role of the ABS is to assist and encourage informed decision-making, research and discussion within governments and the community by leading a high quality, objective and responsive national statistical service.

Identifying and responding to the needs of government and the community is a high priority of the ABS. The Productivity Commission's assessment of geographic labour mobility within Australia can be well informed by the use of ABS data.

As discussed in the Productivity Commission Issues Paper "Geographic Labour Mobility", geographic labour mobility is a specific aspect of labour mobility and has many possible meanings. Broadly, labour mobility generally refers to the movement of people from one job to another. Geographic labour mobility provides a locational perspective on labour mobility. It can include long-distance commuting, permanent residential moves for employment purposes, telecommuting and other practices.

This submission will explain how ABS data can be used for informing this study as well as highlight some work the ABS is exploring on understanding labour mobility.

Labour Market Geography

In the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), Statistical Areas Level 4 (SA4s) have been designed to reflect the labour markets within each State and Territory for the output of labour force data. Labour force data has two geographic components - the labour supply (where people live) and the demand (where people work). Labour markets are geographic regions, which reflect the high degree of inter-connectivity between the labour supply and demand. They are based on Journey to Work analysis and in designing SA4s, the ABS consulted a number of experts on labour market geography. There are 88 spatial SA4s in Australia. They do not cross State and Territory boundaries and in aggregate they cover the whole of Australia without gaps and overlap. SA4s have populations ranging from 100,000 to 500,000. SA4s represent labour markets or, in regions where populations are less dense, groups of connected labour markets. See, Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 1 - Main Structure and Greater Capital City Statistical Areas, July 2011, cat. no. 1270.0.55.001 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/1270.0.55.001Main%20Features1July%202011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=1270.0.55.001&issue=July%202011&num=&view=>).

The ABS recommends the use of SA4s when considering labour markets. ABS data is currently available at the SA4 level from the Census and progressively from February 2014 for the Labour Force Survey and suite of related supplementary surveys.

In the ABS, the Census of Population and Housing, household surveys and some business surveys constitute the primary sources of labour statistics.

Census

One of the most comprehensive and detailed sources of data to understand one aspect of geographic labour is the Census. There are a number of relevant Census data items.

1. Working population

The working population of a region is determined by the workplace address for the main job held in the week prior to Census night. Data available includes labour force status, personal characteristics, education and qualifications, occupation and industry of employed persons, income, and method of travel to work. When analysed in conjunction with place of usual residence and dwelling type, researchers can gain a better understanding of the workforce in a region. The usefulness of Census data for informing on the working populations of particular areas may vary, depending on factors such as the characteristics of the local populations and specific issues associated with local industries. Given that the Census is self-enumerated, the completeness of responses, such as workplace address, will also impact on the analysis which can be done.

The ABS has released a number of analytical articles addressing demographic and labour market issues including seasonal and service populations. These analyse regions impacted by labour activities such as mining, seasonal migration and tourism.

See:

- Western Australia - Outback – A Population Overview
(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features652012-2013>)
- Counting Resident and Non-resident Populations in the Census
(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features802012-2013>)
- Towns of the mining boom
(<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features10April+2013>)

The ABS has also released an article that analyses Business Ownership in SA4s. See Perspectives on Regional Australia: Business Owners in Regions, 2011, cat. no. 1380.0.55.008 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1380.0.55.008>).

2. Enumerated population and resident population

The Census counts people at their place of enumeration (i.e., where they spend Census night). The Census also asks where the person usually lives. Resident population refers to the population that is usually resident within a particular region. People counted in an area on Census night include a mix of usual residents and people who usually live elsewhere or have no usual address. By analysing the enumerated population and resident population in a region as well as understanding the underlying characteristics of a region it is possible to make some assumptions about the observations. Seasonal employees and long distance commuters may appear in the enumerated population of an area but not as usual residents. Tourists, business travellers and anyone else away from home on Census night will also be included in the enumerated population which will influence any conclusions that might be made about the populations. In mid-September, the ABS will publish an article entitled 'Perspective on Regional Australia: Census Night and Usual Resident Populations in Local Government Areas (cat. no. 1380.0.55.009)', which examines Local Government Areas that had high enumerated populations in 2011. The article discusses the population profile of the enumerated population as well as characteristics of the region (tourism, mining etc.) that may indicate why these patterns are observed.

The location of one's 'usual residence' is difficult to determine in some circumstances, for example, for workers who live some time in a city home and some time in a mining camp, children in shared custody, and persons with holiday homes in which they spend part of the year. To enhance the utility of these questions the ABS is currently considering the feasibility of including questions relating to second residence in the next Census. This will help to inform the variety in living arrangements and address the need to understand the range of population employment circumstances.

3. Resident population movements

The Census asks three questions on usual residence: where the person usually lives; where the person usually lived one year ago; and where the person usually lived five years ago. Employment is a factor influencing people's decisions to move, and internal migration data can provide insights into the geographical distribution of regions that are experiencing notable increases or decreases in resident population. Using the Census data to compare address of usual residence one year ago and five years ago with current usual residence and place of work, can help explain the extent to which people have migrated to their place of work. For years in which there is not a Census, the ABS uses administrative data sources to estimate regional population movements, and has recently investigated the potential to provide annual internal migration estimates which would provide a better understanding of movement into and out of areas. While the Census can be used to identify the portion of the population that moved one and five years ago, it cannot identify the reason for the move. Employment may be one of a number of reasons people change their address.

See, Discussion Paper: Assessment of Methods for Developing Experimental Historical Estimates for Regional Internal Migration, Dec 2011, cat. no. 3405.0.55.001

(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3405.0.55.001>). These estimates are published in Migration, Australia, 2010-11, cat. no. 3412.0
(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3412.0>)

Labour Force

The Australian labour force statistics comprise a large number of measures relating to the Australian labour market. These are household survey based collections and in addition to information about current and previous labour force participation, information collected also includes demographic data such as age, sex, family status and country of birth. Labour statistics provide insights into the supply of labour in the Australian labour market. As of February 2014, labour force statistics output will be available at the SA4 level. The ABS program of labour force surveys includes a range of relevant topics including, Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Locations of Work, Forms of Employment and Labour Mobility. See: Labour Statistics: Concepts, Sources and Methods, 2013, cat.no. 6201.0.55.001
(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6102.0.55.001Main%20Features12013?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6102.0.55.001&issue=2013&num=&view=>).

The ABS has conducted surveys as part of its State Supplementary Series that included topics on workplace mobility. See:

- Residential and Workplace Mobility, and Implications for Travel: NSW and Vic., October 2008, cat.no. 3240.0
(<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3240.0Main+Features1October%202008?OpenDocument>); and
- Workforce Participation and Workplace Flexibility, Western Australia, October 2010, cat.no. 6210.5 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/6210.5>)

Business surveys are the primary source of data on labour costs, earnings, jobs and job vacancies all of which provide insights into the demand for labour in the Australian labour market. Data from these surveys are generally only available at the state and territory level. Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits provides detailed business counts presented by industry, employment size and turnover size range. This information is available at detailed geographic levels. See: Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits, June 2008 to June 2012, cat.no. 8165.0 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8165.0>).

Other Work

The National Regional Profile present a set of data (economy, population, people, industry, environment and energy) for a range of geographies including SA4s. Data in the National Regional Profile are sourced from a variety of collections both ABS and non-ABS. Where available, data have been presented as a time series. See National Regional Profile

(<http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/nrpmmaps.nsf/NEW+GmapPages/national+regional+profile>).

The ABS continues to explore the potential of different data sources and additions to existing data collections to better inform questions of geographic labour mobility.

The ABS is investigating uses of administrative data from the Australian Taxation Office (including Personal Income Tax, Business Income Tax and payment summary data) and the Australian Business Register to support detailed analysis of employment and income by industry, region and over time. Analysis of these data over time will also support further understanding of the changing influences on labour mobility.

The potential also exists to collect data on 'place of work' in the Labour Force Survey. This would provide important data on understanding people's commuting patterns. There is also the opportunity to add content to the labour force supplementary survey program to specifically address people's labour mobility experiences. Both of these are subject to program priorities and available funding.

Concluding remarks

As the national statistical agency, the ABS is committed to the on-going provision of high quality population statistics. The ABS recognises the need to continue to work with data users to support their analysis and to improve population statistics to better meet current and emerging user needs where feasible. The ABS continues to explore developing improved measures of different types of populations, but providing these measures as a matter of course is beyond the capacity of our current work program. The ABS understands that information on geographic labour mobility is important to inform debate, policy and service delivery. While the ABS does not currently have the capacity to fill the data gaps in this field, with its data collection infrastructure and ability to integrate new data sources with existing economic and social datasets, it is well positioned to fill data gaps in this field.

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