Demographic and health surveys suggest that up to 80% of urban girls in Ethiopia are recent migrants. Photograph: Isabelle Cadet/AP

No one questions the economic and political significance of international migration. However, internal migration – moving within a country – is a much larger phenomenon that affects the lives of far more people, and one that is given much less attention.

According to the UN, globally there are at least 740 million internal migrants; compare this with only 232 million international migrants. Internal migrants face many of the same challenges – including social isolation, discrimination, forced evictions and poor working conditions – and have the same needs and human rights as international migrants. And yet internal migration is seldom studied or considered at the international programme and policy level.

The dearth of evidence about internal migration was highlighted for us when we gathered data for a 2013 Population Council report, *Girls on the move: adolescent girls and migration in the developing world*. More information is urgently needed about the lives of internal migrants, including girls, who are especially vulnerable. We need to know more than we currently do, for example, about the scale of migration.

For *Girls on the Move* we studied 60 microsamples of population censuses from the IPUMS collection at the University of Minnesota, which gave estimates of between five
and 30% of urban adolescent girls being recent migrants, that is, having arrived within five years before the census. Yet when we looked at the demographic and health surveys, which are conducted in more than 90 countries, we found much higher percentages of girls classified as migrants, as high as 80% of urban girls (pdf) in the case of Ethiopia.

Why the discrepancy? These sources use different criteria to define moves. Also, censuses ask about the specific location (administrative region) where a migrant formerly lived, whereas the DHS asks whether that place was urban or rural but not about its location. Neither source gives the full picture.

Unfortunately, questions about migration have since been removed from the DHS (although that decision is being reconsidered). Unicef's multiple indicator cluster surveys, another valuable source on information on the wellbeing of adolescents, children and adults, has never included migration questions. Without such basic information, we cannot understand the life circumstances of internal migrants, and lack the evidence we need for effective policies and programmes to improve their lives.

Ideally, both surveys and censuses would include at least three simple questions on migration: How long have you lived here? Where did you live before? What type of place was it, urban or rural?

Data generated by these inquiries will provide a powerful tool for us to answer some critical questions about the lives of internal migrants. For example:

**What kinds of places are migrants leaving behind?**

Answering this question will help us identify locations that may be in need of more attention for economic development, and show where remittances are being sent to support the local population. Remittances are one of the ways by which migrants drive development. Recent research supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation reveals that in sub-Saharan Africa, it is far more common to receive remittances from family members who are internal migrants than it is to receive international remittances.

**Are people migrating to locations with less or more environmental risk?**

Migrants are drawn to urban areas in search of schooling and economic opportunity, but many large and growing cities are at high risk of devastating extreme weather events. By moving in search of opportunity, internal migrants may be placing themselves in harm’s way. However, without more specific information about internal migration flows, we cannot assess this risk.

**Is climate change inducing migration?**

There has been a lot of speculation that hardships caused by climate change are leading people to migrate. Until we really know where people are migrating from, it is impossible to say for sure. As Girls on the Move demonstrates, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to displacement for a variety of reasons. This includes catastrophes related to extreme weather events, which are anticipated to increase in frequency in the coming years. It is therefore crucial to understand the intersection between climate change and migration.

The gaps in data about internal migration are not difficult to fill, and they must be filled if programmes and policies are to be properly grounded in evidence, not myths and misconceptions. On International Migrants Day, when the UN raises awareness about international migrants, we must not forget the needs of internal migrants. Crafting a small, easily manageable set of questions to be included in censuses and demographic surveys would go a long way toward helping us better understand and improve their lives.
Mark Montgomery and Sarah Engebretsen are researchers in the Population Council's poverty, gender, and youth programme and Miriam Temin is a Population Council consultant. Follow @Pop_Council on Twitter

This content is brought to you by Guardian Professional. To get more articles like this direct to your inbox, sign up free to become a member of the Global Development Professionals Network

More from the Guardian

What's this?
Take a look inside the world's largest cave 14 Jan 2014
Claustrophilia: how a live-action game became Budapest's top tourist activity 10 Jan 2014
Romanian sex workers in turf wars over London pitches 12 Jan 2014
Smallholding at Soho Theatre: Buy 3 tickets for the price of 2 16 Jan 2014
The development dilemma: give a man a fish or teach him to fish? 16 Jan 2014

More from around the web

What's this?
If You Want To Be Awesome At Emails, Add Yesware To Your Gmail Today (Forbes)
Homeowners Are In For A Big Surprise... (Lifestyle Journal)
Little known way to save hundreds of dollars on 4-star hotels. (A Luxury Travel Blog)
Never transferred your credit card balance? Big mistake. (NextAdvisor Daily)
13 Amazing Uses for WD-40 (Reader's Digest)
Zimbabweans migrating to South Africa at risk of abuse and exploitation
13 Jan 2014
Migrants crossing Zimbabwe border to Musina in search of a better life are vulnerable to robbery, slavery and sexual abuse. Taku Dzimwasha investigates