International Organization for Migration

The demographics of global internal migration

Neli Esipova, Anita Pugliese and Julie Ray

Although international migrants represent about three per cent of the world’s population – or about 214 million people – the UN Secretary-General’s latest report on migration trends suggests that the total number of internal migrants is even larger. However, the dearth of reliable global data on internal migrants – and the lack of cross-national measures – makes the exact number difficult to determine. Between 2011 and 2012, Gallup set out to do just that via its self-funded annual World Poll, uniformly asking 236,865 adults in 139 countries whether they had moved from another city or area within their respective countries in the past five years. With the 139 countries representing 97 per cent of the world’s adults, Gallup reliably estimated that eight per cent of adults have moved within their countries in the past five years. This translates to approximately 381 million adults aged 15 and older worldwide who have moved during the five-year period; of these, about 196 million are women and 185 million are men.

The total number of all internal migrants worldwide is higher because it includes those younger than 15, while the Gallup figure does not. However, while Gallup counts the number of children in respondents’ households, it currently does not ascertain their migrant status. This task is possible to accomplish, but it would require asking additional questions.

Studies such as the Gallup World Poll establish how widely internal mobility rates range worldwide – from more than 21 per cent in countries such as New Zealand and the United States, to less than five per cent in countries such as China and Venezuela. They also confirm commonly held beliefs, including that the United States is one of the most mobile countries in the world. About one in four US adults (24%) reported moving within the country in the past five years – a rate similar to those reported in other advanced economies such as New Zealand (26%), Finland (23%), and Norway (22%).

Figure 1: Percentage of internal migrants
According to the Secretary-General's report, internal migration is mostly driven by economic and political factors. Other dynamics influence internal migration, however. For example, every year, thousands are displaced within their own countries because of conflict or persecution. Environmental changes and natural disasters can also force people to move from their homes.

In the United States, census data on geographic mobility show that Americans are most likely to cite a job-related reason for moving. Similarly, Statistics New Zealand data from 2007 surveys show that economic reasons were the main motivators for New Zealanders to move from one residence to another, and employment reasons were the main motivators for moving from one region to another.

In the developing countries of Syria and Malawi, internal displacement is a plausible explanation for the high internal mobility rates (20% or more). The United Nations estimated in 2012 that the ongoing conflict in Syria has internally displaced more than 1 million residents. Internal migration research prior to the civil war in that country suggested internal migration were far lower than the current estimate of 23 per cent and more typical of developing countries. In Malawi, the high percentage could have some environmental roots; floods, for example, displaced thousands in 2012.

The demographics of global internal migration

If it is difficult to accurately determine the number of internal migrants worldwide, it is even harder to find out who these migrants are and how they fit into development models. Because Gallup annually asks the same questions the same way across all the countries, territories, and regions that it surveys, it is possible to compare data on these migrants across multiple nations and create a demographic profile – the first step in beginning to understand who these migrants are.
The educated are more likely to have migrated internally in past five years.

Migration is often associated with the search for better educational opportunities, and across most regions, adults with higher education are more likely to be internal migrants. Worldwide, those with at least a college education are more than twice as likely (13%) to have moved internally in the past five years as those with primary education or less (5%). In some regions, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), there is no evidence of an education bonus, but the education differences are more dramatic in other areas such as sub-Saharan Africa.

Without further research, we have no way of knowing how educated migrants are prior to their move, so it is entirely possible that higher education levels have made it possible for them to move, or if they attained their education once they arrived at their destination.

Young people are more likely to be internal migrants.

Overall, young adults are the demographic most likely to be internal migrants. Worldwide, 10 per cent of adults between the ages of 15 and 29 report moving within their respective country in the past five years. By age 50, this likelihood becomes only half as high (5%). In a number of regions, such as Northern America, the likelihood to migrate internally starts declining after the age of 29, but in others, including their southern neighbors in Latin America, it doesn’t start to drop off until after 49.

First-generation international migrants are more likely to be internal migrants.

First-generation migrants – adults who were born in countries other than the ones they currently live in – are more likely to report migrating internally than the native-born (19% vs. 8%). In addition, among firstgeneration migrants, newcomers (those who have been in the country five or fewer years) are twice as likely as long-timers those (who have been in the country more than five years) to have moved within the country in the past five years. This relationship is important because it suggests that international migration
directly influences internal migration.

**Internal migrant employment status varies by region.**

Although it is not possible to tell whether their current employment situation is better or worse than before they moved, overall, internal migrants are more likely to be employed full-time for an employer (48%) than those who have not moved (41%). In general, internal migrants are more likely to participate in the workforce (67%) than those who have not moved (63%). In addition, internal migrants are also more likely to be underemployed (22% vs. 17%) or unemployed (11% vs. 8%) than those who did not move in the past five years.

Just as the global economic picture looks different from region to region, so does the employment picture for internal migrants. In Northern America, for example, internal migrants are more likely to participate in the workforce, but those in the workforce are no more likely than their counterparts who have never moved to work full-time (at least 30 hours per week) an employer. Further, internal migrants are significantly more likely to be underemployed (those employed part-time but looking for full-time work) or unemployed.

Internal migrants are more likely to be in the workforce than those who did not move in the past five years, in all regions except Asia and CIS countries. In CIS and Middle East countries, the employment situation for internal migrants and those who have not moved almost perfectly mirror each other.

In some regions, internal migrants in the workforce appear to have some advantages over those who have not moved. In sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Asia, and non-EU European countries, internal migrants in the workforce are more likely to be employed full-time for an employer. They are also roughly as likely as each other to be underemployed or unemployed.

Internal migrants in other regions have some disadvantages. In addition to Northern America, underemployment and unemployment among those in the workforce are
higher for internal migrants in Latin America, the EU and Australia/New Zealand.

**Internal migrants more likely to send and receive financial help.**

Not only are many internal migrants gainfully employed and participating in the economy, they are more likely than their non-moving counterparts to provide financial help to others inside the country and abroad. At the same time, internal migrants are also more likely to receive financial help from within the country and abroad. But when we look at both sending and receiving financial help, internal migrants are more likely to send financial help than receive it; the difference is not that pronounced among those who have not moved.

These results reinforce how internal migration can be as important as or even more important to poverty reduction strategies than international migration. There are more internal migrants than international migrants on the move worldwide, and they are more inclined to send help. However, while there are no available global estimates of the size of internal remittances, additional global Gallup research shows households worldwide are three times more likely to get financial help from individuals within the same country (9%) than from outside (3%).

This relationship, as well as others, illustrate why migration – within countries and across international borders – will continue to be an important item on the post-2015 development agenda. However, compared with available data on international migrants, the development of global estimates of internal migrants is still in its nascent stages. Further research and measurement is needed for policymakers to realize the potential implications of this most common type of migration – internal movement within countries.

1 Neli Esipova is Director of Research for Global Migration and World Poll FSU Regional Director at Gallup; Julie Ray is a writer and analyst at Gallup; and Dr Anita Pugliese is Research and Quality Director at Gallup.


International Organization for Migration (IOM)
17, Route des Morillons, CH-1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland, Tel: +41.22.717.9111, Fax: +41.22.798.6150

Contact Us | Terms and Conditions