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New Strategies in Estimating International Migration

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Background

During the 1990s, estimated net international migration to the United States averaged more than 800,000 annually. Data obtained from Census 2000, however, suggest that net international migration during the 1990s was closer to 1.1 million per year. This discrepancy of nearly 350,000 annually between the initial estimates (produced using information from the 1980 and 1990 censuses and data collected by the Immigration and Naturalization Service) and the Census 2000-based estimates prompted the Census Bureau to begin using data from the annual American Community Survey (ACS) to produce estimates of net international migration. By the 2002 cycle of estimates production, net international migration was estimated at more than 1.4 million per year, nearly 300,000 more than the previous year’s estimate and nearly double the original estimate of 750,000 per year for the 1990s.

These differences in the estimates of net international migration highlight the effect of methodological improvements and new data sources used to produce the estimates.

Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of each methodology as well as the costs and benefits of utilizing particular datasets will help us refine the production process and develop new strategies for estimating net international migration. Better

estimates of net international migration will, in turn, improve the population estimates in general, as this component is an increasingly important part of estimating population change in the U.S.

Past and Present Approaches to Estimating Net International Migration

In the 1990s, the Census Bureau took a component approach to estimating net international migration. This approach considers net international migration to be comprised of six fundamental components: legal immigration to the United States, which typically includes lawful permanent residents and refugees; net movement of unauthorized migrants into the United States; net temporary migration of the foreign born; net movement from Puerto Rico to the mainland United States; emigration of legal foreign-born immigrants; and emigration of natives. The balance of these six components was considered net international migration.

Estimating net international migration using a component approach can be challenging methodologically especially without annually updated data. Changes in the way a component is estimated can substantially impact the final net international migration figure. An evaluation of the component method using the results from Census 2000, yielded findings which showed shortcomings in the component approach even though it provided an updated estimate for several key components of international migration. For example, we found that the component method was not exhaustive of all possible migration statuses (for example, certain temporary migrants and quasi-legal migrants were not included in our estimates in the 1990s). Based on these findings, we changed

our methodology to estimate a net international migration by using data on the foreign born from the American Community Survey, a new source of information that will be updated every year.

This paper details the ways in which net international migration was estimated between the 1990 Census and Census 2000, and since 2000 using data from the American Community Survey. Specifically, we focus on the data sources and methodologies used to produce the estimates and the resultant effects on the net international migration estimate and the characteristics of migrants.

New Strategies in Estimating Net International Migration

Following our discussion of the ways in which net international migration has been estimated in the past, we outline research activities currently underway. These activities focus on possible methodological improvements to the process of estimating net international migration. Moreover, we suggest alternative data sets to evaluate their utility and potential use in the net international migration estimates process.