

**Statement of the Population Association of America
to the United Nations High-level Dialogue (HLD)
on International Migration and Development
July 15, 2013**

There are three key drivers of demographic change in the size and composition of national populations: mortality; fertility; and international migration. Of these three, our understanding of international migration is the most limited by weak data and analytic frameworks.

Since World War II, for entirely legitimate reasons, the focus on improving demographic data and analysis has been on advancing understanding of patterns and trends in both mortality and fertility. Mortality and fertility continue to be important in demographic terms, but more recently the volume and rates of international migration have increased substantially and, combined with the global spread of low fertility, such migration has risen greatly in demographic significance. Yet migration data collection and analyses remain relatively weak compared with those for mortality and fertility. In view of the now-high and rising importance of international migration as a demographic driver, it would be wise to apply the same kind of attention to improving migration data and analyses as was previously applied so successfully to improving our understanding of mortality and fertility.

We recognize that international migration is a politically-contentious topic. In many countries across the world, international migration presents challenges to political systems and to the various parties within these systems. Contentious political debates prevail. The Population Association of America (PAA) is aware of these political debates, but as a leading professional association of demographers it takes no position on any of the political or policy issues involved. Its interest instead is appropriately focused upon measures that might be considered to improve data and analyses of international migration, including quality, comparability, coverage, modeling, and projections.

Since its establishment, the United Nations has been one of the leading sources of reliable demographic data and projections, primarily via the work of the Population Division and the Statistics Division within the UN Secretariat. The Population Division has made some of the most important contributions over the past two decades to improving data on international migration, in particular their migration stock estimates by country of origin and destination. The United Nations is in a unique position to collaborate with national statistical offices in the collection of internationally comparable data from Member States. It also is able to collaborate with Member States in the development of consensus recommendations as to how the quality and integration of such international data might over time be strengthened. Because international migration involves more than one and often multiple States, improving data and understanding can benefit from technically-expert international mechanisms, which can guide and complement the efforts of individual States.

For these reasons the PAA urges Member States, on the occasion of the High Level Dialogue, to encourage the UN Secretariat to continue working to improve the quality of data and analysis on international migration, in full recognition that such migration is now of high and increasing interest to large numbers of Member States. The PAA encourages attention to three particular challenges regarding migration data: appropriately measuring and characterizing migrant populations in the destination country; estimating annual international migration flows; and evaluating what additional internationally comparable data may be needed to accomplish these two objectives.

The main source of information about international migrants by country is population censuses and nationally representative surveys, which can be used to generate estimates of the migrant stock for countries where such data are available. These data are typically intended to survey the resident population, which in theory includes temporary migrants, if they stay for more than a few months, and migrants with an irregular legal status. In practice, such data often either exclude or undercount temporary migrants, irregular migrants and new arrivals. The PAA urges Member States, on the occasion of the High Level Dialogue, to request that the Secretary-General conduct a comprehensive assessment of how to supplement existing data sources to provide more complete data on the migrant population. To maximize the value of such an assessment for Member States, it should involve the key UN agencies and outside experts from national statistical agencies and research institutes. The PAA stands ready to offer suggestions of possible members of such an expert group.

Even more pressing is the need for comprehensive data on annual flows of migrants across international borders. Currently, international migration flow data are gathered and reported by only 43 countries. Many less-developed countries, where migration flows are large and growing, collect little or no reliable flow data. The UN Population Division makes indirect estimates of net migration flows as part of its global population estimates, mostly as the residual of other components of population change. These estimates typically do not distinguish between the net flows of foreign-born persons and natives and may miss irregular migrant flows. It is important to determine how to address this urgent need for migration flow data. In some cases, such data can be developed using administrative data that already are being collected but not used for this purpose or not published. We encourage the United Nations to work with Member States and other stakeholders to find ways of improving national data collection on migrant arrivals and departures and making the resulting data public.

It would also be valuable to begin collecting internationally comparable data in a systematic fashion through sample surveys. Two alternatives that could be considered for establishing a migration survey program include devising and implementing a dedicated global migration survey and adding migration modules to existing Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or to other surveys, such as the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Survey. The latter option, adding questions to existing surveys, may be insufficient to generate comprehensive migration data, a task which often requires a distinct survey methodology and sampling frame to generate large enough samples of migrants on an annual basis. Moreover, some experts consider existing surveys, such as the DHS, already overloaded. In that case, it

may be difficult to accommodate another module, particularly on such a complex topic as migration. The PAA stands ready to suggest experts who might advise the United Nations on the pros and cons of such approaches.

In summary, the PAA believes improving global migration data should be a UN priority as it moves forward to address the increasingly important phenomenon of international migration. This objective will require the collaboration of United Nations staff and external experts as well as the resources required to implement better data collection from both administrative and survey sources. Enhanced administrative data would allow the UN to better document flows and provide insights to Member States about the volume and other characteristics of such movements. Development of survey data on international migration would provide equally valuable information on the characteristics of migrants and on the consequences of migration for both source and destination countries.