

UNHCR STATISTICAL ONLINE POPULATION DATABASE: GENERAL NOTES

UNHCR Statistics, 2009

The UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database summarizes changes in global trends and levels of the population of concern to UNHCR: refugees, asylum-seekers, returned refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) protected/assisted by UNHCR, returned IDPs, stateless persons, and others of concern to UNHCR. The information, reported by UNHCR country offices, generally reflects the data of the host country.

In the absence of official refugee population figures, UNHCR has estimated the refugee population in 24 industrialized countries based on the individual recognition of refugees over a 10-year period. These 24 countries are Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Slovakia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Data prior to 2007 also includes refugees who have arrived under resettlement programmes.

The UNHCR mandate covers all refugees, except some 4.7 million Palestinian refugees residing in areas of operation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). These Palestinian refugees are not included in UNHCR's statistics. However, the Palestinian refugees living outside the UNRWA areas of operation fall under the responsibility of UNHCR and are thus included in UNHCR statistics.

The database is work-in-progress and will be updated on an ongoing basis. Currently, data up to 31 December 2008 can be downloaded from the Statistical Online Population Database. Some of the statistics contained in the Statistical Online Population Database, in particular the ones for 2008 should be considered provisional and subject to change. Some data in the database may differ from statistics published previously due to retroactive changes or the inclusion of previously unavailable data.

UNHCR STATISTICAL ONLINE POPULATION DATABASE: SOURCES, METHODS AND DATA CONSIDERATIONS

Country Data Sheets, 1 January 2007

INTRODUCTION

The 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention provide clear refugee definitions. The fact that more than 140 countries have acceded to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and many of these countries have incorporated the refugee definition contained in that Convention in their national legislation, makes refugees relatively easy to count.

Refugees can only be adequately protected when they are registered. Refugee statistics are generally based on individual registration records, kept by the host government. As such, UNHCR often supports countries in registering and documenting refugees.

Although many countries have implemented the international refugee definition into their national laws and procedures, keeping accurate statistics is not always straightforward. First, there may be a difference of opinion between UNHCR, NGOs and the host country about who is a refugee. For instance, nationals fleeing conflict in their country of origin may be officially recognized as refugees by some countries, but not by others. UNHCR statistics generally reflect the data of the host country. Second, although refugees are often registered individually, the accuracy of registration varies greatly, depending on the protection and operational environment. Third, refugees may not be aware of the need to register or may perceive the costs of registration as higher than its benefits. Fourth, some countries grant not only Convention refugee status, but also subsidiary forms of protection which are more difficult to compare internationally. Fifth, even though there is an international refugee definition, the administrative rules governing the granting of refugee status vary greatly. For instance, some countries have implemented strict criteria for asylum-seekers to be admitted to the asylum procedure. Sixth, administrative records tend to overestimate the actual number of individuals, because it is easier to register than to de-register individuals. This is particularly the case when registration is linked to the provision of services or benefits.

DATA SOURCES AND PROVIDERS

In most countries, various sources are used to establish the size and characteristics of the population of concern to UNHCR. There are three main providers of data regarding the population of concern to UNHCR: governmental agencies, UNHCR field offices and NGOs. Data are compiled or collected using mainly registers, surveys, registration processes or censuses. Whereas the refugee or aliens registers, wherever available, may be the primary source of refugee statistics, asylum-seeker data are often derived from a separate administrative system. Adding to the complexity, voluntary repatriation and resettlement are often managed by separate government agencies. Sources may also differ within countries. In many countries, refugee registration is not centralized, but maintained at the local level. Refugee characteristics, such as sex, age and specific needs may not be available from the register, but collected on an ad hoc basis through surveys.

In most industrialized countries, the host government is generally the sole data provider. In most non-industrialized countries, UNHCR assists the host country in refugee registration for the purpose of international protection, assistance or durable solutions. This assistance may vary from providing

technical advice and limited assistance in countries with a more developed statistical infrastructure to managing the entire registration in countries with limited means.

To ensure that the refugee register is up-to-date, a record should be kept of all changes in the size of the population, including births, deaths, new arrivals, durable solutions and changes in legal status. In mass refugee situations and when populations are highly mobile, maintaining a refugee register is a serious challenge.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Each data collection method has its own strengths and limitations. A register is often created to establish a legal record, to administer entitlements or to deliver services. In a register, all persons should be included and records should be updated regularly. As pressures to register outweigh those to de-register, data from a register may become inflated, requiring periodic verification. On the other hand, registers have a tendency to miss out parts of the population, as not all those who qualify are able or willing to register.

Surveys and censuses are excellent sources for planning purposes, but do not allow for follow-up at the individual level. Although a census includes each individual, it provides only a "snapshot" of the situation and quickly becomes outdated. Surveys are cost effective, but, unless carried out according to strict rules, they may not provide a representative picture. In general, various data methods should be combined and triangulated to obtain the best possible picture.

The role of UNHCR in registration depends on the country of operation. In many cases the government is doing the registration alone, whereas in other situations UNHCR may assist the government or be fully in charge of it. Over the last couple of years UNHCR has developed and started implementing a new registration software – *proGres* – which is a comprehensive database with possibilities for the individual and continuous registration of beneficiaries. It is expected that the implementation of this new registration software will improve the statistics and facilitate well-founded programming decisions.

Refugees who are living outside camps, sometimes unlawfully, are more difficult to track and are underrepresented in UNHCR's statistics. Nevertheless, estimates for self-settled refugees are included in the statistics of a number of countries.

As noted earlier, refugee registers require continuous registration or verification to align the administrative records with the changing situation on the ground. Consequently, the population size in refugee camps is sometimes subject to significant periodic adjustments.

ESTIMATING REFUGEE POPULATIONS IN INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES

Most industrialized countries lack a refugee register and are thus not in a position to provide accurate information on the number of refugees residing in their country. Up to and including 2006, to ensure that the refugee population in these countries is reflected in the global statistics, the number of refugees was estimated by UNHCR based on the arrival of refugees through resettlement

programmes and the individual recognition of refugees over a 10-year (Europe and, since 2006, the United States) or 5-year (the United States before 2006, Canada and Oceania) period. Starting with the 2007 data, the cut-off period has been harmonized and now covers a 10-year period for Europe and non-European countries. Resettled refugees, however, are excluded from the refugee estimates in all countries.

OTHER DATA CONSIDERATIONS

Statistics concerning the former USSR have been reported under the Russian Federation, those concerning the former Czechoslovakia have been reported under the Czech Republic and those concerning the former Yugoslavia and 'Serbia and Montenegro' have been reported under Serbia. Since 2006, separate statistics are available for Serbia and for Montenegro. Prior to 2006, no separate statistics are available and both countries have been reported under Serbia. In most tables, the word "Democratic" has been abbreviated to "Dem.", whereas the word "Republic" is often reflected as "Rep." The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is referred to as TfyR Macedonia.