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Return migration in Australia – a preliminary analysis from the 2001 Census

Most internal migration analyses focus on the aggregate movement of populations over a single time interval. However it has long been recognised that migration is a repetitive event that occurs multiple times over the life course. Understanding the dynamics of these repeat moves is important as they affect the ultimate spatial outcomes, to shape the settlement pattern and affect regional population composition. A better understanding of the nature and role of repeat migration is also needed for policy development, particularly in areas of population decline. Despite its clear significance, little is known about the different types of chronic movement that occur or their relative contribution to overall regional population dynamics. This paper focuses on one aspect of such repeat movement – return migration.

Previous research on repeat and return migration has used data from panel surveys which focus on the dynamics of the migration process and individual migrant characteristics (Da Vanzo and Morrison, 1981) but provide little detail of spatial patterns. Another substantial body of work from North America has exploited data combining place of birth with place of current and previous residence to investigate lifetime return movement (Long, 1988; Longino and Serow, 1992). More recent analyses in Canada and Australia using fixed interval measures have provided further insights into patterns of return migration (Bell, 1996; Bell and Hugo, 2000; Newbold and Bell, 2001). However further research is needed to explore temporal changes in return migration patterns, establish the spatial pattern of return movement at finer scales and determine the characteristics of return migrants in detail.

The potential for research of this type is provided by the Australian Census of Population and Housing. Australia is one of the few nations that collect data on place of usual residence at three fixed points in time. The quinquennial census contains questions that identify an individual's place of residence at the census, as well as one year and five years previously. Similar questions have been asked at each census since 1976, and this paper forms part of a project using these data to establish the patterns and processes of return migration over a 20 year period 1981-2001. Customised migration tables employing a fixed geography enable a robust time series of return migration patterns to be established. This will be the first time that such a temporal analysis of return migration patterns has been undertaken in Australia and the first detailed sub-state analysis.

This paper presents the first results from this analysis of return migration in Australia during the most recent intercensal period, namely 1996 to 2001. Using a migration matrix from the 2001 census the paper aims to

- Determine the extent or intensity of return migration in Australia;
- establish the pattern of return migration and its links to aggregate intercensal flows; and
- identify those segments of the population most prone to return migration.

Results reveal the complex spatial structure of the migration system and the extent to which return migration offsets the pattern of primary flows. They also demonstrate that return movement displays a distinctive age profile that differs radically from that of other migrations. We conclude by developing a series of detailed hypotheses for empirical testing using the full 1981-2001 dataset.

References

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