

Using the population register as a sampling frame for surveying emigrant populations: Introducing the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS)

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Short Abstract

While immigrant populations have been studied extensively, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the processes, patterns and consequences of emigration. This is primarily due to a lack of adequate data on emigrants, since they are excluded from most population censuses and surveys. The German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS) aims to address this lack of adequate data for studying emigrant populations. The GERPS project is the first of its kind to use a population register as a sampling frame for surveying German citizens who recently moved abroad, covering all countries of destination across the globe. The sample will be used to build a unique longitudinal dataset for studying the individual-level determinants and consequences of emigration. The aim of this paper is to critically assess the pros and cons of this alternative sampling frame, and to provide a glimpse at wave 1 and potentials for future research.

Extended Abstract

Background

In the context of an ageing labour force coupled with skill shortages on the labour markets across most more developed countries, international migration has become a major factor in the global quest for (highly) skilled labour. While immigrant populations and their integration into countries of destination have been studied extensively, the aspect of emigration has rarely been considered. Research on international migration from the perspective of the sending country has been hindered by a “lack information on how many people leave their country each year to settle elsewhere and who these emigrants are” (Willekens et al. 2016: 897).

The most common data sources on international migration are national population censuses and national household or labour force surveys. Although these surveys collect detailed individual information, the data they provide generally refer to the resident population only, including immigrants living in the country but excluding emigrants. The latter are typically omitted from national censuses and surveys, as they constitute a geographically mobile and highly dispersed population who are very difficult to track using conventional sampling procedures.

Existing strategies for surveying emigrant populations have mainly looked at emigrants from the perspective of the main destination countries, thereby providing insights into the socio-economic characteristics of a selected sub-group of emigrants living abroad. However, this approach yields little insight into the migration process and its consequences over the life course.

The German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS) aims to address this lack of adequate data for studying emigrant populations. The GERPS project is the first of its kind to use a population register as a sampling frame for surveying German citizens who recently moved abroad, covering all countries of destination across the globe.

The GERPS sampling frame

The sampling frame for the GERPS project consists of all municipalities in Germany that recorded de-registrations of German citizens moving abroad in a 12 month period from mid-2017 to mid-2018. The new sampling approach was successfully tested in a pilot study-scale with a small number of large cities (Ette et al. 2015) and draws on the federal population register. Using the population register as a sampling frame for surveying emigrants is supported by German law. All German citizens are legally required to register their physical address at their local resident registration office, and to provide the residence registration system with detailed and up-to-date information on their basic demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, age, and family status). Although this local resident registration system still has some data quality issues, it has evolved into a highly reliable source of information about the German population. In recent decades, the use of the registration system as a sample frame for high-quality population surveys in Germany has been awarded “best practice” status (Häder 2015: 10; see also Zabal 2014), and has been found to have particular advantages when the aim is to identify “rare populations” (Diehl 2007; Glowsky 2013).

German citizens are generally required to deregister when moving abroad, and to reregister after returning. Thus, it is possible to identify international migrants in the resident registration system. Yet until recently, the information collected from these emigrants included only the country of destination, not a specific address at which these people could be contacted abroad. This changed fundamentally as a result of major legal reforms enacted in recent years (Süßmuth 2016). Since 2015, the resident registration system gives emigrants the option to provide their postal address in the

country of destination, which is used in the GERPS project to contact German citizens living abroad by mail.

The first wave of the GERPS survey will be conducted in Nov/Dec 2018, with funding in place for a further four waves. Letters will be mailed to all of the individuals in the initial sample to invite them to complete the online survey, which is available online at “international-mobil.de”. The sampling frame is designed with the aim for an initial sample size of 3,000 emigrants. The sample will be used to build a unique longitudinal dataset for studying the determinants and the consequences of international migration from a developed country.

Potentials for future research

The GERPS project will provide a novel dataset for the study of emigrant populations, a geographically mobile and highly dispersed population that is difficult to capture using conventional sampling procedures. Our online panel survey will yield valuable insights into migrants’ motives for moving abroad and the consequences of migration for other life course domains (incl. work, family and health). Data collection for the “German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study” starts in late 2018 and data from the first wave will become available in 2019/2020. The panel dataset will hopefully spark renewed interest into research on emigrant populations across the globe, thus improving our understanding of international migration between developed countries.

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