

VII. BALANCES DERIVED FROM CONTINUOUS POPULATION REGISTERS

1. The nature of a continuous population register

A few countries, notably those of Northern Europe, have developed in the course of time a system of human bookkeeping which may be described as a continuous population register. For the present purpose, such a register is defined as a system of registration which maintains an individual record for each person in the population, a record being added for each birth, a record being removed for each death, and provision being made for the transfer of records with changes of residence. This system must be distinguished from that of vital registers, where records of births, deaths, marriages and divorces are kept at the locality of their occurrence (or of the residence of the persons concerned), these records, once made, being final. It must likewise be distinguished from registers for specific purposes, under the control of registration boards, where provisions for entry, deletion or transfer are not sufficient to avoid omissions or double entries.

The distinguishing feature of all these registers is the provision of internal checks to avoid duplicate entries, particularly in the case of persons who change their residence within the country. It is also usual for population registers to be checked and corrected by a periodic census, once every five or ten years, or by comparison with the returns from tax schedules, rationing registers, school registers, etc.

The individual records of a continuous population register thus follow each person, from his birth, through the major events in his life, such as marriage, divorce, and the birth of children, or changes of residence, until death. Addition of the number of live records, at convenient time intervals, results in a population count almost equivalent to a census; and if the register is well kept the population figures which it yields may be superior in quality to those obtained from the average census.

Aside from providing at convenient intervals estimates of the total population, continuous registers serve also a variety of other purposes. They can combine the functions of various non-censal counts, such as counts of persons liable for taxation, persons subject to military service, persons eligible to vote, children of school age, etc., they can supply records for the identification of persons for legal purposes, and they fulfil the functions of registers of births, marriages and deaths. Continuous population registers can be particularly useful in determining the volume of internal migration

within a country, a subject on which it is usually not possible to obtain satisfactory statistics from any other source. They are therefore of great value in providing current estimates of population within a country's administrative subdivisions.

2. The comparability of estimates derived from a continuous population register

It can be generally assumed that estimates drawn from continuous registers are highly accurate. Continuous registers have, however, two main drawbacks. In the first place, they record the resident population according to the manner in which residence is defined by the registration enactments. The definition of this "resident population" may correspond, more or less, to that of *de jure* population used in various censuses, but it differs from a *de facto* definition by excluding persons temporarily present and including persons temporarily absent. Estimates drawn from population registers are, therefore, not strictly comparable with the population estimates made in the majority of countries. It is true that the numerical difference between the *de jure* and the *de facto* population is usually rather small. However, in view of the generally high accuracy of estimates derived from registers, a greater precision of the definition of the population and a greater conformity with international standards appear desirable. For purposes of international comparability, therefore, countries having continuous population registers should endeavour to obtain *de facto* population figures by means of suitable estimates of the numbers of temporary absentees and temporary visitors from abroad.

A second drawback of continuous population registers arises from the difficulty of providing internal checks in the case of persons who have left the country and have either died abroad or established permanent residence in a foreign country. Entries of persons who have left the country without declaring themselves as emigrants but have not returned may therefore remain in the registers for a long time before being removed. A periodic check with census results or the establishment of a special register of persons whose whereabouts could not be ascertained will usually help to remedy this defect, but the remedy is not always perfect. Whereas continuous registers can record migrations within the country to a high point of precision, they are not always successful in recording the true numbers of emigrants.