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UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

20 October 2020

Online Meetings on Migration Statistics 27-29 October 2020

ABSTRACT

Title	The Impact of COVID-19 on Net International Migration Estimates in the United States
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Session	Measuring migration at times of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on international migration flows to and from the United States in 2020. Among policy decisions made in conjunction with the pandemic were: closure of land borders between the United States and Mexico and Canada, except for commerce and essential travel, flight restrictions from many international locations, closure of US visa issuance offices outside the United States, travel bans for non-residents from certain countries, and Executive Orders "pausing" legal immigration to the United States (issuance of new green cards, and family- and work-related visas). Further, US citizens and legal residents living or visiting abroad were encouraged by the US State Department to return to the US in advance of proposed border closures.

These policy decisions have all had a dramatic impact on international migration to and from the United States, resulting in the need for the US Census Bureau to take this into account when producing our July 1, 2020 annual net international migration (NIM) estimates. Vintage 2020 NIM estimates are typically based on 2019 American Community Survey data, thus would not measure the impact of the pandemic. As a result, an attempt was made to develop a methodology to adjust NIM estimates by incorporating more up-to-date (March-June 2020) data sources into our estimates.

We looked at a number of alternative data sources to develop this methodology, including monthly airline passenger data, visas issued abroad, I-94 visa arrivals, and Canadian and Mexican border, flight, and visa data. A number of different models were created using the underlying assumption that migration to and from the United States from March-June was reduced, and near net zero for the months of April-June, as supported by the alternative data sources. Additional assumptions about the return of US citizens in March 2020, as supported by flight data, were incorporated into some models. Further, flight passenger data were used to adjust Puerto Rico to United States migration based on observed and expected net passenger movement for the COVID affected months. Given the uncertainty surrounding these scenarios, an average of the eight models was taken, and then applied as our COVID adjustment. This had the overall impact of reducing our Vintage 2020 NIM estimate by 23%, compared to if we had made no adjustment. Future data releases will help inform the accuracy of this estimate and answer questions about the initial return of US citizens from abroad, and potential outmigration in later months, due to the pandemic.