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FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

Joint ECE-EUROSTAT-ESCWA work session
on Migration Statistics*
(Geneva, 8-10 May 2000)

Topic 2

**"Statistically Correct" Asylum-Seeker Data:
Prospects and Limitations**

Summary

Invited paper by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)^{1/}

1. The domain of asylum-seekers, traditionally of interest to national refugee status determination authorities and a handful of human rights lawyers and refugee advocates, has recently caught the attention of population statisticians and migration scholars. No doubt, one of the main reasons for this is the fact that, since the early 1990s, asylum migration has played a prominent role in European immigration. One of the most tangible reflections of this growing interest has been the request from the United Nations Statistical Division to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for assistance in drawing up refugee and asylum statistics guidelines for national statistical offices within the framework

1/ Prepared by Bela Hovy, Senior Statistician

* The documentation for this work session will be processed as for seminars.

of international migration statistics. The recently published Revised UN Recommendations on International Migration Statistics devote, for the first time, explicit attention to refugees and asylum-seekers. The pull factor "seeking asylum", or the push factor "fleeing persecution/war", has been finally recognized by the population and migration community as one of the key determinants of global migratory movements.

2. One area in which some demographers have taken a vivid interest is the way basic asylum application and decision statistics are tabulated by Governments. Some recent studies have argued that the current practice of tabulating asylum statistics is not "statistically correct". This debate focuses mostly on the calculation of the "recognition rate", the main indicator of the number of asylum-seekers recognized as refugees. Rather than expressing positive decisions in the number of decisions made during the same calendar month or year (period-based or transversal approach), they argue that positive decisions should be expressed in the "original" number of applications lodged, i.e. irrespective of the year in which the application was made (cohort-based or longitudinal approach).

3. This paper examines the current practice of calculating recognition rates across Europe and analyses the advantages and drawbacks of the various methods. The paper concludes that, although the cohort-based recognition rate may be the "statistically correct" measure to apply, lack of data and the slowness of the asylum procedures make that a cohort-based analysis is of little practical use across Europe. Cohort analysis may yield some interesting national case studies, but a period-based approach, providing instant and internationally comparable results, are of much greater interest to policy makers, the main users of these data.

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