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New Insights Into Movers

Findings from an ABS Victoria Population Mobility survey
and possibilities for future work on the topic

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Neil McLean, New insights into movers

In March 2000, the ABS released the findings of a Population Mobility survey (ABS Cat. No. 3237.2) that had been undertaken in Victoria. The survey was done as a supplement to the ABS Monthly Population Survey, being one of the annual State Supplementary Surveys that have been run over the past quarter century or so.

The decision to choose this topic for the 1999 Victorian “State Supp” was made in consultation between ABS and State government agencies. Doubtless it reflected the fact that the reasons and motivations for people moving home have emerged as important policy issues. Of key interest in the development of the survey was to more effectively measure those reasons, as well as the demographic profile of movers and non-movers and whether moving results generally in better or worse housing arrangements.

Those involved in policy formulation on the housing market, infrastructure provision and other social issues can all make good use of such data. Population mobility data is also important in the development of models behind population projections.¹ Of course the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing has been providing a basic picture of population mobility at a small area level for about thirty years.² What we hoped to get from this 1999 survey was a sharper picture, at least in our State, of some broader issues associated with home moving. There was also an expectation that from this Victorian survey might come some clues for how to better cover reasons for moving in ABS national survey programmes.

The Population Mobility survey was run in the field during October 1999, using a sample of people coming from approximately 5,200 private dwellings (houses, flats, home units, tents, etc). People living in non-private dwellings (hotels, caravan parks, hospitals, etc) were not included in the survey. Available for analysis from the survey were the demographic data collected with the Monthly Population Survey as well as responses from specific supplementary questions asked in Victoria that month on population mobility. These included:

- Current home – owning/renting arrangements; dwelling type; length of stay
- If moved in the last three years – where previously lived; how far moved; main reasons for moving, for choosing the new geographic location, for choosing the new dwelling; type of new dwelling; whether same people made the move³
- If likely to move in next three years – when is move likely; which area is planned for relocation; main reason for moving; expected owning/renting arrangements for new home

¹ Some State governments have also been trying to better understand why people are leaving their State to settle elsewhere in Australia. In some cases projects are undertaken to try to attract former residents back to the State. Population mobility surveys can be useful in such analysis.

² Census 2001 will again ask these two internal migration (or population mobility) questions: Q8 Where did the person usually live one year ago (at 7 August 2000)? Q9 Where did the person usually live five years ago (at 7 August 1996)

³ Q135 of the Victorian survey asked movers: Did (you) live with all the same people in the previous home?

A copy of the survey results publication (3237.2) will be found as an attachment to this paper.

One of the key findings of the survey was the extent to which people in Victoria do move residence. Indeed 28.8% of those aged 18 and over (1,014,700) had moved in the previous three years. The young adult years are the most mobile, with 41.8% of 18-24 year olds and 52.7% of 25-34 year olds having moved in the past three years. Mobility does abate progressively with age but even amongst the 55-64 year olds 13.9% were movers in the previous three years. Younger movers did however display a tendency to stay in familiar surroundings, with nearly a quarter of 18-24 year olds choosing to move, but to stay in the same Statistical Local Area (SLA) in which they had grown up.

Of all 1,014,700 movers into Victoria, 54.2% came from other SLAs (local areas) in the State, 35.3% from within the same SLA, 5.4% from interstate and 3.9% from overseas. Of those who moved within Victoria 76.2% moved less than 20 kilometres. This amounted to 700,800 people, of whom just under half (345,700) moved less than 5 kilometres. The quite short distances shifted by many movers suggest that the need to develop new social networks and local service support may not be quite as high as first indicated.

As to the reasons for moving, five main categories emerged, covering about 98% of those 919,900 who had made their move within Victoria – housing reasons (cited by 46.2% of respondents), employment related reasons (10.8%), neighbourhood characteristics (3.4%), accessibility reasons (15.9%) and life cycle reasons (19.9%). Within the housing category, the most common sub-categories were to buy or build (15.6%), to get a bigger home (11.0%) and to find a new place as result of being given notice by a landlord (6.9%). Seeking a reduced rent or mortgage was cited by 5.2%.

The most striking contrasts between Melbourne and country Victoria occurred in both the housing and employment related categories. Of those who had been located in Melbourne before their move, 49.6% cited housing reasons as the main explanation for moving compared with 38.0% of those who had been located in country Victoria pre-move. Conversely, employment related reasons were given as the main reason for moving by a higher proportion of those previously living in country Victoria (17.7%) than in Melbourne (8.6%).⁴ These results clearly suggest that employment looms somewhat larger in country Victoria as a motivator of mobility than in the big city.

Of the 55,200 who had moved into Victoria from interstate, 53.8% gave employment related reasons and 31.0% gave accessibility reasons (31.0%) as the main reasons for moving to Victoria to live. Employment prospects had been considered as a factor in making the move by 61.2% of those who came from interstate.

⁴ It should be noted with this data that moves might well have been made within the same section of State (Melbourne and country Victoria).

As part of understanding why people had moved, the survey also sought insights into main reasons people had come to their current suburb, town or locality and what (if anything) they had found appealing about their current home. Of the 919,000 who had moved from within Victoria in the past three years, 57.0% gave accessibility reasons. This included such factors as moving for work, moving to be nearer family and friends, moving to go to school/university or for lifestyle reasons. Housing reasons were given by 23.3% of movers (214,800) as the motivation for choosing the current suburb/town/locality, with hopes of getting a better housing cost outcome figuring most strongly in the decision-making of nearly half the 214,800.

In respect of main reasons amongst movers within Victoria for choosing the current dwelling of residence, 46.2% (424,900 people) gave home/property characteristics and 43.0% (395,800) financial/personal reasons. About 49% of these latter 395,800 people gave their main reason for choosing their current location as “best able to afford”. Only 4.9% of movers within Victoria gave “only suitable home in the area” as their main reason for moving.

An important social issue concerned with population mobility is whether the tenure type and standard of housing arrangements rise or fall as a result of moving. In Table 3 of the publication (attached), current tenure type and dwelling structure are cross tabulated with previous tenure type and dwelling structure. Although it is not possible to get a precise insight to the issue from this data, some reasonable observations can be made, at least in respect of tenure type. Assuming there is a simple hierarchy of housing tenure rising from renter, through purchaser to owner, it is possible to compare the ownership profiles of previous and current tenure types.⁵ This shows a slight fall off in ownership amongst the 1,014,700 movers (13.9% of movers were owners on the previous tenure structure compared with 11.6% on the current tenure and dwelling structure). There was however a large increase in the proportion of purchasers amongst the movers (15.5% on the previous structure compared with 32.7% on the current type). This boost in purchasers most likely explains much of the decrease in the proportion of renters (49.2% on the previous structure compared with 44.9% on the current structure).

As well as studying past movers’ reasons and motivations, the survey assessed likely moves by the whole population aged 18 years and over (3,520,900 people). In all 779,900 people (22.2%) indicated that they were likely to move in the next three years. Nearly 61% of the likely movers were aged 18-34 years, 23.2% had tertiary qualifications and 89.2% (695,700) were living in a multi-person household – 409,100 planned to live with the same people after the move, 248,200 would not live with the same people and 30,000 had not decided if they would be living with the same people! The main reasons for the likely move were “buy or build” (19.4%), get a bigger home (12.6%), employment related (10.6%), being independent (9.7%) and better lifestyle (8.6%). The contrast

⁵ It did not prove possible to organise all six categories of Previous Tenure and Previous Dwelling Structure in this Table into a single hierarchy representing “housing quality advance”. It is possible that some movers who once were renters have become purchasers (or even owners) as a result of the move. However, they may not have achieved a higher standard of housing through becoming purchasers (or owners). There is also an argument made by some that the economics of renting may be more favourable to advancing living standards in some circumstances.

between city and bush on employment related reasons was again quite stark – 7.3% of those currently located in the Melbourne MSR gave employment as the main reason for the likely move, compared with 21.6% of those in the Balance of Victoria).

These then were some of the key characteristics of Victoria’s one million movers captured in the 1999 State Supplementary. Further details are provided in the attached publication and through contacting the paper’s author.⁶

With the release of the Victorian Population Mobility survey results in March 2000, quite a bit of interest was shown in the data by Victorian agencies and by academic researchers in population and related fields. The ABS Statistical Consultancy unit, which had managed the survey in Victoria, initiated an informal national consultation into Use of Data on Reasons for Moving. This was done in conjunction with the ABS Demography Director, John Paice. The work was principally carried out by Ms Jessica Enders of the ABS Victoria Statistical Consultancy unit and done during March to August of this year. In addition to the 1999 Victorian Survey, three other recent ABS surveys on population mobility (including reasons for move) were identified and some key users of the output contacted. These three surveys were:

1998 A.C.T. Public Transport Usage and Migration Patterns survey
 1998 W.A. Housing Motivations and Intentions Survey
 1998 N.T. Future intended moves (done via the Population Survey Monitor)

The five yearly Census questions on population mobility, referred to earlier, were also made part of the study.

The consultation was held with a range of government, university and other research people. Four general questions were put to participants in the study:

1. What ABS population mobility data had they used?
2. How useful had they found the data to be?
3. Were there significant variables missing from the datasets that limited their use?
4. If they hadn’t used a particular ABS data, why not ?

Some key points that emerged from the discussion with clients around these four questions were:

- The Census is central to the estimation of population mobility but there are some limitations: the Census doesn’t capture information about the characteristics of the person before the move (e.g. there may be a high proportion of movers unemployed at the time of the Census but there is no way of knowing whether those individuals became unemployed as a result of the move or if they moved as a result of being unemployed); limited population mobility data is available in ABS standard products making it quite expensive to obtain the necessary special data; Census data focuses

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largely on individuals making it very difficult to track whether households moved together or separately.⁷

- The State Supplementary Surveys⁸ have expanded understanding of population mobility issues although there is a degree of unpredictability about them. There is change in topics from year to year and from one State to another. They do not offer a stable collection vehicle for better tracking reasons for moving and other population mobility issues, especially from a national perspective. Their capacity to offer output at sub-State level is also quite limited.
- Several clients queried whether it was realistic to expect a respondent to adequately assign a single reason to their move; similarly concerns were raised about the quality of likely movers' "intentions data". It was suggested that ongoing work will be needed in survey development to find ways of overcoming these difficulties. ABS will certainly be keen to seek further advice from clients on this matter.
- There are new forms of mobility emerging in our society that may need to be brought into statistical collections planning. The notion of a usual residence, for example, is being made more complex by a growing number of people who may maintain, or be part of a second usual residence, because of work done too far from primary place of residence to return home each night. The changing structure of families and personal relationships is also having an impact on traditional notions of usual residence. These, and other related issues, need to be taken into account in collecting and analysing data on population mobility.

The ABS is very appreciative of the many contributions made to the informal consultation from people in government, universities and other organisations around Australia. The overall impression gained is that available ABS data on population mobility is being used quite widely and there is need for some widening of what is produced. During the consultation ABS also obtained an updated picture of non-ABS data being used on population mobility. This includes Australia Post relocation data, information about residential land purchasers gathered by the Victorian Valuer-General, and various ad hoc surveys done by State governments on people's reasons for moving home. Clients reported to the ABS Victoria consultation that these other sources were often not very suitable for their purposes. There remains an expectation that ABS will find ways within its social survey programme to increase its coverage of the population mobility issues.

ABS is now discussing possible ways of doing this and will be seeking further advice from a range of clients in firming up the options. Some issues where further discussion is required include:

- Distilling further priority issues from what is a complex overall topic

⁷ The situation has been alleviated to some extent by inclusion of a variable (MV1D and MV5D for one and five year moves respectively). It provides output on whether all, some or no residents of a household changed address in the last year (last five years).

⁸ Including the 1999 Victorian Population Mobility discussed in this paper.

- Achieving greater stability and regularity in the collection of population mobility survey data, especially at a national level
- Tackling possible methodological difficulties that arise in seeking single “main reasons for move” or clear-cut articulation of “likely intentions” concerning a forthcoming move
- Understanding better the impact of changing social patterns on the traditional concept of “usual residence”

Large costs to the public purse do arise from a highly mobile population. Improved data on population mobility – or at least on key aspects of it – seem likely to be welcomed in various quarters, especially amongst those concerned with urban and regional planning, along with overall infrastructure provision.

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