

UNHCR Statistical Reporting on Statelessness

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A stateless person is someone who is not considered a national of any State under the operation of its law.¹ The problem of statelessness constitutes a sociolegal gap depriving several million people worldwide from full enjoyment of human rights and civic participation.² Resultant exclusion not only impairs individual human dignity, but socioeconomic development and the whole of society.

UNHCR has a mandate to identify and protect stateless persons, and to prevent and resolve situations of statelessness. These processes are interlinked because enhanced identification of cases is necessary for informing the development of legislative safeguards and nationality procedures, and monitoring their implementation. In 2014, the *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014 – 2024*³ was developed in consultation with States, civil society, and international organizations to provide a guiding framework for ending statelessness by 2024. This paper focuses on existing needs and progress pursuant to Action 10: improving quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations.

Statelessness is challenging to measure because affected populations frequently reside precariously on the margins of society. The causes, profile and magnitude of statelessness also vary country-by-country. Despite increased awareness of statelessness globally, comprehensive statistics on all countries are not available, and existing data on statelessness remains poor. Fewer than half the countries in the world possess government data on stateless populations. The most populous countries with suspected stateless populations do not report on statelessness, among them China, India, Indonesia and Nigeria (together accounting for 42 per cent of the entire world population). Currently, UNHCR reports on 3.9 million stateless people but this is known to be an underestimate and a global figure of at least 10 million is used. However, this figure is not based on robust or transparent demographic methods and, as a result, its use to track progress on reducing statelessness and for policy, programming or advocacy purposes is limited. Although UNHCR has supported efforts to improve national and global estimates, more is required to capacitate member states and coordinate data collection to estimate the number of stateless persons within their territory.

Presently, there is an increasing demand for comprehensive and consolidated guidelines on reporting standards, best practices and coordination as UNHCR country operations use differing and inconsistent methods to estimate stateless populations. These inconsistencies across countries and years, alongside gaps in data and conceptual ambiguities, create substantial challenges for the accuracy, reliability and interpretation of existing data on statelessness. Lack of proper documentation and metadata information in UNHCR's database on stateless population exacerbates these issues.

¹ Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.

² Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014-2024. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/545b47d64.html>

³ Ibid.

The following sections provide an overview of sources and methods used for UNHCR's published annual country-level figures of statelessness. Data sources include UNHCR own operational data, governments, NGOs, and unspecified combinations of the aforementioned. Chapters on each source is organized according to the methodological and population categories delineated by the Population Statistics Reference database⁴. As elaborated in the following section, these methods span "registration", "census", "survey", other estimation techniques ("estimate" in the database), and unspecified methods ("various/other" in the database). Population types includes "stateless" (presumed de jure), "de facto stateless", and "undetermined" populations.

Platforms for data collection and dissemination

UNHCR collects country-level data on stateless populations together with data on other groups of persons of concern (such as refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs) in its Population Statistics Reference database. UNHCR country offices report on numbers and demographic composition of the different groups of populations of concern twice a year, for reference dates 31 December in the Annual Statistical Reporting (ASR) and 30 June in the Mid-Year Statistical Review (MYSR). The resulting data tables are verified by UNHCR's Field Information Coordination and Support Section (FICSS), published in the PopStats database,⁵ and used for the Global Trends Report⁶, the Mid-Year Trends Report,⁷ and associated annex tables.

UNHCR country offices obtain yearly figures on the number of stateless persons at the cutoff dates from a wide range of methods and sources, and data uploaded to UNHCR's Population Statistics Reference database elaborates on methods and source information in most cases. Annual statistical reporting on statelessness typically derives from a combination of administrative registers maintained by national statistics offices and line ministries; nationality determination and other registration procedures; census data; household surveys; UNHCR initiatives; civil society and NGO data; and other internal estimates.

Within this reporting process, UNHCR's Population Statistics Reference database organizes methodology across "Source" and "Basis". Source refers to the primary data processing institution and includes government, UNHCR and NGOs as well as combinations of these. Basis denotes the data collection method and includes registration, censuses, household surveys, other techniques described as "estimates", as well as unspecified combinations of these methods described as "various/other". Supplementary descriptions, comments, and footnotes specify notable characteristics and anomalies of the enumerated populations, reporting timelines and methods used. However, figures in the database resulting from the same sources and methods are in many cases annotated with different methods and sources. For example, extrapolated and adjusted census data is correctly categorized as census data for some years and countries, but as UNHCR estimates or government registration in others. Estimates of the

⁴ <https://popdata.unhcr.org/>

⁵ <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>

⁶ 2018: <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/#>

⁷ 2018: <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5c52ea084/mid-year-trends-2018.html>

number of stateless persons for countries with unspecified methodological bases are difficult to evaluate regarding their historical usage, estimation methods, reporting gaps, and inconsistent reporting intervals.

UNHCR's country-level data on stateless populations is disaggregated demographically by sex and age, however the availability of disaggregated data varies from country to country. Specification of ethnic and other population characteristics is sometimes available in the population descriptions, particularly when estimation techniques target narrowly-defined populations such as specific ethnic groups that are known to be stateless. Furthermore, stateless populations are estimated according to different definitions such as de jure statelessness (cited as "stateless" in the database), de facto stateless populations ("de facto stateless") and populations of unknown nationality ("undetermined"). Depending on methodological choices, enumerated groups can include combinations of the aforementioned categories. Although the distinction between what constitutes de facto, de jure and undetermined nationality is not always clear due to methodological uncertainties and contradictions across databases, de facto and de jure stateless populations are never reported simultaneously within the same country, however for some countries they are both reported across different years.

Data Sources

The PopStats database contains data for 82 countries that have reported figures to UNHCR from 2009 to 2018. Six countries that reported figures during this timeframe have data which is poorly documented or consists of one-off reporting for a single year only. Among them are countries that have stopped reporting but previously cited fewer than five stateless persons for one year and similar cases with low numbers, short reporting timeframes, and limited methodological information.

As UNHCR works to improve gaps with governments and other partners, Global Trends 2018 included 78 countries reporting on statelessness, an increase from 75 in 2017. Of these estimates, 55 derive from government data, 13 from UNHCR-assisted initiatives, 3 from NGOs, and 7 unspecified. The methods used to collect data for these figures include 41 registration procedures, 9 government censuses, 4 surveys, 14 other estimation techniques, and 10 unspecified methods. These figures include 21 de jure stateless populations, 18 de facto stateless populations, 17 undetermined populations, 12 combinations of de facto stateless and undetermined populations, and 10 combinations of de jure stateless and undetermined populations.

UNHCR

In 2018, UNHCR itself was involved in the reporting of 13 of 78 countries for which stateless figures were available. While this assistance spanned countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean, efforts were concentrated in the successor states of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. In 2018, UNHCR-reported figures without supplementary government reporting included two estimates; four registration exercises; and two unspecified figures. Combined reporting conducted together with governments include UNHCR registration in an additional two countries; estimates in an additional one; and two surveys. Associated methodological bases include six registrations, three estimates, two surveys, and two unspecified bases. These figures typically correspond to undetermined populations: UNHCR sources cited six undetermined populations, one de jure

stateless population, one de facto stateless population, four combinations of undetermined and de facto stateless populations, and one combination of undetermined and de jure stateless populations.

UNHCR has the most comprehensive information on its own figures, but a key issue lies in the lack of comprehensive handbook on reporting standards and best practices aimed for data collection and coordination. Information on measuring stateless populations is spread out across several different documents, including the UNHCR Handbook for Registration,⁸ 2014 Handbook on Protection of Stateless Persons⁹, and 2011 Guidance Document on Measuring Statelessness.¹⁰ While the first focuses on refugees, the second does not prioritize delineating statistical best practices and the third provides guidance on research design for projects but does not address the need for streamlining coordination and reporting across countries.

The lack of widespread and accessible information on UNHCR's data best practices and priorities leads to unclear standards and coordination. UNHCR registration efforts correspond to heterogeneous enumerated populations with little methodological elaboration in databases. These registration efforts do not always allow for demographic disaggregation, and significant changes in the figures from year to year are not always explained. Some countries offices provide demographic disaggregation but no explanations for changes in reported populations. Others lack disaggregation despite improvements in registration efforts and data quality. UNHCR surveys are more targeted but sometimes ambiguously documented and lack accessible information on earlier figures.

Where populations are difficult to enumerate, UNHCR estimates of undetermined populations are established in collaboration with stateless communities or NGOs. Information is not available on the historical usability and methodological background of many of these estimates. Although challenges to updating these figures create data gaps spanning several years amid inconsistent reporting timelines, countries that have cited such estimates typically move onto methodologies allowing for more frequent updates where political will and capacity allows.

Challenges associated with the lack of organized information are exacerbated by conceptual ambiguities surrounding stateless and undetermined populations. UNHCR figures are particularly unclear regarding how the latter is defined. Whereas some countries cite "undetermined" populations on the basis of stateless persons measured with ambiguous methodology, others include persons or groups at risk of statelessness. Others still define it as those of unknown nationality. However, most UNHCR reporting does not provide additional description when citing undetermined populations.

Governments

Amid coordination issues and information challenges similar to the ones described for UNHCR figures, government reporting tends to apply to a narrower set of estimation methods focused on minimising false positives of

⁸ Largely directed towards refugees and asylum seekers; source: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/4a278ea1d/unhcr-handbook-registration-provisional-release-september-2003-complete.html>

⁹ Outlines some procedures; source: https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2017/04/CH-UNHCR_Handbook-on-Protection-of-Stateless-Persons.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4f688762.pdf>

statelessness determination, potentially leading to an increased risk of underreporting numbers of stateless persons. These factors alongside other inconsistencies underscore the need for better guidance on enumeration and reporting methods most conducive to monitoring figures on stateless populations for reduction and prevention of statelessness.

In 2018, 55 of 78 reporting countries disclosed figures derived exclusively from government sources. Data collection methods used include 34 administrative registers, 9 national censuses, 5 government estimates, 2 household surveys, 2 statelessness determination procedures, and 3 unspecified methods. Whereas the majority of UNHCR-assisted reports cite populations of undetermined origin, governments focus on reporting *de jure* and *de facto* stateless populations. Reporting countries from 2018 cited 16 *de jure* stateless populations, 12 *de facto* stateless populations, 12 undetermined populations, 7 combinations of *de facto* stateless and undetermined populations, and 8 combinations of *de jure* stateless and undetermined populations.

Across time, however, methodological changes and improvements in reporting are not always documented amid population fluctuations, reporting gaps, irregular figures and other uncertainties. It is often difficult to assess whether year-on-year changes in stateless numbers correspond to real population fluctuations or to changes in the methodology. Population changes may correspond to unexplained and later reversed methodological decisions, such as alterations in government source. Annually adjusted figures may take into account naturalization processes but base adjustments on decade-old figures that do not account for demographic change. Despite lack of methodological elaboration accompanying historical methods and changes, some of the variation in the data can be explained by looking at metadata such as the population type and supplementary comments.

Government Registration

With 34 of 78 reporting countries in 2018 citing government registration data, administrative registers are the most common and at the same time among the most methodologically heterogeneous bases for government reporting. Although the following list is incomplete, frequently cited government authorities include Ministries of the Interior, Departments of Immigration and National Statistical Offices, with the latter being the most common. Less frequent sources include Police and Border Control, Ministries of Justice, and dedicated offices. Similar national departments nonetheless exhibit a wide range of methods for data collection and reporting: While statistical offices often rely on data from tax authorities, others consolidate information across numerous sources and do not report registration data. Immigration departments may report to-s statistical bureaus, which subsequently report to UNHCR; a process which may involve unspecified adjustments. Thus, figures from government authorities neither correspond solely to registration data nor particular statelessness categories.

In our dataset, at least 20 of 35 countries citing government registers in 2018 have done so consistently since 2009. However, there persists a lack of centralized data collection and verification procedures. While some countries cite figures based on municipal data, others do not verify self-reported data and classify statelessness as a phenomenon exclusively linked to specific ethnic groups. Doing so can lead to exclusion and underreporting where there are other stateless groups in the country.

Vis-à-vis these challenges, a key pattern lies in that government registration – in contrast to UNHCR registration that prioritizes casting a wide net to capture undetermined populations – does not typically record such populations. For example, countries in 2018 reported 12 de jure populations, 9 de facto populations, 2 undetermined populations, 7 combinations of stateless and undetermined populations and 5 combinations of de facto and undetermined populations. For registration by countries, undetermined populations tend to be categorized as such due to questionable methodology rather than population characteristics, in contrast to UNHCR reporting which mainly uses the category for those with ambiguous nationality status.

As government registration tends to focus on enumerating populations known to be stateless, they report narrower figures compared to UNHCR for three main reasons. First, some countries with high statistical capacity make efforts to differentiate stateless populations from undetermined populations and other categories of concern, with others opting to report only the former. Second, many countries report pre-existing data that is readily accessible, such as data on residence permits from the Ministry of the Interior. Many population estimates resulting from such reporting procedures thus only include stateless persons with residence permits and permanent residence, leading to exclusion of the most vulnerable without any sort of documentation. Third, various countries seeking to expand data collection will target specific at-risk communities due to capacity constraints and general challenges for identifying stateless persons. As many efforts are geographically focused, exclusion may arise for stateless persons outside these areas.

Differences in enumerated populations between UNHCR and government registration processes suggests a potential gap in priorities. Potential explanations include coordination issues related to the use of registration data across government agencies; governments believing narrower estimates to be more suitable for UNHCR's statistical reporting; political priorities; limitations in capacity and resources; and combinations of the above.

Censuses

In 2018, 9 out of 78 reporting countries relied on census figures from years ranging from 2009 to 2016. Some report annually adjusted populations amid nationality confirmation procedures, and census estimates for undetermined populations alongside data on stateless persons registered by the Ministry of the Interior. While some countries exclusively reported census data, enumerated populations include a broad range of categories, including four undetermined populations, one de jure stateless population, one de facto stateless population, and two combinations of de facto stateless and undetermined populations.

Based on existing records, at least 14 countries relied on census estimates at some point between 2009 and 2018. Although some countries only cited census data briefly before returning to previous reporting methodology such as government registration, most changes reflect increased political will and efforts to provide more timely data, such as implementation of nationality campaigns and statelessness determination procedures. Given the problems associated with lack of questions regarding statelessness and concerns regarding self-reporting, census data is also available across more countries than those who report it.

In the current reporting environment, the combination of outdated and adjusted censuses result in difficulties for distinguishing between static and dynamic populations. Some countries provide adjusted figures based on nationality campaigns. Baseline figures in these cases may be outdated due to the long intercensal periods and are often not adjusted for demographic change.

Government Surveys

Compared to other government reporting methods, surveys among stateless populations conducted by countries are largely straightforward and comprise targeted initiatives that are limited in scope with regards to the timeframe and population of interest. They are thus similar to UNHCR surveys in nature. Two of the 78 reporting countries in 2018 reported government surveys. While one refers to an undetermined population established through an older campaign and adjusted across several years based on demographic projection, the other cites stateless persons who were not qualified for naturalization according to existing nationality laws.

Other Government Reporting Techniques

In 2018, 5 of 78 reporting countries cited figures from other techniques used by governments to estimate numbers of stateless persons. Derived from the Population Statistics Reference database, this designation encompasses figures corresponding to various methodologies reported to UNHCR by national authorities as “estimates”, and thus classified as such. They presently include two stateless populations, one de facto stateless population, one undetermined population, and one combination of de facto stateless and undetermined populations. However, some ambiguities persist regarding classification. Of reporting countries, some update estimates regularly while others do not. Specified techniques may include extrapolating from media reports, internal data, and government commissions. UNHCR’s reference databases do not provide additional details on extrapolation methodology as little elaboration on methodological techniques is readily available. Distinctions between “estimates” and unspecified figures can thus be uncertain.

Similar as for UNHCR estimates, reporting gaps and incomplete information on historical usage is common, leading to difficulties for distinguishing methodological change and improvements from real population shifts. This is due to existing challenges for coordination and the tendency to defer to government estimates in political and institutional contexts where enumeration is difficult. This tendency is reflected in fragile and conflict situations where UNHCR often switches to government estimates after relying on NGO, nationality campaigns or own sources pre-conflict. Other figures point to conceptual inconsistencies and statistical under- as well as over-coverage for data reported through government estimates, for examples by using data only from detention facilities or including all persons who lack citizenship certificates. While the concept of legal identity and statelessness are overlapping, not all stateless persons are without legal identity and vice versa. This points to conceptual inconsistencies for undetermined populations, further exacerbated by inclusion of populations at risk of statelessness in addition to ambiguous and out-of-date figures.

Unspecified Government Sources and Statelessness Determination Procedures

While described as “various/other”, this category is largely unspecified and serves as a miscellaneous group containing an array of sources and methodologies. This category is very similar to “government estimates”, but contains estimates with fewer methodological details in addition to statelessness determination procedures. Under this classification, UNHCR’s Population Statistics Reference database includes estimates of undetermined

populations, estimates of de facto stateless populations, and figures derived from statelessness determination procedures. Most of these figures are reported for middle and high income countries. The figures are compiled from various sources and consolidated by statistics department in some cases, and from estimates of stateless persons from parliamentary requests for information without further methodological elaboration in others.

In addition to ambiguities between unspecified techniques and other estimation techniques, two main problems persist for reporting statelessness determination procedures. First, statelessness determination procedures do not have a consolidated place within UNHCR's existing databases: some are listed here, others under registration, and others still are not recorded. This creates reporting gaps and renders counting verification processes and nationality campaigns difficult. Second, while such procedures reflect attempts to improve statelessness data, resulting figures are often reported while the procedure is still underway. This can lead to fluctuations in estimates that are purely a result of the ongoing process of the statelessness determination and not of any actual changes in the number of stateless persons. Some member states also report ongoing statelessness determination processes but categorize their methodology as government registration rather than "various/other". These ambiguities and gaps highlight both the need for better reporting and for clarified standards and best practices amid insufficient information on statelessness determination and similar procedures.

Other Sources

In addition to UNHCR and government data, 2018 figures derive from three NGO sources and seven unspecified sources. Corresponding populations include three de jure stateless populations, five de facto stateless populations, one undetermined population, and one combinations of de facto stateless and undetermined populations. Estimates from this list range substantially in quality as information on methodology is spotty amid inconsistent reporting and descriptions across databases.

Data quality among NGO sources is particularly uneven. While NGO data collection in collaboration with UNHCR for some countries seems to have been relatively thorough albeit regionally concentrated, others cite estimates of only a handful of persons of undetermined nationality over several years without any updates.

"Various/other" or unspecified sources, like "various/other" or unspecified bases, may refer to data derived from various sources but generally serves as a miscellaneous category containing unknown or unspecified methodology. These estimates correspond to various populations and comprise three primary categories: The first can be seen for countries with substantial gaps in recording over the years, some of which had no update at least since 2009. The second category contains cases that are pending further study by UNHCR and government auspices, especially in fragile and conflict situations. These factors indicate political will and UNHCR attention amid likely collaboration with government and civil society. The third includes countries where confusion persists with regard to reporting. Reporting of stateless figures for some countries cites both stateless and de facto stateless populations across years, despite the figures staying the same over the years and presumably referring to the same population. Some countries are reluctant to report undetermined populations due to potential overlap with other categories and the likelihood that this overstates the level of statelessness within its territory. On the other hand, citing both

stateless and undetermined populations is common across government reporting and for UNHCR figures that focus on those at risk. Apparent confusion in reporting on stateless, de-facto stateless and undetermined populations underscores the need for a handbook to inform reporting priorities vis-à-vis stateless and undetermined populations.

Consistency of Estimates

Despite methodological improvements in certain countries, comparing data collection and estimation methodologies across years and time becomes very difficult due to information gaps amid overwhelming methodological and timeline-related irregularities. Observed population shifts, on the one hand, may be a product of methodological changes or correspond with actual changes in the number of stateless persons, for example due to nationality campaigns or demographic change. Difficulties for distinguishing between these two explanations for shifts are exacerbated by data coordination issues, data gaps and conceptual ambiguities such as between de facto and de jure stateless people. Reported population shifts in the past decade are attributable to a combination of methodological changes, improvements in data collection, nationality verification and statelessness determination procedures, and processes of naturalization including nationality campaigns.

Meanwhile, lack of statistical capacity can also lead to data gaps. Gaps in reporting are largely associated with a lack of statistical and political capacity, inconsistent reporting timelines and coordination issues while reporting. Constraints related to political capacity and will are especially important where they persist.

Conceptual ambiguities are both a product and a potential cause of methodological inconsistencies, given unclear standards and lack of best practices for reporting. Despite efforts undertaken at the country level to improve data, the existing approach can be uncoordinated across countries. Taken together, it becomes very difficult not only to discern real population changes amid disjointed shifts and gaps, but also to understand who these populations comprise. Distinctions between stateless and de facto stateless populations and what comprises undetermined populations are especially ambiguous.

Data gaps: method and capacity issues

Despite efforts to consolidate and clarify statelessness figures, challenges persist in establishing accuracy of yearly updates, leading to problems for measuring progress towards the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness by 2024. Of the 82 countries included, gaps in real updates have persisted across 16 countries for the past half-decade or more. This includes gaps attributable to out-of-date censuses and estimates across eight countries.

However, gaps in data collection and reporting also persist across countries that have reported more recent updates. Adjusted figures are based on out-of-date estimates across three countries and there are two instances where UNHCR has information regarding changes, but updates were not recorded due to lack of official confirmation. Eight other instances seem outwardly coherent, but are affected by inconsistent reporting, volatile data sources, and lack of central data collection and formal data on stateless populations. Inconsistent reporting

and volatility can derive from a combination of factors, including poor coordination for recording population changes across years and reliance on municipal databases where others statistics on statelessness are absent, respectively. Given these gaps, UNHCR is working with government authorities to address inaccurate reporting in six additional countries known to have reporting issues. To address difficulties in ascertaining the full scope of statelessness based on existing data, UNHCR is also trying to improve data collection on countries that do not report statelessness figures. In 2017 and 2018, five countries that have never previously reported statelessness figures provided estimates to UNHCR.

Change in figures over time: methods and nationality initiatives

Problems for comparing existing data lie not only in the divergent quality of data, but also in the diversity of methodological changes and conceptual implications across enumerated populations. Twenty-eight countries in UNHCR's database have reported consistent methods across time. This figure does not include countries that ceased reporting before 2018. Methodological changes and improvements, including Statelessness Determination and Nationality Verification Procedures, have predicated shifts in 52 countries in the database. However, this list is incomplete due to lack of robust means to classify and monitor such procedures as the majority of insights are derived from separate comments or additional country reports. There may be nationality campaigns and statelessness determination procedures not fully reported to UNHCR's database.

Based on existing information, many methodological changes across countries have been haphazard and heterogeneous, with few underlying patterns in 24 countries in our dataset. Nineteen of these countries have experienced disjointed, ambiguous, or unexplained changes. An additional five lack information on the majority or all aspects of their historical data collection methodology. Where additional information exists changes across years can be attributed to back-and-forth alternations between data sources citing very different figures.

In light of incomplete information, UNHCR, governments, and other partners are improving data collection within countries. Cited improvements can include statelessness determination procedures or relate to other improvements. The latter can include shifting from infrequently updated census data and estimates to more accurate figures; expanded data collection without substantial methodological change; and clarifications with government or civil society.

Seventeen countries have reported discernable efforts to improve statelessness estimates and gather better data. UNHCR has information on nine total statelessness determination and nationality confirmation procedures, although this list is not comprehensive and does not include all such procedures. Statelessness determination and nationality verification procedures for some countries are recorded as unspecified. In others, they are recorded as "registration" without further specification in existing comments. This lack of clarity can lead to a lack of understanding of the sources of current and historical shifts, in addition to challenges to monitoring existing campaigns. Thus, challenges to coordination remain amid improvements to data collection.

There are a total of 28 cases of statistical improvements across time vis-à-vis 24 cases of haphazard or unexplained change. Existing difficulties with statelessness statistics are not only due to numerically similar incidents of improvements and haphazard changes that make it difficult to discern one from the other, but also because reporting itself does not always follow an orderly process. Incomplete information, combined with the overwhelming volume of commentary in the database aimed to clarify methodological and conceptual inconsistencies, results in difficulties in differentiating real population changes from reporting issues. The degree of accuracy for registered and estimated populations is uncertain given a lack of elaboration on methodology and unevenly updated commentary across sources. Robust population estimates are thus very difficult to determine, especially as information across sources can be contradictory and lead to ambiguity.

Even where there is information, records can be inaccurate, contradictory, and disorganized, underscoring the need for improved reporting practices and coordination based on statistical needs. While some sources continue to cite outdated estimates, others have at different points reported recent data one year and reverted to outdated data from a different source the following year. Information gaps remain where no specified methodological bases are reported and no additional comments are provided as many initiatives are recorded, but many are not. Even where there are efforts to streamline methodological and conceptual divisions, inconsistencies across countries and years remain substantial; population descriptions are not always informative; and data sources are not always clear-cut, complicating country-by-country comparisons. An overwhelming volume of commentary results from deep-seated incoherency and issues surrounding coordination.

Conceptual ambiguities and misreporting

While methodological shifts and data gaps across countries and time make distinguishing real population shifts very challenging, conceptual ambiguities render comparisons similarly difficult. Although there is insufficient data to identify definitional changes across time, registration efforts in recent years commonly include stateless or de facto stateless populations with residence permits or permanent residence, likely excluding the undocumented and most vulnerable. Meanwhile, estimates and enumeration efforts tend to focus on specific at-risk groups and locations, leaving gaps for other incidents of statelessness. Enumerated populations in 2018 include 21 stateless, 18 de facto stateless, 17 undetermined, and 22 combinations thereof.¹¹ However, other factors complicate these conceptual boundaries.

First, there are documentation gaps in the database vis-à-vis population descriptions and collection methodologies. Although broad tendencies can be identified based on current comments, it is difficult to ascertain whether existing data encompasses the full scope of statelessness in a given country. Second, distinctions between conceptual categories in UNHCR's reporting can be blurry within reporting. Despite work to improving statelessness data at the country-level, resultant conceptual inconsistencies are exacerbated by uncoordinated data consolidation. Distinctions between stateless and de facto stateless are not always clear as an identical population may be characterized as one for one year and the other for the next. The definition of undetermined populations also raises

¹¹ These include 12 combinations of de facto stateless and undetermined populations, and 10 combinations of stateless and undetermined populations.

questions regarding the threshold for when populations should be recorded as stateless and when as undetermined nationality, relating to issues surrounding reporting best-practices, resource limitations, and political and institutional expediency. Undetermined populations typically refer to situations where there is no data available with regards to a person's nationality, but this definition cannot be confirmed to be a popular usage based on current data. "Undetermined" has been used to refer to many different concepts across years and countries, and many countries provide no additional elaboration on usage. Where information is available, it can refer to at-risk populations in some countries. Other reported populations are designated as such due to methodological uncertainties. Many countries report a very wide scope of persons under the designation of undetermined populations.

Conclusion and way forward

Political and capacity constraints impair data collection and are exacerbated by insufficient coordination and elaboration on standards and best practices both externally and internally to UNCHR. Guidelines delineating methodological best practices and clarified classification of categories should thus complement UNHCR's mandate pursuant Action 10 of the *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness*. Given the disjointed and inconsistent nature of reporting on stateless populations in UNHCR, an in-depth evaluation of the database and reporting processes including data sources, methods and metadata documentation will be needed to assess the current state of reporting and to make recommendations on the estimation of country-level and global figures on statelessness. This will need to include clear statistical recommendations and definitions on the use of terms to delineate stateless groups such as de-facto and de-jure statelessness, undetermined nationality and persons at risk of statelessness. Internationally-agreed recommendations on reporting standards and best practices aimed at data collection, definitions, estimation techniques and consolidation of different data sources should be developed to provide guidance to member states and UNHCR operations in reporting stateless populations.

In cooperation with partner agencies from within and outside the UN system like UNFPA, UN DESA, UNICEF and the World Bank, UNHCR has started a process to improve the global and country-level estimates of the number of stateless persons, leading to the implementation to the sub-group on data of the Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) on Statelessness. A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) of academic experts from outside the UN system is further envisaged to independently advise the work of the sub-group on data and develop methodological approaches to estimating statelessness. This working paper can serve as a starting point for the work of the TAG. A more comprehensive version of the document is available for review by independent experts.

While inter-agency work and input by independent experts is important for improvements on the technical level and to ensure coordination of definitions and methodology in the international sphere, the success of these efforts will crucially depend on an additional, member-state driven process to develop expertise and recommendations for the estimation of the number of stateless persons globally and on country-level. This process can draw inspiration from the successful work of the Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics (EGRIS).¹² A first meeting of technical

¹² <https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/experts-finally-agree-on-standards-for-refugee-statistics/>

experts from countries with stateless populations and representatives of international organisations will take place in December 2019. The joint effort of member states, international community and technical experts will be needed to obtain valid and reliable estimates for the global number of stateless persons for the very first time.

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