The ESRC Centre for Population Change – working in partnership with ONS and GROS

Jane Falkingham

Director ESRC Centre for Population Change, University of Southampton

This October marks the first anniversary of the formal launch of the ESRC Centre for Population Change. This issue of Population Trends includes a number of articles based on research within the Centre, highlighting the breadth of research taking place within the Centre and its relevance for researchers in academia and national and local government.

The ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC) brings together experts from across the social sciences to carry out research that will lead to a better understanding of the key drivers of population change and the implications for economic welfare and social support at the national, local, household and individual level. The CPC is a joint initiative between the University of Southampton and a consortium of Scottish Universities, led by the University of St Andrews, in partnership with the Office for National Statistics and the General Register Office for Scotland¹.

The Centre is carrying out research in the thematic areas of:

1. Dynamics of fertility and family formation;
2. Household change and living arrangements across the life course;
3. The demographic and socio-economic implications of national and transnational migration;
4. Modelling population growth and enhancing the evidence base for policy.

Within each of the four themes a series of research projects is addressing some of the critical scientific research questions. The choice of these themes reflects the critical role played in recent population change by:

- Low fertility, with couples now having, on average, fewer than 2.1 children, below the level needed for the population to replace itself. A key question is whether this trend will continue or whether fertility will rise and what, if anything, governments can or should do to influence this.

- The emergence of 'new' forms of intergenerational relationships and living arrangements, such as 'living apart together', 'boomerang children', that is, adult children returning to the parental home in their 30s and 40s, and increasing childlessness. Improvements in longevity and rises in the average age at which women give birth and the age at which children subsequently leave home have also resulted in more people, particularly women, being faced with the double burden of caring for both their own (adult) children and their parents, the so-called 'sandwich generation'. Again these new behaviours raise important issues for policy makers. More information is required on how widespread these behaviours are and the factors associated with them.
- Increasing levels of migration both internally and between countries. Of particular note is the increase in the number of non-UK EU migrants settling in the UK, many of whom are of childbearing age. One key question is whether these migrants will choose to stay and raise a family here or whether they are just temporary migrants who will return home. This has important consequences both for the UK in terms of its demographic structure, labour market and social transfers and for the country of origin, where the economy as a whole, as well as individual families may benefit from remittances but where the disruption of traditional family networks may leave older people vulnerable.
- Individual and population ageing. The next 20 years will see an increase in the proportion and absolute number of older people in the population. This presents challenges and opportunities for society; challenges in terms of providing economic support and health and social care and opportunities in terms of more people living a healthy and productive life and for longer.

A hallmark of the Centre's research is a focus on the dynamic interconnections between the different demographic processes and the implications for policy and the community in the context of an ageing society. Ranging from in-depth qualitative studies of the processes underlying individual demographic behaviour through to complex statistical and economic modelling, the Centre's research brings methodological innovation to the study of population change in the UK and will enhance the evidence base both for improved population projections and for policy formulation. Partnerships with ONS and GROS ensure that the work undertaken is relevant to national and local government.

The papers by CPC researchers included in this issue of Population Trends were chosen to showcase both the range of research topics and the variety of datasets being used within the Centre. The first article by Máire Ní Bhrolcháin, Eva Beaujouan and Ann Berrington presents the initial results from a new combined dataset bringing together data from the General Household Survey for the period 1991-2007. The paper examines time trends in family intentions in order to improve our understanding of recent trends in fertility. The research challenges the idea that the trend toward later childbearing is the result of active 'postponement' but argues that the whole environment of opportunities and incentives for childbearing has been changing, resulting in a progressive increase in the age of mothers at all parities.

This is followed by an article by Irene Mosca and Robert Wright who use HESA data to examine the nature of national and international graduate migration flows in the UK. The analysis suggests that migration is a selective process with graduates with certain characteristics having considerably higher probabilities of migrating both to other regions of the UK and abroad.

Moving further up the life course, Athina Vlachantoni investigates the demographic characteristics and economic activity patterns of carers over the age of 50 in England using data from the English Longitudinal survey of Ageing (ELSA). The results suggest that the nature of care provision changes at different points of the lifecourse, and that it is quite a different experience for men and women. In particular, the research sheds new light on the so-called 'round-the-clock' carers, who make up just over one-fifth of all carers aged 50 and over.

Maria Evandrou, Jane Falkingham and Marcus Green then explore the factors associated with migration among people aged 50 and over using data from the British Household Panel Study over the period 1991–2007. Previous research has distinguished three distinct types of migration at older ages: 'amenity' related or retirement migration undertaken to improve quality of life; disability or health-related migration, undertaken to move closer to kin; and finally moves into institutions towards the end of life. The paper highlights that as divorce and remarriage become more common in later life, a fourth category of 'relationship driven migration' may need to be added to this typology.

Finally, Guy Abel, Jakub Bijak and James Raymer from the CPC modelling strand compare official population projections with Bayesian time series forecasts for England and Wales that allow of the inclusion of uncertainty in a consistent manner. The results lend support to the idea that the methods currently used to produce population projections should be modified to include a greater emphasis on specifying uncertainty, allowing more informed decisions to be made by population planners and policy makers.

- 1 CPC is directed by Professor Jane Falkingham and co-directed by Professor Maria Evandrou (University of Southampton) and Dr Elspeth Graham (University of St Andrews). Its founding co-directors included Professor Paul Boyle, who from 1 September 2010 has been appointed Chief Executive and Deputy Chair of the Economic and Social Research Council, and Professor Sue Heath who has recently taken up a new post at the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life at Manchester University.