The Kiwi factor in record net migration

This article discusses how the net losses of New Zealand citizens contribute to record-high net gains in total migration.

A record net gain of 71,900 non-New Zealand citizen migrants in the May 2016 year, was partly offset by a smaller-than-usual net loss of 3,500 New Zealand citizens (Kiwis), and produced a record-breaking net gain of 68,400 people. The last time the difference between Kiwi migrants arriving and departing was this narrow was 25 years ago.

More Kiwis are coming back after living overseas and fewer are leaving than in recent years. These historically small net losses of New Zealand citizens combined with record net gains in non-New Zealand citizens have created our current record in migration.

The graph below shows New Zealand’s annual net permanent and long-term migration for 1986–2016.

Each year, typically more Kiwis depart overseas than return after a year or more away, and more non-New Zealand citizens arrive here to stay for a year or more, than leave.

The flow of New Zealand citizens can be large, and at times significantly offset the net gain in non-New Zealand citizen migrants. For example, in the May 2012 year 22,400 Kiwis arrived back in New Zealand and 61,800 headed overseas for a year or more, creating a net loss of 39,400 Kiwis. In the same period, there was a net gain of 35,800 non-New Zealand citizens which was outweighed by the loss of Kiwis, creating a total net loss of 3,700 migrants.

Since 1986, an average of 21,600 more Kiwis have left than arrived back, compared with an average of 32,100 more non-New Zealand citizens arriving than departing per year. These figures contribute to an average net gain of 10,500 migrants a year.

There are many ways of analysing net migration including by country of residence. The biggest net gains by country of citizenship in the May 2016 year, contributing to the 68,400 total net gain, were from:

- India (13,100)
- China (9,600)
- the Philippines (6,200)
- the United Kingdom (5,600).
Net migration is the difference between arrivals and departures of migrants. The biggest flows in either direction in the May 2016 year were:

- New Zealand citizen departures (34,200)
- New Zealand citizen arrivals (30,700)
- Indian citizen arrivals (14,400)
- Chinese citizen arrivals (11,500)
- United Kingdom citizen arrivals (10,300).

While Kiwis are not contributing net gains to the current record gain in migration, they are a big determinant of total net migration as they dominate both migrant arrivals and departures.

Notes:

1. A ‘migrant’ arrival in International Travel and Migration statistics is anyone coming to New Zealand who plans to stay for 12 months or more. That includes New Zealand citizens coming back after living overseas for a year or more.
2. A ‘migrant’ departure is anyone leaving New Zealand who has lived here for 12 months or more. This includes non-New Zealand citizens who have lived in New Zealand for 12 months or more and are returning to live overseas (e.g., international students returning home after completing a university degree).
3. Net migration is the balance of all migrants coming into New Zealand less those that have departed (regardless of citizenship).