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DEVELOPING SMALL AREA ESTIMATES IN THE UK – A PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE

Marta Haworth and Marie Cruddas¹

ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1990s there has been in the UK a growing demand for small area statistics – for evidence-based policy formation, for informing funding decisions and for targeting and evaluating policy initiatives at the local area level. In response to this demand, the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) began in 1998 research into indirect small area estimation techniques, leading to the development of area level synthetic estimators.

Implementation has become a priority in the last couple of years, especially in the context of the ONS Neighbourhood Statistics Programme. This is a major initiative to bring together and make widely available statistics down to the small area level where the survey sample sizes are too small for direct estimation to produce adequate results.

The methods developed during the first phase of the research have been implemented to derive experimental estimates for some important social and key Labour Market indicators, in particular unemployment. In each case of implementation of indirect small area estimates particular attention has been paid to model specification and testing and to both internal and external evaluation. The dissemination of results recognizes that there is a choice of models and that users need to understand the strengths and limitations of estimates of this type. Some of these estimates have been published as experimental and others are undergoing a process of evaluation.

The paper will describe the approach and models, and the issues and problems which had to be tackled. It will also discuss the lessons learned and experience gained in practical implementation. Specific case studies will be presented to show the results obtained and the approach to their evaluation and dissemination. These will concentrate on unemployment and income. The paper will also outline the work done on psychiatric morbidity and crime statistics and implications for future research. The paper will describe the approach and the models used, and the issues and problems which had to be tackled. It will also discuss the lessons learned and experience gained in practical implementation. Specific case studies will be presented to show the results obtained and the approach to their evaluation and dissemination. These will concentrate on unemployment and income. The paper will also outline the work done on psychiatric morbidity and crime statistics and implications for future research.

¹ Marta Haworth and Marie Cruddas, Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom