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Consulting the oracle: using the Delphi method in research with undocumented migrant children

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Abstract

Although there are estimates of the number of undocumented migrant families resident in the UK, there are currently no estimates at local authority level. As a result, undocumented migrant families are often invisible in local discussions of child poverty and safeguarding, can be excluded from services to safeguard their welfare, and face the risk of destitution. This paper explores the Delphi method as a way of using expert consensus to estimate numbers of undocumented migrant families. Fieldwork was completed in Birmingham, West Midlands, but uses a methodology transferrable to other areas. A median estimate of 1,500 families, containing 1,900 children was reached. The paper concludes with a discussion of the methodological difficulties encountered, and recommendations for use of the method in the future.

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Introduction

Undocumented migrant children are some of the most vulnerable in the UK (Jolly, 2018). However, there are currently no estimates of the numbers of undocumented families at local authority level. The absence of reliable data compounds the invisibility of undocumented migrant families, hindering the delivery and planning of support services, and the work of solidarity and campaigning groups (Koser, 2010, p.182). Although undocumented migrant families are excluded by the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) rule from most social security benefits, and from accessing paid employment, local authorities retain a responsibility to safeguard the welfare of all children in their area under (in England) section 11 of the Children Act, 2004, and one of the few entitlements that undocumented migrant families possess is 'child in need' support under (in England) section 17 of the Children Act, 1989. A method which is able to explore the extent of the issue of unsupported migrant children at local authority level is, therefore, particularly useful, because it is at local authority level that child in need services are organised and delivered.

Residual model

Perhaps the most widely accepted method of estimating the size of the undocumented migrant population is the residual method, which subtracts estimates of the lawfully resident foreign-born population from the total foreign-born population using census data to reach a de facto 'residual' number of the undocumented population (Pinkerton et al, 2004). Using this method, Gordon et al (2009) estimated that there were 85,000 UK-born children resident in the UK in 2007. This figure was subsequently revised by Sigona and Hughes (2012) to conclude that there were 120,000 undocumented migrant children in the UK at the end of 2011. Most recently, Dexter et al (2016) updated this figure to 144,000.

However, data to calculate the residual are not available at local authority level. In order to calculate the residual, it is necessary to know the size of the foreign-born population which has been granted settlement in the UK; the numbers of EEA citizens; as well as figures for emigration, deaths and births for the foreign-born population in a local area (Woodbridge, 2005, p.12). Even if disaggregated data were available for the numbers of families granted settlement by local authority area, it is not known whether families move after being granted settlement, or remain in the same area.

The Delphi method

Given the difficulties of applying the residual method at a local authority level, an alternative method is Delphi: a structured, iterative technique for eliciting expert consensus on a topic (Linstone and Turoff, 2002). In Delphi, a panel of expert respondents is invited to participate in a series of questionnaires over a number of rounds. Respondents are anonymous and known to the researcher, but blind to each other. The open questionnaire in the first round acts as a survey instrument for the second round of structured questionnaires, consisting of summarised information from the previous round. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the feedback, and are given the opportunity to amend their responses, in order to facilitate the emergence of a consensus. The method is characterised by the use of expert participants rather than a representative sample of the population (Goodman, 1987, p.730).

Delphi has been used in a variety of settings including future forecasting (Rowe and Wright, 1999), nursing research (Keeney et al, 2001), and educational research (Green, 2014). Gordon et al (2009, p.33) identify Delphi as one of the three 'extensively investigated' methods of quantifying the undocumented migrant population, and the method has been used to estimate the size of undocumented migrant populations in other European countries, including Switzerland (Piguet and Losa, 2002); the Czech Republic (RILSA, 1997), Italy (ISTAT, 1991) and the Netherlands (Zandvliet and Gravesteijn-Ligthelm, 1994). However, the method has not previously been applied to research with undocumented migrants in the UK. Pinkerton et al (2004) acknowledge that the method could be applied in a UK context, but question how it would be verified, recognising that its reliability would rest on the knowledge of participants. Although a panel with expert knowledge of the undocumented migrant population across the whole of the UK presents difficulties, for a smaller area, such as a single city, the method becomes more feasible due to the smaller size of the population in question and the local knowledge of the panel.

Method

The size of Delphi panels varies considerably, with no consensus on their optimum size. Skulmoski et al's (2007) review of published Delphi research found that panel sizes ranged from three to 171, with the majority having a panel size of less than 30 (Skulmoski et al, 2007, p.6). However, more than the size of the panel, the usefulness of the method relies on selecting 'experts' who have a greater insight into an issue than the general population. This reliance on experts leaves the technique vulnerable to charges of elitism, and the reliability of expert knowledge over the general population is by no means an uncontested principle, with the method susceptible to a 'halo effect' of confirmation bias amongst a panel with mutually reinforcing views (Sackman, 1975). Nonetheless, for exploring a population which is hidden and invisible, the knowledge of people who have direct experience of an issue, rather than detached experts, or of the general public, is of particular value.

The majority of panel members were recruited through a steering group of the key voluntary sector agencies in Birmingham working with undocumented migrants. The panel was predominantly drawn from the voluntary and community sector, and so additional attempts were made to recruit representatives from the local authority (both officers and elected members). However, no local authority representatives decided to take part in the panel. This is perhaps not surprising, given the controversial nature of the issue, public hostility to irregular migration, and the fact that the local authority would have a safeguarding obligation to any undocumented migrant children who are identified in the research, with potentially significant financial implications for the local authority (R. Clue v Birmingham, 2010).

This lack of local authority representation on the panel was a weakness in the composition of the panel, which meant that a valuable local perspective wasn't included in the estimates. However, unlike other areas of social work practice, local authorities are not the sole or even the largest agency working with undocumented migrants. The total number of families supported by the local authority at the time of the panel was 163 families, but panellists reported receiving an average of 15 new referrals a week for undocumented migrant families. Even accounting for staff leave and holiday closures, panel members were in contact with a significantly higher number of families than the local authority. Nonetheless, efforts should be made in future research to involve local authority representatives to ensure that all relevant local perspectives are included.

In order to broaden the perspectives included in the panel, three 'experts by experience' who had themselves been undocumented were also recruited. Half of those in employment were involved in direct work with children and families, either as a practitioner or in a managerial role (Table 2). Two thirds of the panel were employed by a charity, either locally or nationally (Table 1).

Table 1: Q. Which best describes your own situation?

Panel members	Number
Undocumented migrant/former undocumented migrant	1
Volunteer with undocumented migrants	4
Employee with local charity	5
Employee with national charity	7
Researcher	1
TOTAL	18

Table 2: Q. If you work or volunteer with undocumented migrant families, which best describes your role?

Job role	Number
Direct work with families	8
Managing direct work with families	1
Strategic or policy role	3
Other	3
TOTAL	15

Data collection took place between March and September 2016. Questionnaires were hosted online using an encrypted site, and the initial survey was piloted with three volunteers to ensure that it was understandable and the questions were clear. All participants were given a participant information sheet, and informed consent was indicated through an online tick box. 18 people took part in the panel, including practitioners, policymakers, and undocumented families themselves. Participants were asked a total of 26 questions over three rounds, starting with basic demographic information about the participant and their knowledge and experience (see Table 3).

Table 3: Delphi questionnaire

Round	Question
One	1.1 Which best describes your own situation?
	1.2 If you work or volunteer with undocumented migrant families, which best describes your role?
	1.3 In your experience, what are the most common districts of Birmingham that undocumented migrant families live in? (please choose up to 3 in order of frequency, with #1 being the most common)
	1.4 Based on your personal or professional experience, over the past 12 months, have the numbers of undocumented migrant families living in Birmingham: Increased, Decreased, Stayed the same, Unsure
	1.5 Approximately how many undocumented migrant families does your agency work with in a typical week in Birmingham?
	1.6 Based on your personal or professional experience, over the past 12 months has destitution amongst migrant families in Birmingham: Increased, Decreased, Stayed the same, Unsure
	1.7 Approximately what percentage of the families you work with are supported by the Local Authority under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989?
	1.8 Which are the main organisations who work with undocumented migrants in Birmingham? (Please name up to five organisations)

	1.9 Based on your personal/professional experience, approximately how many undocumented migrant families would you estimate are currently living in Birmingham?
	1.10 Based on your personal or professional experience, how many undocumented migrant children (under the age of 18) would you estimate are currently living in Birmingham?
Two	2.1 Based on the above information (from round one), how many undocumented migrant families do you think are likely to live in Birmingham?
	2.2 How many children?
	2.3 Has your estimate changed since round one? If so, how? (Increased or decreased)
	2.4 Please give any reasons for your answer (e.g. why you changed your estimate, or why it stayed the same?)
Three	3.1 Based on the above information (from round two), how many undocumented migrant families do you think are likely to live in Birmingham?
	3.2 How many children?
	3.3 How sure are you about your answer? (Likert scale)
	3.4 Has your answer changed since round two? If yes, how has your estimate changed? (Increased or decreased)
	3.5 Please give any reasons for your answer (e.g. why you changed your estimate, or why it stayed the same?)
	3.6 What do you think are the three most common countries of origin for undocumented migrant families in Birmingham?
	3.7 According to a report from the London School of Economics there were an estimated 618,000 undocumented migrants in the UK in 2007. If this estimate is correct, it would mean that 11% of the total foreign-born population in the UK are undocumented, and of that group, 25 % are under 18. Based on your experience, do you think this is true in Birmingham?
	3.8 How sure are you about your answer?
	3.9 Is there anything else you would like to say?

In round three, a question was added to allow participants to compare their answer with external information. This enabled participants to triangulate and compare their responses with other sources. A question was added to see how certain participants were of their answer, and a question about the most common countries of origin was added to enable a comparison to be made with other demographic data about Birmingham (See Table 3).

Results

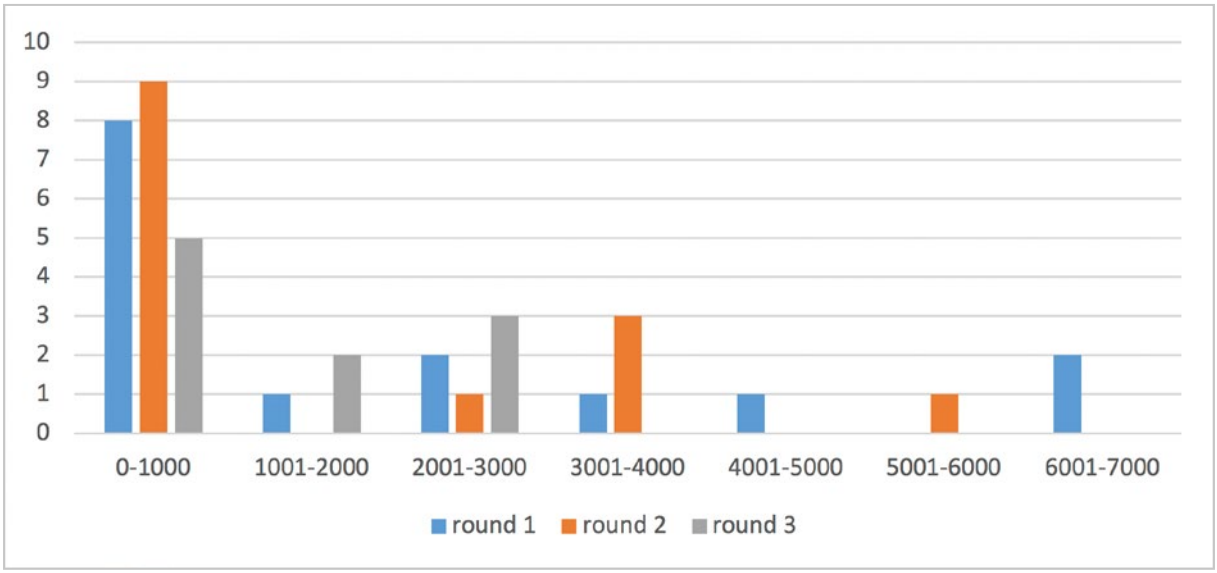
All panel members regularly encountered undocumented migrant families. Numbers ranged from between five and 35 undocumented families each week (mean: 12, median: 9), and between five and 40 children (mean: 16, median 15). However, the situation of these families varied widely. The percentage of these families who were destitute[1] ranged from eight to 100% (mean: 64%, median: 73%). The percentage supported as 'children in need' under section 17 of the Children Act (1989) was between 0 and 80% (mean: 40%, median: 38%).

These differences reflected the variety of job roles of panel members. Nonetheless, panel members were on average more likely to see families who were destitute than those receiving Section 17 support.

When asked whether the number of undocumented migrant families had increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the previous twelve months, none thought that numbers had decreased; twelve (67%) believed that numbers had increased; one (6%) thought numbers had stayed the same; and five were unsure (28%). When asked if destitution had increased, participants were even more definite – 15 (83%) thought destitution had increased over the previous twelve months; one thought they had stayed the same (6%); and only two were unsure (11%).

In the first round, two participants left the estimate of numbers of undocumented migrant families blank. To avoid this, the question was made compulsory in subsequent rounds. The 16 who did respond gave answers ranging from 200-7,000 (mean: 2,100, median: 1,000). Estimates of numbers of children ranged from 200 to 15,000 (mean: 2,698, median: 1,288). Answers clustered towards the extremes, with half of answers 1,000 or below, and two estimates of 7,000. It is unclear why this was the case, although it is notable that the two highest estimates were from participants with a 'strategic or policy' role, and the lowest estimates were from participants with a direct role with children and families. It is, therefore, possible that the lower estimates were based on the individual caseloads of practitioners, while the higher estimates drew on a more strategic perspective which took into account wider trends across the city.

Figure 1: Estimated numbers of families



[1] Defined in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 as not having adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it; or having adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but unable to meet other essential living needs.

Figure 2: Estimated numbers of children

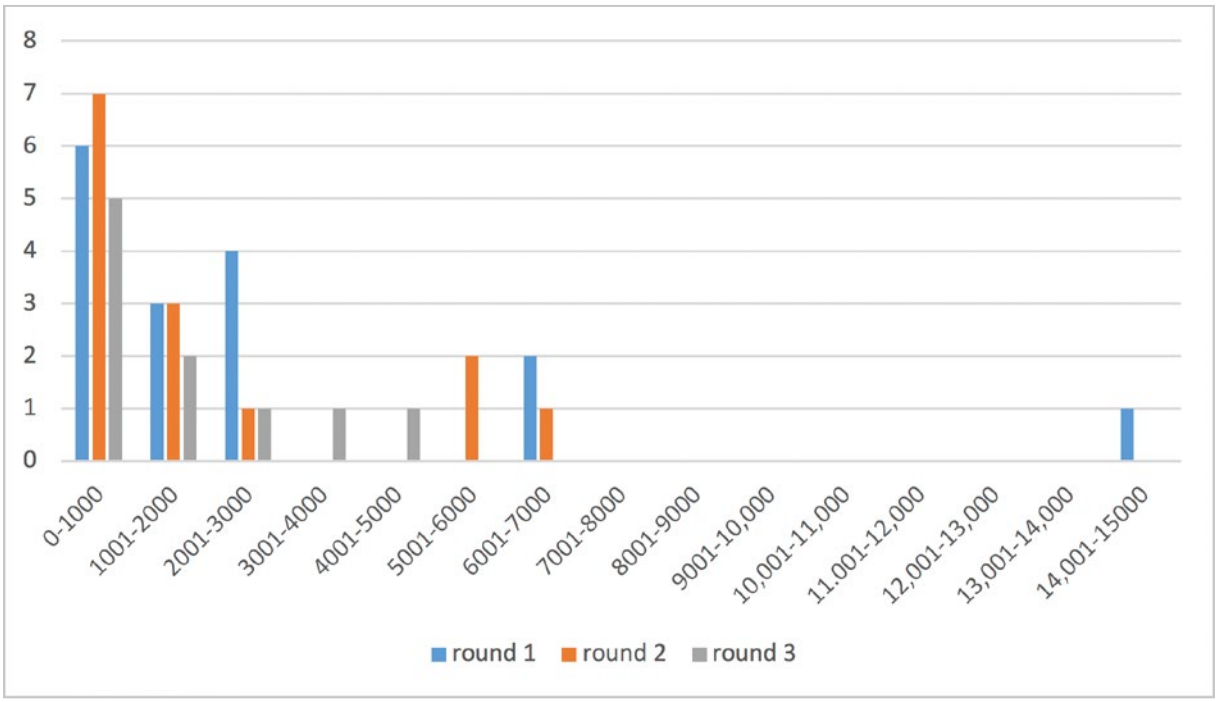


Table 4: Median estimates of children and families in each round

	Median children	Median families
Round 1	1,288	1,000
Round 2	1,350	1,000
Round 3	1,500	1,050

Nine out of the 14 participants in the second round changed their answer from round one, considerably narrowing the range. However, estimates still diverged strongly, ranging from between 300 and 5,001 for families. The median remained 1,000, although the mean had reduced to 1,872, and results still showed a positive skew (see Figure 2). Similarly, for children, the range had reduced and was now 400-7,000, and the median had increased to 1,350, but the mean had fallen to 2,232. Despite the reduction in the mean compared to round one, nine participants (81%) increased their estimate, with only two (18%) reducing their estimate. This anomaly is accounted for by the fact that so many answers were clustered in the 0-1,000 bracket and by the outlier of 15,000 in the first round.

In the final round, seven out of ten participants changed their answer from round two. Again, a majority chose to increase their answers, but by a smaller margin – six increased their estimate, and one decreased it. The estimates of family numbers had narrowed to between 400 and 3,000 with an increase in the median to 1,500 and a reduction in the mean to 1,460, as the higher outliers adjusted their assessments downwards. Similarly, estimates for children ranged from 600-5,000, and the median had increased to 1,500, while the mean had fallen to 1,890.

Linstone and Turoff (2002) maintain that three rounds are most commonly sufficient to attain stability in responses and avoid repetition for participants. Given this insight, and the fact that the mean and median answers had converged to within 390 for children and 40 for families, the process closed after the third round. The final estimates are given below in Table 5.

Table 5: Final estimates of numbers of children and families

Number of children	Number of families
Median 1,500	Median 1,000
Range 100 to 3,000	Range 500 to 2,500

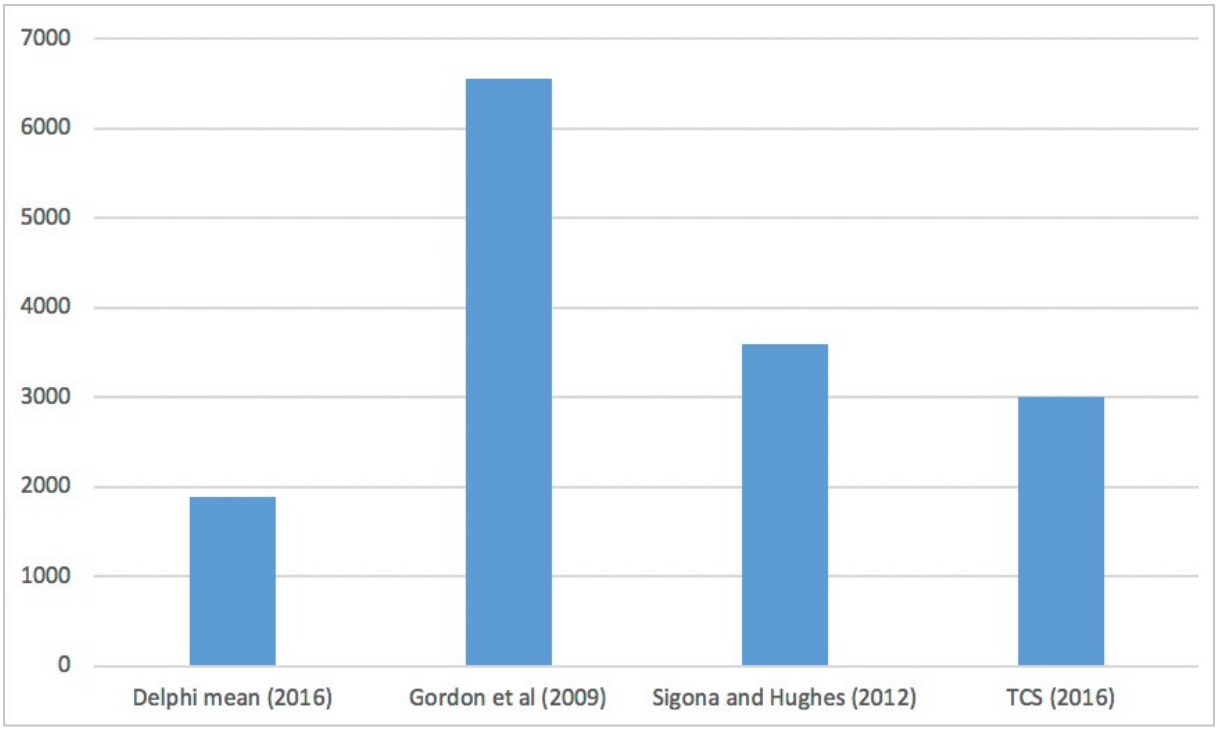
Analysis

Comparison with other sources

The research took place in Birmingham where, at the end of 2013, the city council was providing financial support to 163 undocumented migrant families to prevent destitution (Birmingham City Council, 2013, p.13). However, this number is likely to represent a small proportion of the total undocumented migrant families in the city because it does not include families who have never approached children's services, nor those who have approached the local authority for support, but were refused. Dexter et al (2016) use data from 35 local authorities to estimate that six out of ten undocumented migrant families approaching children's services are refused support, and one agency in Birmingham reported that only 8% of its referrals of undocumented migrant families to the city council received Section 17 support (Birmingham City Council, 2013, p.31). Therefore, the finding of the panel that only a minority of undocumented migrant families was supported by children's services appears to be substantiated by other sources.

According to census data, the foreign-born population in Birmingham in 2011 was 238,313 (Krausova and Vargas-Silva, 2013). If Birmingham had the same proportion of undocumented migrants as the UK in total, using Gordon et al's (2009) estimate, there would be 6,554 undocumented migrant children in Birmingham, a figure which is considerably higher than even the highest estimate in the final round of Delphi. Similarly, if the Sigona and Hughes (2012) estimate of 120,000 undocumented migrant children living in the UK at the end of March 2011 is used as a benchmark, there would be 3,590 undocumented migrant children in Birmingham. Finally, if Dexter et al's (2016) estimate of 12,000 undocumented migrant children in the West Midlands region in mid-2014 is disaggregated to city level, Birmingham would have 3,008 undocumented migrant children (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Comparison of estimates of undocumented children



Each of the other figures is within the range of all but round three of the Delphi panel, and all but the projection based on Gordon et al are in the range of all three rounds of Delphi. Nonetheless, out of all the projections, the Delphi panel gave by far the lowest estimate of numbers, which is perhaps surprising, given that experts who work with undocumented migrants might be expected to have an interest in emphasising the numbers of families. This can possibly be explained by the fact that panel members extrapolated their estimates from the numbers of families they met in their work or daily lives, and, therefore, under-represented those families not in contact with support services.

Attrition and engagement

The process of recruitment and of ensuring that the maximum number of participants took part in each round was time consuming, taking six months from the first recruitment meeting to the end of round three. Millar et al (2006) suggest that the process should take four months, including planning, but with only five days for each of the rounds. However, significant delays were experienced due to panel members not responding within this timeframe. The difficulty of sustaining engagement is most likely a reflection of how busy participants were in their jobs, as some participants acknowledged. Finding the time to complete a questionnaire took considerable thought and engagement (including reviewing case files and other internal data sources). Delays in responding were not necessarily an indication of a lack of interest in the subject, as 13 out of 18 participants asked to be kept informed of the research results and left email contact details to do so. In future Delphi panels more active ways of engaging with participants could be used, such as offering face-to-face interviews and telephone conversations rather than asking participants to click on a link in an email. Another factor which might improve retention is the use of incentives. In this research there was no financial reward for completion of each round, but a small cash incentive might be a way of acknowledging the time and effort of contributing to a Delphi panel, and of ensuring continued engagement.

Despite attempts to contact participants, there was attrition at each round. Of the 18 participants in round one, 14 participated in round two, and ten in round three. Half of the eight participants who dropped out between round one and round three described themselves as undertaking direct work with undocumented migrant families; three described their role as 'other'; and one didn't respond to the question. This meant that the final panel consensus had proportionally fewer people whose role was direct work with children and families, and those who remained had higher first-round estimates than those who left the panel. This is interesting, as it has already been identified that frontline practitioners tended to make lower estimates than other panellists. It is, therefore, surprising that the final consensus estimates were lower than projections using other methods.

Table 6: Comparison between estimates of panel remainers and panel leavers

	Mean families estimate (round 1)	Mean children estimate (round 1)
Panel leavers	1,092	1,054
Panel remainers	2,705	3,870

A compromise had to be reached between ensuring the maximum number of participants took part, and the need to keep the rounds close together to ensure that participants remembered their answers in each round. Rounds were kept open beyond the recommended time period in order to maximise participation. However, in rounds two and three, five respondents needed prompting to remember the answers they had given in previous rounds, which suggests that the gap was too long in this instance, and rounds should have been shorter.

Quality/validity of data

By its nature, the Delphi method can only offer a partial perspective, giving an overview of the opinion of experts in the field. Most participants gave estimates based on their own experience, using casefile data and information about the numbers of people accessing their own service. This was useful information which had not been previously shared outside their own organisations, and which, without the guarantee of anonymity that the Delphi process provided, they might have been reluctant to share publicly.

Nonetheless, despite the insider knowledge that panel members possessed, most expressed a lack of confidence in their answers. In the final round, a supplementary question was introduced to test participant confidence in their answer using a four-point Likert scale. The intention was to better evaluate the reliability of individual estimates in the event of a clear consensus failing to emerge (Millar et al, 2006, p.21). Participants were very uncertain of their responses, reflecting the difficulty of estimating a hidden population, even amongst those who were knowledgeable about the issue. None said they were very sure of their answer, and only two were slightly sure. In contrast, the majority were unsure, either slightly (three), or very (four). One participant explained:

> 'It's very difficult to know or even guess the answer to the question as my personal experience teaches me that a lot of people only seek help when they are not able to cope at all. I can't be at all sure.' **(undocumented migrant)**

Another commented:

> '[It is] very difficult to gauge the amount of undocumented families living in Birmingham, so most of it based on experience and guesswork.' **(charity employee)**

Despite their reticence about making an estimate, participants were well-informed about the issue, all had contact with undocumented migrant families either personally or through their organisation, and they drew on both their personal experience and the responses of others in making decisions:

> 'Having previously amended my estimate based on the figures provided after round one, I do not believe that my experience of working with destitute families with children and the estimates of others indicates that my estimate should be decreased, but I have no first-hand experience which indicates that it should be further increased.' **(frontline worker for national charity)**

Others drew on their knowledge of relevant research to triangulate with their own statistics, and the responses of others:

> 'I think the answers of the majority in the first round made me reconsider my initial figure and I lowered it. However, I have reviewed numbers of undocumented families accessing our service – which is only open to certain people – and extrapolated them while taking into account Nando Sigona's research conclusions (120,000 undocumented children in the UK). In light of this, I have decided to raise my estimate again.' **(frontline worker for local charity)**

Recommendations

Validity

One of the difficulties with the Delphi method is that it is not possible to externally verify the validity of the answers given. It was, therefore, important to build in checks and opportunities for reflection within the process. This was done through asking why people had given particular responses and how sure they were of each answer, and feeding these responses back in subsequent rounds in order to better inform panel members. It was also helpful to introduce outside information to panel members in order to compare their own estimates with external evidence. In this study, this was introduced in the final round, but it could also have usefully been introduced earlier on in the process, which may have helped to reassure participants about their answers.

Panel composition

To ensure a balanced panel, it was important to include 'experts by experience', practitioners and strategic workers, and the panel was effective at recruiting representatives of all these groups. However, as discussed above, there was difficulty in recruiting local authority representatives. Future Delphi panels should allow additional time to build relationships with local authority representatives before the start of the panel, using contacts at a strategic level and attending meetings and other events to encourage participation.

Timing

The process was time consuming and labour intensive, so enough time (up to six months in total from recruitment to completion of analysis) should be allocated for the process. Particular delays were experienced in recruiting people to the panel, and ensuring that panel members participated in each subsequent round. As a result, some panel members needed to be reminded of their initial responses. Researchers should make every effort to minimise the time between rounds, ideally less than two weeks, and should follow up with participants in a flexible way. The use of financial incentives should also be explored as a means to encourage participation. Where it is not possible to keep rounds to under two weeks, participants should be provided with individual summarised feedback on their earlier responses.

Conclusion

There is no explicit agreement in the Delphi literature about defining consensus, and this is open to interpretation by the researcher. As the information above shows, it is difficult to reach consensus on a contested and under-researched issue. However, while it is challenging to reach consensus, and a degree of divergence remains after three rounds, there does seem to be a tendency for estimates to converge around a figure of the low thousands for children in Birmingham who are undocumented. Furthermore, there was a stronger consensus amongst panel members that numbers of undocumented migrant children and families are increasing; that a minority of families are known to local authority children's services; and that a majority of these families are experiencing destitution. These findings are not a definitive estimate of the situation of undocumented migrant children and families in Birmingham, merely an indication of the collective knowledge of people who are familiar with this particular group of children and families. The result should, therefore, be treated with caution and not viewed in isolation from other information. But it does provide new knowledge of a previously unresearched issue.

Given these findings, and despite the limitations of the method, it can, therefore, be cautiously concluded that the Delphi method is a useful way of eliciting new information about a hidden issue (Millar et al, 2006, p.31). If used thoughtfully, it can be helpful in informing debate and supporting practice at a local level. If the learning points described in this pilot study are applied, the method could be productively used in other geographical areas to explore the same issue or, more broadly, any research issue that is hidden and where traditional data sources are not available.

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