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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Counting the People Who Move: Census 2027 and Migration

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11 July 2026 ·

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Counting the People Who Move: Census 2027 and Migration

 **Down to Earth**

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GS1
GS3

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THE LIFT LINE

A person who is counted where they sleep but not where they work becomes invisible to both places, and a nation that cannot see its migrants cannot plan for them.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

World Population Day is a fitting moment to ask what a census is for. **Census 2027** (<https://ujjayari.com/terms/census-2027/>), India's first digital census after a long delay, will shape welfare targeting, urban planning and political representation for a decade. Its most important reform may be the least discussed: how it counts internal migrants, especially the circular and seasonal workers who move for months at a time and whom the current method systematically undercounts. For **GS1** this concerns population and migration; for **GS3** it concerns urbanisation and the economy.

GS Paper 1: population and associated issues; migration, its causes and consequences; urbanisation and its problems.

GS Paper 3: the economy, planning and the mobilisation of resources; inclusive development and welfare delivery.

For **Prelims**, note that Census 2027 is being conducted as India's first digital census, that the Census of India classifies migration by place of birth and place of last residence, and that internal migration is captured imperfectly, particularly short-term and circular movement. For **Mains**, argue that better migration data is a **precondition** (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/precondition/>) for portable welfare and realistic urban planning, and keep this distinct from the separate question of caste enumeration.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Every ten years the census is meant to hold up a mirror to the nation, but the mirror has a blind spot. India's enumeration is built around usual place of residence and captures long-term, permanent migration reasonably well. It struggles with the far larger reality of circular and seasonal migration, the tens of millions who leave villages for construction sites, brick kilns, farms and city labour markets for part of the year and return home. Such a worker may be enumerated in the village they have temporarily left, missed in the city where they actually live and work, or double-counted, and in each case the data misrepresents where people really are.

This is not a technical footnote. Cities plan housing, water, sanitation and transport on the basis of counted populations, so undercounting migrants means under-building for them. Welfare entitlements are often tied to place, so a migrant counted at home but living elsewhere can fall through the gaps of both. As Census 2027 moves to a digital, self-enumeration-enabled platform, it has a rare chance to redesign how movement itself is recorded.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Why the current count misses migrants

The census framework was designed for a more settled population. Its categories of place of birth and place of last residence do not easily capture a worker who is in three places across a single year.

DATA GAP	CONSEQUENCE
Circular and seasonal movement uncounted	Migrant workers invisible where they actually live
Enumeration tied to usual residence	Undercount in destination cities
Short reference periods	Temporary migrants missed or double-counted
Weak links to welfare records	Entitlements fail to travel with the migrant

Data drives welfare and planning

Accurate migration data is the backbone of **portability** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/portability/>). Schemes such as One Nation One Ration Card exist precisely so that entitlements follow the person rather than the place, but portability works only when the state knows who is moving, from where and to where. Without it, both the origin state that loses labour and the destination city that gains it plan on false numbers.

A digital census as an opportunity

A digital census can, in principle, use richer questions, mobile enumeration and self-reporting to capture temporary and multiple residences, provided the questionnaire is designed to ask the right things. The technology is only as good as the concepts it is built to measure.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

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Read the census not as a headcount but as the state's map of where its people actually are. The transferable rule: welfare and infrastructure can only reach populations that the data can see, so improving how mobility is measured is itself a welfare intervention. The reform to demand is conceptual before it is technological, redefining what counts as residence so that the person who moves is no longer lost between two places.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Worker migrates seasonally village to city -> census counts usual residence only -> circular migrant undercounted or double-counted -> distorted population data -> cities under-plan housing and services, welfare fails to follow the person -> fix: redesigned migration questions in digital Census 2027 + welfare portability like One Nation One Ration Card -> migrants visible and served

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Redesign the migration questionnaire.** Add questions that capture short-term, seasonal and multiple residence so that circular migrants are recorded where they live and work, not only where they were born.
- ❷ **Link data to portable welfare.** Use the count to strengthen portability schemes so that ration, health and other entitlements travel with the worker across state lines.
- ❸ **Exploit the digital platform well.** Use mobile and self-enumeration to reach migrants at destinations, while safeguarding privacy and preventing exclusion of those without devices.
- ❹ **Plan cities on real numbers.** Feed improved migration data into urban housing, water, sanitation and transport planning so destination cities build for the population they actually host.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the causes and consequences of internal migration, the problems of urbanisation, and the role of data in governance. This editorial ties those to the design choices facing Census 2027.

Practice question: “The value of a census lies not in the total it reports but in whether it can see the people who move.” Discuss with reference to internal migration and the design of Census 2027. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: Down To Earth (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>), Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India (<https://censusindia.gov.in/>)

~~Source: Counting the People Who Move: Census 2027 and Migration~~ ~~Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS~~
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