



An Phríomh-Oifig Staidrimh Central Statistics Office

Preasráiteas Press Statement

Innovation Spotlight: Using mobile phone data for Tourism Statistics

CSO planning new analysis of Tourism Statistics which will:

- provide valuable new insights for decision makers
- guarantee individual privacy
- and provide value for money

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) is always exploring better ways to provide statistical insights on Irish society and the economy. The CSO is in the process of developing an innovative technical solution in which anonymised mobile phone location information can be used to address significant knowledge gaps in tourism data.

The aim of this work is to provide further breakdowns of the pattern of tourism visits to Ireland – for example, the regional breakdown of tourism, areas that visitors generally bypass, and the patterns by port of arrival (such as how many US-based tourists arrive via Dublin and visit other regions). These statistics are not available from the CSO's traditional paper based passenger surveys at ports and airports. The CSO hopes to address these gaps using the approximate location (such as the town) that a random sample of phone users access services from. Only this broad location and the country of origin of the phone would be collected and not any names, account details or any content such as calls, texts and internet usage.

The CSO has been working on this project since 2012. The Office is consulting closely with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC) and the mobile network operators to ensure that we identify and meet all requirements, especially those relating to privacy. The potential of new data sources to provide insight into emerging social and economic trends is immense – but they also present new challenges that are technical, legal and statistical. The CSO only allows data to be used to describe circumstances and trends at an aggregate level and never discloses any data that could subsequently be associated with any person or business – the same legal guarantee on census confidentiality applies to all data that the CSO holds. The CSO appreciates the constructive input and advice from ODPC and the mobile network operators.

Commenting on this innovative project, John Dunne, Senior Statistician CSO said:

“Currently, our tourism surveys at airports and seaports don't provide all the information that decision-makers need – for example, the patterns by region visited and by port of arrival. New data sources, such as mobile phone location information, can help to fill in the gaps.

We are committed in the CSO to protecting confidentiality and privacy at an individual level. Our sole aim is to publish the aggregate statistics that our society needs.

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We will compile these new statistics from a sample of anonymised records which do not identify any individual visitor to Ireland. We are currently consulting with the mobile network operators in relation to the technical details. The approach we are working on will set very high standards for data protection, statistical confidentiality and e-privacy.”

This CSO innovation is one of several initiatives across the European Statistical System (ESS) to use new data sources in the production of statistics that provide greater insight into social and economic trends. The ESS Big Data project is co-ordinated by Eurostat, the EU statistical office, and aims to integrate big data in the regular production of official statistics, through pilot projects exploring the potential of selected big data sources and building concrete applications.

Commenting on the CSO Tourism Statistics project, Emanuele Baldacci, Chief Information Officer of Eurostat, said:

“Big Data is an important part of Eurostat and the European Statistical System’s vision for the future. The use of Big Data offers many possibilities for official statistics including producing new statistics in areas that might otherwise be difficult to observe, more timely delivery of results and reducing the statistical burden on citizens and business by utilising sources of data that are already being collected. And of course confidentiality and respect for privacy is very important – statistical offices are very used to handling such data.”

Notes for Editors:

Feasibility study by Eurostat First project:

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/tourism/methodology/projects-and-studies>

ESS Big Data programme:

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/essnetbigdata/index.php/ESSnet_Big_Data#WP5_Mobile_phone_data

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