



BIG
ISSUES

MIGRATION

the movement of people from one place or country to another

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BIG ISSUES: MIGRATION

Migration in its simplest form refers to the process by which people move from one place or country to another. Migration is far from simple however. There are several different types of migrant for example, and new forms have emerged in recent years too. In addition, other terms such as ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’ and ‘internally displaced’ can sometimes be confused with the language of migration and migrants.

Human history is a story of people on the move. This movement might be out of choice to look for work, to study, or through marriage for example. In other cases people may move out of necessity to avoid conflict, persecution or a threat to their human-rights. Natural disasters and the effects of a changing climate are other reasons that might cause people to move.

Migration can be within a country or between different countries. People who move from one country to another are known as international migrants. In 2020 there were around 281 million international migrants in the world, making up around 3.6 per cent of the global population¹.

Migration as a controversial issue

Although people have always moved between countries, international migration has become a controversial and very political issue in parts of the world. In parts of Europe for example, some political parties have openly campaigned on promises to reduce the number of migrants entering the region or country. The reasons they give for this are that migrants will take jobs, houses, healthcare and school places from people who already live there. This can encourage a fear or even hatred against migrants.

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Placards support migrants at a march on Seattle, USA.

There are others who present a different view of migrants and welcome migration for the ways in which it contributes to the local economy. Migrants may bring new skills or help to fill job vacancies where there are shortages for example.

Strong opinions about migration mean it is important to understand more about the issue and the language that is used to discuss it. This language has become as controversial as the issue itself. The word ‘illegal’ is often used in conjunction with migrant for example. This can make migrants sound like criminals and in the USA the term ‘alien’ has been used. Other highly emotive words are also used in discussing migration such as ‘invasion’, ‘waves’, ‘flood’ or ‘tsunami’.



BIG ISSUES: MIGRATION

Migration terminology

Many different terms are associated with migration. These are some of the more common ones that you might come across in reports or the media about migration and migrants.

Migrant - Someone who moves from their place of birth, or the place where they usually live and who is not a citizen of the country they move to. The term excludes short-term movement for purposes such as recreation, business, medical treatment, or religious pilgrimage.

Refugee - Someone who is outside their own country but has been granted refugee status to stay in another country. Refugee status is normally granted to those who are unable to return, in fear of death, imprisonment or harassment because of their race, religion, nationality, social group or political opinions.

Asylum Seeker - Someone who has fled their own country and crossed an international border, asking another country to recognise them as a refugee and give them protection. Asylum seekers normally have to apply and wait to hear if they will be given 'Refugee Status'.

Internally displaced person - Someone who, like a refugee, has been forced to leave their home but has moved to another part of their own country.

Economic migrant - Someone who leaves their country to earn money or seek work in another country but still has the protection of their own country. This can describe someone who is working legally or someone who is working illegally.

Irregular migration - The movement of persons from country to country outside of existing laws, regulations or agreements governing movement between those countries.

Diaspora - Migrants, or descendants of migrants whose cultural heritage and connections to their homeland and each other is an important part of their identity and sense of belonging.

Emigrant - A person who leaves their home country to live in another country. This term is used from the perspective of the home country. E.g. She was an Indian emigrant who moved to the UK to study for a PhD.

Immigrant - A person who moves to a country to live. This term is used from the perspective of the person's destination country. E.g. They are an immigrant to Malaysia from Sri Lanka.

Naturalized citizen - A person who has migrated and obtained citizenship in their country of destination.

Non-national - A person who does not hold the citizenship of the country in which they live.

Regular migrant - A person who is legally authorized to enter or stay in a given country.

Stateless person - A person who is not a recognised as a citizen of any country.

For detail and more terms see the [Glossary on Migration](#) by the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM).

BIG ISSUES: MIGRATION

Migrants in numbers...²

All regions of the world have seen an increase in the number of international migrants between 2005 and 2020 (the year with the latest data). The regions with the most international migrants in 2020 are Europe (87 million) and Asia (86 million). Together they account for 61.4 % of international migrants.

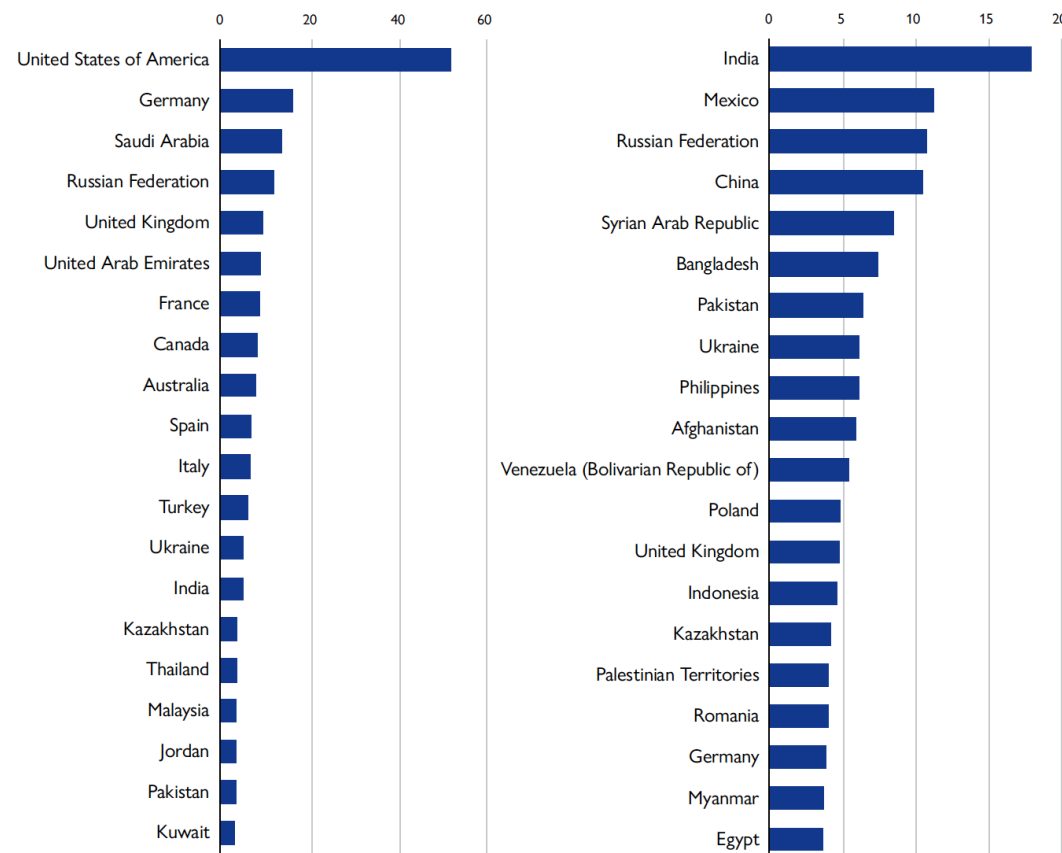
As a percentage of total population, Oceania is the region with the largest proportion of international migrants with 22 % of its population having been born overseas. North America and Europe follow this with 15.9 % and 11.6 %.

Males made up 52.1 % of international migrants in 2020 and the majority of international migrants (78 %) were of working age (aged between 15 and 64).

Although international migrants can be found in countries around the world, there are certain 'migration corridors' that make up a significant number of the world's international migrants. The migration corridor from Mexico to the USA for example included 11 million international migrants by 2020.

The USA tops the list of destination countries having the most international migrants in 2020 with 51 million, followed by Germany with 16 million and Saudi Arabia with 13 million. India is the largest country of origin in 2020 with 18 million of its people living abroad, followed by Mexico (11 million) and the Russian Federation (10.8 million). The chart on this page shows the full list of the top 20 destination and origin countries in 2020.

Top 20 destinations (left) and origins (right) of international migrants in 2020 (millions)



Source: UN DESA, 2021a.

The data and chart on this page are all reproduced from the World Migration Report 2022, by the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM).

BIG ISSUES: MIGRATION

The bigger picture...

Stories about international migrants in the media have been mainly negative in recent years, but these stories tend to hide the bigger picture.

Stories in some sections of the media present the idea of being 'overrun' by migrants and some politicians and governments talk about drastically reducing their numbers to protect the interests of their own citizens. In reality international migrants make up a relatively small proportion of the global population (less than 4 %). The majority of migration takes place within countries (e.g. from rural areas to urban areas, or from poorer to wealthier regions).

Migrants that do travel abroad often bring great benefits to the countries that they travel to. They may contribute to the economy for example or to the sociocultural life of the

Simple activities – such as shopping for groceries at our local market, eating out at a restaurant or ordering take-away food, visiting a place of worship, attending a musical performance or watching a sporting match – are likely to have been influenced or enriched (or, in some cases, made possible) by migrants who have brought with them customs and traditions.³

destination country. In the USA, since 1976, international migrants have been responsible for 30 % of innovation within the economy, despite making up just 13 % of the population³

In the UK, chicken tikka masala has become a 'national dish' following the influence of migrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh into the UK. The mini - an icon of British car design - was actually created by a British-Greek migrant, Alec Issigonis, who was born in Turkey.

In cities, migrants can make up a particularly significant proportion of the population and may take on jobs that nationals are less keen to do. These are sometimes called the 3D jobs - dirty, dangerous, demanding - in areas such as transport, construction, cleaning, and health and social care.

Dubai in the United Arab Emirates is dependant on international migrants who make up 83 % of the population.⁴



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BIG ISSUES: **MIGRATION**

Migration within countries

Most migration takes place within countries. One of the most common forms of migration worldwide is the movement of people from rural areas to urban areas. This process, known as urbanization, increased rapidly following the industrial revolution as the demand for workers in new factories drew people in from rural areas.

Urbanization continues today and by 2030 it is expected that 60 % of the global population will live in urban areas, compared to 30 % in 1950.⁵ The most urbanized parts of the world are North America where 82 % of people live in urban areas and Latin America and the Caribbean where it is 81 %. The fastest growing urban areas (where there is most migration at present) are in Africa and Asia.

Migration or mobility

Some specialists believe that talking about mobility is better than talking about migration. This is because there are so many forms of migration that it can become confusing. For example there is circular migration where people may move back and forth between regions or countries on a regular basis, perhaps following the availability of seasonal work for example. Temporary migration is similar but tends to be for a longer period of time and to not be repeated once the migrant returns to their place of origin.

Another reason that mobility is used by some instead of migration is because of the stigma and negative associations with 'migration' and 'migrants' in recent times.

New forms of migration

As our world changes so too do the ways in which we live and move to live. This has led to new forms of migration in recent decades. For example, migrating to study is now more common and is increasingly done at an international scale. In the UK for example, there were 600,000 international students in higher education institutes in 2020/21 making up 22 % of all students that year. This compares to less than 164,000 international students in 1994/5.⁶

Our changing climate has led to the terms 'climate migrant' and 'climate refugee' being used as people are forced to move due to the damaging effects of global climate change. Environmental disasters (floods, droughts) have always caused people to move, but this mobility is now more frequent and often more permanent due to our changing climate. Despite this growing pattern there is not yet a legal recognition of climate or environmental migration.⁷

Wildfires are just one effect of climate change that have led people to migrate, sometimes permanently as homes and livelihoods are destroyed.





BIG ISSUES: MIGRATION

Sources

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