Migration policies and impacts cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how race and ethnicity shape individual and community experiences at all stages of cross-border movements—in normative frameworks, as drivers of movement, in explicit and tacit criteria for entry, and in treatment at the destination. The factors driving discrimination include racism, xenophobia, ethnic animosities, and religious prejudice. Playing out in countries at all income levels, they aggravate human distress and result in inequitable opportunities and outcomes.

Normative frameworks and policies

Some migration policies have been designed with an explicit racialized intent, even though international human rights law precludes discrimination on the basis of race, nationality, or ethnic origin. For example, with passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Immigration Act, the United States aimed to restrict or ban immigrants of non-European descent. Likewise, the “White Australia” policy aimed to maintain racial homogeneity, and it was not revoked until 1973.

Some migration systems have been less explicit in their attempt to exclude people with certain racial backgrounds, typically non-White, but they have been similarly intentional. For example, in 1908 Canada enacted the “continuous journey regulation” in response to an influx of Asian laborers, mostly Japanese and Indian. The regulation required whoever immigrated to Canada to make a continuous journey from their country of citizenship, but there were no direct routes from Japan or India. The government could then restrict immigration from these countries without specifying exclusion on the basis of race, nationality, or ethnic origin.

Immigration measures that provide preferential visas based on descent may not be as intentional, but they have racialized impacts. For example, in the United Kingdom an Ancestry Visa is available to South Africans with a grandparent, and in some cases a great-grandparent, born in the United Kingdom, and it grants the bearer five years of work authorization with a pathway to citizenship. This visa has the effect of allowing access for predominantly White South Africans that their Black co-nationals do not enjoy.

The international refugee system has long been applied in a racialized manner as well. The 1951 Geneva Convention restricted the definition of refugees to persons fleeing events in Europe before 1951, leaving out the 14–18 million people who were displaced in the aftermath of the 1947 partition of British India and the 5 million people who fled from the Korean War in the early 1950s. The 1967 Protocol to the Convention lifted these restrictions and somewhat relaxed the “Eurocentric” definition of a refugee in international law. Still, the number of non-European people recognized as refugees remained very low throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, even though war was raging in Vietnam and tens of millions were displaced during the Bangladesh Liberation War. It is only from the mid-1970s on that the international system began to recognize large numbers of refugees outside of the European context.
The very definition of *migrant* in many countries has exclusionary undertones. Unlike this Report, many data sources on migration define a *migrant* as a foreign-born individual rather than a foreign national. This definition implies that integration or assimilation is not sufficient to be no longer considered an alien: migrant is a lifelong status. In countries where most migrants have a different racial or ethnic background from the majority population of the destination country, expressions such as “second-generation immigrants” can carry the distinction between citizens even further, and they can compound other forms of discrimination.

**Drivers of movement out of origin societies**

Racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination in the origin society determines in part who decides to migrate or to flee. It also underpins many situations of statelessness. Discrimination is severest when specific groups are targeted for violence or persecution because of their race, ethnicity, or religion. The experience of Jewish people forced to flee Nazi Germany and other occupied countries during World War II exemplifies such situations. Later, and under less extreme circumstances, Jewish minorities disproportionately fled the Soviet Union and other countries. In the early 1970s, people of South Asian descent were disenfranchised and persecuted in Uganda, which led to their massive exodus. More recently, the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar and the Shi’a Hazara in Afghanistan had to leave their respective countries because of targeted violence. Discrimination also may spur migration when specific groups are no longer able to access economic opportunities in their country of origin, such as those of South Asian descent in Fiji following a regime change in 1987. When members of these groups have the necessary resources, they often migrate to more open environments.

**Perceptions in destination societies**

Racism and other prejudices play a central role in the perceptions of migrants and refugees in destination societies, particularly when race is regarded as a key part of the destination country’s national identity. In North America and Europe, many citizens’ positions on immigration depend on the race or ethnicity of the migrants. For example, polls in both the United Kingdom and the United States reveal that their citizens were more welcoming to Ukrainians fleeing violence than to other populations such as Syrians or Afghans. In the Russian Federation, attitudes toward immigrants from the South Caucasus and Central Asia are more negative than attitudes toward immigrants from other regions of the former Soviet Union with a predominantly White population.

Political leaders may reflect or further fuel popular misgivings. In January 2018, US president Donald Trump asked why more people from “shithole countries” should be allowed into the United States, reportedly referring to African countries. He then suggested that, instead, the United States should allow more entrants from countries such as Norway. In July 2022, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán expressed concern about non-European migration: “This is why we have always fought: we are willing to mix with one another, but we do not want to become peoples of mixed-race.”

Ethnic differences can also negatively affect the perception of migrants and refugees in destination societies. In South Africa, for example, attitudinal surveys suggest a degree of xenophobia (figure S6.1). Somali and Zimbabwean migrants and refugees have been subject to violent xenophobic attacks. Such attacks against foreigners and their businesses have predominantly occurred in townships and informal settlements where marginalized South Africans feel they are competing with migrants for scarce employment opportunities and a better quality of life.
Differences in religious and cultural backgrounds are also often invoked to justify prejudice. Even in European countries where religious practice is low, citizens usually express a preference for migrants originating from traditionally Christian countries, and they are less welcoming to migrants with a Muslim background. In some Swiss municipalities where citizenship applications used to be decided by referendum, the country of origin was a critical determinant. Turkish applicants were found to receive a higher rate of “No” votes than applicants from Northern or Western Europe, even when other factors such as their language ability, age, education, and number of years since arrival were the same.

Effects on migration policies

Perceptions of and racial attitudes toward migrants affect the conditions under which they can enter a country. For example, in the United States undocumented immigrants, who are largely from Latin America, face harsher consequences than White Europeans faced in years past for the same offense—unauthorized entry. For refugees and asylum-seekers, racism and prejudice against certain ethnicities sometimes drive who is granted status, even though the asylum regime is explicitly intended to protect individuals who have faced persecution based on race and ethnicity. In 2022, for example, many African immigrants living in Ukraine experienced discrimination when trying to flee the war.

Perceptions and attitudes also affect how migrants and refugees are treated in the destination country. Darker skin color is associated with lower call-back rates for interviews in at least nine European and North American countries. Women with a Turkish name but with a résumé otherwise identical to those of women with a German name are less likely to be invited to a job interview in Germany, especially if they wear a headscarf. Employers in Uganda are also less likely to hire refugees than citizens, and the policy in Ethiopia that permitted refugees to leave camps was initially limited to Eritrean refugees. In some countries, migrants and refugees also face ethnic discrimination in the workplace and in

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**Figure S6.1** Attitudes toward migrants in South Africa are more negative than positive

Percentage of responses to 2019 survey question “Do you agree/disagree with the statements about cross-border migrants?”

Source: Adapted with permission from *Economist* 2022b.
the housing market, as well as in their access to social services. They are subject to harassment, and in some extreme cases to racially motivated hate crimes.

Racial and ethnic discrimination affect migrants’ economic outcomes and compromise the benefits that accrue to host societies. Darker skin color is associated with worse economic outcomes among immigrants in the United States. Besides making it more difficult to obtain a job, discrimination can lower the actual performance of migrant workers as well as their acquisition of human capital. Faced with discrimination in hiring, migrants search for jobs farther from where they live, and the higher transportation costs reduce their earnings, as experienced in South Africa.

Discrimination also affects migrants’ social integration and overall well-being. Anti-immigration attitudes and perceived discrimination are closely associated with worsened mental health for migrants. Social integration is hindered or facilitated by the perceptions and attitudes of the host community. In Germany, attitudes toward immigrants are as important as local unemployment rates in shaping refugees’ integration outcomes. Openness toward migrants affects their ability to build social networks with their hosts, which are important for integration.

* * *

Migrants have the right to fair and decent treatment regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, or cultural origin. This principle should be at the center of all policy making. It implies that countries need to adopt policies explicitly aimed at combating all racial and other forms of discrimination. Global normative frameworks can also help ensure that racism and other forms of discrimination do not negatively influence policy making.

Notes

1. For a discussion of discrimination against women and girls, as well as sexual and gender minorities, see spotlight 4.
7. See OHCHR (1951), Article 1, Paragraph B.(1).
11. Devos and Banaji (2005); Devos and Heng (2009).
22. OHCHR (2022).
23. Kamasaki (2021); Li (2019).
24. Quillian and Midtbeen (2021); Quillian et al. (2019).
27. Auspurg, Schneck, and Hinz (2019); Baldini and Federici (2011); Bosch, Carnero, and Farré (2010).
33. de Coulon, Radu, and Steinhardt (2016); Steinhardt (2018); Suleman, Garber, and Rutkow (2018); WHO (2022).
References


