2
The numbers

Understanding who moves, where to, and why

Key messages

• Migration is a mechanism used by people in responding to long-term global imbalances, such as differences in welfare, and in adapting to shocks, such as conflicts.

• Some 184 million people live outside of their country of nationality, about 20 percent of whom are refugees. Patterns of movement differ based on migrants’ motives (figure 2.1).

• Migrants and refugees live in countries in all income groups—43 percent in low- and middle-income countries; 40 percent in high-income member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); and 17 percent in member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

• There is no simple dichotomy between migrants’ countries of origin and countries of destination. Many countries at all levels of income are both, at the same time.

Figure 2.1 Patterns of movements reflect distinct matches and motives

Source: WDR 2023 team.

Note: Match refers to the degree to which a migrant’s skills and related attributes meet the demand in the destination country. Motive refers to the circumstances under which a person moves—whether in search of opportunity or because of a “well-founded fear” of persecution, armed conflict, or violence in their origin country.
Current trends

This Report focuses on people who live outside their country of nationality, whether they moved in search of better economic opportunities or were displaced by conflict or persecution. There are approximately 184 million such people worldwide, of whom 37 million are refugees, and they constitute about 2.3 percent of the global population. They live in countries in all income groups (figure 2.2):

- **Low- and middle-income countries.** Of the approximately 79 million migrants and refugees who live in these countries, some moved for job opportunities, family, or other reasons under a variety of statuses, including undocumented (detailed data are lacking, however, in most countries). They also include about 27 million refugees. Although migrants represent a relatively small proportion of the population in most low- and middle-income countries, there are exceptions such as Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, Jordan, and Lebanon. Some migrants eventually acquire citizenship in the country of destination.

- **High-income OECD countries.** The approximately 74 million migrants and refugees who live in these countries include both high- and low-skilled workers, migrants on student visas, as well as undocumented migrants. Family reunification with spouses, parents, or children accounts for a large share of regular migrants—about 35 percent in the European Union (EU). Among these migrants are people who have extensive residency rights, such as the 11 million EU nationals who live in another EU country and the 13.6 million green card holders in the United States. Also among them are about 10 million refugees, who are receiving international protection. Some migrants to the OECD high-income countries move temporarily, while others intend to settle there. Many are eventually naturalized—about 62 million naturalized citizens are spread across OECD high-income countries (and are not considered to be migrants in this Report).

- **GCC countries.** Of the roughly 31 million migrants living in GCC countries, nearly all have a temporary status, typically a multiyear work visa that can be renewed. They are both high- and low-skilled. Only high-skilled migrants can be accompanied by their families. GCC countries do not host large numbers of refugees. Overall, migrants constitute about half of the GCC population—about 79 percent if Saudi Arabia is excluded (box 2.1).
There is no sharp distinction between countries of origin and countries of destination for migrants. In fact, most countries are both—at the same time. For example, the United Kingdom is home to about 3.5 million immigrants, but it is also the origin of 4.7 million emigrants. At a lower level of income, Nigeria is home to almost 1.3 million immigrants and is the origin for 1.7 million emigrants. Türkiye has a large diaspora of economic migrants in Europe, but also hosts 3.5 million Syrian refugees and over 2 million other migrants. Each society needs a combination of policies to best address the situation of both the people who enter and those who leave.

Box 2.1 Migration data in this Report

Unless otherwise indicated, the data and figures in this Report are based on the WDR2023 Migration Database. The database is constructed from the bilateral immigration data produced by the censuses of individual destination countries. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, only a handful of high-income countries managed to conduct the decadal censuses or nationwide surveys in 2020. Data for member countries of the European Union, as well as for Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, are based on the European Union Labour Force Survey. Data for all other countries are from the International Migrant Stock estimates of the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). Most of these data are based on a definition of migrant as a person who lives in a country that is different from the country of birth. For the purposes of this Report, the data have been adjusted with citizenship data obtained from a variety of sources or estimations. Data on refugees are based on the Refugee Population Statistics Database of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and include refugees and asylum-seekers and other people in need of international protection as determined by UNHCR as of mid-year 2022.

Changes over time

Historical data on migration patterns are not available. What is known is that the share of foreign-born people (both migrants and naturalized citizens) has fluctuated between 2.7 percent and 3.5 percent of the world population since 1960. However, the apparent stability of this number is somewhat misleading because, worldwide, demographic growth has been very uneven since 1960. The world population increased by about 156 percent between 1960 and 2020, but high-income countries grew by only 58 percent, while middle-income countries grew by 177 percent and low-income countries by 383 percent. As a result, migration trends vary considerably across country income groups (figures 2.3 and 2.4).
As income levels and demographic trajectories change over time, the directions of migration flows change as well. Some countries or regions emerge as important origins or destinations, while others disappear. For example, the large movements from Europe to Latin America a century ago are no longer happening today. Migration to the GCC countries was almost nonexistent 60 years ago, and yet today these countries are the destination for some of the largest migration corridors. Meanwhile, Ireland and Italy, once countries of origin, have become countries of destination.

Cross-border movements are increasingly distributed across a substantial number of corridors. In 1970, just 150 corridors—out of more than 40,000 possible pairs of origin and destination countries—accounted for 65 percent of the world’s migration. By 2020, that share had declined to 50 percent. Today’s main corridors include Mexico to the United States; India to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia; India and China to the United States; Kazakhstan to the Russian Federation and the Russian Federation to Kazakhstan; Bangladesh to India; and the Philippines to the United States. Additional large corridors are associated with the main forced displacement situations, such as between the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye, República Bolivariana de Venezuela and Colombia, and Ukraine and Poland.

**Origin countries**

The largest share of emigrants are from middle-income countries. They are typically among neither the poorest nor the wealthiest in their country of origin; they can afford to move, and they have an incentive to do so. Even in situations of conflict and persecution, those who have more means tend to leave first, although there are exceptions, such as when an entire group is targeted for violence.
Emigrants constitute a significant share of the population of some origin countries. Many Small Island Developing States have emigration rates well above 25 percent of their population. A number of Central and Eastern European countries also have relatively large emigration rates, typically above 15 percent (their citizens have easier access to Western European countries). The share of refugees to the total population of origin countries is also high in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and República Bolivariana de Venezuela (map 2.1). Across all countries, the median emigration rate stands at 7 percent of the population.

Destination countries

Immigrants are spread across the world in countries at all levels of income. The main destination countries (in numbers of migrants) include the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, and France. Other countries, such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, have naturalized large numbers of migrants over time.

The share of immigrants in the population of destination countries varies (map 2.2). It is largest in the GCC countries—up to 88 percent in the United Arab Emirates. It is also significant in a number of high-income OECD countries, typically 5–15 percent. Part of migration is intraregional, directed to countries that are relatively better-off than their neighbors, such as Costa Rica, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, or Singapore. The share of immigrants is also large in some countries with a small population, such as Belize, Djibouti, and the Seychelles. Finally, although the share of refugees in the host population is typically small—below 1 percent—there are exceptions. For example, as of mid-2022, one person in six was a refugee in Lebanon; one in 16 in Jordan; and one in 21 in Colombia.
Regional perspectives

Patterns of movements vary widely across regions (figure 2.5):

- In the East Asia and Pacific region, immigration remains limited, except for high-income countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Emigration from the region is directed to a range of destinations, both within the region and outside, such as North America and the GCC countries.
- High-income European countries are home to about 43 million migrants, including 8 million refugees. They are predominantly from other European countries (56 percent) and to a lesser extent from other regions, mainly the Middle East and North Africa (13 percent), Latin America (9 percent), and Sub-Saharan Africa (8 percent). Emigration is mainly directed to other high-income European countries and North America.
- In other European countries and Central Asian countries, the movements mainly take place within the region, totaling about 14 million immigrants. These movements are centered on a few corridors, including between countries of the former Soviet Union. Some people from the region have also migrated to high-income European countries (about 11 million).
- In Latin America and the Caribbean, two main trends are evident. First, relatively large movements occur within the region (about 10.7 million people), including the 4.4 million people who left República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Second, a large number of people originating from the region have emigrated, mainly to North America (about 60 percent) and to a much lesser extent to the European Union (about 10 percent).
- In the Middle East and North Africa, there are three distinct patterns. First, GCC countries receive large numbers of immigrants, mainly but not only from South Asia (60 percent). Second, the rest of the region is the origin of relatively large emigration flows mainly toward high-income European countries (8 million) and to the GCC countries (6 million). And, third, the Syrian crisis and the ongoing insecurity in Iraq have also produced a large number of refugees who are hosted in the region (about 3.5 million).
• In North America, the number of immigrants is about 6 times larger than the number of emigrants. Many of those who come to the region are from Latin America and the Caribbean (about 43 percent). Other large regions of origin are East Asia and Pacific (21 percent), Europe and Central Asia (16 percent), and South Asia (9 percent), with relatively smaller numbers from the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the immigrants to the United States and Canada are eventually naturalized.

• In South Asia, migration is relatively limited considering the demographic size of the region. Three main trends are at play. First, about 19 million people have emigrated to GCC countries. Second, an additional 15 million have emigrated to other regions, mainly North America and high-income European countries. And, third, forced displacement—from Afghanistan to Pakistan and from Myanmar to Bangladesh—accounts for additional movements.

• In Sub-Saharan Africa, most movements take place within the region. Of the approximately 22 million people who live outside of their country, about 35 percent are refugees. These movements are particularly intense along some corridors such as from Burkina Faso to Côte d’Ivoire or to regional economic poles such as Nigeria or South Africa. There are also large refugee movements—for example, out of South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Somalia, and the Central African Republic. Emigration to other countries is mainly directed to EU countries, the United Kingdom, and the United States—about 10.3 million people.

Motives and patterns

People move for a variety of reasons. Their motives partly determine the socioeconomic outcomes of their migration and their need for international protection. Patterns of movements differ between those who seek economic opportunities in the destination countries and those who move because of a “well-founded fear” of persecution and conflict. In some situations, however, the line is blurred because some people are looking for both opportunities and safety.

The decision to migrate is a complex one, forcing people to weigh their options: staying, moving within their own country, or migrating to a foreign destination. Some migrants decide to move on their own, whereas others do so at the behest and with the support of an entire group—their family or their community. Many factors come into play in making such a decision, including both economic and personal considerations. Economic theory suggests that potential migrants compare their expected welfare in various situations and the corresponding costs of moving—financial and nonfinancial. They eventually settle for the option most likely to let them achieve their objectives in terms of economic prospects, social and psychological well-being, or safety.

Aspirations for a better life

The vast majority of migrants—over 80 percent—move in search of opportunities in the destination country. Their movements are often gradual, with predictable trends that reflect medium-term economic and demographic patterns. These migrants are mainly driven by the potential for higher wages and for access to better services (map 2.3). Although they are not refugees, some people also move to find improved personal safety, a stronger rule of law, and more personal freedoms.

In 2020, the vast majority—about 84 percent—of migrants (and naturalized citizens) lived in a country with an income higher than that of their country of origin. But migration levels are not the highest for corridors where welfare disparities are the largest. Where people are coming from largely determines where they are moving to. Movements are mainly determined by the demands for skills in the labor markets of destination countries, historical and geographic links, and the costs of migration. Most migrants from low-income countries migrate to other low-income countries or to middle-income countries, often because the cost of migration to higher-income destinations is prohibitive. Migrants
Figure 2.5 Cross-border movements vary greatly by region

(Figure continues next page)
Figure 2.5 Cross-border movements vary greatly by region (continued)

Note: Due to limitations on available data, immigration numbers for each region include all of foreign nationals; emigration numbers include foreign-born people (including naturalized). EAP = East Asia and Pacific; ECA = Europe and Central Asia (including Western Europe); GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council (countries); HICs = high-income countries; LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; NA = North America; SA = South Asia; SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa.
Some of the global imbalances that drive migration movements are reflected in the Human Development Index.


Note: According to UNDP, the Human Development Index is “a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living.” It ranges between 0 and 1. The categories in the map are defined as follows: low (below 0.55), medium (0.55–0.70), high (0.70–0.80), very high (0.80–0.90), and highest (above 0.90).

from middle-income countries often move to high-income countries. Likewise, many emigrants from high-income countries move to other high-income countries (figure 2.6).

Overall, migration is constrained by challenges and barriers that most migrants face:

- **Uncertainty.** Migration is inherently risky. It involves dealing with unexpected and uncertain outcomes, including the possibility of unemployment, social isolation, psychological stress, or even injuries and death while in transit. People who migrate in search of opportunities tend to be more willing to take risks than others in their communities of origin. They also tend to be more adaptable to new environments and situations, regardless of their skill level or socio-economic background.¹⁰

- **Unfamiliarity.** Moving to unfamiliar settings entails costs, both monetary and nonmonetary. To succeed, migrants must familiarize themselves with the language, social norms, and culture of their destination society.¹¹ This may be difficult, and it takes time, although for some people, the social and cultural differences between origin and destination societies are precisely what motivates their movement. Examples are some women and members of ethnic, sexual, and political minorities.¹² The internet and new technologies have enhanced access to information and created both new aspirations and a better awareness of the potential risks and benefits of migration.¹³

- **Job search.** Finding a job in a new country can be challenging. Skills, credentials, or diplomas acquired in one country may not transfer easily to another country. Many migrants end up “downgrading” to a lower-skill occupation, leading to “brain waste.”¹⁴ Some migrants rely on information passed through informal networks of friends and family to find decent work.
They tend to move to areas that are already home to other migrants of their nationality. Other migrants use formal intermediaries—typical for migrants moving from South Asia to the GCC countries—although such intermediation has a high cost.

- **Financing.** The upfront costs of migration can be substantial. They typically include travel and relocation, visas, and processing, as well as payments to intermediaries to find a job or arrange a move. The costs vary widely across corridors. For example, for low-skilled migrants the cost of moving from Central America to Mexico can be as low as US$100, whereas it can reach more than US$4,000 for a move from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. Irregular migration often requires paying high smugglers’ fees. For example, the cost of crossing the southern border of the United States irregularly has been estimated at US$2,000–$10,000, depending on the migrant’s point of origin.

These constraints apply differently, depending on skill levels, which largely explains why low- and high-skilled migrants aim for different destinations. A large share of low-skilled migrants move within their region: in 2020, about half of all low-skilled migrants were in a neighboring country. When they go farther, they tend to aim for more familiar places—that is, where they speak the dominant language or where they have access to social networks based on their ethnicity, community, or nationality. They therefore avoid the higher barriers in farther or less familiar destinations—such as higher financing constraints or greater difficulties in finding a job. By contrast, high-skilled individuals are more likely to migrate to high-income countries, and this trend has intensified over time. High-skilled individuals often benefit from a stronger demand for their skills and more-welcoming migration regulations. In some countries, they also have easier access to pathways to residency and citizenship.

Against this backdrop, migration can be both permanent or temporary. Some people, such as many high-skilled migrants in Australia, move with the intention of living permanently in the destination country. Some move with their families, whereas some plan to bring them later. But for others, migration is only temporary. They move for a fixed period of time, to study or to work, with the intention of returning home afterward. This strategy accounts for most movements to GCC countries, the Republic of Korea, and Malaysia. Yet the distinction between temporary and permanent migrants is blurred because many people who initially intended to move for only a few years extend their stay for decades,
and sometimes for a lifetime. The impacts of temporary and permanent migration—the benefits they yield, the challenges they pose, and the policy responses they require—are markedly distinct.

**Fear in the country of origin**

The patterns of forced displacement differ from those of economic migration in terms of the concentration of movements, the vulnerability of those who move, the destinations they choose, and the suddenness and rapid pace under which their movements occur.

Unlike economic migrants who move from a wide range of countries, most refugees come from a limited number of countries of origin—and increasingly so (figure 2.7). Although there are refugees from almost all countries in the world, crises in six countries account for 76 percent of all people in need of international protection: Ukraine (8 million as of February 2023), Syria (6.8 million), República Bolivariana de Venezuela (5.6 million), Afghanistan (2.8 million), South Sudan (2.4 million), and Myanmar (1.2 million Rohingya).  

Refugee flows include large numbers of vulnerable people—those a family or a community wants to see out of harm’s way—unlike economic migrants, who are primarily working-age adults. In fact, children account for 41 percent of refugees, and some are unaccompanied. For example, as of 2023 more than 70,000 unaccompanied or separated children were in Uganda. Regardless of their situation at origin, many refugees reach their destination in a state of destitution, having left behind their assets and arriving with little or no savings. Some have undergone traumatic ordeals that can make their economic and social inclusion challenging.  

Refugees and economic migrants choose their destinations differently. Economic migrants typically move to a place where they believe there is demand for their skills, regardless of the distance from their country of origin. By contrast, refugees prioritize safety and security over labor market considerations, and therefore they tend to move to a safe country that borders their country of origin.

Overall, more than half of all refugees are hosted in just 10 countries that typically border the origin countries (maps 2.4 and 2.5). As of mid-2022, 99 percent of refugees from South Sudan were hosted in neighboring countries, as were 86 percent of refugees from Myanmar; 78 percent of refugees from Syria; 75 percent of refugees from Afghanistan; 64 percent of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo; and 62 percent of refugees from Burundi.

**Figure 2.7** Most refugees come from a limited number of countries of origin—and increasingly so

![Graph showing the number of countries and share of refugees over time](source link)
Map 2.4  Most refugees flee to neighboring countries

Note: The bubbles indicating the number of refugees are placed at the center of each host country and not over the specific subregions in which refugees are hosted.

Map 2.5  Ten countries host more than half of all refugees

Note: The bubbles indicating the number of refugees are placed at the center of each host country and not over the specific subregions where refugees are hosted.
and 77 percent of refugees from Afghanistan. In some cases, refugees have moved to other countries within their region—such as those leaving Ukraine and República Bolivariana de Venezuela—but they remain very concentrated. In total, about 74 percent of refugees live in low- and middle-income countries, and 26 percent are in high-income countries, mainly in OECD high-income countries.28

Refugees who move beyond neighboring countries are increasingly traveling farther and to a larger number of destinations.29 They typically have better incomes, assets, education, skills, and access to migration networks than refugees who flee to neighboring countries.30 Their movements are often influenced by opportunities for better economic benefits, family ties, and political freedoms.31

Refugee movements are also often characterized by their suddenness and rapid pace. Some refugee crises build up gradually, giving destination countries and the international community some time to prepare. But many occur suddenly,32 adding to the challenges of providing adequate assistance to the forcibly displaced and their hosting communities. The number of refugees fleeing a particular conflict may fluctuate as the intensity and geographic spread of violence evolve, triggering successive waves of movements. On average, however, over 40 percent of refugees in a given situation flee in the first year after violence breaks out (figure 2.8).33 When the numbers are large, hosting countries undergo a significant shock. These spikes often dominate the policy debate and the news headlines because of their intensity and human toll, even though refugees represent a small share of all migrants.

Over the last decade, the nature of refugee movements has begun to change, although it is difficult to assess whether this is part of a longer-term trend. In particular, the countries of origin have changed. Although they were predominantly low-income and low-capacity countries until 2014, they are now increasingly middle-income countries (figure 2.9).
This shift is changing some key characteristics of refugee flows. Refugees originating from middle-income countries typically have higher levels of skills than those leaving low-income countries, and their skills and attributes can make for a stronger match with the needs of the destination countries.

**A continuum of protection needs**

Complex patterns of movements have emerged that blur the distinction between refugees and economic migrants. Some routes, especially to high-income countries, are used by both economic migrants and refugees. Although they travel alongside each other, they still have distinct motivations, prospects, and needs for protection. Yet for destination countries, such “mixed movements” pose particular challenges, requiring significant resources to determine who should be granted entry and under what status. Even on an individual level, movements may be determined by a combination of security threats and other considerations. Although not necessarily direct causes of refugee movements, climate change, environmental degradation, and natural disasters are increasingly interacting with the drivers of such movements.34

There is growing recognition that there is a continuum of international protection needs between those who move to seek opportunities and can enjoy the continued protection of their country of citizenship and those who are recognized as refugees under international law. Some people risk harm if they return to their country of origin, even if that risk does not meet the threshold necessary for being granted refugee status—for example, when their country is in deep political crisis or subject to widespread criminal violence. The challenge for both destination countries and the international community is to ensure that all those who need international protection can access it and that the international framework evolves in line with the emergence of new protection needs.

**Notes**

1. In this Report, unless otherwise stated, the term refugees refers to refugees and other people in need of international protection.
2. Data cover all valid permits. They represent all European Union countries for which data were available in 2021. See Eurostat (2022).
6. Emigrants are defined as people who have departed from their country of origin to become migrants.
7. Immigrants are defined as migrants who have arrived in a destination country.
8. These figures, based on UNHCR (2022b), do not include Palestinian refugees. The government estimate of the number of refugees in Lebanon is more than 1.5 million, including Palestinian refugees. The government estimate of the number of refugees in Jordan is more than 2 million, including Palestinian refugees.
11. For a recent review of migration barriers with particular emphasis on familiarity barriers, see McKenzie (2022).
12. For example, in destination countries higher female empowerment—as measured by the political empowerment subindex of The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (WEF 2019)—is associated with a higher share of females among migrants. Conversely, higher female empowerment in origin countries is associated with a lower share of females among migrants. The association is much stronger among migrants from low-income countries. In the United States, between 1.2 and 1.7 percent of applicants who applied for asylum because of fear of persecution mentioned gender identities in their asylum interviews (Shaw et al. 2021).
15. For the microdata sets, see KNOMAD and ILO (2021a, 2021b). For South Asian migrants to the GCC countries and Malaysia, migration costs ranged from US$600 to US$4,400, which amounted to 2–10 months of migrant earnings. A large share of the migration cost in this
corridor can be attributed to high intermediation fees (Bossavie 2023).
20. UNHCR (2022b).
26. Devictor, Do, and Levchenko (2021); UNHCR (2022b).
27. Devictor, Do, and Levchenko (2021); UNHCR (2022b).
28. The numbers on foreign citizens and foreign-born populations are based on 2020 data of WDR2023 Migration Database, World Bank, Washington, DC, https://www.worldbank.org/wdr2023/data. However, data on refugees are from 2022 and include the movement of refugees stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
32. UNHCR (2022a).
33. This result is consistent with the finding of Melander and Öberg (2006) that the rate of forced migration (including both refugees and internally displaced persons) abates rather than escalates over time.

References


