

Top Statistics on Global Migration and Migrants

July 21, 2022 FEATURE | By Jeanne Batalova

Among its many impacts on the world, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in major disruptions to human mobility, including a virtual halt to migration across international borders. The United Nations Population Division estimates that the population of international migrants dropped by approximately 2 million as of mid-2020, halting the significant growth witnessed over the past two decades. Cross-border movement reignited in 2021 and 2022, aided by the end of lockdowns, improved migration management at national and international levels, availability of vaccines, and the resumed motivation for people to move in search of work, education, family reunification, or humanitarian protection.

The chilling of global mobility, including longer-term temporary and permanent migration, in 2020 represents a small coda to a history of movement across international boundaries as old as the creation of borders. People have always moved in search of better livelihood opportunities for themselves, a safer and more prosperous life for their children, or protection from conflicts, persecution, or the effects of natural disasters.

Unlike the past, it is more common and within reach today to move for work or study, and because of technology it is much easier to maintain close connections with family and friends, send money back home, or engage in the political, economic, and cultural life of the country of origin. As the result, global migration has experienced strong growth over the past several decades.

Box 1. Definitions

An **international migrant** is defined as a person who moves away from their place of usual residence across an international border, temporarily or permanently. The term, which is not defined in international law, spans a range of categories, including migrant workers, international students, humanitarian migrants, and people who move abroad for lifestyle or family reunification reasons. This article uses international migrant, global migrant, and migrant interchangeably.

The **international migrant population** (more formally known as the international migrant stock) represents the total number of international migrants present in a given country at a particular point in time. Governments and international organizations typically collect migrant stock data, though in some cases also gather **migrant flow** data, describing the number of international migrants entering or leaving a country during a specified period. With flow data not available at a global level, this article uses stock data in referring to population size unless otherwise noted.

At the same time, people move across international borders not only in response to their personal aspirations. Events such as public-health crises, global or regional armed conflicts, and economic shocks play a big role in shaping how many people move and where they go. Consider the most recent

flows of migrants from Ukraine, Venezuela, and Syria who fled by the millions because of ongoing wars (Ukraine and Syria) and a major political, economic, and societal crisis (Venezuela). The 2008-09 global recession and the COVID-19 pandemic had the opposite effect, chilling many would-be international migrants from going to another country—at least for a time.

This article draws on the most current data sources to offer a useful resource with frequently sought statistics on international migration, highlighting types, the size of the migrant population and growth over time, and major sending and receiving countries and regions. In particular, this article uses data showcased in the [International Migration Statistics](#) section of the Migration Policy Institute's Migration Data Hub and a user-friendly compilation of more than 250 global and U.S. data sources called [Immigration: Data Matters](#).

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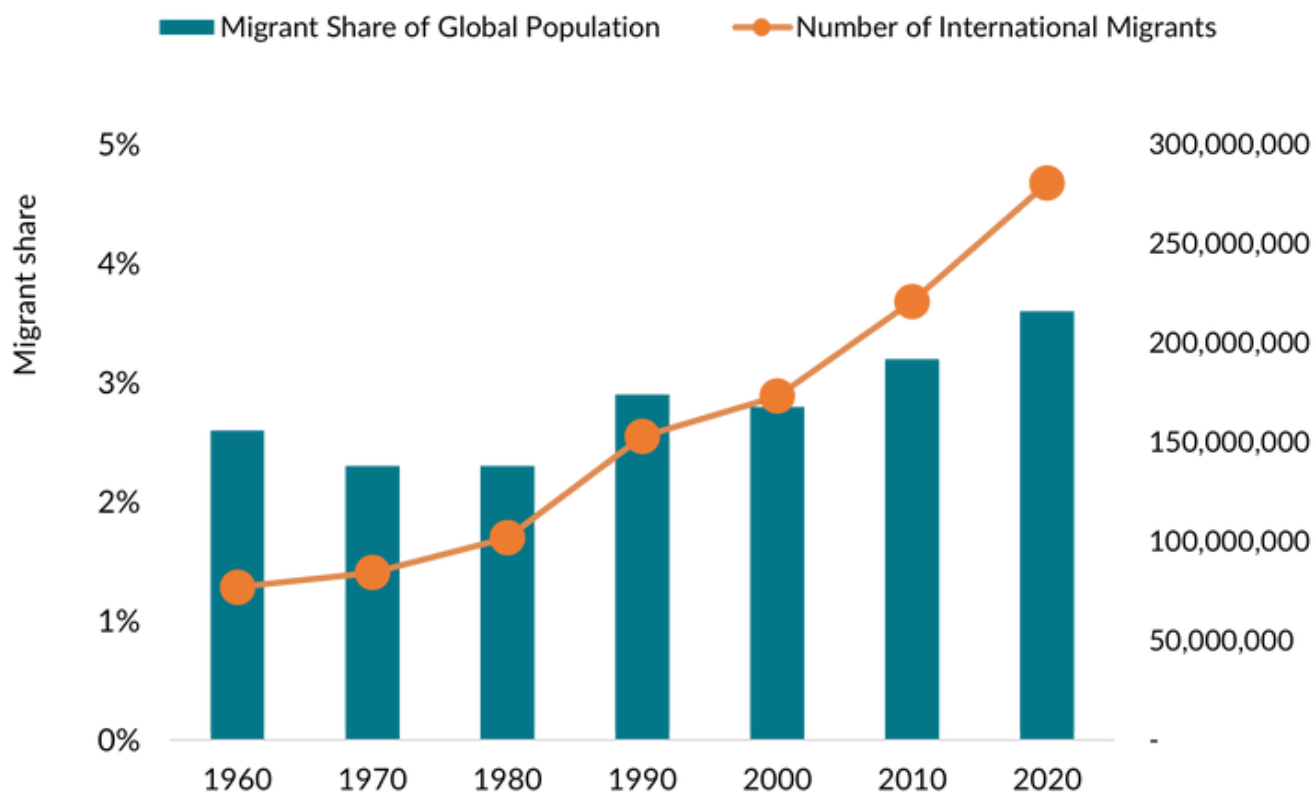
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How many international migrants are there? What is their share of the world's total population? And how have the size and share of this population changed over time?

According to the latest available estimates, there were 280.6 million global migrants in 2020—representing close to 4 percent of the world's 7.8 billion people. To put this in perspective, if migrants formed their own country, it would have been the fourth most populous country in the world in 2020 after China, India, and the United States (and just ahead of Indonesia).

The number of people worldwide living outside their origin countries as of 2020 was at its historical high—almost quadruple the level in 1960 when this population stood at 77.1 million. In the last decade alone, nearly 60 million more people became international migrants. Much of this increase has been driven by labor or family migration. The international migrant share of the world's population also is rising, standing at 3.6 percent in 2020, up from 3.2 percent a decade earlier, and 2.6 percent in 1960.

Figure 1. Number and Share of Global Migrants, 1960-2020



Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination*, Table 1: International Migrant Stock at Mid-Year by Sex and by Region, Country or Area of Destination, 1990-2020, [available online](#). Data prior to 1990 are no longer available online.

Which regions and countries receive the most global migrants?

Migrants do not move across the world uniformly. Most choose to go to high-income countries such as the United States or in Europe because of the greater economic and social stability they offer as well as oil-producing countries in the Gulf that attract Asian and other migrants who come largely through temporary worker programs. As Table 1 shows, more than 52 percent of international migrants resided in Northern America and Europe. The Northern Africa and Western Asia region followed, with 18 percent of the international migrant stock.

Table 1. Destinations for International Migrants by Region, 2020

	Destination	
	Number	Share of International Migrant Population (%)
Total International Migrant Population	280,598,105	100%
Europe and Northern America	145,414,863	52%
Northern Africa and Western Asia	49,767,746	18%
Sub-Saharan Africa	22,221,538	8%
Eastern and Southeastern Asia	19,591,106	7%
Central and Southern Asia	19,427,576	7%
Latin America and the Caribbean	14,794,623	5%
Australia and New Zealand	9,067,584	3%
Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand)	313,069	0%

Note: Per UN definition, Northern America includes Bermuda, Canada, Greenland, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and United States. To see which countries are part of each region listed in the above table, click [here](#).

Source: MPI tabulation of data from UN DESA Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination*, Table 1: International Migrant Stock at Mid-Year by Sex and by Region, Country or Area of Destination, 1990-2020.

The United States is the world's top migrant destination: The country accounts for 5 percent of the global population but has attracted 18 percent of all migrants. Put differently, the United States has more global migrants (more than 50.6 million as of 2020) than the next four receiving countries—Germany, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United Kingdom—combined (50.2 million). Australia, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom have joined the ranks of the top 10 destinations since 1990.

Note: In some cases, UN Population Division estimates of migrant stock do not match those provided by national statistical agencies. There could be several reasons for data differences, including periods referenced, definitions, and estimation methodologies. For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau's estimate of the foreign-born population as of 2019 is several million lower than the UN estimate because the Census Bureau considers persons born outside the United States and its dependent territories to a U.S.-citizen parent as "U.S. born," whereas the UN Population Division defines them as born abroad.

While the United States has the largest absolute number of migrants, it does not crack the top 25 countries in terms of the share of the overall population that global migrants represent. Here the Gulf nations, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, lead the way with 88 percent and 77 percent, respectively, of their overall populations comprised of migrants.

Click here to see the number and share of international migrants for the top 25 destination countries, from 1960 onward.

What countries are the sources for the largest numbers of migrants?

While it is well known that Europe and Northern America receive the largest share of migrants, it is perhaps less well understood that these countries also send the largest number of migrants abroad. Central and Southern Asia takes second place as the largest emigrant-origin region, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (see Table 2).

Table 2. Origins for International Migrants by Region, 2020

	Origin	
	Estimate	Share of International Migrant Population (%)
Total International Migrant Population	280,598,105	100%
Europe and Northern America	67,601,621	24%
Central and Southern Asia	51,229,549	18%
Latin America and the Caribbean	42,890,481	15%
Eastern and Southeastern Asia	38,400,740	14%
Northern Africa and Western Asia	37,563,820	13%
Sub-Saharan Africa	28,284,538	10%
Australia and New Zealand	1,404,924	1%
Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand)	565,281	0%

Source: MPI tabulation of data from UN DESA Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2020: Origin*, Table 1: International Migrant Stock at Mid-Year by Sex and by Region, Country or Area of Origin, 1990-2020.

Among sending countries, middle-income nations such as India, Mexico, Russia, China (mainland), and Syria send the most migrants in absolute numbers, including refugees in the case of Syria. While nearly all Mexican migrants (97 percent) reside in the United States, international migrants from India are more scattered across the world, including in the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Oman.

[Click here](#) to view an interactive map showing immigrant and emigrant populations by country of origin and destination.

How many migrant workers are there worldwide?

The number of international migrant workers stood at 169 million in 2019, or nearly 5 percent of the global workforce, according to [International Labor Organization estimates](#). Migrant workers can be found across all skill levels and sectors, but are often concentrated in lower-skilled industries such as agriculture, construction, and tourism.

Close to 70 percent of all migrants of working age (15 and older) are workers. Women represented 70 million (almost 42 percent) of all international migrant workers.

What level of financial remittances do migrants and their relatives send? What are the largest remittance-receiving countries?

Money sent by migrant households to family and friends in the origin country, referred to as remittances, helps to keep loved ones out of poverty, weather a temporary economic or health crisis, or support the education of migrants' children. In some cases, remittances are an important source of investment in national education, health, and infrastructure projects. Collectively, remittances are larger than the foreign direct investment and official development assistance received by low- and middle-income countries.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, officially recorded remittances hit a record-high US \$719 billion in 2019, including \$548 billion to low- and middle-income countries, the World Bank estimates. The numbers dropped in 2020 because of pandemic-related disruptions, though not as sharply as initially prognosticated. For 2020, \$702 billion was recorded in remittances through formal channels, with \$539 billion going to low- and middle-income countries.

The top five remittance-receiving countries in 2020 were India, China, Mexico, the Philippines, and Egypt. Combined these five countries received more than \$250 billion (36 percent) of all officially recorded remittances. While the absolute total of remittances is important, it may be a small source of income for some countries. For instance, remittances represent just 3 percent of India's gross domestic product (GDP). When remittances are measured as a proportion of GDP, the top receiving countries are very different. In 2020, Tonga (38 percent of GDP), Somalia (35 percent), Lebanon (33 percent), and South Sudan and Kyrgyz Republic (29 percent apiece) relied on the remittances the most.

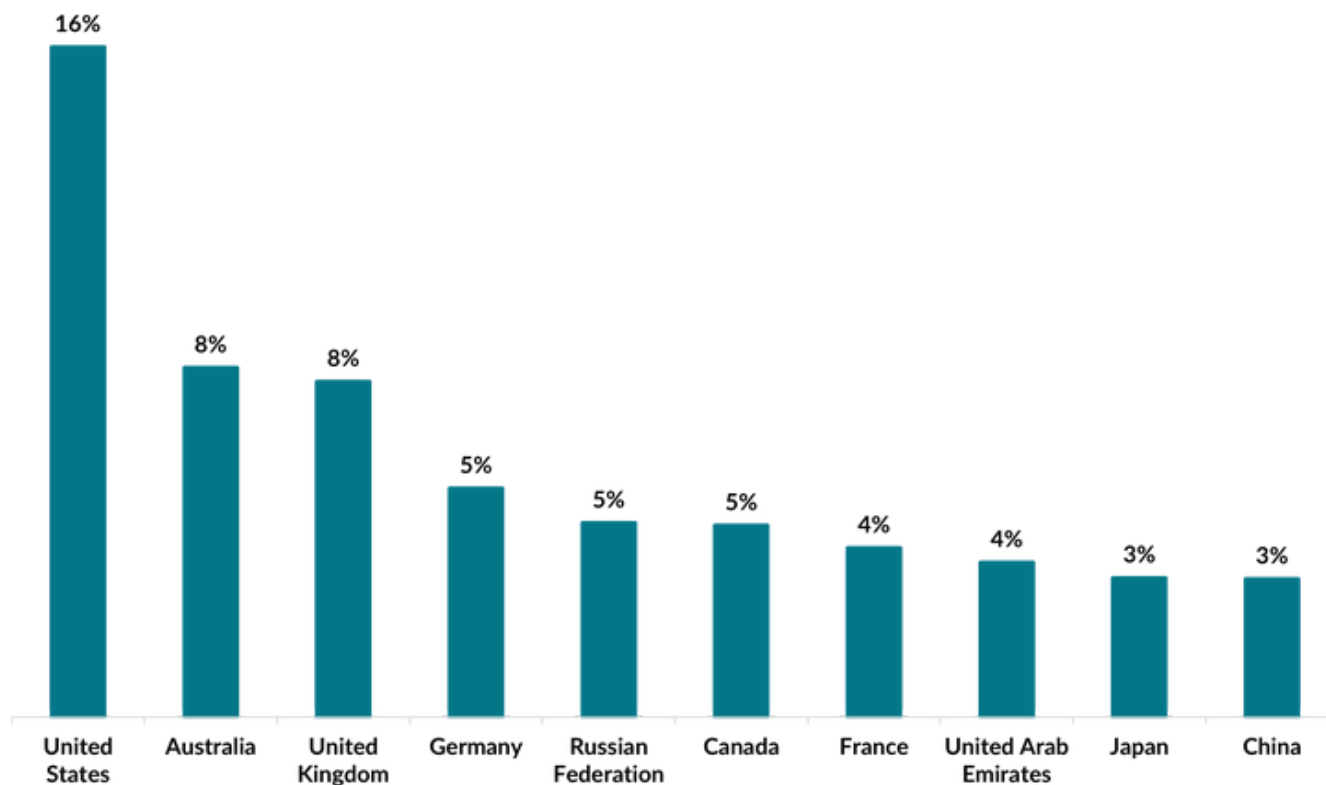
[Click here](#) to view total remittance inflows and outflows by country since 1980.

Note: The World Bank data only capture remittances sent through formal channels such as banks and money transfer operators. Currently, no uniform and authoritative historical data on informal flows exist. Given the widespread use of informal channels, the data should be regarded as underestimates of total flows.

How many international students are there worldwide?

Close to 6.1 million students were studying outside of their country of origin in 2019, up from 4.8 million in 2015 and 2 million in 2000, according to UNESCO data. The top five destinations for international students were the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Russian Federation. Combined, they hosted 43 percent of global students. The top five sending countries of international students in 2019 were China, India, Vietnam, Germany, and France.

Figure 2. Top 10 Host Countries of International Students, 2019



Source: UNESCO, “Total Inbound Internationally Mobile Students, Both Sexes (Number)” (2019), accessed July 18, 2022, [available online](#).

How many humanitarian migrants are there globally?

The number of persons forcibly displaced worldwide (including refugees, people in refugee-like situations, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons [IDPs], Venezuelans displaced abroad; and returned refugees and IDPs) exceeded 100 million, according to early 2022 estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These estimates included 26.6 million refugees, 4.4 million asylum seekers, and 50.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Representing 1 percent of the global population, the forcibly displaced figure is equivalent to the 14th most populous country in the world.

Over the last two decades, the forcibly displaced population quintupled from its 20.7 million level in 2000, driven by large flows from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Neighboring countries often become the hosts: 72 percent of refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad lived in neighboring countries.

There is no doubt that 2022 will set another unenviable record, as the already record-high population of the forcibly displaced swelled with millions of new entrants fleeing conflict and violence. UNHCR announced on May 23 that in the first few months of 2022, an additional 11.8 million people were forced to flee their homes. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has displaced millions beyond the Ukrainian borders, and millions more inside the country. As of mid-July 2022, close to 6 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe, one of the biggest mass displacements since World War II and comprised overwhelmingly of women and children. The situation in Myanmar with the Rohingya and in Burkina Faso, both of which already have large numbers of IDPs, continues to get worse.

How many women and girls are global migrants?

In 2020, 48 percent (134.9 million) of all international migrants worldwide were women or girls, according to [mid-2020 UN estimates](#). The number of female migrants grew by 26 percent over the past decade, up from 107 million in 2010. The number of male migrants grew slightly faster, by 28 percent during the same period.

Most migrant women move for work, family, or education. Some leave their countries due to man-made or natural disasters. Women and girls made up approximately half of the refugees and other vulnerable humanitarian migrants.

How many international migrants are children?

Of the 280.6 million international migrants in 2020, [35.5 million of them were children](#) under the age of 18, according to the mid-2020 UN estimates. This is the highest level ever recorded, according to the [International Data Alliance for Children on the Move](#).

How many humanitarian migrants are children?

According to [2021 UNHCR estimates](#), 36.5 million children under age 18 were forcibly displaced. Overall, 1.5 million children were born into refugee life, with 350,000 to 400,000 joining child refugee rolls every year on average between 2018 and 2021.

For more stats on various aspects of international migration, check out [Immigration Data Matters](#), our useful online guide that takes users directly to more than 250 authoritative governmental and nongovernmental data sources by topic or region of interest. And as always:

Your One-Stop Shop for U.S. and International Migration Data

- Profiles of the immigrant population at U.S. & state levels
- Immigrants around the world by country of origin & destination
- Unauthorized immigrant profiles at U.S., state & top county levels
- Remittance flows by sending & receiving country
- Current & historical immigration trends



www.migrationpolicy.org/datahub

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