

Asylum Migration to the Developed World: Persecution, Incentives, and Policy

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Who is a refugee? The most widely used definition is given by Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention: a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...” This definition has been widened in certain treaties—including the 1969 Convention of the Organization of African Unity, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration (in Latin America), and the European Union’s 2004 and 2011 Qualification Directives—to include those suffering from persecution on other grounds and those fleeing generalized violence such as war or armed insurrection.

Refugee policy differs from regular immigration policy in two respects. First, in high-income countries, the immigration stream focuses on two groups: individuals with family ties to the receiving country (as is common in Italy, Spain, Japan, Israel, and the United States), or individuals deemed to meet specific labor market criteria (for example, the point systems used in Canada and Australia, or the US H-1B visa system). Immigration policies can be interpreted as serving the interests of the host-country population, either specific individuals such as the sponsors of those coming through family reunification, or the wider economy as in the case of skill-selective labor migration. By contrast, refugees are admitted on the grounds of the benefit to *them* of escaping persecution rather than for any direct benefit to the host society or certain members of it. Indeed, the sole criterion of having a “well-founded fear

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of persecution” is specific to the individual refugee and does not depend on the “value” of that person to the host country. Rather, the rationale for the host society of providing a safe haven for refugees is much more indirect: to meet basic humanitarian concerns.

Second, while immigration policy involves characteristics that are relatively straightforward to verify, the definition of a refugee is much more subjective. Assessing the authenticity of applications for asylum requires destination countries to make an individual assessment, often based on inadequate or incomplete evidence (for example, is a particular migrant truly under threat for political or religious beliefs in that person’s home country?). Also, it usually involves an evaluation of the situation in origin countries (for example, what is the extent of human rights abuse?). It can be difficult to separate refugees as defined in international agreements from those who wish to migrate for economic reasons. This is because most of the hundreds of thousands who apply for political asylum each year come from countries that are both strife-prone *and* poor, places where suffering genuine fear of persecution is a distinct possibility, and also where the economic gains to emigration would be large.

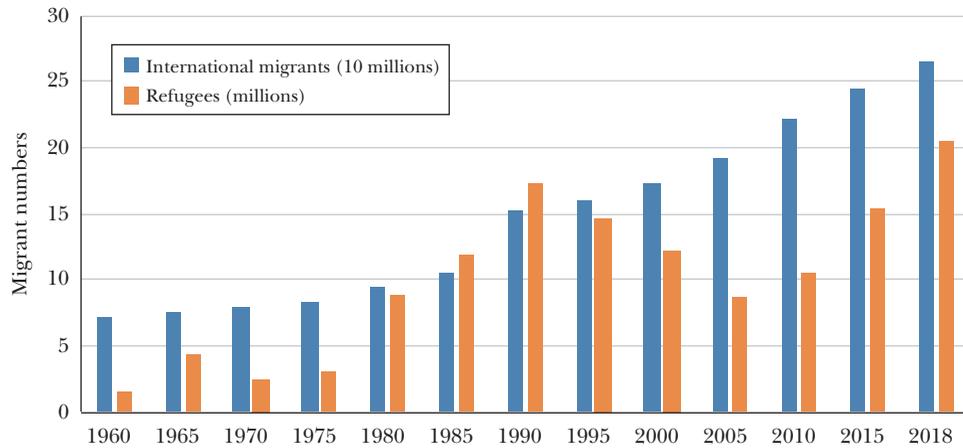
Most of those fleeing civil wars and human rights abuses are forcibly displaced within their own country or seek refuge in a country nearby. But the focus here is on asylum seekers who have grabbed the headlines and created public debate by migrating to the stable, safe, and secure countries of the West. Asylum migration has a long history, but the number arriving at the doors of the rich world has been on the increase. In 2015–2016, more than a million migrants from Syria and other Middle Eastern and Asian countries sought entry to the European Union and, from 2018, migrant caravans traveling from Central American countries converged on the US border with Mexico. So what explains asylum migration, and how does it differ from other migrations? And how have policies towards refugees and asylum seekers evolved in response to changing social and political pressures?

In this paper, I begin by presenting long-term trends on the number and composition of refugees and asylum seekers. The following section examines the political and institutional history that has drawn an increasingly sharp distinction between refugees and other types of migrants. Recent analysis has explored the determinants of asylum migration and has attempted to evaluate the effects of policies such as tighter border controls and more restrictive evaluation of asylum applications. Against this background, I examine how changes in public opinion and politics are shaping asylum policies in the aftermath of recent surges in asylum applications.

How Many Refugees?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates the total number of refugees worldwide at the end of 2018 at 20.1 million. This is less than one-third of the total of 70.8 million “forcibly displaced persons,” which also includes those displaced within their home country (41.3 million) and Palestinians

Figure 1
Worldwide Migrants and Refugees since 1960



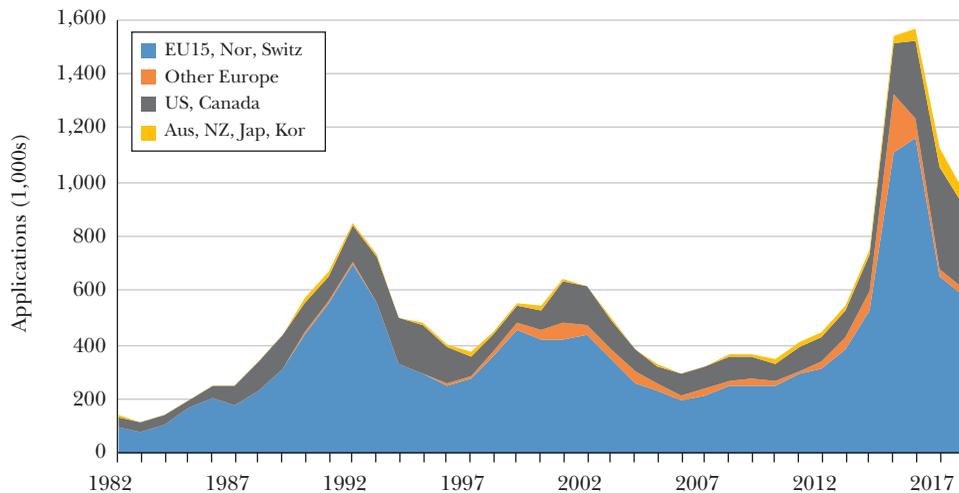
Source: Migrants: World Bank, International Migrant Stock. Refugees: 1960 to 1995 from UNHCR, State of the World's Refugees (2000) Annex 3; 2000 to 2010 from UNHCR Statistical Yearbook for 2007, Annex Table 20, and 2014, Annex Table 25; 2015 and 2018 from UNHCR Global Trends for 2015 and 2018, Annex Table 1.

Note: End year totals of international migrants (in 10 millions) and refugees (in millions).

(5.5 million) who come under a separate mandate (UNHCR 2019, 2). In 2018, refugees were 7.6 percent of the stock of all international migrants (defined as those living outside their country of birth). As Figure 1 shows, the number of refugees grew faster than total migrants from 1960 to 1990. After declining to the mid-2000s, the total number of refugees has risen steeply, largely as a result of conflicts in Syria, South Sudan, and Myanmar. As of 2018, two-thirds of refugees are from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia. Of the total, 85 percent of refugees are located in developing countries, often just across the border from the origin country, and about 30 percent of these languish in organized refugee camps.

Each year, a small proportion of those recently displaced arrive as asylum seekers at the door of high-income Western countries in the hope of gaining recognition as refugees. In 2018, they were just 7 percent of those newly displaced (most of whom were internally displaced). The vast majority of asylum applicants in the developed world arrived as “spontaneous asylum seekers,” having migrated from the origin country on their own initiative and not as part of an organized program. In contrast, the number of refugees who were transferred directly from refugee camps through resettlement programs averaged less than 100,000 until recently, but increased to a temporary peak of 189,000 in 2016. In 2016, 51 percent of resettled refugees went to the United States and another 39 percent went to Australia and Canada, while Europe took less than 10 percent. Since the late 1980s, the overwhelming majority of spontaneous asylum seekers have arrived in Europe. A large proportion gained

Figure 2

Asylum Applications to Western Countries, 1982–2018

Source: 1982 to 2000 from UNHCR, *Statistical Yearbook for 2001*, tables C1 and C2; 2001 to 2013 from UNHCR, *Asylum Levels and Trends, 2005, 2009, and 2013*, table 1; 2014 to 2018 from OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2019*, table A3.

Note: Annual number of persons applying for asylum, excluding repeat applications and appeals.

unauthorized entry, often traversing continents and traveling by hazardous land and sea routes. Frontex, the European Union's combined border force, estimated that unauthorized border crossings into the European Union increased from 105,000 in 2009 to a peak of 1.82 million in 2015.

Figure 2 shows the annual number of new asylum claims lodged in Europe, North America, Australasia, and Japan/Korea over the last 37 years. Most of the long-run increase is accounted for by asylum applications to Europe, which received 76 percent of total applications over the 37-year period, and especially Western Europe (71 percent). The total numbered less than 200,000 until the mid-1980s then rose steeply to a peak in 1992. This was the result of a surge of applications from Asia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, followed by an even larger increase in applications, mainly from and through Eastern Europe, that attended the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was followed a decade later by a wave of applicants fleeing the Kosovo conflict. But what stands out above all is the steep increase during the Syrian crisis to one and a half million applications per annum in 2015–2016.

Most asylum applicants come from low-income countries embroiled in civil wars, internecine strife, and human rights abuses. Table 1 shows the top 30 origin countries by total applications over the decade 2009–2018. The Middle East, Africa, and Asia are the most prominent source regions, but there are also important origin countries in Europe (Serbia, Russia, and Albania) and in Latin America (El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, and Venezuela). China and India appear on the list, even

Table 1

Asylum Applicants to Western Countries by Origin: Total, 2009–2018

<i>Origin country</i>	<i>Total (000s)</i>	<i>Origin country</i>	<i>Total (000s)</i>	<i>Origin country</i>	<i>Total (000s)</i>
Syria	1,098.9	Albania	183.7	Georgia	97.4
Afghanistan	629.7	El Salvador	180.7	Guinea	87.3
Iraq	429.0	Somalia	176.1	Sri Lanka	84.0
Serbia	295.4	Mexico	160.4	Ukraine	79.3
Pakistan	275.2	Guatemala	138.3	Dem. Rep. Congo	71.0
Nigeria	252.8	Venezuela	133.9	Gambia	71.0
Eritrea	244.9	Bangladesh	123.8	Algeria	70.4
China	244.4	Honduras	109.9	Haiti	70.2
Russia	212.2	Turkey	106.9	Sudan	65.2
Iran	201.1	India	99.9	Mali	64.2

Source: Calculated from OECD, International Migration Database.

Note: Asylum applications from the top 30 origin countries to the EU28 plus Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and the United States over the decade 2009 to 2018.

Table 2

Asylum Applicants to Western Countries by Destination: Total, 2009–2018

<i>Destination country</i>	<i>Total (000s)</i>	<i>Per 1,000 population</i>	<i>Destination country</i>	<i>Total (000s)</i>	<i>Per 1,000 population</i>
Germany	1,986.4	24.4	Switzerland	210.7	25.9
United States	1,462.1	4.6	Belgium	195.4	17.6
France	665.1	10.1	Netherlands	185.8	11.0
Italy	553.9	9.2	Australia	167.5	7.2
Sweden	478.1	49.3	Spain	135.0	2.9
United Kingdom	318.0	4.9	Norway	109.9	21.6
Hungary	276.6	28.0	Poland	77.4	2.0
Canada	270.5	7.7	Denmark	75.2	13.3
Austria	263.9	30.8	Finland	67.4	12.4
Greece	245.9	22.5	Japan	63.5	0.5

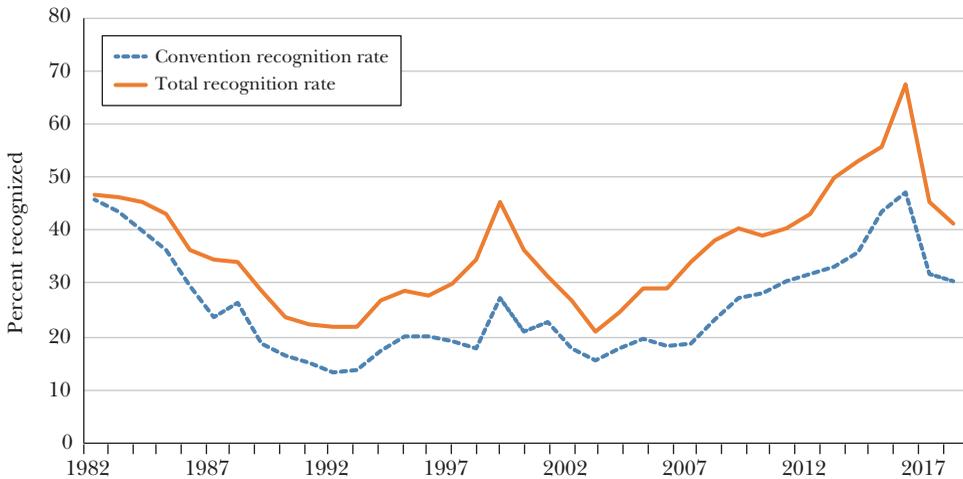
Source: Calculated from OECD, International Migration Database.

Note: Asylum applications over the decade 2009–2018 from all origin countries. The numbers in this table include applicants who were stateless or of unknown nationality. The figure for the United States includes both affirmative and defensive applications and has been adjusted by the OECD to reflect the number of individuals.

though the number of applications is small relative to their populations. Table 2 reports applications for the top 20 destination countries. Germany and the United States received the largest number of applications over the decade, but relative to population, the leading country is Sweden with 49 applicants per 1,000 population, followed at some distance by Austria, Hungary, and Switzerland.

Asylum applicants enter into a process to determine whether they qualify as refugees under the definition in the 1951 Refugee Convention or are eligible for admission on other humanitarian grounds. The total recognition rates (Convention

Figure 3
The Refugee Recognition Rate for 24 Countries, 1982–2018



Source: 1982 to 2005 from UNHCR, *Statistical Yearbook for 2001* tables C26 and C29, and 2005 tables C27 and C30; 2006 to 2018 from UNHCR, *Global Trends for 2006 to 2018*, table 10.

Note: The countries included in the weighted recognition rates are: the EU-15 (excluding Luxembourg), the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada, and the United States.

plus humanitarian) for 24 countries since 1982 are plotted in Figure 3. These recognition rates were close together in the early 1980s, but a gap emerges as weaker forms of recognition were adopted in the face of the rising number of applications. The average total recognition rate over the most recent 37 years is just 36 percent (26 percent for Convention recognition). Even if successful appeals were taken into account, the share of those applying for asylum who receive some form of recognition would not exceed half. Unsuccessful applicants are legally required to leave the country either voluntarily or by deportation, although a significant proportion disappear into the informal economy and remain as undocumented immigrants.

The total recognition rate peaked in 1999 and again in 2016. This pattern reflects both variations in the gravity of asylum claims and changing policy towards them. In Europe, the shift towards tougher policy in the early 2000s was arrested in the following years as the EU's Common European Asylum System came into effect. Against this background, the rising number of asylum claims recognized as valid increased, fueled by the so-called "Arab Spring," to reach a crescendo in the Syrian migration crisis of 2015–2016, when the existing policies were temporarily suspended. The sharp fall in asylum applications after 2016 largely reflects the agreement between the European Union and the main transit country, Turkey, which stemmed the flow across the Aegean Sea. The decline in recognition rates represents a return to preexisting policies. But both the volume of applications and the average recognition rate remain high by historical standards as the underlying

pressures persist. It remains to be seen whether this really is a “paradigm shift,” as sometimes suggested (UNHCR Global Trends 2015, 3).

Evolution of the International Refugee System

For centuries, those facing oppression and persecution—often on religious grounds—have sought sanctuary in other countries. From the Huguenots in the seventeenth century to the Russian Jews in the late nineteenth century, these groups moved in modest numbers and generally with little hindrance (Marrus 1985, chap. 1). Within Europe and the New World, border controls were minimal and the authorities made no formal distinction between those fleeing persecution and other migrants. However, there were tight restrictions on migration from Asia and from colonial dependencies. After World War I, more restrictive and selective immigration policies were accompanied by the widespread introduction of passports as proof of identity. From that time, refugees emerged as a category distinct from other migrants. In the United States, immigration quotas by country of origin, introduced in 1921 and tightened in 1924, drastically restricted immigration from countries, some of which became sources of refugees. From then until 1952, refugees were neither formally included in immigration policy nor recognized separately.

From 1920 to 1950, the international refugee regime evolved through several stages (Hathaway 1984). Refugees were initially considered to be those who had been displaced by war and only later as those facing individual persecution. The initial focus was on providing legal status for stateless Europeans in response to mass displacements across shifting borders in the aftermath of World War I. These included two million Poles and a million Germans as well as many thousands of Magyars, Greeks, and Armenians. In 1921, the newly established League of Nations created a High Commissioner for Refugees with a mandate to assist, firstly, displaced Russians and then other nationalities by negotiating the exchange, repatriation, and resettlement of refugees, one key element of which was the issue of internationally recognized travel documents.¹ With the rise of Fascism, the focus shifted in the 1930s from the effects of displacement to the causes of persecution as group-specific mandates were issued, one of which applied to Jews fleeing Austria and Germany. The United States eased its eligibility criteria to admit a few thousand (but still did not fill its German quota until 1939), while more found sanctuary in France. But international diplomacy aiming to resettle larger numbers failed, and increasingly restrictive immigration policies around the world meant that there were few other havens for refugees (Loescher 2001, 31; Marrus 1985, chap. 3).

World War II created even greater displacement. By 1945 there were over 30 million displaced persons in Europe, not counting the 13 million ethnic Germans expelled mainly from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union. At the end of the war, voluntary and official agencies assisted eight million European refugees, but a million more remained displaced. The initial focus on exiles from Fascism

¹The first High Commissioner of Refugees, polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, instigated the issuing of identity certificates, which became known as Nansen passports.

and Nazism then transformed into concern with those fleeing communism. The International Refugee Organization, created in 1946, was an initiative of the United States against Soviet opposition, and it specifically sought to distinguish between those fleeing persecution and those migrating for other reasons. It set out a definition of a refugee, which focused on the individual rather than the group and on the expectation of future persecution rather than on the circumstances of past displacement. It also reflected a shift from viewing repatriation as the principal solution to refugee problems to establishing a role for permanent resettlement elsewhere. The successor organization to the International Refugee Organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) created in 1949, was followed in 1951 by the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention built upon the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included in Article 14 the right to seek asylum from persecution (Goodwin-Gill 2008), and following the precedent of the International Refugee Organization, it enshrined individual fear of persecution as the criterion.

The Refugee Convention (UNHCR 1951) includes three interlocking elements, which have shaped refugee policy up to the present. First, a signatory state must offer a procedure to assess whether or not each individual lodging a claim qualifies as a refugee under the Convention's definition of being outside that person's origin country and having a "well-founded fear of persecution" (Article 1). Second, while being on a country's territory (or at the border) does not, of itself, guarantee access to the process, the so-called *non-refoulement* clause (Article 33(1)) forbids returning a person to a place where that person's life or freedom would be threatened. Third, illegal entry or presence in the country does not prejudice admission to the procedure for determining refugee status or the outcome of that process (Article 31). In addition, while the Convention does not provide the right to permanent residence, it does encourage host countries to "facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees" (Article 34). The Convention originally applied only to those displaced in Europe before 1951, but its scope was radically widened by the 1967 New York Protocol, which removed geographic and time limitations. It was gradually adopted worldwide and the number of signatory states increased from 60 in 1970 to 145 in 2015. It is noteworthy that, in principle, there is no limit to the number of asylum applications a state is obliged to process and accept.

The United States did not sign the 1951 Convention, and its policies diverged from those of Europe. Instead, it developed a series of initiatives, such as the 1952 Escapee Program, which focused on refugees from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. During the early years of the Cold War, refugees moving to the West were welcomed as a powerful symbol of Western superiority over communism, especially in the United States. Reflecting Cold War strategy, the bulk of refugees admitted to the United States during this period were from communist countries and were admitted for resettlement through executive orders outside of the immigration quota (Zucker and Zucker 1996, chap. 2). In the 1970s, the human rights agenda gained increasing popular support as, in the wake of the Vietnam War, the media fed public awareness of oppression and international conflicts in Latin America, Asia,

and Africa. This was reflected in growing support for humanitarian agencies such as Amnesty International, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, and Human Rights Watch, which was launched in the United States in 1978 (Neier 2012). It was also reflected in public policy: the Jackson-Vanik Amendment in 1974 (trade sanctions against nonmarket countries that denied the right to emigrate) and the creation of an Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in 1977. Finally, the US Refugee Act of 1980 established an annual refugee quota of 50,000, and in principle shifted the emphasis from country of origin to the plight of the individual, aligning more closely with the Refugee Convention.

The Refugee Act widened the scope of US refugee policy, and it provided a procedure for refugee status determination, which was foreshadowed by Canada in 1976 and Australia in 1978. In these countries, while the main mechanism was resettlement direct from countries of first asylum, the door was also opened to spontaneous asylum seekers. The United States nevertheless continued with ad hoc measures and a focus on exiles from communism; for example, Cubans were favored over Haitians and Nicaraguans over Salvadorans and Guatemalans (UNHCR 2000, 174–77). But of the two million that the United States resettled from 1975 to 1999, two-thirds were from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The Vietnamese boat people symbolized what was to follow, as the relatively liberal refugee regime of the 1980s faced severe challenges with growing numbers of spontaneous asylum seekers, often arriving illegally and from ever-more remote parts of the world. The end of the Cold War, heralded by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, generated a surge in the numbers seeking asylum, just as the strategic value of refugees receded (Zucker and Zucker 1996, 37–38). In Europe, the steep increase up to 1992 (shown in Figure 2) led to tougher policies that included visa restrictions and tougher status determination policies (shown in Figure 3). Most notable was the 1992 amendment to Germany's Basic Law providing that asylum claims by applicants who originated from safe countries of origin or who traveled through safe third countries were deemed to be manifestly unfounded (Hailbronner 1994). Across the Atlantic, the US Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 restricted access to asylum procedures for those arriving without documents.

The further round of policy tightening that took place from the early 2000s in the face of rising applications was precipitated by the attacks of September 11, 2001. This intensified concerns that asylum seekers from conflict-ridden countries presented not only an economic burden and social problem but also a security risk. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 increased border security and identity checks, and sweeping reforms were also introduced in Australia (2001) and Canada (2002). In Europe, stricter border controls and visa policies were aimed at denying access while tougher processing policies and less generous welfare provisions were used to deter prospective applicants. But the first round of directives in the EU's Common European Asylum System in the mid-2000s sought to prevent a race to the bottom in asylum policies by harmonizing policies and striking a balance between excluding economic migrants while protecting the rights of genuine refugees. Even though asylum policies have become more restrictive

since the 1980s, there has been no mass defection from the Refugee Convention, a treaty that was conceived in conditions very different from today. Thus, the key elements of the liberal post-World War II regime—the right to claim asylum and the *non-refoulement* provision—remain in place without regard to the numbers that this may imply. The European migration crisis of 2015–2016 and the migrants gathering on the US southern border since 2017 have put these principles under severe pressure and have opened once again the question of whether existing asylum policies are still fit for current purposes.

What Drives Asylum Applications?

Existing studies have identified key factors that influence the number of refugees. Davenport, Moore, and Poe (2003) found that the stock of refugees around the world could be explained mainly by genocide, civil war, dissident conflicts, and political regime transitions. Consistent with this, worldwide refugee numbers run parallel with indicators of conflict, which ascend steeply to a peak in 1992 and then decline before reversing from 2011 (Center for Systemic Peace 2018). Recent examples include the war in Syria and persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, but while the first produced large outflow to the West, the latter did not. In a study of bilateral refugee movements, Moore and Shellman (2007) found that, while most migrants moved to contiguous countries, movements beyond countries of first asylum were positively related to the locations of previous migrants, but were constrained by the costs of migration. Annual asylum applications to the developed world have increased on trend relative to the worldwide refugee stock as more migrants have moved beyond countries of first asylum. Taking the ratio of asylum applicants to the developed world (shown in Figure 2) to the world refugee stock (shown in Figure 1) as 100 in 1985, this index increased to 345 in 1995, 272 in 2005, and 674 in 2015.

Several studies have assessed the push and pull forces behind asylum applications to industrialized countries by analyzing panel data on the number of applicants by origin, by destination, and over time. The most important origin-country variables are political terror and lack of civil liberties; civil war matters less, perhaps because war *per se* does not necessarily confer refugee status (Hatton 2009, 2017a). There is weaker evidence that declines in origin-country income per capita leads to more asylum applications, which offers modest support to the view that economic migration is part of the story. Proximity and access are important in determining the volume of asylum applications. Countries that are small but nearby can generate large flows—as with a quarter of a million Cubans moving to the United States in the 1970s and 400,000 Serbians and Montenegrins moving to the European Union in 1995–2004—provided that the door is left ajar. But the growth of transit routes and migrant networks have fueled the upward trend of applications from more distant origins. For example, travel in caravans through Mexico combined with violence and drought at home, a growing diaspora, and mixed messages about future US policy all combined to boost migration from Central America (Capps et al. 2019).

How does asylum migration differ from migration through other channels? Studies of total migration flows—including both asylum and non-asylum migration—that share the same panel data structure produce similar but not identical findings. The most obvious difference is the much greater influence on asylum migration of terror and human rights abuse in origin countries. Another difference is that economic “pull factors” in destination countries are stronger and “push factors” from origin countries are weaker for non-asylum migration. For example, Mayda (2010) and Ortega and Peri (2013) report large and significantly positive effects of destination-country income per capita on migration, but smaller and sometimes insignificant negative effects of origin-country income.² As in many migration models, the most powerful single variable influencing asylum-seeker flows to a country is the stock of previous migrants from the same origin. Underlying these network effects are historic factors shaping migration such as colonial ties, common language, and shared culture, as well as geographic proximity. The negative effect of distance is especially important for asylum applications, and it matters even in the presence of the migrant stock, something that probably reflects the greater costs and hazards of what, for many, is risky clandestine migration.

A particularly important issue is whether, and to what extent, restrictive asylum policies reduce asylum applications, especially as these are often purposely designed for deterrence. Policies that may influence the volume of asylum applications can be divided into three types. First, policies such as border surveillance, visa policies, and carrier sanctions seek to deny admission to asylum procedures by restricting access to the border. In the European migration crisis of 2015–2016, countries in the EU’s eastern border adopted strict controls on border crossing and admission to asylum procedures. Second, rules that are applied in processing asylum claims can influence the likelihood that an applicant gains recognition. For example, when in 2013 Sweden granted all Syrian asylum seekers permanent instead of temporary residence, the number of applications more than doubled (Andersson and Jutvik 2019). Third, restrictions on movement that apply during processing and cuts in welfare benefits, such as the 47 percent benefit cut introduced by Denmark in 2015, might also deter asylum applications.

These policies are hard to quantify, but they can be crudely represented by an index comprising dummy variables for changes in each subcomponent of policy. When these variables are included in a model of asylum applications, border controls and processing policies have significant deterrent effects while welfare policies do not (Hatton 2004, 2009, 2017a). One interpretation is that what matters most to asylum seekers is the prospect of gaining permanent settlement, whatever the short-term hardships. The wave of tougher border controls and processing

²A related issue is that most migrants are young, which is predicted by economic theory because the net present value of investing in migration is greater the longer the duration of expected future returns. Consistent with this insight, studies of migration find that emigration is greater the larger are the young cohorts (aged 15–29) in the origin country (Mayda 2010; Hatton and Williamson 2011; Hanson and McIntosh 2016). That may also be true of asylum seekers, most of whom are young, but this effect has not been thoroughly investigated.

policies that took place between 1997 and 2005 reduced applications to 19 major destination countries by nearly 30 percent. From 2005 to 2014, countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom continued to tighten their policies while others, including France, Italy, and especially Sweden, eased theirs, so that the overall effect was a modest increase in applications (Hatton 2017a, 464). In this light, it is not surprising that subsequent dramatic policy shifts in Europe had sizable effects on the volume of applications. The diverse incentives and deterrents can influence the characteristics of asylum applicants as well as the overall number. A study of migrants crossing the central and eastern Mediterranean routes in 2015 and 2016 found that those who claimed to be fleeing persecution were more positively selected on education than economic migrants (Aksoy and Poutvaara 2019). Those with low education were more often heading for countries with easier access to employment and more generous welfare states, but such intentions were also influenced by rising border restrictions on different routes.

It is sometimes suggested that more restrictive policy adopted by one country simply deflects asylum applicants to others. For regular migration, there is some support for this view (Ortega and Peri 2013), and this might be particularly important in the European Union, where nearby countries could be close substitutes. A careful test supports the deflection effect on asylum applications to third countries but finds it to be small (Barthel and Neumayer 2015). A possible reason is that the EU's so-called Dublin Regulation (which was suspended in 2015–2016) requires that an applicant can lodge an asylum claim in only one country, normally the country of first arrival, which restricts potential access to asylum procedures at alternative destinations. It has also been suggested that more restrictive policies on other types of immigration could *increase* asylum flows to a country, as potential immigrants seek an alternative immigration channel. Here, too, the evidence supports a substitution effect. However, employment-based immigration policies became *less* restrictive on average in 19 major destinations from 1997 to 2014, and this reduced asylum applications on average by 9 percent (Hatton 2017a, 463).

The effects of border controls are likely to be heterogeneous. Much of the evidence comes from the experience on the US-Mexico border. In the 1980s and 1990s, undocumented migration across this border increased in tandem with manpower and expenditure on border control, suggesting that policy had little effect. Increasing apprehension rates at the main crossing points diverted migrants to other sectors where access is more difficult, which raised the cost of employing smugglers (“coyotes”) but had only modest effects on the total number of attempted crossings (Gathmann 2008; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016; Lessem 2018). Indeed, the majority of those apprehended were granted voluntary return to Mexico, only to repeat the attempt until successful, while those who crossed successfully were less likely to return. But barriers were strengthened and surveillance intensified further, and from 2005 on, tougher sanctions were imposed that included criminal proceedings. Analysis of individual-level data on apprehensions for 2008–2012 indicates that this reduced the probability of re-apprehension within a year by nearly one-quarter (Bazzi et al. 2018). With the subsequent transition from single Mexicans looking

for work to Central American families seeking asylum, the United States faces new challenges at the border.

Unauthorized crossings to Europe have long been made with the intention of applying for asylum and gaining permanent residence. Most of these migrants are from countries that do not share a land border, so that unauthorized travel often involves the costs and risks of long and difficult migration routes through other countries and/or across the Mediterranean. The changing importance of different migration routes to the European Union during the last decade is largely a result of the vagaries of enforcement policies at different crossing points, rather than of substitution between routes by migrants (Hatton 2017a, 475–79). A good example is when the “friendship agreement” of 2008 between Italy and Libya collapsed with the demise of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. This increased unauthorized migration through the central Mediterranean route between 2010 and 2012 by a factor of three. Friebel et al. (2018) show that the increase in actual and intended migration came from countries relatively near Libya. There was almost no increase in migration, actual or intended, from more distant countries such as those in the Middle East and no reduction in travel through other routes.

Perhaps the most dramatic recent example of enforcement effects is how the massive surge of migrants through the western Balkans and eastern Mediterranean, as a result of the war in Syria, was brought to an abrupt halt after the 2016 agreement between the European Union and Turkey. The number of unauthorized crossings through the western Balkans and eastern Mediterranean fell from 1.65 million in 2015 to 54,500 in 2017, with only modest effects on the numbers traveling through other routes. Although the number crossing from Libya to Lampedusa (Italy) and Malta remained high, most of these migrants were from sub-Saharan Africa and the three leading nationalities were Nigeria, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire (Frontex 2018, 43). This experience indicates that land and sea crossings can be stemmed, but only with draconian policies and in cooperation with transit countries.

Public Opinion, Politics, and Policy

The dramatic increase in asylum applications in recent years has created headlines and alarmed policymakers. There is a widespread perception that public opinion has shifted dramatically against immigrants in general and asylum seekers in particular. This has been linked with increasing support for populist political parties, particularly those of the far right. Even when such parties do not get into government, they may shift the agendas of mainstream political parties towards a more anti-immigration stance.

What does survey evidence show on how public opinion has shifted? In 2002, 2014, and 2016, the European Social Survey (ESS) asked respondents if they agreed/disagreed with the statement: “the government should be generous in judging applications for refugee status.” The first row of Table 3 reports the average over 17 countries of the proportion of respondents that disagreed or strongly

Table 3

Anti-refugee and Anti-immigration Opinion in 17 European Countries

	2002	2014	2016	Change 2002–2014	Change 2014–2016
Applicants for refugee status (% disagree or disagree strongly)	40.9	26.6	36.1	-14.3	9.5
Immigrants of different race/ethnic group (% few or none)	48.3	42.3	41.8	-5.9	-0.5
Immigrants from poor countries (% few or none)	47.8	50.4	43.9	2.6	-6.5

Source: European Social Survey, cumulative file.

Note: The first row is the percentage of respondents who “disagreed” or “disagreed strongly” with the statement: “the government should be generous in judging applications for refugee status.” The second and third rows are the percentages of respondents who replied “a few” or “none” to the question: “to what extent do you think [country] should allow . . . people of a different race or ethnic group from most [country] people” and “. . . people from the poorer countries outside Europe.” These are the unweighted averages for the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

disagreed with the statement. From 2002 to 2014, on average, there was a fall in the proportion of those expressing anti-refugee sentiment by 14.3 percentage points. In 2014, anti-refugee preference averaged 26.6 percent, and it was less than 50 percent in all 17 countries, ranging from 7.6 percent in Portugal to 47.0 percent in the Netherlands. But from 2014 to 2016, the decline in anti-refugee sentiment was sharply reversed everywhere except Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In Germany, anti-refugee sentiment increased 17 percentage points and in Hungary by 26 percentage points. Trends in opinion on immigration policy are rather different, even towards otherwise similar groups such as immigrants from minority ethnic backgrounds and those from poorer countries outside Europe. Anti-immigration responses are taken as the percentage who prefer admitting “a few” or “none,” compared with the alternatives “many” or “some.” As Table 3 shows, from 2002 to 2014, there was much less decline in negative sentiment towards immigrants as compared with refugees. There was some softening of views towards ethnic minority immigrants but not towards those from poor countries, with some reversal of trends from 2014 to 2016.

The United States presents a somewhat different picture. Each June, Gallup asks if immigration should be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased (Gallup 2014). The percentage of respondents wanting immigration to be decreased fell from 49 in 2002 to 41 in 2014, 38 in 2016, and 35 in 2019. Despite the growing support for immigration, there is evidence of increasing concern about the situation on the border with Mexico, which 74 percent of respondents in 2019 considered to be a “crisis” or a “major problem.” But when asked about admitting refugees who have left Honduras and other Central American countries, 57 percent approved

while 60 percent either opposed or strongly opposed expanding the construction of walls along the US-Mexico border. In this respect, opinion in the United States has some parallels with that in Europe on the eve of the migration crisis.

Two important elements contribute to the overall climate of opinion towards asylum seekers. First, public opinion is very strongly against unauthorized entry. Among respondents to a survey of eight European countries in 2013, an average of 75 percent were “worried about illegal immigration,” as compared with 29 percent who were “worried about legal immigration.” For the United States, these figures were 61 percent and 25 percent, respectively.³ It is likely that the increase in unauthorized arrivals has further hardened attitudes towards spontaneous asylum seekers. Second, and related to this, the *saliency* of immigration has increased. Saliency refers to how important a respondent thinks an issue is, as distinct from the respondent’s position or preference over the issue (as reported in Table 3). One measure of saliency is recorded in the Eurobarometer surveys, which ask respondents about the two most important issues facing the country. From 2004 to 2012, roughly 10 percent of those in the survey ranked immigration in their top two issues. But in 2015, this shot up to over 30 percent for the European Union as a whole and a whopping 75 percent in Germany.

Populist parties have been gaining influence across Europe, and although they vary widely in other ways, they typically share a strong anti-immigration stance. In Italy, votes for the centre-right coalition in the national elections of 2001–2008 were positively influenced by the proportion of foreign-born in the local population (Barone et al. 2016). In Austria, votes for the far-right Freedom Party in elections from 1979 to 2013 are causally related to the increase in immigration (Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017). In districts of Hamburg, Germany, voting for the far-right parties in state and national elections in 1987–2000 is linked to the share of immigrants (Otto and Steinhardt 2014). Across Europe, votes for nationalist parties in European elections are positively affected by the local share of low-skilled immigrants, especially those from outside Europe (Moriconi et al. 2018). These findings reflect both economic interests and cultural concerns, and they suggest that the (pro-immigrant) “contact effect” is overwhelmed by a “group threat effect,” which reflects both fear of competition and cultural concerns. But these findings relate to immigration generally and not specifically to refugees or asylum seekers.

By exploiting the (exogenous) placing of refugees in localities in Denmark in 1986–1998, Dustmann, Vasiljeva, and Damm (2019) find causal evidence of a link between the presence of refugees and voting for anti-immigration parties in rural areas but the opposite effect in the main urban areas (consistent with group threat and contact effects, respectively). The recent refugee crisis of 2015–2016 fueled support for anti-immigrant parties, but this effect varied between countries and localities. In Upper Austria, support for the Freedom Party increased by less in municipalities that

³These figures were derived from the database for Transatlantic Trends 2013 (Stelzenmueller et al. 2013). In a 2014 Gallup poll, 77 percent of US respondents thought that controlling US borders to halt the flow of illegal immigrants into the United States was either “very important” or “extremely important” for government policy.

hosted refugee centers, but by more in border municipalities that migrants passed through on their way to Germany (Steinmayr 2018). Exposure to migrant arrivals on Greek islands also increased opinion in favor of exclusion and added electoral support for the far-right party, Golden Dawn (Hangartner et al. 2019; Vasilakis 2018; Dinas et al. 2019). This evidence suggests that, against a background of rising countrywide salience, contact or proximity to refugees mitigated or had mixed effects on the rise in voting for anti-immigrant parties, while direct experience of unauthorized migration boosted it.

There is much less evidence exploring the last link in the chain running from immigration to public attitudes and then on to changes in immigration policy. One strand of evidence suggests that higher public salience of immigration is associated with more restrictive asylum policies (Hatton 2017b). But because the legislative process is often protracted and the outcome uncertain, the immediate effects of shifting attitudes are more likely to be on enforcement within the existing policy framework. For example, surges in asylum applications are associated with slightly lower asylum-seeker recognition rates in European countries, but there is no clear relationship with the strength of far-right political parties in government (Neumayer 2005; Toshkov 2014).

In the European Union, the Common European Asylum System has increasingly constrained the policies of individual governments. But the migration crisis of 2015–2016, along with the collapse of border controls in southern Europe and Germany's short-lived open door policy pitched this policy regime into disarray. The public backlash against asylum migrants largely reflected concerns about unauthorized immigration, but it also presented an opportunity for further reform (Trauner 2016). The EU agreement with Turkey over the movement of Syrians, noted earlier, was followed in 2016 by the transformation of the EU's border force, Frontex, into a more integrated European Border and Coastguard Agency, with increased executive power and greater financial resources. The reforms also include a doubling of the EU's Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund and the transformation of the European Asylum Support Office into a full-fledged EU Agency for Asylum, with greater operational powers. The crisis also led to measures to redistribute 170,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy, even in the face of opposition by four member states. This was a modest breakthrough for a policy of European burden-sharing that has long been discussed, but not acted upon.

Recent experience has led some to criticize as inefficient an asylum system that provides incentives to engage in risky unauthorized migration, only for the majority of such migrants to fail to gain recognition as refugees (Hatton 2017a). Tighter border controls reduce unpopular unauthorized migration, but they exclude both economic migrants and genuine refugees. An alternative would be more like the Australian system where tough border controls are accompanied by a resettlement scheme which, if scaled up on a per capita basis to the EU population, would admit around 375,000 refugees per year. Substituting resettlement for spontaneous asylum-migration was at the core of the EU-Turkey agreement, which provided that for every Syrian migrant returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian refugee

would be resettled from Turkey to an EU member state. With that provision as background, in 2017, the EU adopted an expanded resettlement program of 50,000—or five times the number of the program launched in 2008. In contrast, the United States has moved in the opposite direction by reducing the resettlement target as the specter of spontaneous asylum-seeking increased. The US resettlement program of 96,900 in 2016, which was more than half of the worldwide total among developed countries, was reduced to just 22,900 in 2018.

Conclusion

Concern over refugees has increased in recent years as the numbers have surged. While most refugees are located in low-income neighboring countries where they first found asylum, the increasing number applying for asylum in the Western world has attracted widespread attention. These trends should be understood against the background of the evolution of international policy towards refugees and the changing incentives for asylum migration. The terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the asylum policies built upon it have provided clear incentives for spontaneous migration from poor, strife-prone countries to the developed world. While the evolution of policy sharpened the distinction between refugees and other immigrants, that difference has become increasingly blurred among asylum migrants.

Since the early 2000s, public attitudes towards genuine refugees have become more favorable, but concerns about unauthorized arrivals have increased. In Europe, these concerns came to a head in the migration crisis of 2015–2016, and the backlash from that experience has led to a range of policy reforms, particularly tougher border controls. But it also marked a small step towards favoring resettlement over spontaneous asylum-seeking. Meanwhile the United States has shifted the other way: with a leaky southern border and public support for the Central American refugees, the government has drastically cut its resettlement program. It remains to be seen whether the tougher border controls that have been proposed will in time be accompanied by a return to a more generous resettlement quota.

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