

Exploring migration causes: why people migrate



Group of migrants walking along railway tracks. ©Ajdin Kamber/AdobeStock

People migrate for many reasons, ranging from security, demography and human rights to poverty and climate change. Find out more.

The total number of [non-EU citizens residing within the EU](#) as of 1 January 2021 was 23.7 million, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. This represents 5.3% of the EU population. In most EU countries, the majority of non-nationals were from outside the EU.

What is migration?

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another, to settle in a new location. Migration can be voluntary or involuntary and can occur for a variety of different reasons, including economic, environmental and social issues.

Reasons for migration: push and pull factors

Push factors are the reasons people leave a country. Pull factors are the reason they move to a particular country. There are three major push and pull factors.

Social and political factors

Persecution because of one's ethnicity, religion, race, politics or culture can push people to leave their country. A major factor is war, conflict, government persecution or there being a significant risk of them.

Those fleeing armed conflict, human rights violations or persecution are more likely to be humanitarian refugees. This will affect where they settle as some countries have more liberal approaches to humanitarian migrants than others. In the first instance, these people are likely to move to the nearest safe country that accepts asylum seekers.

The backbone of international humanitarian law is the [Geneva Conventions](#), which regulate the conduct of armed conflict and seek to limit its effects.

In recent years, people have been fleeing to Europe in large numbers from conflict, terror and persecution at home. Of the 384,245 [asylum seekers granted protection status in the EU](#) in 2022, more than a quarter came from war-torn Syria, with Afghanistan and Venezuela in second and third place respectively.

Demographic and economic causes

Demographic change determines how people move and migrate. A growing or shrinking, aging or youthful population has an impact on economic growth and employment opportunities in the countries of origin or migration policies in the destination countries.

Demographic and economic migration is related to poor labour standards, high unemployment and the overall health of a country's economy. Pull factors include higher wages, better employment opportunities, a higher standard of living and educational opportunities. If economic conditions are not favourable and appear to be at risk of declining further, a greater number of people will probably migrate to countries with a better outlook.

According to the UN International Labour Organization, migrant workers - defined as people who migrate with a view to being employed - stood at roughly [169 million worldwide in 2019](#) and represented more than two thirds of international migrants. More than two-thirds of all migrant workers were concentrated in high-income countries.

Environmental and climate migration

The environment has always been a driver of migration, as people flee natural disasters, such as floods, hurricanes and earthquakes. However, climate change is expected to exacerbate

extreme weather events, meaning more people could be on the move.

According to the [International Organization for Migration](#), "Environmental migrants are those who for reason of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad."

It is hard to estimate how many environmental migrants there are globally due to factors such as population growth, poverty, governance, human security and conflict, which have an impact. Estimates vary from 25 million to one billion by the year 2050.

How is the EU addressing these causes?

Migrant workers having easier access to legal ways to move to the EU

The European Union has been encouraging legal migration to address labour shortages, fill skill gaps and boost economic growth. These include:

- The EU Blue Card: a work and residency permit that allows non-EU citizens to work and live in an EU country, provided they have a degree or equivalent qualification and a job offer that meets a minimum salary threshold
- The Single Permit: a combined work and residency permit, issued for up to two years by an EU country
- EU long-term resident status: allows people from outside the EU to stay, work and move freely in the EU for an indefinite period

Further information

[Read more about legal ways to work in the EU](#)

New Pact on Migration and Asylum

Managing migration effectively to deal with asylum seekers and protect external borders has been an EU priority for many years. The EU has been working on a [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), and in April 2024 Parliament backed an agreement with the Council to [revamp the EU's asylum and migration laws](#).

The pact sets out [improved and faster procedures](#) throughout the EU's asylum and migration system. It revises the Dublin regulation, which determines the country responsible for processing each asylum claim. The new system sets different types of [contributions](#) from EU

countries, including the relocation of asylum seekers from the country of first entry, financial contributions or providing operational and technical support. The new system is based on solidarity and flexible forms of support, which could become [requirements at times of pressure](#).

Once the new rules come into force, EU countries will have two years to incorporate them into their national laws.

Further information

[Read more about the EU's response to migration](#)

Further information

[Facts and figures on asylum and migration in the EU](#)

More about migration

[Study: interlinks between migration and development](#)

[Briefing: legal migration to the EU](#)

[Migration and migrant population statistics](#)