CLUB DE MADRID

‘Overcoming misinformation about migration and migrants: A data-driven report on the positive impact of migration on economy and social development’

Policy Report

AUGUST 2025

FOREWORD

Migration has long been at the center of public debate, but it is rarely treated as a complex public policy. For decades, political practice has reduced migration to a question of security—border control, enforcement, deterrence—while neglecting its broader economic, and social dimensions. This narrow framing has created a vicious circle: citizens, encouraged to see migrants primarily as threats, demand policies that reinforce those fears, which in turn deepen polarization and weaken democracy.

Yet migration is not a temporary emergency to be managed with suspicion; it is a permanent feature of our interconnected world. The choice is stark: governments can either continue to approach migration through fear and short-term politics; or they can adopt pragmatic, evidence-based strategies that unlock migration's potential for shared prosperity.

This policy report is based on the conviction that we must urgently break free from the security-only lens. Migration cannot be wished away, nor can it be reduced to simplistic binaries of "open" versus "closed." As populations age, as labor markets tighten, and as inequality strains social cohesion, migration will become increasingly central to both economic stability and democratic resilience. The question for policymakers is not whether to engage with migration, but how.

The first brief, ***Demographic Decline and the Role of Immigration***, highlights a pressing reality: across the OECD, deaths will soon surpass births, ushering in a century of demographic contraction. Without immigration, shrinking populations will deepen labor shortages, strain pensions, and slow growth. Yet immigration alone cannot solve these challenges—the scale required is politically unrealistic and raises concerns about "brain drain" from sending countries. What migration can do is ease fiscal pressure when paired with strategies that boost productivity, raise participation across all groups, and support healthier ageing. Policymakers must therefore move past the false dichotomy of "migration versus no migration" and design integrated approaches that link mobility with broader demographic and economic planning.

The second brief, ***Progress, Patents, and Knowledge Flows: The Immigration Advantage***, shifts focus to innovation. Migrants are not only workers but also entrepreneurs, inventors, and taxpayers, generating long-term prosperity and cross-border knowledge flows. Yet these benefits are often obscured by electoral cycles and populist pressures that favor short-term rhetoric over evidence. This brief argues for insulating migration policymaking from partisan volatility and for transparent, data-driven communication that underscores migration as not just necessary but advantageous.

The third brief, ***Safe Pathways in an Era of Mixed Migration***, examines the limited infrastructure available for orderly and regular migration. Irregular and risky routes prevail largely because safe alternatives—education, labor mobility, family reunification, humanitarian corridors—remain underdeveloped. Expanding these pathways is a governance as well as humanitarian imperative. Modernized visa systems, clear eligibility criteria, and accessible information platforms can reduce exploitation while creating win-win solutions for origin, transit, and destination countries. Migration will happen; the real choice is whether it will be safe and productive or chaotic and dangerous.

Finally, the fourth brief, ***Building Robust Democracies through Immigrant Inclusion***, places migration within the struggle for democratic resilience. Populist parties exploit anti-immigrant sentiment to erode liberal norms, and mainstream parties that echo exclusionary rhetoric only reinforce the trend. Evidence shows a better path: comprehensive integration policies reduce xenophobia, weaken far-right mobilization, and strengthen democracy. Inclusion fosters contact, lowers perceived threats, and sustains a virtuous cycle of tolerance and civic participation. Robust democracies require robust inclusion.

Taken together, these four briefs sketch a vision of migration policy that is pragmatic, balanced, and humane. They show that migration is not a panacea, but neither is it the threat so often depicted in political discourse. It is a force multiplier—its impact depends on how societies choose to manage it. Managed with evidence, cooperation, and inclusion, migration can help address demographic decline, fuel innovation, strengthen democracy, and protect vulnerable people. Managed with fear and neglect, it can deepen inequality, destabilize integration, and erode trust in institutions.

This report seeks to reframe the debate: away from fear and securitization, and toward evidence, cooperation, and inclusion. If we get this right, migration can be not a dividing line but a shared path to prosperity and resilience:

Let's separate migration policy from short-term politics. Decisions must be grounded in data and long-term public interest.

Let's embed migration in a multilateral framework. No country can manage these dynamics alone.

Let's invest in integration and public perception. Migrants succeed when given the tools to contribute, and societies succeed when they make space for new forms of belonging.

Carlos Alvarado Quesada, *former President of Costa Rica (2018-2022) and Member of Club de Madrid*

Katrina Burgess, *Professor of Political Economy and Director of the Leir Institute for Migration and Human Security at the Fletcher School*

María Elena Agüero, *Secretary General of Club de Madrid*

Club de Madrid is the world's largest forum of democratic democratic former Heads of State and Government, who leverage their individual and collective leadership experience and global reach to strengthen inclusive democratic practice and improve the well-being of people around the world. Club de Madrid "Shared Societies Programme", funded by *Alain B. Slifka Foundation*, has been the framework for the development of this Policy Report, as well as for previous Club de Madrid works focusing on the inclusion and the fight against the discrimination of migrants, such as the report *Deconstructing Myths and Narratives around Migration*. Club de Madrid "Shared Societies Programme" is a holistic approach to sustainable development, integrating social, economic and environmental dimensions, with social inclusion at its core, as it understands that all aspects of development are interrelated and interdependent.

The Henry J. Leir Institute for Migration and Human Security at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy is a hub for interdisciplinary research and engagement at the intersection of migration, human security, and policy innovation. We bring together scholars, practitioners, and students to explore the drivers of displacement, the impacts of migration, and the development of rights-based, effective policy responses. Through rigorous research, experiential learning opportunities, and strategic partnerships, the Leir Institute works to shape data driven approaches to global migration and human security challenges.

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CLUB DE MADRID

FLETCHER HENRY J. LEIR INSTITUTE

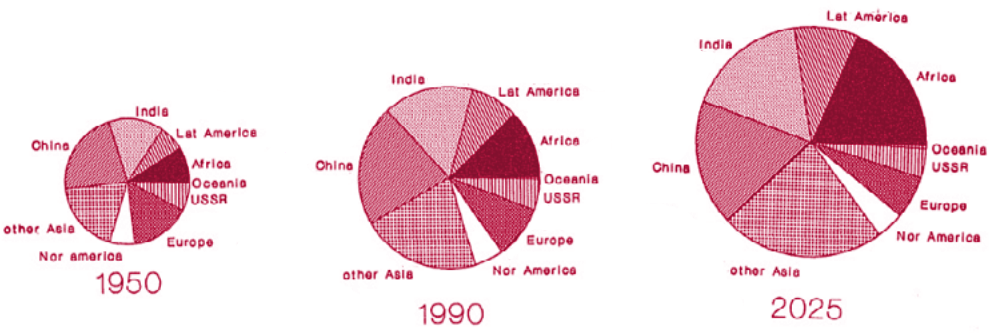
Policy Brief

DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE AND THE ROLE OF IMMIGRATION

By **Lorenzo Beadle**

AUGUST 2025

Figure V. Distribution of population among major areas of the world, 1950, 1990 and 2025



World Population Prospects 1990, 15

Lorenzo Beadle *is a member of the research team that has developed this report for Club de Madrid and the Leir Institute, under the supervision of Fletcher School Professor* ***Katrina Burgess*** *and Fletcher School Professor and Club de Madrid Member* ***Carlos Alvarado****.*

This Policy Brief has been funded by Alan B. Slifka Foundation for Club de Madrid's Shared Societies Programme.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Within the next ten years, deaths will surpass births across the OECD, ushering in a century of shrinking populations and rising old age dependency ratios; without sizable immigration, labor shortages, slower growth and mounting pension costs are inevitable. Yet the scale of immigration required to maintain today's growth and pension promises is politically unlikely and risks "brain drain" from sending countries. Immigration therefore cannot single handedly solve demographic decline, but it can meaningfully ease fiscal pressure when paired with productivity gains, healthier ageing, and inclusive labor market policies that raise participation across all age groups. Policymakers must weigh these trade offs now, designing immigration and complementary economic strategies that balance domestic needs with global equity as the world navigates an unprecedented era of demographic divergence.

INTRODUCTION

Within a decade, the number of deaths in **OECD countries** will exceed the number of births. Under hypothetical net-zero migration, this means that the OECD's collective population will be in decline for the remainder of the 21st century. At the same time, over 440 million people worldwide have expressed a desire to move to the United States, Canada, Germany, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, or Italy—nearly 40 percent of the receiving countries' collective population.

The future balance between net migration and natural increase will depend on policy choices and the prevailing economic conditions in countries of origin and destination. A demographic equilibrium (or surplus) as a result of net migration is no guarantee. ***This brief discusses how the macroeconomic challenges posed by demographic decline in Europe and the United States may be affected by immigration flows in the coming decades.***

Two concepts in demography are crucial to frame this discussion:

1. the replacement birth rate or **replacement rate**, defined as the number of live births per woman that results in a long-run stable population (this number is 2.1). If a country's fertility rate falls below the replacement rate, with net-zero migration the population will shrink year-on-year.

2. the **dependency ratio**, defined as the ratio of economically dependent members of a population (younger than 15 or older than 64) to economically productive members of a population (15-64, working age). The dependency ratio summarizes a country's labor market needs—as it rises above 1, pension outlays, demand for caretaker and healthcare services, and labor shortages in certain sectors will also grow.

These two concepts are important to interpret the data and discourse concerning fertility-related risk and fertility-affecting policy.

GLOBAL FERTILITY TRENDS

Global population projections are underpinned by the **demographic transition model**, which envisions the trajectory of a population in four phases as elaborated in Figure 1.

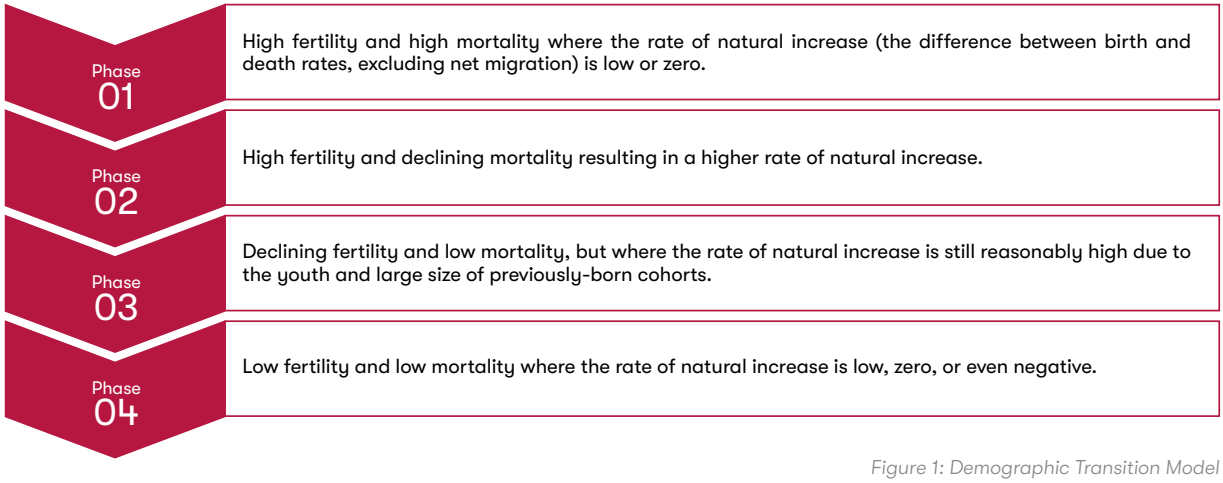


Figure 1: Demographic Transition Model

Broadly speaking, the world is in the third phase, but this disguises significant heterogeneity: some countries are in the second phase, while others are in the fourth.

The demographic transition model is also limited by its lack of a definite unit of analysis. One could speak of demographic transition at the level of the entire world, of continents, of regions, of countries, of ethnic groups, of subnational divisions, or of even smaller clusters. Policymakers must be aware that the selection of just one unit of analysis may mask significant heterogeneity, which might make the sources of future growth unclear. For example, describing the world as "in the third phase" does not tell us anything about the geography of demographic transition, which is the pertinent question when assessing where immigrants might come from and where they may be needed.

Furthermore, the speed at which a population will shift between these phases is uncertain—population projections are inherently probabilistic. The UN offers a low-fertility variant and a high-fertility variant of its **projected global populations by 2100**, with a difference of over 7.3 billion people between the two variants.

According to the UN's 2024 World Fertility Report, the global fertility rate stands at **2.2** (just slightly over replacement). The UN's World Population Prospects for 2024 suggests that the global population is likely to peak at **10.3 billion** in the 2080s before slowly declining to **10.2 billion** by 2100 as the global fertility rate likewise falls to **1.8**. While the pace of this decline is uncertain, the UN has **high confidence** that the global peak population will be reached this century because fertility rates are **unlikely** to recover to above replacement within the next few decades. This is because most future population growth **depends** on present-day youth, as in the third phase of demographic transition. In other words, a great deal of projected growth is already 'baked-in' by the childbearing decisions made by previous generations.

At the national level, net migration and changes in life expectancy will be the **primary contributors** to demographic outcomes apart from this preordained structural constraint. For **62 countries**, immigration will be the leading contributor to population growth through 2100.

As of 2024, all the countries in Europe, North America, and most of South America and the Caribbean have undergone fertility transition—the shift to below-replacement birth rates. Above-replacement countries in the Americas (concentrated in Central America and the Caribbean) will undergo fertility transition **by 2054**. As the century progresses, new births will be concentrated in shrinking oases surrounded by a global fertility desert (Fig. 2).

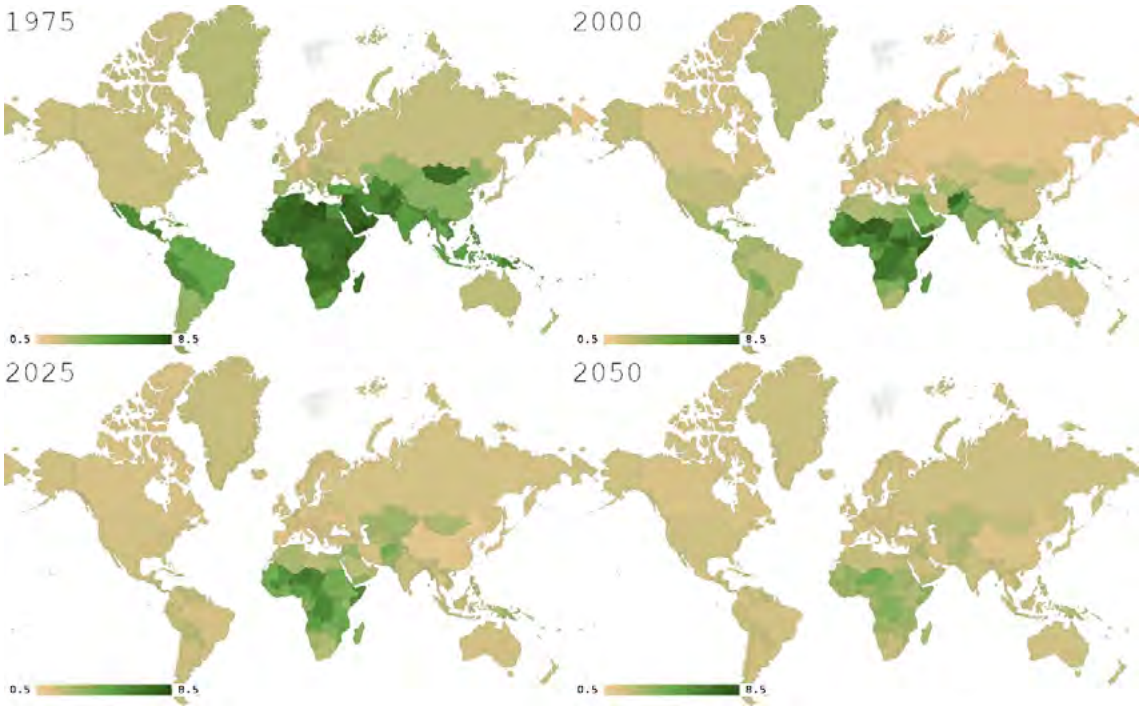


Figure 2: Global Fertility Desertification, 1975–2050

MACROECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE

The macroeconomic consequences of demographic decline in Europe and the United States are concentrated in fiscal challenges posed by growing pension obligations and labor market shortages in sectors where either supply will shrink (lower-compensated sectors) or demand will expand (those growing with aging populations).

As the number of old-age dependents rises, and if pension outlays remain level, higher claims on working-age income will be necessary to finance benefits. A smaller share of the population will be responsible for a larger volume of transfers. Furthermore, the average hours worked per week will begin to fall because non-working retirees will make up a larger share of the population.

A dwindling labor force will render marginal labor more valuable, allowing high-productivity services to grow at the expense of lower-productivity primary and secondary sectors, which may be unable to offer the remuneration

necessary to attract labor. All else equal, workers unable to transition into these faster-growing sectors will experience relatively slower wage growth, accelerating income inequality. Furthermore, strategic sectors of the economy may be weakened. For example, without concomitant automation, a shrinking agricultural labor force may imperil food security while an inability to extract certain rare earth minerals could have upstream implications for both energy security and defense industrial bases.

Without adjustments—such as changes to immigration policy—output growth is **likely to slow** as a result. Immigrants engage with host economies in a variety of ways (see Policy Brief #2), but a narrow model is sufficient to intuit the relationship between immigrant labor and the macroeconomy of demographic change. Roughly speaking, the contribution of labor alone to economic growth is driven by the following variables:

1. The proportion of the population in the labor force *(labor force participation)*[VI]
2. The average hours worked per worker for each age *(labor intensity)*
3. The number of people in each age group *(age mix)*
4. The average value of output produced for each hour worked *(productivity)*

Labor force participation not a primary concern for this brief—even in countries that currently have low youth labor force participation, demographic decline presages a scenario where native labor is nearly fully employed and nevertheless insufficient to arrest macroeconomic deficits. ***Labor intensity*** is critical because it falls with age, even prior to retirement. As a result, when a population's ***age mix shifts*** toward the elderly, its labor intensity experiences a secular decline. ***Productivity growth***, however, can compensate for declining labor intensity caused by a shift in the age mix and has been the **chief contributor** to GDP per capita growth in recent decades.

Therefore, the negative effects of demographic decline can be ameliorated by some combination of the following outcomes:

1. Shift in the age mix toward age groups with the highest labor intensity;
2. Increase in the labor force participation of age groups with the highest labor intensity;
3. Rapid and wide dissemination of productivity enhancements.

ROLE OF IMMIGRATION

Immigration policies affecting labor force participation and productivity will be mentioned, but this brief centers on ***how immigration can shift the age structure to raise population-level labor intensity and the implications for labor market shortages and the fiscal costs of demographic decline.***

Immigration can address the macroeconomic consequences of demographic decline by increasing both the working-age population and the population of childbearing-age women (thereby increasing the working-age population in the future).[VII] In some countries births are **projected** to continue increasing in the coming decades because of the immigration of childbearing-age women—but this is no reason for long-run economic optimism. The circumstances still vary immensely by country, time period, and prospective immigration policy.

In some high-income countries, the quantity of immigration necessary to sustain current levels of economic growth is so large that populations would have to become nearly fifty percent foreign-born in the **next twenty-five years**. That is to say, politically infeasible levels of immigration from high-fertility countries (now largely in sub-Saharan Africa) would have to be 'matched' with low-fertility destination countries by some organizing authority. As Giovanni Peri **writes**:

> **"There is no clear channel through which aging societies—which become economically stagnant and less innovative and whose citizens are likely to fear international migrants for the change they bring—will attract more immigrants."**

Expected future flows to these low-fertility destination countries (absent extraordinary policy changes) will therefore be insufficient to fill the shortfalls in growth (and in pension outlays and labor supply). High-fertility countries will not 'rescue' their low-fertility counterparts.

The population transfer necessary to overcome this tendency—putting aside political dilemmas—would also run the risk of robbing developing countries of their **demographic** dividend: the opportune period when productive age categories are overrepresented and surplus resources may be sufficient to redirect toward transformative social and economic ends. To sustain high-income growth rates, a large share of the youthful dividend population would have to immigrate to high-income countries, fueling debates surrounding 'brain drain' (see Policy Brief #2). Briefly, if an individual of any country belongs to a productive age category, there are two questions that can be asked:

1. In which labor market is their productivity highest? (A descriptive question.)

2. How ought the remuneration for their highest-productivity labor be allocated? (A prescriptive question.)

Youthful individuals in developing countries may be more productive in high-income countries (where they also help to arrest demographic decline). However, if none of their remuneration is allocated to their country of origin (through remittances or eventual return migration, bringing human capital home), there arises a global welfare conundrum; this conundrum becomes more acute the larger the share of a dividend population moves out of the country.

Ultimately, this brief is concerned with the way that immigration can address the macroeconomic consequences of demographic decline in Europe and the United States. However, there are bilateral implications of immigration flows. Assuming that macroeconomic challenges can be solved exclusively by immigration is both politically unrealistic and raises world welfare questions that are beyond the scope of this brief.

LABOR MARKETS

As explained above, an aging society results in a shift in the age mix toward older ages with lower labor intensities (fewer hours worked). As a result, there are fewer hours worked in the economy overall, making the marginal hour worked more valuable. Marginal hours will accrue to the sectors that can offer higher wages—those with higher productivity (output per hour worked) like software. Lower-productivity sectors (like agriculture) will either experience a shortage of hours, raise productivity and remuneration, or compress margins and raise remuneration.

We can see these dynamics at work in the United States. For decades before the 2008 Financial Crisis, the U.S. received large numbers of low-skill immigrants from Mexico. As macroeconomic conditions in the United States changed and underwent fertility transition, these flows began to diminish, measurably **compressing** the wage premium to high-skill labor. Thanks to significant increases in the flow of low-skill immigration from other countries in the last decade (especially Central America and Venezuela), low-skill-intensive sectors (like agriculture or construction) have avoided shortfalls that would have forced U.S. firms to "alter their production techniques in a manner that replaces low-skilled labor with other factors of production." At the same time, the decline in the native born working-age population has been **concentrated** among the least educated Americans. Absent alternative sources of low-skill immigration, technology will have to compensate by raising productivity or sectoral output will fall.

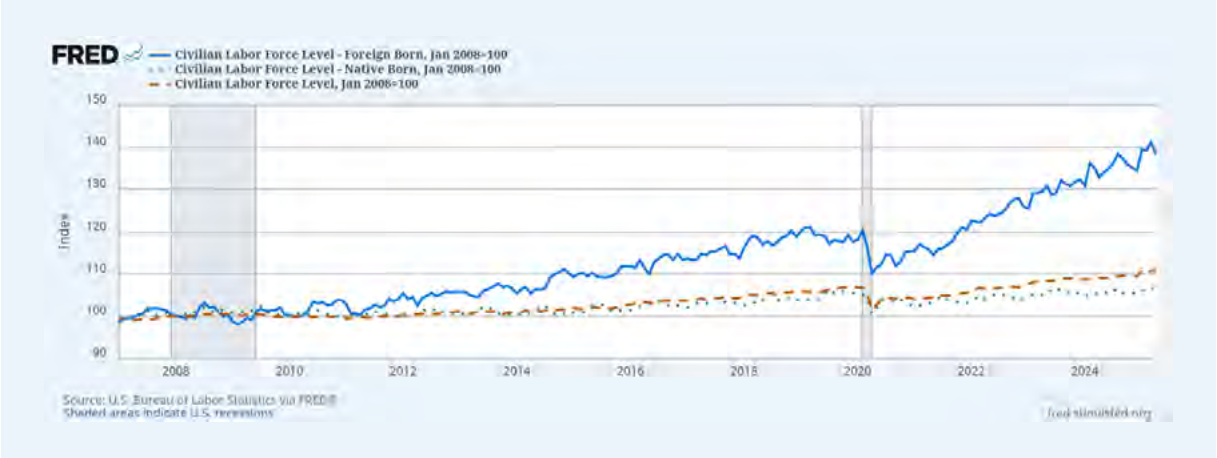


Figure 3:
Contribution to Growth in U.S. Civilian Labor Force (- -) by Native Born (•••) and Foreign Born (—) Workers, 2007–2025[VIII]

As shown in Figure 3, net growth in the U.S. labor force since 2008 has been driven almost entirely by growth in foreign born workers, reflecting growth across all skill levels driven by undocumented

and visa-managed flows alike. [insert data for EU or OECD]. Thus, high- and middle-income countries already (or will) find themselves in a situation where labor force growth is immigration-driven.

Status quo flows are nevertheless insufficient to resolve looming (and extant) sectoral shortages. While there are numerous policy levers available to address this problem, migration policy responses can be summarized as follows: raise the quantity of the most labor-intensive (young) workers and/or raise the labor intensity of each age category's workers.

The first solution is straightforward: attract more immigrants from countries with the greatest demographic dividend. These are the countries that will add the largest share of global births relative to their share of global population—which are located primarily in Africa and Asia. By 2100, African countries will make up **38 percent** of the world's population while contributing **half** of global births. As a result, substantial shares of workers in the most labor-intensive age categories will be African (followed by Asians and especially South Asians); it is these workers who must be attracted in order for immigration to help resolve shortfalls in demographically disadvantaged sectors.

The second solution requires some intuition. As worker ages rise, average hours worked per week fall (Fig. 4). Labor force participation accentuates this trend; for example, **German** workers 65 years and older work 2 hours per week on average because relatively few are in the labor force. The civilian labor intensity at each age (including employed and non-employed) can be raised by increasing the labor intensity of workers and/or shifting non-employed into the labor force. Migration policies – understood broadly to include both origin and destination countries – can contribute by supporting younger populations in high-dividend countries, protecting migrants in transit (see Policy Brief #3), and promoting inclusivity in the labor market (see Policy Brief #4).

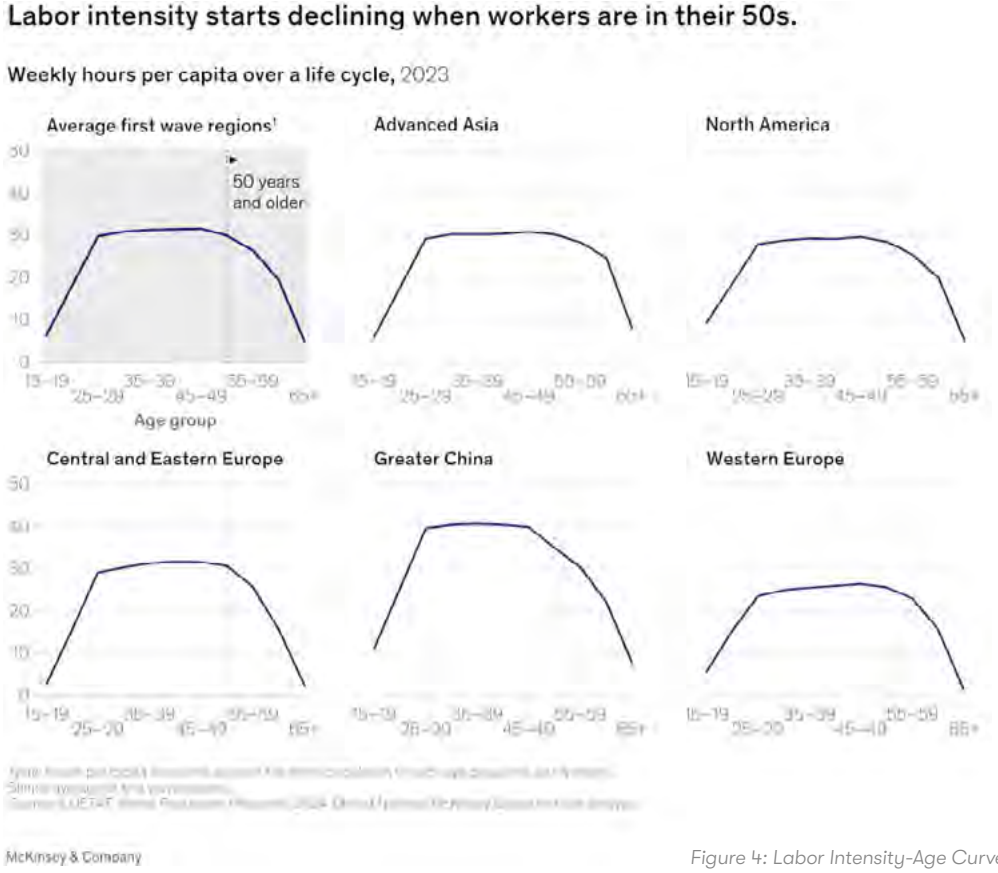


Figure 4: Labor Intensity-Age Curves

With respect to labor intensity, consider the difference between a high-dividend country wracked by epidemics and one with the fiscal and medical resources to contain disease outbreaks and treat serious illness. If a demographic dividend is eroded by disease before the working-age population can ever migrate (or even work domestically), freedom of movement matters little. Disease-burdened populations are also likely to have lower labor intensity at every age. Thus, public health interventions abroad can be understood as part of a migration policy portfolio aimed at counteracting demographic decline.

Similarly, exposure to trauma while migrating can impinge on an immigrant's potential labor intensity at every age. Traveling through dangerous environments, transacting with dangerous firms or individuals, and facing dangerous border control measures can inflict psychological and physical costs on immigrants that reduce labor intensity (see Policy Brief #3). This is a particularly serious concern for children making these journeys. Thus, minimizing the costs imposed by the migratory process helps ensure that immigrants match or exceed an incumbent population's labor intensity as they grow older.

A related concern is **healthy aging**, which permits improved labor intensity and higher labor force participation even at the older end of a population's age mix. Healthy aging of incumbent populations, like status quo immigration, will not resolve the macroeconomic consequences of demographic decline on its own. However, the promise of healthy aging also applies to immigrants: if the peak of maximum labor intensity is extended over higher ages, the global pool of prospective immigrants that could resolve sectoral shortages becomes larger. It therefore becomes essential that immigrants have access to healthcare and other resources that enable a healthy lifestyle.

In each age category, labor force participation may be suppressed not only by disability, sickness, or caretaking, but also because of labor market discrimination. Civil rights that guarantee protection against employment discrimination on the basis of identity increase the global pool of workers available to avoid shortages. Furthermore, changes in labor market expectations in high-dividend countries (for example, ending sex-based exclusion from the labor market) effectively increase the size of a dividend by creating more individuals with a demand for work. Broad demographic inclusivity at home and abroad raises labor force participation across the age mix, making available more workers with youthful labor intensities that can help respond to labor shortages in demographically disadvantaged sectors.

A complementary approach, which may reduce (but not eliminate) the demand for low-skill labor in Europe and the United States, is to increase productivity by lowering barriers to entry for immigrants qualified to fill higher skilled jobs, which are likely to occupy a growing share of the **future occupational structure** in Europe and elsewhere. For example, immigrant-receiving countries could develop better processes to validate immigrant credentials so that high-demand labor markets can take full advantage of the human capital actually available to them. Rather than trapping trained and educated immigrants in underemployment, credential evaluation should be improved in order to grow the pool required of a higher-skill occupational structure.

Furthermore, even if productivity growth resolves shortages and sectoral outputs remain steady, there may be reasons to expand output in what would still be relatively low-productivity sectors. For example, in countries with chronic housing shortages, low-skill immigration could help build the houses necessary to end the shortfall. Productivity growth and low-skill immigration can be complementary, and policymakers may desire large expansions in low-productivity sector output that cannot be achieved with growth in only one of these variables. Political barriers to large-scale low-skill immigration could be allayed through **circular migration** (see Policy Brief #3), whereby immigrants work temporarily in a destination country (e.g., during a harvesting season) before returning to their country of origin.

PENSION SYSTEMS

A country's overall dependency ratio (capturing the volume of young and old dependents) will be high in the second phase of demographic transition due to a youthful surplus (below 15 years old) that will eventually age and shift the ratio down in the third phase. Finally, in the fourth phase of demographic transition, the ratio will rise again—now as a result of a larger old-age population.

The old-age dependency ratio (capturing only growth in 65+ year-old population relative to working-age population) rises consistently through demographic transition, while the overall dependency ratio fluctuates (Fig. 5). Old-age dependency illustrates where the need for public saving support is growing, but overall dependency illustrates both this shortage and the countries with demographic dividends that could supplement declining working-age populations abroad.

As a country undergoes fertility transition, **working-age saving rises** due to reduced childcare spending. At the same time, the age mix shifts toward age categories that consume working-age public and private savings. Pensions fall under the category of public savings.

Most pension systems are defined benefits, meaning that transfers "depend on the number of years of contributions and the individual's earning history," and a majority of defined benefits systems are pay-as-you-go, meaning transfers to the current old-age population are financed by taxes on the current working-age population. Without raising taxes, conditioning or reducing outlays, or altering the age mix, the fourth phase of demographic transition model requires that pension outlays to the future old-age population mechanically decline relative to the current old-age population as the old-age dependency ratio rises and benefits are financed by a smaller share of working-age individuals. For instance, G-20 pension outlays will grow by **7 percentage points** between 2019 and 2050.

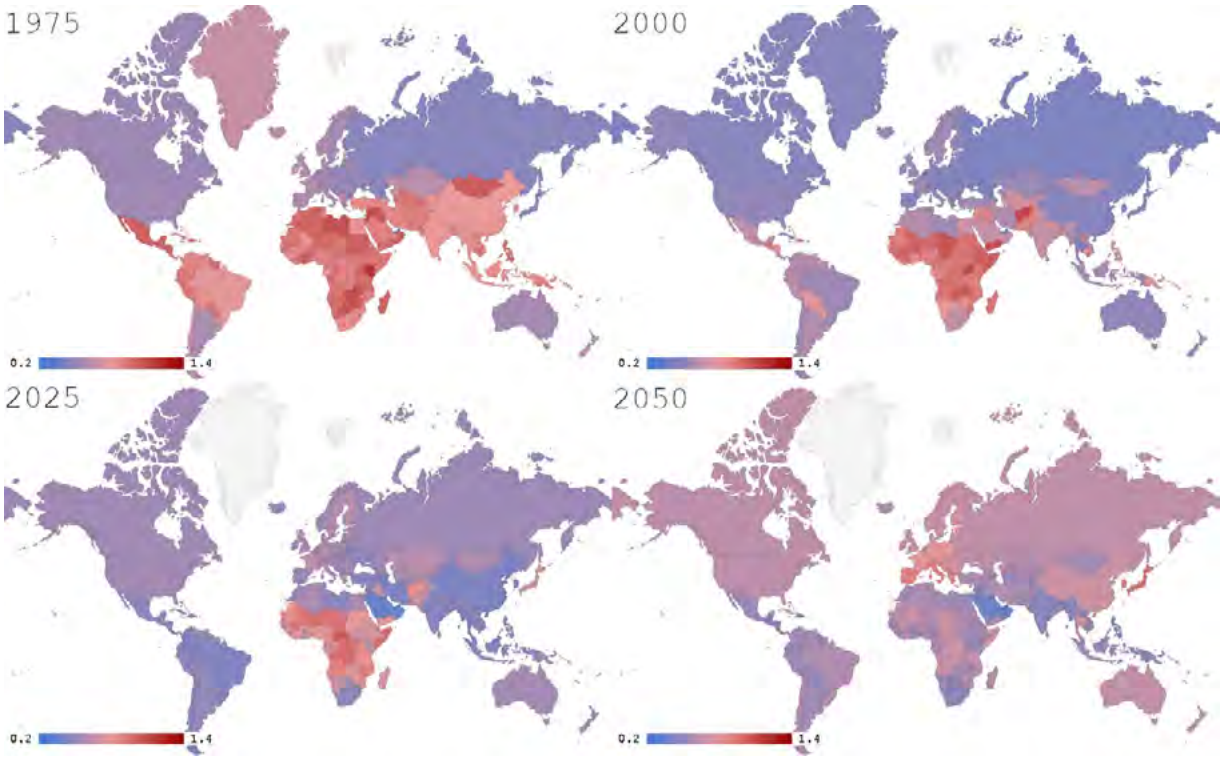


Figure 5: Global Dependency Ratios, 1975–2050

Immigrants at peak-labor intensity ages shift the age mix toward ages that are financing current pension outlays. Nonetheless, sustaining pension outlays with immigration may be difficult. For example, the 2024 Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance Trustees' Report calculated the long-run cost rate (ratio of program cost to taxable payroll) for the U.S. social security system under three different average annual net immigration scenarios. Only modest improvements were **identified**: the long-run cost rate under a low-immigration scenario stood at 17.75 percent compared to 16.87 percent under a high-immigration scenario.

In theory, a sufficiently large flow of immigrants could sustain or reduce the cost rate. In practice, the range of politically plausible flows (even under sanguine assumptions) is unlikely to fully resolve the future budgetary shortfalls of most pension plans. However, immigration can still be part of a solutions portfolio—after all, immigrants (including undocumented immigrants) **pay taxes** that finance pension outlays (see Policy Brief #2). New immigrants generally have a positive fiscal impact at the national level (including public pension outlays), but ultimately the fiscal impacts depend **largely** on fiscal policy—when outlays are high enough, no one (native or foreign born) produces a fiscal surplus over their lifetime. Overall, immigration policy of the same sort that might resolve labor market shortages can contribute moderately to pension outlay shortages. However, policymakers must keep in mind the plausibility of different immigration flow scenarios—in order for the United States to sustain the same old-age dependency ratio between 2020 and 2060, annual immigration would have to increase by **37 percent**.

CONCLUSION

Demographic projections are characterized by uncertainty. Annual euro area population growth will turn negative by **2035**, but with immigration flows 33 percent higher than baseline estimates, growth would remain positive until **2050**. Annual Canadian immigration of 0.3 percent of population implies a 2046 population of about 40 million, while 1.8 percent of population implies a 2046 population of over 60 million. Likewise, the U.S. Census Bureau assesses a difference in population size of nearly 40 million people between low and high immigration scenarios by 2050. Meanwhile, net migration from Mexico to the United States seemed to have zeroed out in **2012**, and while Mexicans were the largest category of U.S.-bound immigrants in **2022**, the Mexican-born share of the population has fallen in the last decade.

Populations in high-income countries may stagnate or grow depending on the magnitude of immigration flows, and the origins of those flows are likely to shift depending on policy changes in sending and receiving countries. Latin America, passing through fertility transition, may not send as many immigrants to the United States; intra-European immigration between low-fertility countries may fall; and African and Asian countries may become major origins of immigration flows for high-income counterparts or even, in the future, increasingly low-fertility middle income countries. At the same time, immigration skepticism could truncate flows or even result in mass deportation. Just as this brief has discussed the possibilities of increased immigration to fulfill fiscal and economic shortfalls, removal of the incumbent population would have the precise opposite effect. The model tying together demographic transition, dependency, and labor-driven growth can be reversed to intuit these results.

Under a supranational regime, the surplus savings from countries in fertility transition might be directed to high-dividend countries whose surplus youth might, in turn, be directed to low-fertility countries where their remuneration is high enough to shore up fiscal deficits and send remittances to their countries of origin. In theory, this could accelerate convergence between low- and middle- and high-income countries by the end of the century.

But no such supranational regime exists in a world dominated by sovereign states. Thus, achieving an equitable and sustainable solution to these demographic challenges will require global and regional partnerships among low-fertility and high-dividend countries.

These partnerships will only be effective, however, if they are informed by a data-driven understanding of what is at stake.

- In low-fertility countries, policymakers need to recognize the potential contribution of newly arrived immigrants to labor markets and fiscal obligations at risk from demographic decline while pursuing complementary policies to sustain growth.
- In high-dividend countries, policymakers need to weigh the short-term benefits of migration (e.g., remittances) against the longer-term benefits of investing in opportunities for young people to build successful lives at home – investment that is likely to require support from the wealthier (low fertility) countries.

If managed properly and combined with effective domestic policies, these partnerships could produce the win/win outcome of sustainable growth in the rich countries and rising incomes in the poorer ones as the world makes the global fertility transition.

ENDNOTES

[I] **Gallup**; author calculations. Note that Gallup's findings cannot be trivially generalized to the whole OECD because some of the prospective migration reflects intra-OECD movement. This, however, is a minority share.

[II] **For intuition**: if the average number of live births is >2, so long as there is no out-migration and a low death rate each pair of parents is replaced by another pair ensuring a long-run stable population. The rate is >2 and not exactly 2 to compensate for unbalanced sex ratios and women's and girls' deaths before childbearing. Slightly higher birth rates of boys than girls require the replacement rate to be >2—otherwise, the sex ratio would grow so unbalanced that a population would not be able to reproduce itself. 105 men to 100 women can be compensated by a fertility rate of 2.05, but the rate must be significantly higher if the ratio is 500 to 50 because only 50 women would have to give birth to 550 individuals. Similarly, deaths before childbirth require some women to have more than 2 children for their generational cohort to be fully replaced. In societies with high levels of childhood mortality the replacement rate may be significantly higher because fewer girls survive to childbearing age and so would have to give birth to many more children to maintain demographic stability. 2.1 is an estimate that takes into consideration the unbalanced sex ratio, but also assumes a low death rate. None of this is prescriptive, but merely a description of the rates of childbirth required to maintain a stable population under different circumstances.

[III] **For intuition**: a dependency ratio of 0.5 means that there are 2 working-age people for each dependent within a population; a dependency ratio of 1 means that there is 1 working-age person for each dependent within a population; and a dependency ratio of 2 means that there are 0.5 working-age people for each dependent (or 1 working-age for 2 dependents) within a population. The dependency ratio, as defined by international statistical agencies, is not modified by a country modifying its retirement age, which should condition the interpretation of each country's dependency ratio. Two countries may have the same size population and the same dependency ratio—but if one has a retirement age of 64 and the other a retirement age of 70 the ratio fails to capture the larger number of working people in the latter case and is less informative as a result.

[IV] Author calculation, to replicate at UN source: File Type - "Standard Projections (Estimates and Projection scenarios)"; Major Topic/Special Groupings - "Most Used"; Files - "**Complete (estimates and all projection scenarios) (XLSX)**" [direct link to download]; Coordinates - High Variant (sheet 3), row 94 and Low Variant (sheet 4), row 94.

[V] **World Bank Databank**, *population estimates and projections* (Country: all; Series: "Fertility rate, total (births per woman)"; Time: 1975, 2000, 2025, 2050).

[VI] For the purposes of this brief, this is the U.S. BLS **definition** of labor force participation: the share of the civilian, noninstitutional population that is either employed or non-employed but actively seeking employment (at least within the last 4 weeks).

[VII] Immigrants, of course, do not only intermarry. In a sense, restrictions on the free movement of people create friction for family formation. More interaction with different people might raise the chances of finding the 'right match'—a complex, personal hurdle in each individual's decisions regarding childbirth.

[VIII] **Federal Reserve Economic Data** (Civilian Labor Force Level, Civilian Labor Force Level - Foreign Born, and Civilian Labor Force Level - Native Born; all Index with 2008-01-01=100; 2007-01-01 to 2025-04-01). Shaded areas are recessions.

[IX] **McKinsey Global Institute** ("first wave regions" are those where working-age populations have begun to decline).

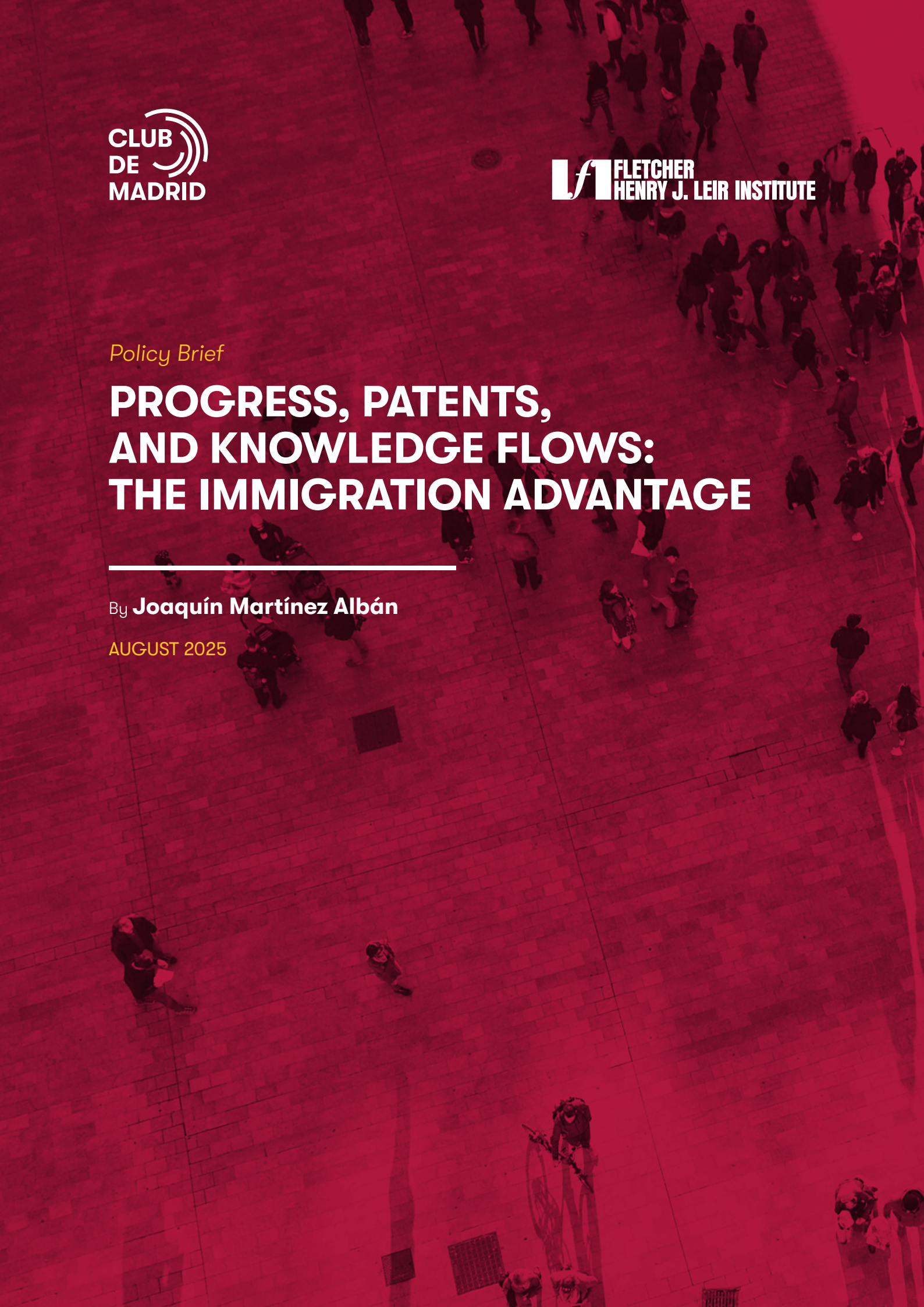
[X] For example, but not limited to, class, sex, gender, gender identity, sexuality, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, ideology, geography of origin, and disability.

[XI] Productivity growth and low-skill immigration may also *not* be complementary if the productivity growth in a sector is derived from skills-biased technological change. Under these circumstances, higher-skill workers would be necessary to properly harness sectoral productivity improvements.

[XII] **The Future of Saving: The Role of Pension System Design in an Aging World**, pp. 10 (point 10) and 12 (Box 1).

[XIII] **World Bank Databank**, ***population estimates and projections*** (Country: all; Series: "Age dependency ratio (percent of working-age population)"; Time: 1975, 2000, 2025, 2050; percentages divided by 100 to obtain ratios).

[XIV] **U.S. Census Bureau**, Projections for the United States: 2023 to 2100 (Comparison Table A, row 36).



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FLETCHER HENRY J. LEIR INSTITUTE

Policy Brief

PROGRESS, PATENTS, AND KNOWLEDGE FLOWS: THE IMMIGRATION ADVANTAGE

By **Joaquín Martínez Albán**

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Joaquín Martínez Albán *is a member of the research team that has developed this report for Club de Madrid and the Leir Institute, under the supervision of Fletcher School Professor* ***Katrina Burgess*** *and Fletcher School Professor and Club de Madrid Member* ***Carlos Alvarado****.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores how migration impacts macroeconomic growth, innovation, and tax revenue. It also surveys migrant entrepreneurship trends and the impact of remittances on origin countries. The brief argues that immigration can be an advantage for recipient countries. However, this depends on (1) how countries navigate short-term political pressures in favor of long-term economic benefits; (2) insulating migration policies from electorally driven discourse; and (3) communicating the benefits of migration through a pragmatic, data-driven approach.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief analyses the economic effects of migration looking at five pillars: (1) macroeconomic growth, (2) innovation, (3) tax revenue, (4) entrepreneurship, and (5) remittances. The brief also surveys the risks policy-makers face when instituting migration reform. The analysis will draw examples from developed and developing economies, providing a diversified regional focus to show trends and offer general suggestions of how countries can design successful migration policies.

PILLAR 1: MACROECONOMIC GROWTH

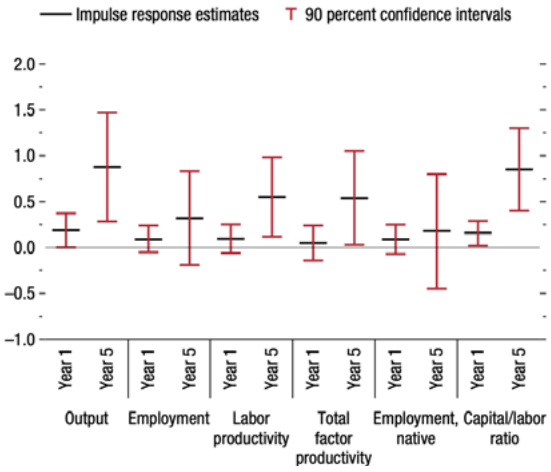
Macroeconomic growth brings progress and improves living conditions. This section covers studies of the impact on macroeconomic growth of three migration-related variables: (1) immigration flows; (2) immigrant stocks (as a share of the population); and (3) immigration policy orientation (closed vs. open).

Regarding flows, Piazza et al. (2020) report mixed results depending on the country's level of development. In developed economies, their analysis of six macroeconomic ratios over a five-year period shows that large-scale immigration waves contribute to economic growth in the long run. They find that a 1% increase in migration inflow increases GDP by almost 1%. Likewise, a 1% increase in migration inflow increases employment by 0.4% and labor productivity by 0.5%.

They find no evidence of local employment decreasing over the five-year period. In fact, a 1% increase in migration inflow actually increases native employment by 0.2%. This occurs principally because, as migrants arrive, native workers move to more specialized and complex tasks, gaining from specialization of labor.

The outlook is different for developing countries faced with large-scale immigration waves. Specifically, Piazza et al. (2020) look at Colombia, Jordan, and Lebanon, each of which had a migration wave equivalent to at least 4% of the population. Migrants in these countries face higher obstacles to formal employment, which relegates them to the informal sector or excludes them from the labor force entirely. Moreover, these economies were already suffering from "negative spillover effects in neighboring countries" that left them vulnerable to negative migration shocks (Piazza et al. 2020, 92). Therefore, the positive results for migration to developed economies are not observed in developing economies struggling to absorb large numbers of migrants.

Figure 4.17. Macroeconomic Effects of Migrant Inflows in Advanced Economies
(Percent)

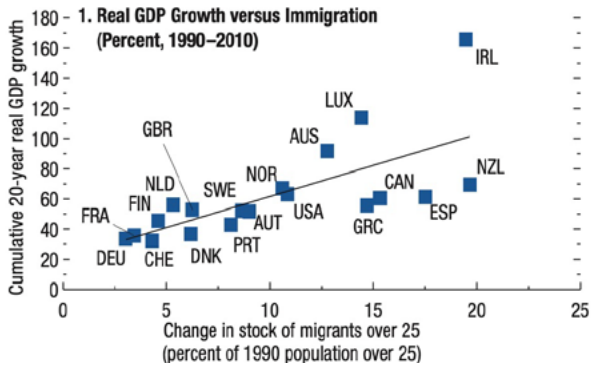


Source: Piazza et al. (2020), 90

Regarding stocks, wealthy countries that have historically hosted a higher percentage of immigrants over time exhibit stronger GDP growth. Vesperoni et al. (2017) plot the migrant population as a percentage of total population against GDP growth in 18 OECD countries over 25 years. They find that, for the period 1990 - 2010, countries that increased their migrant stock had higher GDP growth over the long term.

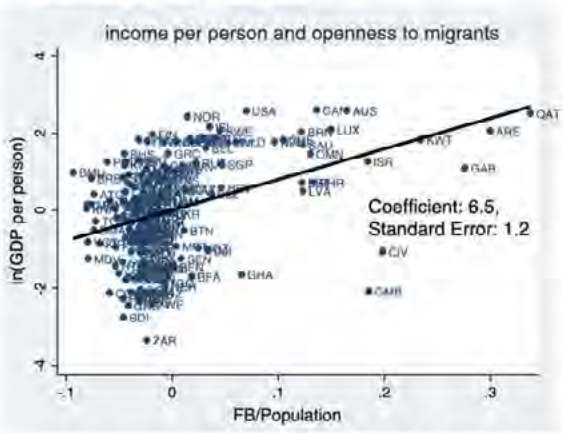
Regarding policy orientation, Ortega and Peri (2014) study the effects of open vs. closed immigration policies on macroeconomic performance in 188 countries. They rank these countries on the openness of their immigration policies using closely associated estimator variables. Here they note that if a country with policies at the 10th percentile of openness were to adopt policies at the 90th percentile of openness, their long-run income per capita would increase by 70%.

Figure 4.16. Determinants of Migration

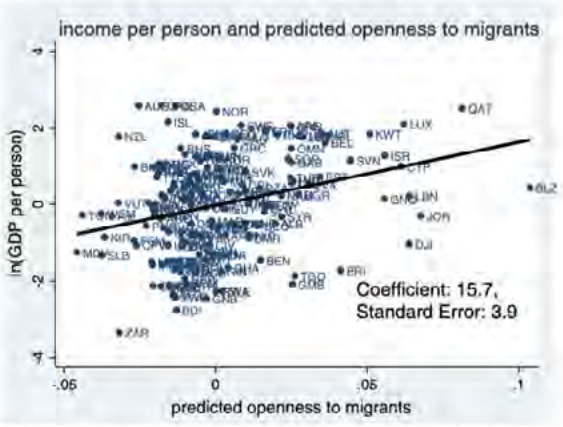


Source: Vesperoni et al (2016), 186

A) MSH and GDP per person



B) Gravity-predicted MSH and GDP per person



Note: The scatterplot shows each variable after adjusting for logarithm of population and area. The predictor for inmigration share used is the linear gravity predictor.

Source: Ortega and Peri (2014), 239.

Openness to migration plays an active role in "accounting for cross-country differences in income per capita" when isolating for other variables (Ortega and Peri 2014, 232). The authors argue that a 1% increase in immigration as a percentage of the total population increases the host country's per capita average income by 6%. Enhanced productivity is the principal factor allowing long-term income growth. This effect appears to hold across levels of development.

One of the most interesting findings from this analysis is that countries should pursue migration openness **even if current macroeconomic performance is slow** because growth will follow. Waiting for the economy to improve before adopting open immigration policies will delay potential macroeconomic growth.

By contrast, mass deportations are likely to have a considerable negative impact on growth, causing short-term labor market shocks that provoke shortages and/or inflationary pressures as natives demand higher wages to substitute for migrant labor (American Immigration Council 2024).

PILLAR 2: INNOVATION

Innovation is a complicated concept to measure, but it plays a critical role in increasing economic productivity. One common indicator of innovation is patents. This section analyzes studies that examine (1) the impact of migration on patent filings; and (2) the complex relationship between mobility and human capital.

Bahar et al. (2022) analyze the relationship between work-related migration reforms and patent filings by multinational enterprises (MNEs) in 15 countries across development levels from 1990 to 2016. They find that when countries encourage inventor mobility by adopting open immigration policies, the patents filed by MNE subsidiaries in that country increase. Specifically, a 1% increase in Global Mobile Inventors causes a 1.8% increase in patents filed.

They find the oppositive effect when countries adopt reforms that discourage inventor mobility by adopting closed immigration policies, Here they estimate that each negative reform decreases patents filed by MNE subsidiaries in that country by 24%. They find, moreover, that negative reform has stronger marginal effects than positive reform, signaling that countries that actively discourage immigration have destructive effects on innovation levels.

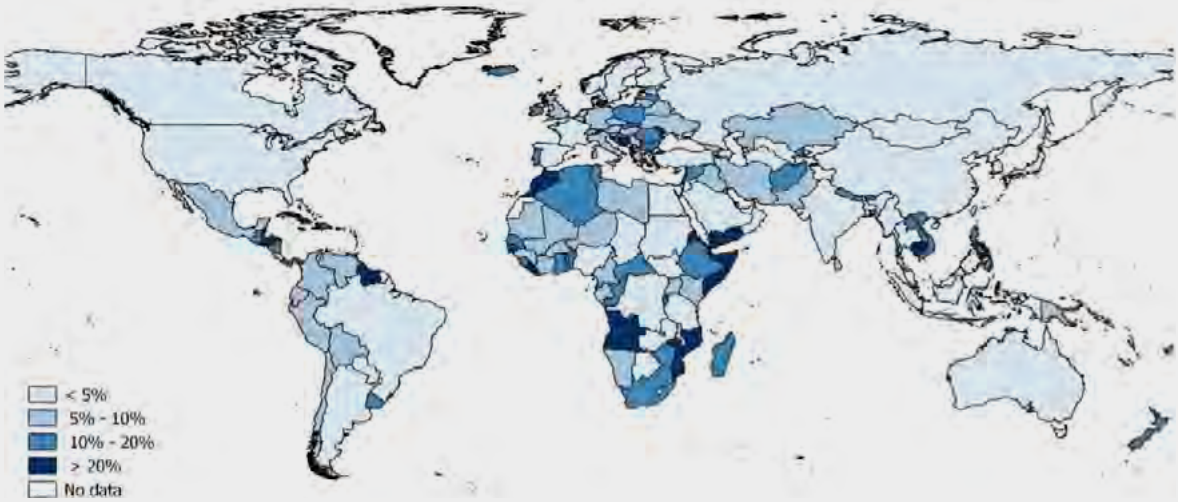
These results are not limited to developed countries. The authors find that at least half of the global knowledge production in emerging markets is caused by positive migration reform. These economies have benefited from welcoming highly educated individuals who have consistently filed patents with benefits that spread through the host country. Likewise, the research highlights the clear relationship between policies that deter human mobility through closed immigration policies and the detrimental effects on local knowledge production.

At a more local level, Buchardi et al. (2021) analyze the effect of immigration on patents in the United States by looking at county-level data. The authors use simple regression models to estimate the positive and negative effects over a five-year period to look for the closest causal relations, controlling for momentary economic downturns. They find that a 1% increase in immigration caused a 1.7% increase in patents filed by individuals in the area. Neighboring counties also have measurable increases in patent fillings, signaling that the initial benefits expand beyond the site of immigration.

Moreover, the increased patent filings attributable to immigration spill over into productivity and wage growth for native workers. Because innovation follows a virtuous circle, "the positive impact of higher innovation and labor productivity on wages gradually builds over time and becomes dominant" (Buchardi et al. 2021, 33). An important caveat is that immigrants' education level is one of the most important predictors for patent filings and, relatedly, local wage increases.

In a survey of patents filed in eight developed economies, Lissoni and Miguelez (2024) find that highly-educated immigrants make an especially notable contribution to innovation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). They also report that the percentage of patents filed by migrant inventors has increased over time in North America and Europe. They conclude that "senior and highly experienced migrant inventors may play a key role in transferring knowledge from their home countries to their host ones" (Lissoni and Miguelez 2024, 48).

Figure 10. Emigration rates of the highly educated to OECD countries, 2015/16



Source: OECD (2020)

The previous point raises concerns that poorer countries are losing the very people they need to boost development. Historically, economists understood migration as a zero-sum game whereby one country's "brain gain" was another's "brain drain." As the map above shows, the emigration rate of highly educated individuals is over 20% in more than a dozen countries (OECD 2020). This loss of talent is especially salient for countries that have the educational infrastructure to produce high-skilled workers but struggle to create commensurate opportunities in the labor market.

The traditional solution has been **brain train and retention** whereby countries seek to retain trained talent within their political borders to contribute to development (Shin and Moon 2018). However, this approach overlooks the fluid and multidirectional relationship between mobility and human capital. Shin and Moon (2018) propose a revised conceptual framework that considers gains from high-skilled emigration through 'brain circulation' and 'brain linkages'.

1.

BRAIN CIRCULATION:
Sending citizens to study abroad so they can return with increased skills and knowledge.

2.

BRAIN LINKAGES:
Encouraging high-skilled emigrants to transmit knowledge and resources back to the origin country through business trips, short-term stays, foreign investment, or remittances.

As high-skilled migrants reap the income premium from working abroad, they become better equipped to provide the capital required to finance development back home (see Pillar 5). Those who return either temporarily or permanently also bring acquired knowledge and networks that disseminate into the local economy. To encourage this outcome, developing countries are increasingly funding advanced education in internationally renowned universities – especially in STEM fields – for students who commit to return home to apply their new-found skills. Bilateral circular migration programs are also gaining momentum because they allow migrants from both countries to engage in advanced sectors in the host country while allowing them to eventually return and apply specialized industry knowledge in the origin country.

Economists also point to an **indirect brain gain** that occurs when citizens invest in training for opportunities abroad. While some of them will migrate, Batista et al. (2025, 1) find that "migration opportunities often increase human capital stock in origin countries" (p. 1). For example, when the United States expanded visa availability for nurses, enrollment in nursing schools in the Philippines surged, expanding the overall stock of tertiary-educated labor and producing nine new nurses for every one who emigrated. Similarly, when the United States eased the H1-B visa cap, Indians acquired computer science skills at a higher rate, producing a 10% increase in the earnings of Indians working in the United States (some of which they remitted back home) and a 5.8% increase in IT employment in India (Batista et al. 2025, 4).

PILLAR 3: TAX REVENUE

As countries grow, it is critical that they expand their tax revenue base accordingly. This section examines the net fiscal contribution of immigrants in Europe and the United States, which tends to exceed that of native-born residents because of immigrants' relative youth and lack of eligibility for social programs. The section concludes with a brief discussion of the fiscal implications of providing pathways to regularization (see Policy Brief #3).

Boffi, Suari-Andreau, and van Vliet (2024) use the concept of net fiscal positions (NFP) to compare the tax contributions and fiscal benefits received by immigrants in 15 European countries. They find that immigrants on average were net fiscal recipients but still received fewer benefits than the average native in two-thirds of the countries. Interestingly, migrants were net fiscal contributors in the other third. Overall, they find that "highly skilled migrants are most often net contributors, whereas low-skilled migrants or refugees are mostly net recipients" (Boffi, Suari-Andreau, and van Vliet 2024, 4).

The scenario plays out somewhat differently in the United States where access to welfare is more restricted. According to a Cato Institute update of a report by the National Academy of Science, U.S. immigrants contribute nearly $300 billion more than they receive in cash assistance, entitlements, and public education (Bier 2023). Low-skilled workers in particular are more likely to be undocumented and therefore net fiscal recipients. For instance, undocumented immigrants paid close to $55 billion in federal taxes and $33 billion in state and local taxes in 2023 but will receive little to no welfare benefits or entitlements in return for their contribution (unless they have U.S.-born children) (American Immigration Council 2025). Refugees and asylum seekers are also net fiscal contributors to the tune of $124 billion between 2005 and 2019 (Ghertner, Macartney, and Dost 2024).

Providing undocumented immigrants with legal pathways may reduce this fiscal advantage in the short run by requiring higher social expenditures. In the long run, however, it is likely to reap significant fiscal benefits. The formal labor market pays higher wages, on average, than the non-formal labor market where many undocumented immigrants are stuck working. Moreover, formalizing economic activity enables states to regulate, tax, and control these businesses. Finally, regularization pulls previously undocumented immigrants into the formal banking system, which increases their access to financing and allows further control and oversight.

With a regular status, migrants receive not only higher income but also economic stability which is crucial for long-term income growth. They also gain greater access to educational programs that further enhance human capital, leading to even higher wages (and tax revenues) in the long-term (Christensen Gee, Gardner, and Wiehe 2016). This creates a reinforcing cycle whereby tax revenue is expanded through payroll taxes while the country reaps the benefits of upwardly mobile immigrants. Unleashing this potential is especially critical in countries facing demographic decline (see Policy Brief #1).

PILLAR 4: ENTREPRENEURSHIP

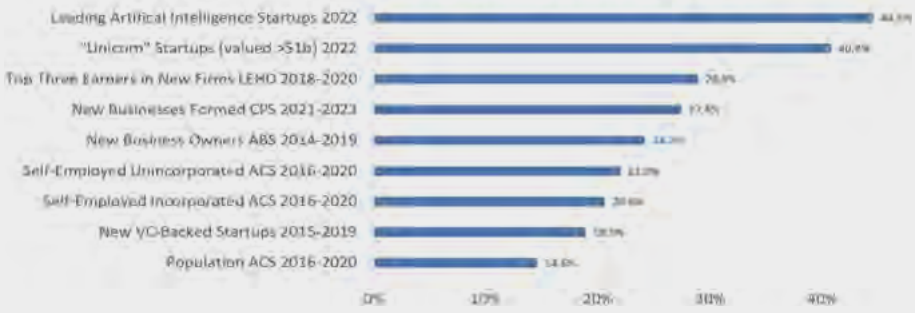
There is a politically charged notion that migrants 'take away' from natives by crowding out the labor market. However, in most situations, migration is a precursor to business-creation. This section examines (1) how the migrant population participates in new business creation and (2) the types of businesses migrants are creating.

Anyone who has visited an immigrant neighborhood can attest to the prevalence of immigrant-owned businesses. In the OECD, immigrants are more likely than native-born to be self-employed in two-thirds of countries, particularly Colombia, Central and Eastern Europe, Canada, the United States, Portugal, and Spain. From 2011 to 2021, self-employed immigrants created more than 3.9 million jobs, accounting for 15% of total employment growth. In 2022, the OECD hosted 10 million migrant entrepreneurs (OECD 2024).

The United States and Canada have especially high rates of business formation by immigrants. Fairlie (2024) finds that the rate of new business formation by immigrants in the United States increased from 13.3% in 1996 to 30.9% in 2023. This evidence suggests that immigrants are increasingly starting their own businesses instead of relying on the traditional labor market. Rather than taking away jobs, they are creating them through new business formation.

Similarly, Chodavadia et al. (2024, 15) find "an upward trend over time in the share of immigrant entrepreneurship" as a percentage of economically active population in the U.S. from 18.7% in 2007 to 24.2% in 2019. Most importantly, immigrants are creating high value-add businesses associated with STEM fields and technology. For instance, the authors find that migrants are responsible for over 44.5% of "Leading Artificial Intelligence Startups" and 40.8% of Unicorn startups. Notably, immigrants create 27.4% of new businesses, but they only represent 14.6% of the total population.

Figure 1b: Immigrant share of US entrepreneurship by types



Source: Chodavadia et al (2024), 28

PILLAR 5: REMITTANCES

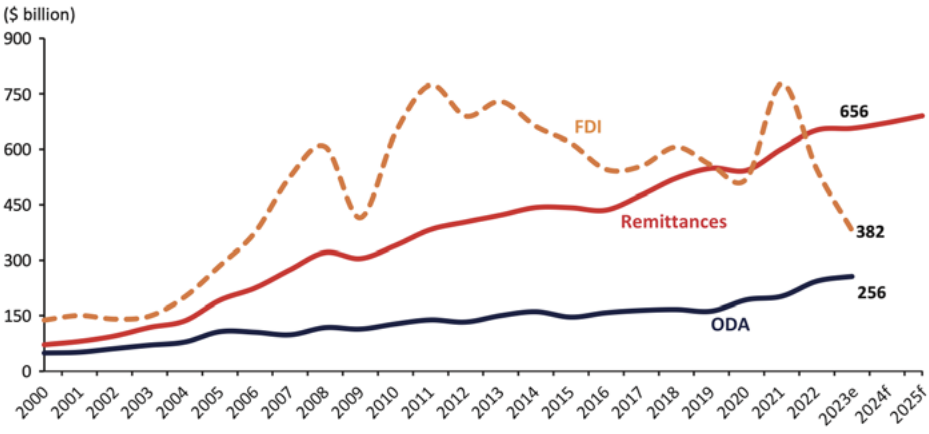
With the exception of brain circulation and brain linkages, previous sections focus primarily on the impact of migration on host countries. However, migrant remittances have a profound economic effect on origin countries. Often received by poorer segments of the population, remittances are transferred without government intervention and constitute one of the "largest sources of development capital" in developing economies (Howard 2023, 321).

The latest available data from 2023 measured global remittance flows at $857 billion (World Bank 2024) which is just slightly below Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) at $1.3 trillion (UNCTAD 2024). That year, more than 60 low and middle-income countries had remittances inflows accounting for at least 3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank 2023). The share is much higher in many smaller countries. In El Salvador, for example, remittances are equivalent to around 24% of GDP (EU Global Diaspora Facility 2022). These funds contribute significantly to the national economy by increasing "domestic savings and easing credit constraints" (Vespero et al. 2017, 192).

Sending remittances has historically faced barriers and high costs. For example, banks and other financial services often charge a high margin of sent income. In 2015, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda established the goal of reducing the sending cost of remittances below 3% and eliminating low-volume remittance corridors with costs of 5% of sent income (United Nations 2015). Nonetheless, despite the benefits of technological advances, the average cost to send $200 to low and middle-income countries in 2023 was 6.4%, more than double the 3% threshold established in the Action Agenda (World Bank 2024).

Thus, governments have yet to create the financial infrastructure that ensures "cheaper, faster, and safer transfer of remittances in both source and recipient countries" (United Nations 2015, 20). For instance, coordination between financial regulators in sending and receiving countries could ensure that non-bank service providers promote conditions for cheaper solutions. From a conceptual standpoint, it is crucial that developing countries understand the increasing importance of remittance flows in their sometimes-fragile economies.

Figure 1.1 Remittances Larger than FDI and ODA Combined in 2023



Source: World Bank/KNOMAD staff estimates.
Note: f = forecast; FDI = foreign direct investment; ODA = official development assistance.

Source: (World Bank 2024, 2)

CONCLUSION

While open migratory policies create long-term benefits, they require time before success can be measured through formal economic indicators. They also require continuity that transcends electoral cycles (Benton, Banulescu-Bodgan, and Hooper 2025). In the meantime, policy makers face short-term political pressures to deliver results, and opposition parties have an opening to engage in slash and burn discourses arguing the negative effects of migration.

In this context, short-term programs like bilateral circular migration schemes, if managed well, can show positive results in a shorter time period. These programs are easily implemented within typical electoral cycles, and their impacts on local economies are almost immediate, allowing decision-makers an immediate feedback loop to argue for the positive effects of migration at large. The positive results of these schemes can serve as initial evidence for skeptics of the benefits of adopting open migratory policies more broadly.

Moreover, as argued in Policy Brief #4, democracies need to navigate the electorally motivated negative discourse around migration. It is likely that nationalist and populist politicians will continue to characterize migration as a 'chaotic liability', especially during moments of economic downturn (Buchardi et al. 2021). Even worse, 'availability bias' makes it easier for voters to recall situations associated with negative effects of migration portrayed in politically driven messaging, even if they are statistically insignificant.

One avenue is to treat migratory policy as a long-term public policy investment. Distancing migratory policy decisions from partisan political spaces and moving them into the realm of independent, non-partisan institutions provide more stability. The same independence and separation that characterize monetary policy decision-making would allow evidence, rather scoring political points, to be the driving force of new decisions.

Another avenue is to reap mutual gains through regional and global partnerships. Besides encouraging brain gain, circulation, and linkages, such partnerships could improve efficiencies through mobile welfare benefits, reduced transaction costs for remittances, and expedited licensing for high-skilled immigrants (see Policy Brief #3). These partnerships should include an important role for diasporas, who bring valuable resources, knowledge, and networks to the table and are uniquely positioned to serve as interlocutors.

Finally, while macroeconomic growth brings progress and improves living conditions, the perception of progress and fairness is equally as important, especially for those subgroups whose economic conditions might not be improving. Reducing the perceived threat of migrants as welfare-seeking will provide economically struggling subgroups assurance that their conditions are not perpetuated by incoming migrants. Most importantly, quick economic integration is likely to strengthen social cohesion too, as migrants engage in social interactions with locals as a part of their everyday routine.

The integration of "harder-to-employ" individuals into the labor market to reduce welfare net-outflows is particularly important. As their economic integration transforms a net budget outflow into a new budget inflow, the populist 'liability' discourse is weakened significantly. As migrants create businesses, file patents, and generate tax revenue, they become active contributors to the economic prosperity of their adopted country on its path to macroeconomic growth, innovation and progress.

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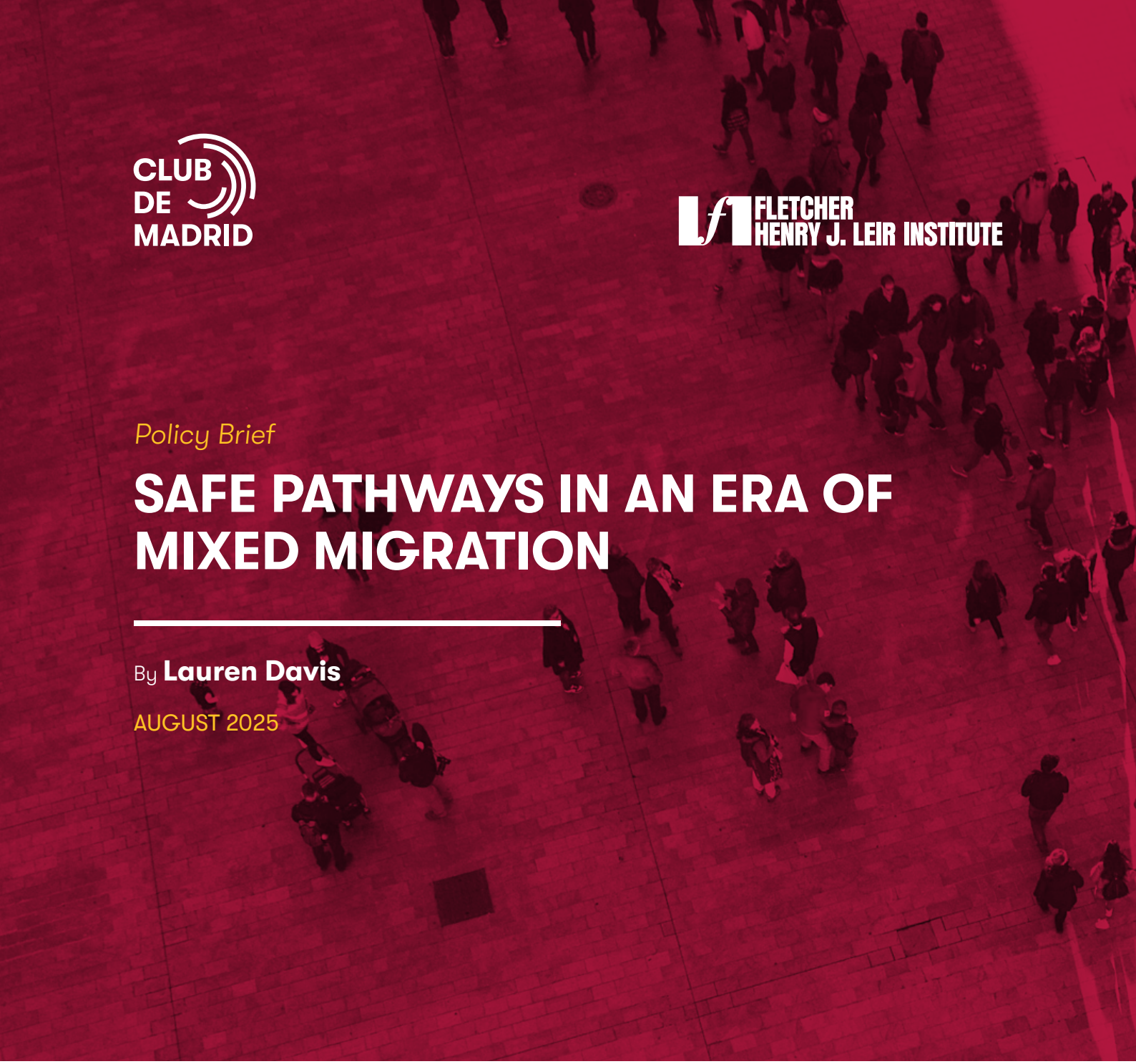

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Policy Brief

SAFE PATHWAYS IN AN ERA OF MIXED MIGRATION

By **Lauren Davis**

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"The evidence shows overwhelmingly that long-term, regular pathways will better protect migrant rights, they will better enable governments to plan for and manage movements in an orderly way, and they will support economic development in the countries that the migrants are coming from, as well as the countries that migrants are going to. Now, ultimately, it is up to all of you, it's up to you as governments to create the policies that will enable those regular pathways."

-Amy E. Pope, IOM Director General (IOM 2024b)

***Lauren Davis** is a member of the research team that has developed this report for Club de Madrid and the Leir Institute, under the supervision of Fletcher School Professor **Katrina Burgess** and Fletcher School Professor and Club de Madrid Member **Carlos Alvarado**.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores the global use of complementary or safe pathways to resettle migrant populations, including those potentially eligible for refugee protections, and makes recommendations for best practices according to existing data and various example programs. It does so while accounting for mixed migration across all categories. These are grouped into (1) humanitarian protections that are available en route or on a shorter time horizon, and (2) non-humanitarian pathways which include three of the four umbrella areas of safe pathways—education, labor, and family reunification—as well as regularization and general recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Safe pathways is an umbrella term for **alternative or complementary migration tracks, statuses, and resources for individuals in transit from their country of origin to an eventual host country**. Such pathways recognize the protection needs of particular migrants, as well as of all migrants in transit, and by various methods address the dangers of irregular migration (IOM 2024b). Such pathways are necessary to protect migrants who otherwise lack regular status, whether because they are ineligible for existing programs, because they need to reach their destination before applying, or for other reasons.

Migrants without permission to enter, transit through, and/or reside in a country face a plethora of challenges, including reliance on smugglers, barriers to formal work, lack of access to basic services, inhumane detention, vulnerability to violence and exploitation, and a greater risk of dying in inhospitable terrain such as the Darien jungle, the Arizona desert, and the Mediterranean Sea. These conditions enrich criminal actors and increase migrants' dependence on humanitarian assistance. In the process, these actors harm local communities as well as the migrants themselves. Existing global legal protection mechanisms such as the 1951 Refugee Convention inadequately address the present reality of migration, leaving individuals at risk without protection.

This problem is magnified by the phenomenon of **mixed migration**, which refers to the **multiple and various motivations, strategies, pathways, and legal statuses of migrating individuals** (Burgess 2023). Mixed migration recognizes that both individuals and groups of migrants combine various statuses, goals, and vulnerabilities at one time as well as throughout stages of their journeys (Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009). These individuals, who may and often do combine economic, protection, and other motives for migrating, are poorly served by the existing, bifurcated international legal regime established by the 1951 Refugee Convention. The nuance of lived experiences of migration and the struggle to conform to existing, incomplete policy channels forces mixed migrants outside of protected categories and pathways into irregular or indefinite status as well as reliance on smugglers and more dangerous routes. Aside from the obvious physical danger to individuals, such uncertainty takes a psycho-social toll on migrants that can inhibit the myriad benefits that both host nations and migrants can expect from regular migration. Mixed migration is not new or necessarily a problem, but it highlights the ways in which existing policies fall short of both domestic and international expectations (Shachar 2020).

> **Safe pathways can help migrants avoid the dangers of irregular migration and maximize their well-being and contributions once they arrive at their destination.**

Such reformed or new pathways should facilitate mixed migration and recognize the benefits of regular migration rather than focus on stopping flows. They are especially necessary in the face of overwhelming demand for traditional refugee resettlement and in-country asylum (Clemens 2022).

At the end of 2024, there were 123.2 million forcibly displaced people around the world. 73.5 million of these are internally displaced, 36.8 million are refugees, and 8.4 million are asylum seekers. This leaves nearly 6 million people in need of international protection, while only 188,800 of the 36.8 million refugees were resettled that year (UNHCR 2019). In the United States during the same period, the asylum backlog reached nearly 2.8 million pending cases, and the number continues to increase annually (Batalova 2025). Existing asylum systems lack the capacity to process the number of claims they receive, while also rendering most applicants ineligible because they fall outside the narrow definition of "refugee." Nor do these systems reflect the reality that individuals decide to migrate for various and multifaceted reasons that are rarely neatly categorized.

This brief recommends two tracks for providing safe pathways to migrants who do not benefit either from ordinary legal migration pathways or from international protection mechanisms. Safe pathways that are more adequate to mixed migration flows will benefit migrants and countries of origin, transit, and destination.

1.

The first track involves **humanitarian protections** designed to avoid or ameliorate the difficult journeys that irregular migrants must otherwise make. Such protections offer short-term relief but do not provide durable solutions to displacement.

2.

The second track involves **alternative pathways** usually linked to so-called "economic" or "voluntary" migration, specifically **education, labor, regularization, and family reunification**. These pathways could alleviate some of the pressures on refugee and asylum systems by offering displaced migrants an alternative that aligns with one of their other reasons for migrating. If designed well, they could also facilitate immigrant integration and thus the myriad benefits identified in the other briefs in this series.

TRACK 1: HUMANITARIAN PROTECTIONS

Humanitarian protections can take two forms: (a) providing food, shelter, medical care, psychological support, and other needs-based assistance to migrants on the move; and (b) creating legal pathways for safe passage to the migrant's destination.

A. HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Transit states face growing demands to respond to the needs of mixed migrants, leading to the proliferation of new programs (GIZ 2025; IOM 2021; MIRPS 2022; Schmidtke and Yates 2024; UNICEF 2024) . Most funding for these programs is provided by NGOs or international organizations (UNHCR, UNICEF, etc.) rather than governments, although the United States (until January 2025) and the European Union have contributed a sizable share of the funding. The most notable exceptions are emergency shelters set up by transit states when migrant flows suddenly increase.

Government-run shelters can provide vital support to vulnerable migrants, but they have been criticized for operating more like detention centers and prioritizing control over care. This is especially likely when the shelters are run by immigration enforcement agents rather than social service providers, a practice which unfortunately has been commonplace in North Africa and the Sahel with terrible consequences for migrants (Amnesty International 2024; MSF 2023; Signer 2021). The 1951 Refugee Convention outlines minimum standards for the treatment of refugees as including the right to housing, work, and education while displaced (UN General Assembly 1966). Although the Convention does not require such protections for other migrants, it is underpinned by a certain respect for human rights which should be due to any individual regardless of their status, particularly given the prevalence of mixed migration flows today.

The governments of Panama and Costa Rica set up temporary care centers in the Darien province of Panama (**ETRM**) and on the southern border of Costa Rica (**CATEM**). These shelters provided access to safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation, protection services, and referrals to meet humanitarian needs. Migrants passing through were registered by the government and received assistance in organizing their continued movement by bus. Each shelter was supported by INGOs such as the Red Cross and UNICEF.

The Honduran government provided temporary housing for migrants in transit through its **Centers for Assistance to Irregular Migrants (CAMI)**. With support from international organizations, the CAMIs provided shelter, basic necessities, medical care, and other assistance.

Djibouti's 2021 **First National Strategy on Migration** includes awareness and provision for the humanitarian and protection needs of migrants in transit. Djibouti's Human Rights Commission, in coordination with the **Better Migration Management program** funded by the European Union and Germany, established a complaint mechanism to curb human trafficking as well as several centers for the provision of information to and documentation of migrants transiting through Djibouti. Such centers also provide referrals to migrants looking to access services such as accommodation and medical care, although this was not provided directly by the program.

Source: GIZ (2025); IOM (202)1; MIRPS (202)2; Schmidtke and Yates (2024); UNICEF (2024)

B. HUMANITARIAN LEGAL PATHWAYS

Humanitarian legal pathways are temporary regularization schemes that enable migrants to take faster, safer routes to their destination. By allowing migrants to avoid smugglers and hostile terrain, these schemes save lives, reduce irregular migration, and weaken smuggling networks (EU 2020). Among the most common are provisional documentation, humanitarian admission, humanitarian visas, and community sponsorship (UNHCR 2019).

These schemes work differently in each country, but we can group them according to how they affect migrant journeys. One group includes schemes to regularize migrants on the move through transit countries (IOM 2024a; Triandafyllidou, Bartolini, and Guidi 2019). The other group includes schemes to allow migrants and refugees to request and receive protective status before they embark on these dangerous journeys (Hovil, Bueno, and Hernández Gamboni 2024; ICF and Migration Policy Institute 2018; IRAP 2024). This approach has two potential advantages. First, those who are successful can fly directly to their destination, thereby avoiding the costs, dangers, and trauma of irregular migration. Second, those who think they might be successful are likely to delay their departure and forego hiring a smuggler.

- **Humanitarian Visitor's Card** created by the Mexican government to enable migrants to work and transit safely through the country.
- **Provisional National Migration Registration Document** created by the Brazilian government to assist Venezuelan asylum-seekers without passports.
- **Mediterranean Hope**, a humanitarian corridor created by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy and the Waldensian Church in 2014 to support migrants, largely from Africa and the Middle East to integrate into their host society. This network of collaborators identify eligible individuals before they undertake to cross the Mediterranean by supporting them in applying for humanitarian visas valid for Italy.
- The European Union's **Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)** was enabled for Ukrainian migrants fleeing war to grant them certain legal status permitting them to access a variety of rights in EU member states. Such rights include access to medical care, work authorization, free movement, and education. Positively, upon activation TPD included provision for individuals granted protection in Ukraine prior to the invasion whose nationality was not Ukrainian.

Source: IOM (2024a); Triandafyllidou et al. (2019)

Safe Mobility Initiative launched by the U.S. government in June 2023 to provide free access to refugee resettlement services at offices in Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. When an individual was ineligible for refugee status, office staff would screen the individual or family for other legal pathways to the United States or other countries. This program had limited impact, however, because it lacked direct authority to grant protective status.

Humanitarian Parole used extensively by the United States to allow vetted and sponsored migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to fly directly to the United States and receive temporary work permits.

Uniting for Ukraine. A streamlined process for Ukrainian nationals fleeing the conflict between Russia and Ukraine to enter the United States and remain legally for up to two years. Requires a U.S.-based financial supporter.

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme launched by the UK government to resettle Syrian refugees with community sponsorship.

Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program adopted by the Canadian government. An organization, group of five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents, or corporation can sign up to sponsor refugee(s) outside of Canada to permanently resettle in Canada. The sponsorship lasts one year and the sponsor takes on resettlement activities typically provided by the state.

Residence for Reasons of International Humanitarian Protection adopted by Spain in 2019 in response to prolonged and large groups of Venezuelan migrants to the country. This program intends to protect those individuals denied asylum, but whom nonetheless flee socioeconomic crisis in Venezuela and ought not be returned.

Source: Hovil et al. (2024); ICF and Migration Policy Institute (2018); IRAP (2024)

If designed properly, these schemes can eliminate the requirement that migrants travel irregularly across long distances just to apply for safe pathways or protection in or nearer to their final destination. Most migrants would prefer this option unless they are forced to wait in unsafe conditions. Moreover, such schemes, if effective, could alleviate the chaotic and easily politicized arrival of large numbers of migrants at borders.

However, using extraterritorial processing to block asylum seekers—or, worse, to detain returnees—rather than to grant them safe passage does more harm than good and should be discouraged. Here are some examples (Leclerc, Mentzelopoulou, and Orav 2024):

- EU Migration Transit Centers proposed by several EU members to process asylum applications extraterritorially. These proposals have never been adopted, however, because of concerns about their legality under international law and the human rights implications.

- Regional Processing Agreements between Australia and third countries such as Cambodia, Nauru, and Papua New Guinea to process refugee claims extraterritorially. These agreements have raised the same concerns as the proposed EU Migration Transit Centers, especially now that they are being converted into to “return hubs” for deported asylum seekers.

TRACK 2: NON-HUMANITARIAN PATHWAYS

Not even the best humanitarian mechanisms can address the mismatch between supply and demand: in the current contextual framework of mixed migration, more migrants are in need of protection than the existing refugee and asylum systems can offer. It therefore behooves states to explore alternative (non-humanitarian) pathways for safe mobility. Fortunately, such pathways already exist in the form of educational visas, work permits, family reunification, and regularization.

> **Rather than being exclusively for "voluntary" migrants, these pathways should be part of a holistic response to migrants with multifaceted reasons for leaving home.**

A. EDUCATION

Pathways to status for education purposes provide an individual with the opportunity to study in another country based on conditions and for a duration defined by the government of the host nation. This may take the form of private, community, or institution-based scholarships; apprenticeship or traineeship programs; or common qualification frameworks (Clemens, Dempster, and Gough 2019; IOM 2024b; UNHCR 2019).

The benefits of education-based migration include fostering innovation, strengthening global ties, and supporting economic development in both the host nation and the country of origin if the migrant returns (see Policy Brief #2) (IOM 2024b). Challenges include higher tuition fees and quotas for international students, as well as eligibility restrictions based on academic discipline.

Another limitation is that education-based migration tends to prioritize highly educated and multilingual individuals rather than the most vulnerable. For this reason, it is important to emphasize that education and other complementary pathways must be recognized as an addition to rather than a replacement for traditional resettlement and asylum systems (Hashimoto 2021; ICF and Migration Policy Institute 2018). Moreover, even those seeking protection who do qualify may need additional support in the form of funding for travel, accommodation, and subsistence in addition to language training, cultural orientation, and psychosocial support (IOM 2024b; UNHCR 2019).

ECUADOR

Ecuador's Council of Higher Education regulates tertiary education and issued the Regulations Governing Degrees and Diplomas Obtained at Foreign Institutions to guide migrants and returning nationals in transferring qualifications

SOUTHERN AFRICA

Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework. A common qualification framework to facilitate worker movement between Southern African nations to meet labor market demands

JAPAN

Government of Japan Initiative for the Future of Syrian Refugees. Permits students as primary migrants to bring their spouses and children during their studies

GERMANY

A pilot program of privately funded partnerships which recognizes and adds to the training of nurses from Tunisia, The Philippines, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina who are placed with German employers

Source: IOM (2024); Clemens et al. (2019)

B. LABOR

Labor migration pathways help countries to meet labor or skill shortages and build the skills of migrants, including those seeking international protection (UNHCR 2019). Many nations use a mix of national policies and bilateral agreements to meet market requirements.

The benefits for recipient nations are clear: economic migrants are key to filling labor shortages which are becoming increasingly important in aging high-income nations where migrants fill many essential roles in the service industry and care economy (IOM 2024b) (See Policy Brief #1). Spain is a great example of this, with a population growth rate higher than both the United States and the Eurozone average that is attributable to the nation's acceptance of foreign workers (ETIAS 2025; Santos 2025). Challenges include the difficulty of matching migrant skills with industry needs across borders. This misalignment of supply and demand can stymie the benefits of labor migration. In addition, many small- and medium-sized companies do not have the resources to hire abroad or are unaware of the opportunities and legal pathways to do so (Alcidi, Laurentsyeva, and Yar 2019).

Governments have a plethora of tools for creating labor-based pathways for mixed migrants. These tools are most likely to be effective if countries coordinate their efforts. Recipient nations should consider providing employer incentives, contributing to building the capacity of intermediaries in sending countries, and supporting users of other eligibility pathways in skill acquisition and job preparation (IOM 2024b). Sending countries should establish dedicated policies on emigration including in the areas of cooperation with recipient nations and the diaspora population, as well as the formalization of remittance processes (IOM 2024b).

EU LEGISLATION TO FACILITATE LABOR MIGRANT ADMISSION

SINGLE PERMIT DIRECTIVE

Merged residence and work permits and sets a time limit for application processing. Guarantees equal treatment rights and recognition of diplomas to migrants

SEASONAL WORKERS DIRECTIVE

Designed to provide needed seasonal labor while protecting seasonal workers in the EU. It is the responsibility of member states to designate sectors eligible for seasonal work. Applicants must submit a work contract or job offer specifying conditions of work as well as evidence of housing. Member states fix a maximum period of stay per twelve months.

BLUE CARD DIRECTIVE

Special entry and status for highly skilled individuals. Broader rights provided to recipients and fewer bureaucratic formalities during the application process.

DIRECTIVE ON STUDENTS AND RESEARCHERS

Harmonized rules for students, researchers, and some other fields. Provides students the option to remain and search for a job after graduation.

MOBILITY PARTNERSHIPS

Formed between the EU, a member state(s), and a third country to manage irregular migration, regular and labor migration, international protection, and migration and development. Non-binding policy frameworks are increasingly used.

Source: Alcidi et al. (2019); EUR-Lex (2014); European Commission (2014)

When skills do not match need, training in the country of origin is considered a preferable form of global skill partnership.

Origin training provides the greatest opportunity for simultaneous development impact on the country of origin and benefit to recipient nations (Clemens 2022; European Commission 2013; IOM 2024b). Compared with skilled migration and training in the destination country, origin training is less expensive and more inclusive. However, nations interested in engaging in such an agreement should carefully balance investments in training with managing expense; these factors are highly affected by sector choice and required skill level (Clemens 2022; Hooper 2019). Ideally, origin training will also include an education or skill-building track for non-migrants in the origin country to contribute to development and prevent "brain-drain" (see Policy Brief #2). It may also be beneficial to involve the private sectors in both sending and receiving nations (Clemens 2022).

Countries should also encourage circular migration, which refers to seasonal, temporary, or repetitive migration. Such mechanisms work well for agricultural and tourism sector labor such as hotels and restaurants. These opportunities reduce incentives for irregular migration, permit the circulation of skills, and fill labor needs in the host country's economy (Dayton-Johnson 2007; EUR-Lex 2014; European Commission 2014).

Finally, countries should work together to provide clear guidelines for both workers and employers to facilitate use of the programs; enhance information sharing abroad regarding opportunities and options for legal labor migration; and protect potentially vulnerable migrants from worker abuse and exploitation through careful monitoring of private facilitator or employer activities (Hooper 2019; IOM 2024b).

RWANDA

- Skilled Workers Program
- Skilled Workers in Occupations in Demand Program
- Employer Sponsored Skilled Workers Program

Separate and specific categories minimize administrative barriers for eligible labor migrants; here various forms of skilled workers

CARIBBEAN

CARICOM's Free Movement of Skills Policy and Labour Market Information System

CARICOM is working to develop a regional "Labour Market Information System" to collect, analyze, and disseminate market data for use in national and regional decision-making. This draws on the experience of the Southern African Development Community.

AUSTRALIA AND TUVALU

Falepili Union

Bilateral Agreement to collaborate on climate, *mobility with dignity, and shared security*. The "special mobility pathway" enables 280 Tuvaluan citizens annually the choice to live, work, or study in Australia.

EUROPEAN UNION

Skills Profile Tool

An online tool used by organizations engaged with migrants to map migrant skills, qualifications, and work experience and help to connect migrants with resources

Source: European Commission (2013); IOM (2024b)

C. REGULARIZATION

Migrants often enter a host nation legally but overstay their visa or fail to renew their residence permit.

> **Regularization is a process by which a country allows irregular migrants already living within its borders to obtain legal status.**

It is also referred to as amnesty or legalization (Sunderhaus 2007). The European Union does not release statistics on visa overstays, but the United States Department of Homeland Security reported a suspected rate of 1.45% of migrants overstaying in fiscal year 2023 or over 500 thousand individuals (CBP 2024).

Regularization allows migrants to more effectively exercise their human rights and contribute economically to host countries while reducing the likelihood of migrant exploitation (Allué 2023; Balcells Group 2018; CCSI 2025; Jan-Erik Refle et al. 2023; Kang Nam Labor Law Firm 2016; Women in Migration Network 2017; Yoo 2005). Furthermore, in nations with overburdened asylum systems that make migrants wait for years or decades for a final decision on their case, regularization is able to relieve some of this burden for eligible individuals (Sunderhaus 2007).

Typically, regularization programs require a combination of (1) minimum length of residence in the host-nation, (2) proof of work and social welfare contributions, (3) a clean criminal record, and (4) the payment of administrative fees to meet eligibility requirements. Although such programs can be expensive, it is important to carefully balance costs incurred by the government with costs incurred by individual migrants who may be dissuaded from applying by unattainable fees (Chaves-González et al. 2025). Successful applicants more fre-

Switzerland's **Operation Papyrus** in the canton of Geneva regularized individuals who met residence period, financial, and integration standards set by the public authorities of Geneva as well as had no criminal background. The operation lasted from February 2017 to December 2018.

The Republic of Korea in 2003-4 enacted the **Act concerning the Employment Permit for Migrant Workers** which required the government take measures to legalize the high number of low-skilled migrant workers then living and working in the country. This led to a sharp drop in the number of undocumented migrants in the Republic, as it ultimately implemented a pattern of circular migration which has been adjusted and maintained to the present day.

Spanish **Arraigo** continually permits regularization for migrants who meet certain requirements. The Arraigo system was established after a series of six massive regularization processes from 1986-2005 found public support and significant economic benefits. Criteria include residence period, employment, and social integration levels. The authorization lasts one year, may be renewed, and may be modified to a regular residence permit.

In the United States, **Temporary Protected Status (TPS)** is designated on a country by country basis by the Secretary of Homeland Security. This provides nationals of a country in crisis temporary legalization as well as permission to work. It is granted on an individual basis and may also be granted to individuals who last resided in the designated country. Every 18 months, each individual must apply to renew their TPS during a particular, designated period of time to maintain their regularization and work permit.

In 2017 Peru created the **Permiso Temporal de Permanencia** which offers one year of temporary status to Venezuelan migrants. This program required applicants to demonstrate that they entered regularly and before a deadline, as well as to prove their Venezuelan nationality. 460,000 individuals received this status and of them, roughly 315,000 went on to receive permanent resident status. A qualitative study showed that some of the remaining 145,000 individuals felt that the need to renew the status annually was inadequately communicated to them by the government of Peru.

Sources: Allué (2023); Balcells Group (2018); CCSI (2025); Chaves-González et al. (202)5; Chaves-González and Delgado (2023); Jan-Erik Refle et al. (2023); Kang Nam Labor Law Firm (2016); Sunderhaus (2007); USCIS (2025); Yoo (2005)

quently receive temporary rather than permanent residence permits, as well as permission to work. Regularization is a useful alternative to mass deportations of undocumented individuals, which most democracies find infeasible for ethical, legal, and practical reasons (Sunderhaus 2007). Furthermore, regularization may be applied on a country of origin basis, as in the United States's Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program or Peru's Permiso Temporal de Permanencia to address particular migration drivers and humanitarian concerns (Chaves-González and Delgado 2023; USCIS 2025). This can work well for nations unaccustomed to large migration flows (Chaves-González et al. 2025). Turkey did so effectively for Syrian migrants by addressing a common lack of documentation and ensuring that the most vulnerable migrants were accounted for in their regularization process specific to Syrians (Chaves-González et al. 2025).

A major challenge for regularization programs is their vulnerability to electoral cycles. Policymakers should therefore try to protect such programs by adopting them early in an administration's term and/or writing them into legislation rather than relying on executive orders. Relatedly, programs that prohibit regularized migrants from moving from temporary to permanent status prolong migrant uncertainty, prevent the host nation from reaping some of the benefits of migration, and increases the likelihood of migrants falling back into irregularity. The same effect occurs if it is unclear to migrants themselves how to make this transition when available (Chaves-González et al. 2025) or if the documentary burden for reapplication puts migrants at risk of falling back into irregular status.

Another impediment more common to migrants in need of international protection is the inability to get documentation from their country of origin or its embassy. A regularization program aiming to, for example, reduce asylum backlog ought to account for this and other needs particular to mixed migrants (Sunderhaus 2007). Likewise, regularization schemes should account for mixed migration by adopting flexible positions in terms of children born in nations different from parents and mixed or informal family units.

D. FAMILY

There are three forms of family-based migration: ***(1) family reunification after initial migration, (2) family formation or new marriage, and (3) family member accompaniment of a primary migrant entering at the same time.*** Family migration is the largest category of permanent migration to OECD countries (IOM 2024b). Its benefits include increased skill contributions to recipient country labor markets due to spouses who tend to share education levels, increased likelihood of permanence when migrant spouses work, and improved integration capacity (EU 2020; IOM 2024b). However, family migration can create an undue burden when the family member must take on responsibilities assumed by the state when a migrant is resettled via another pathway (Hashimoto 2021).

PERU

In recognition of the prevalence of nontraditional family organizations, Peru permits reunification of spouses, de facto partners, dependent children up to 28 years of age, and parents of the principal migrant

GERMANY

Uses existing family reunification pathways to facilitate the migration of Syrian and Iraqi nationals fleeing conflict. This is done by providing counseling, assistance with visa applications, and pre-departure orientation in recognition of the enhanced needs of individuals from these nations which are likely complex migrants

Sources: IOM (2024b); UNHCR (2019)

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

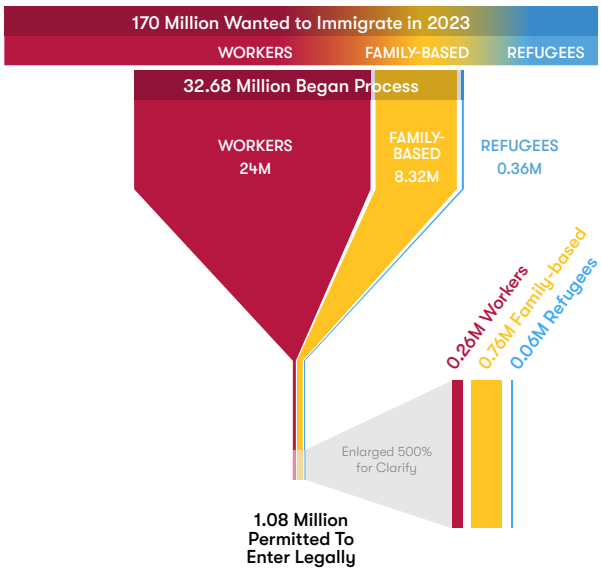
Many existing pathways face design, operation, or other challenges (CCNY 2025). Creating more specific pathways or strengthening existing ones are both effective ways of managing today's mixed migration flows while reaping the benefits of regular migration.

Reforming existing pathways and improving their efficiency can be a more budget-friendly, less public method for reaping the benefits of regular migration than introducing new pathways.

Governments can do so by (1) supporting institutional capacity for coordination of the design, implementation, and scaling of policies, and (2) promoting clear and transparent rules and regulations for regular migration through existing pathways (Alcidi, Laurentsyeva, and Yar 2019). For example, Canada offers a short survey to help potential migrants explore immigration pathway eligibility. Information regarding different pathways ought to be provided to potential migrants for free, in multiple languages, be regularly updated, and be easy to find and share (Alcidi, Laurentsyeva, and Yar 2019; Daniels 2024). One way to encourage regular migration is to enable potential migrants to access solutions independently using publicly available information and processes (UNHCR 2019). For example, online Visa services streamline the process and save costs both for the recipient country and the applicant (Alcidi, Laurentsyeva, and Yar 2019).

Another good practice is to establish an independent, credible government agency to make immigration regulation recommendations in line with national interests. An example of such an agency is the United Kingdom's Migration Advisory Committee (Clemens 2022).

Recipient countries should also consider adjusting existing pathways to meet unique at-risk and mixed migrant needs in accordance with the Refugee Convention. These include protection against refoulement, nondiscrimination and the use of objective criteria in processes, facilitation of access possibly including more flexible procedures, and confidentiality needs (UNHCR 2019). Ideally, all pathways would abide by the Global



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Source: CCNY (2025)

Compact on Refugees' participatory approach in terms of gender, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, etc. (UNHCR 2018)

Furthermore, it is important that new pathways are "...in addition and complementary to–not in place of..." traditional refugee admission. (Hashimoto 2021, 15) This means that, although new pathways may provide much needed additional resources and options, states should not neglect to update and streamline existing pathways. Similarly, international legal instruments relating to migration and migrant protection are old. As nations work to more effectively manage flows into, through, and out of their territory, **collaborative management of international migration should be fostered on a bilateral and multilateral level.**

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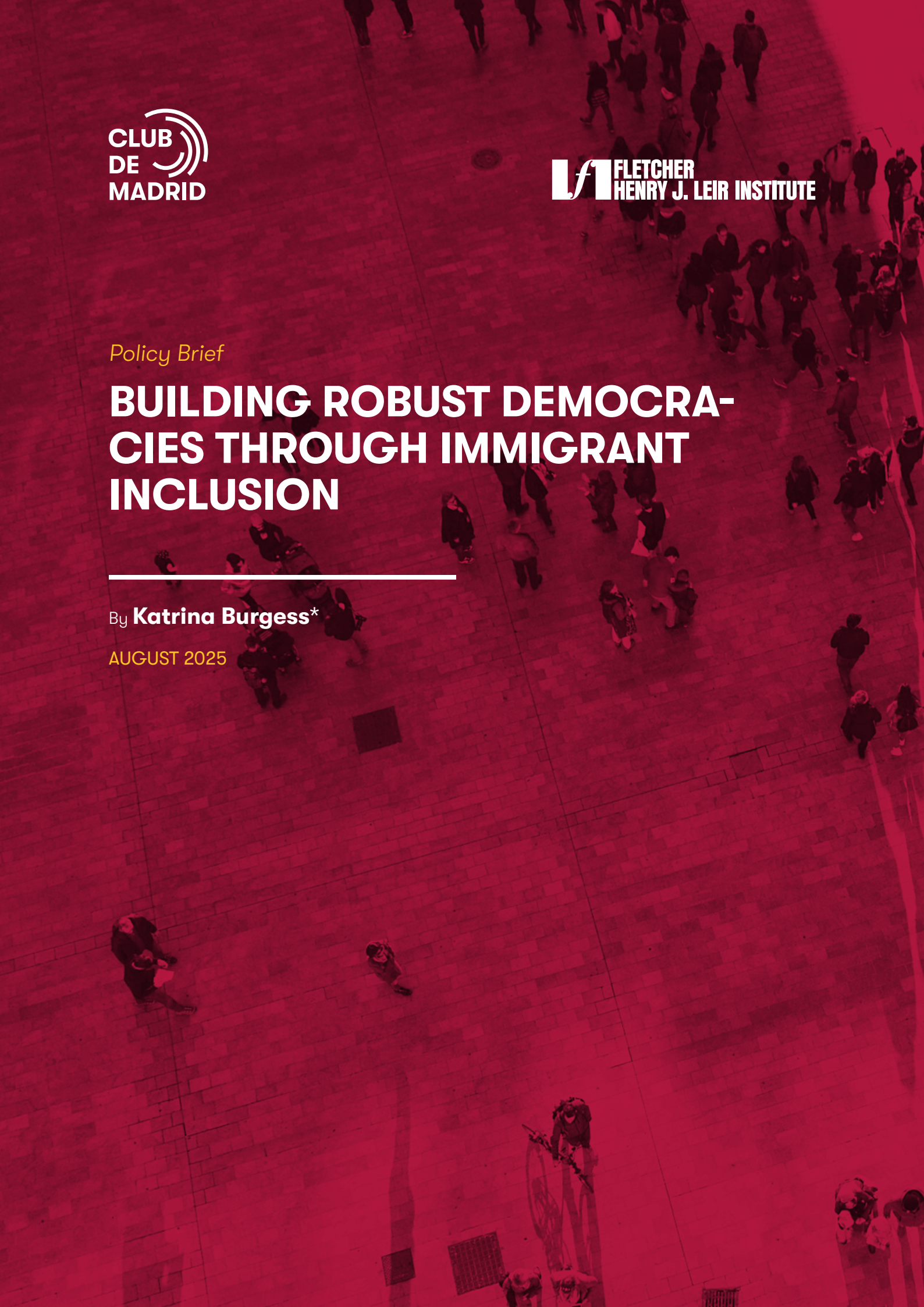

CLUB DE MADRID

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Policy Brief

BUILDING ROBUST DEMOCRACIES THROUGH IMMIGRANT INCLUSION

By **Katrina Burgess***

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Katrina Burgess *is a Professor of Political Economy at Fletcher School and has developed this Brief as a member of a Club of Madrid and Leir Institute research team.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Right wing populist parties (RWPP) are driving democratic backsliding across wealthy democracies by exploiting anti immigrant sentiment, yet evidence shows that copying their exclusionary rhetoric fails electorally and further erodes liberal norms. This brief argues that the true antidote lies in robust immigrant inclusion. Countries with comprehensive, coherent integration policies—measured by indices like MIPEX—consistently report lower xenophobia and weaker far right votes. On balance, studies find that inclusion fosters everyday contact, shrinks perceived threat, and sets off a virtuous cycle in which tolerant attitudes reinforce pro democratic governance. Mainstream parties should therefore pair humane border management with a suite of integration policies that expand the parameters of belonging and address broader quality of life concerns, thereby undercutting RWPP mobilization and fortifying democracy for all.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Freedom House, global freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024 (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2025). While most advanced industrialized democracies are still free, more than half have experienced a drop in their Freedom House scores since 2013. This backsliding is closely associated with the rise of right-wing populist parties (RWPP) that demonize and scapegoat immigrants to win votes (see Table 1).

Country	2013 Score	2024 Score	Change	RWPP Presence	RWPP Highest Vote Share
Hungary	88	65	-23	Yes	1st
Poland	93	80	-13	Yes	1st
United States	93	83	-10	Yes	1st
Israel	81	74	-7	Yes	1st
France	95	89	-6	Yes	2nd
Spain	96	90	-6	Yes	3rd
UK	97	91	-6	Yes	3rd
Austria	96	93	-3	Yes	1st
Bulgaria	81	78	-3	Yes	1st
Germany	96	93	-3	Yes	2nd

Note: Ranking is limited to high-income countries with >5 million inhabitants scored as FREE in 2013 (Freedom in the World 2025). Of the nine countries that experienced no democratic backsliding, only Italy and Switzerland have dominant RWPP.

RWPP pose a serious threat to democracy for two reasons. First, they are willing to violate and/or change the rules of the democratic game to achieve their objectives. Second, their exclusionary nativism is incompatible with the basic tenets of liberal democracy. At the heart of any democracy is the equality of all citizens regardless of their birthplace or identity. A liberal democracy goes a step further to guarantee that everyone, regardless of their citizenship, enjoys basic human rights. Discrimination, xenophobia, and denial of due process are attacks on democracy even when directed against non-citizens.

Preserving democracy is therefore integrally linked to how pro-democracy parties respond to immigration, especially in Europe and the United States. Kapeiner (2024) suggests that the rise of RWPP may put these parties in a "democratic dilemma" that requires them to choose between two incommensurate outcomes:

1. **Safeguard democracy** by adopting anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy and thereby "crowding out" RWPP; or

2. **Uphold immigrant justice** at the risk of losing power to RWPP and thereby enabling democratic backsliding.

Drawing on empirical research, we reject the democratic dilemma on two fronts. First, we find that the first approach often fails and, worse, can weaken democracy even further. Second, we find that **inclusive immigrant integration** offers a way out of the democratic dilemma by mitigating anti-immigrant attitudes and support for RWPP. Rather than trying to outbid RWPP with anti-immigrant appeals, the best way to safeguard democracy may be to render these appeals less relevant by reshaping what it means to belong.

IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON SUPPORT FOR RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

Before turning to integration, it is worth examining whether immigration itself is driving anti-immigrant attitudes and, by extension, support for RWPP. Scholars have posited two conflicting theories about how native-born residents are likely to respond to immigrants (Callens 2015). **Ethnic competition theory** holds that the in-group (the native-born majority) will feel threatened by outgroups (immigrant minorities) when they experience real or perceived competition with the outgroups for material resources, status, and/or cultural dominance. This theory predicts that increased immigration will fuel anti-immigrant attitudes, especially among more vulnerable groups in the native population. **Contact theory** makes the opposite claim. Rather than creating competition, "large groups of immigrants raise opportunities for inter-group contact and, consequently, lead to decreased perceived threat and prejudice" (Callens 2015, 4). This theory predicts that increased immigration will be associated with more pro-immigrant attitudes and, in turn, less support for RWPP.

Neither theory is consistently supported by the evidence. Cross-national studies find little to no effect of the size of the immigrant population on anti-immigrant attitudes or far-right voting (Careja and Andreß 2013; Cools, Finseraas, and Rogeberg 2021; Isac, Maslowski, and Werf 2012). Moreover, Dancygier et al. (2025) find intriguing evidence that the main driver of support for RWPP in Europe is not the arrival of immigrants but the **departure of citizens**, which has negative consequences for the quality of life.

There is a bit more support for **ethnic competition theory** at the country level. Studies of Japan, the UK, Sweden, Italy, France, Austria, and the Netherlands find a positive association between increased immigration (including by refugees) and either anti-immigrant sentiment or support for RWPP (Abbondanza and Bailo 2018; Edo et al. 2019; Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Igarashi and Laurence 2021; Rydgren and Ruth 2011). Consistent with ethnic competition theory, this effect is largely driven by lower-educated or lower-skilled individuals rather than the entire native population. It also tends to be fueled by a rapid influx of non-Western or low-skilled immigration.

The results are more mixed at the neighborhood level. Some studies find that competition for local resources correlates with higher far-right voting (Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Otto and Steinhardt 2014), but others find that sustained contact with refugees at the neighborhood level lowers far-right voting by decreasing prejudice through close interpersonal experiences

(Hennig 2021). Anecdotal evidence from the United States lends further support to **contact theory**. For example, the residents of two small towns in New York (Rodriguez 2025; Wilkinson 2025) and Missouri (Healy and Davis 2025) voted overwhelmingly for Trump yet protested vigorously against his administration's efforts to deport valued members of their community (see Box 1).

BOX 1: Sackets Harbor, New York is a Trump stronghold and the hometown of Trump's so-called border car, Tom Homan. In March 2025, agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) apprehended three grade-school students during a raid of a local dairy farm, sent them to a detention center in Texas, and placed them on a fast track to deportation. The school's principal immediately took action and organized hundreds of phone calls to local and state officials with the help of other teachers in the town. Their efforts caught steam, and in a matter of days, a massive rally took place demanding the release of the children with numerous members of the media present. Ultimately, these efforts proved to be successful as ICE quickly announced that they would be releasing the children. **Kennett, Missouri** is also a staunchly pro-Trump town. In May 2025, ICE agents arrested and detained Carol Hui, a Chinese immigrant who had spent 20 years in the United States building a life and family. The majority of the town voted for strong immigration policies - but not like this, not mothers. The community came to her defense with Church vigils, fundraisers, and petitions to bring her home.

The main takeaway of all these studies is that "immigration has **heterogeneous effects** on political outcomes" (Hennig 2021, 2) depending on the context and composition of the electorate. Green et al. (2016) and Vasilopoulos (2022) show this heterogeneity across jurisdictional levels within the same polity. At the district or departmental level, their results are consistent with ethnic competition theory. Green et al. (2016) find that higher shares of low-income immigrants in Swiss districts heightened threat perceptions and, in turn, increased support for the Swiss People's Party. Similarly, Vasilopoulos (2022) finds that higher levels of immigration correlated with higher far-right vote shares in the 2017 elections in France.

The results are different, however, at the community level. In the Swiss case, positive everyday contact with similar immigrants reduced far-right voting propensity through reduced threat (Green et al. 2016). Likewise, in the French case, high-immigrant neighborhoods had lower far-right vote shares (Vasilopoulos, McAvay, and Brouard 2022). These results lend support to contact theory. They also suggest a **disconnect** between what citizens experience in their everyday lives and what they perceive to be happening to others, raising questions about whether ethnic competition is, in fact, driving the macro-level effects.

This disconnect may be explained by another strand of research showing that it is the **salience** of immigration, not its levels or even composition, that matters most for triggering far-right voting (Dehdari 2025; Goodwin, Eric, and Larsen 2022; Schneider-Strawczynski and Valette 2025). Support for RWPP has vastly outpaced the growth of anti-immigrant attitudes, which have remained relatively stable over time. What has changed is the amount of attention being paid to immigration by politicians, parties, and the media. RWPP have benefited disproportionately from this change due to "an asymmetric realignment around immigration" (Goodwin, Eric, and Larsen 2022, 1–2). Because anti-immigrant voters care more about immigration than pro-immigrant voters (Kustov 2023), they are easier to mobilize when the salience of immigration increases.

This brings us back to the democratic dilemma. If the salience of immigration is what drives support for RWPP, then trying to beat these parties at their own game is unlikely to work. In fact, it is likely to backfire. Rather than capturing votes that would otherwise go to RWPP, anti-immigrant accommodation by mainstream parties legitimizes the far right while reaffirming the notion that immigration is a threat (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; May and Czymara 2024). The result is less democracy, not more.

Fortunately, there is an alternative strategy that, while difficult to implement, has the potential to weaken RWPP while upholding democratic norms and institutions. As hinted by the community-level results supporting contact theory, better integration of immigrants into the host society may help bridge the gap between immigrants and native-born citizens and thereby reduce the perceptions of threat that drive support for RWPP.

IMPACT OF INTEGRATION ON SUPPORT FOR RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

Integration is difficult to measure, which complicates an analysis of its impact on anti-immigrant attitudes and/or support for RWPP. We identify four types of indicators:

1. De *jure* integration policies
2. De *facto* integration outcomes
3. Economic or social distance between immigrants and native-born citizens
4. Parameters of belonging

De **jure integration policies** are relatively easy to define and quantify because they are based on formal rules, regulations, and programs. Not surprisingly, this indicator is the most widely used in cross-national research on the relationship between immigrant integration and political outcomes. Most of these studies draw on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) to measure integration policies (MIPEX 2020).

This literature documents a **strong, inverse relationship between inclusive integration policies and anti-immigrant attitudes and/or support for RWPP**. In a meta-analysis of 18 studies using MIPEX, Callens finds consistent evidence that "more inclusive policies tend to improve attitudes towards immigrants among the general public across European countries, while exclusionary policies tend to harden anti-immigrant sentiments in the population" (2015, 11). Studies published since Callen's review reinforce the conclusion that inclusive migrant integration policies dampen anti-immigrant attitudes by creating more interactions and positive experiences with migrants and thereby decreasing the perceived threat they pose (Callens and Meuleman 2017; De Coninck et al. 2021; Green et al. 2020; Kende et al. 2022; Neureiter 2022; de la Sablonnière et al. 2020). In an interesting twist, De la Sablonnière et al. (2020) find that it is not just the inclusivity of integration policies that matters for how the native-born perceive immigrants but also the **coherence and consistency** of these policies.

Zagórski et al. (2025) reach a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between integration policies and far-right voting. In a study of 15 EU member

states, they find a positive association between more inclusive integration policies and a lower likelihood of support for RWPP. Following MIPEX (2020), they point to a **virtuous cycle** between inclusive integration and immigrant-friendly politics (see Figure 1). The flipside, as documented by Gruber and Roseberg (2023) in the case of Austria, is a **vicious cycle** between the success of RWPP and constraints on integration policies.

Figure 1. Virtuous Cycle of Inclusive Migrant Integration Policies

Source: (Zagórski, Díaz Chorne, and Lorenzo Rodríguez 2025, 52).
PRRPs = populist right radical parties

The disadvantage of using de jure integration policies is that they not necessarily map onto **de facto integration outcomes**, which are presumably what increase intergroup contact and reduce the perceived threat of immigrants. Unfortunately, we did not find any studies using data on integration outcomes from datasets such as the OECD's Indicators of Immigration Integration (OECD and European Commission 2023). An alternative is to use measures of **economic or social distance** as a proxy for integration outcomes. In effect, this is what many of the studies reviewed in this brief do. By including immigrant skill-levels and/or religious or cultural differences in their models, they implicitly test for levels of integration.

The aforementioned finding that economic and social distance heightens anti-immigrant attitudes and far-right voting reinforces the argument that integration matters. In a slightly different version of the **vicious cycle** argument, Docquier and Rapoport (2025) find a "vicious circle of xenophobia" between negative skill-selection of immigrants and support for right-wing populism. Since wealthy, aging societies need low-skilled immigrant labor (see Policy Briefs #1 and #2), inclusive integration rather than exclusion may be the best way to disrupt this negative feedback loop.

The challenge, of course, is to reduce the perceived threat posed by immigrants while recognizing the heterogeneous composition of immigrant communities. This brings us to our fourth indicator: the **parameters of belonging**. Inclusive integration is not achieved through unidirectional assimilation into the dominant society. To the contrary, it occurs through a mixing and melding of native and immigrant norms, institutions, and practices. By expanding native-born citizens' beliefs about **who belongs**, inclusive integration can potentially reduce the perceptions of threat that drive support for RWPP.

In her study of the Turkish community in Berlin, Annika Hinze (2013) introduces the concept of a "**third-space**" where immigrants and their children form hybrid identities, combining elements of their Turkish origin with elements of the German society of which they have become a part. This space is shaped by daily social interactions within a neighborhood – the foods people eat, the activities they enjoy, the neighbors they meet on the street. The neighborhood becomes a site of peaceful cultural coexistence, producing new conceptions of what it means to belong.

Third-spaces are likely to emerge wherever immigrants are spatially concentrated within an urban environment. For example, immigrant-owned corner stores in U.S. cities like New York City and Philadelphia have spawned a bodega culture (Kaufman and Hernandez 1994; Pine 2007) that bridges socio-economic and ethnic divides (see Box 2). Cuisine can also be an important third-space. In Berlin, the Turkish Döner Kebab (Annika Marlen Hinze 2013) has become one of the city's most popular street foods (see Box 3). Other examples include Tex-Mex in the United States and Chicken Tikka Masala in the UK. While these hybrid cuisines do not immediately change the political preferences of the native-born, they expand the parameters of belonging through their indirect impact on the dominant culture.

While we lack direct evidence that exposure to third-spaces reduces the propensity to support RWPP, the indirect evidence is compelling. First, these parties tend to do poorly in more diverse, urban districts. Second, studies show that positive everyday contact with immigrants can reduce perceptions of threat. If the parameters of belonging can be broadened in other contexts through explicit programming, RWPP may find less fertile ground for mobilizing voters.

BOX 2: Bodega culture has blossomed in major U.S. cities such as New York City and Philadelphia. Bodegas are family-owned corner stores that sell a variety of food, groceries, snacks, drinks, and supplies. They have become immensely popular, and the immigrants who often own, run, and/or work at them have cemented their role as pillars in their respective communities. Besides providing an essential service, generating tax revenue, and creating jobs, the bodegas are an important site of cultural exchange. Whether a banker buying groceries after a long day at the office or a construction worker grabbing a bagel in the morning, the bodega's customers are exposed on a daily basis to the products, language, and music of the immigrants who often run them. These interactions foster mutual understandings between native- and foreign-born populations. Even the popularization "bodega' of the word "bodega' as a substitute for "corner store" or "convenience store" amongst native populations shows how deeply these shops have permeated U.S culture.

BOX 3: The Turkish Döner Kebab is a dish featuring shaved meat from a rotating rotisserie (usually beef, lamb, or chicken) served on pita bread or on a platter with an assortment of sides and condiments. By 2012, there were more Döner Kebab shops in Berlin than in Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey and one of the biggest cities in the world. The non-Turkish population consuming Döner Kebab as part of their daily routine is exposed to the culture of the Turkish community through the food, exposure to the native languages of shop owners, and even the presence of music/media inside these shops.

CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed in this brief offer hope that pro-democracy parties can escape the democratic dilemma by adopting more inclusive immigration policies. Besides building more robust democracies, this outcome would greatly facilitate the kind of policymaking and coalition-building necessary to reap the potential gains – and ameliorate the potential losses – of migration for **all countries**, not just Europe and the United States. Only by lowering the political temperature and reframing migration as an economic opportunity rather than a security threat in the global North do we have any hope of implementing the recommendations in the other three policy briefs.

This is much easier said than done, however, especially in countries where RWPP have already made sizable gains. Resisting the temptation to outbid the far-right with stricter immigration policies requires political courage, and integration policies take time to work even if they get adopted. And once a vicious cycle has been set in motion, it is very difficult to shift the equilibrium to a virtuous one. It is not impossible, however, and may be critical to building more robust democracies.

Existing research suggests that no single policy can unlock the virtuous cycle of pro-democracy integration. In their study of 25 European countries, Careja and Andrej find that "natives are likely to agree that immigrants are needed for economic reasons in countries with a more generous opportunity structure for immigrants' incorporation into the labor market" (2013, 402). This positive relationship does not extend, however, to perceptions of threat, which they suspect are more dependent on individual-level characteristics.

Bhatiya arrives at a similarly mixed result in his study of immigrant enfranchisement in the UK. On the one hand, he finds that "enfranchisement amplifies immigrants' political engagement and prompts incumbents to address immigrant issues more frequently and positively" (2024, 25). On the other, native-born voters in these districts tend to gravitate toward rival parties, including RWPP, offsetting some of the gains. In addition, incumbents often complement their pro-immigrant policies with support for greater restrictions on new immigration, presumably in an appeal to native-born voters.

These studies suggest that reducing support for RWPP may require a suite of inclusive integration policies that mitigate anti-immigrant attitudes along various dimensions. It may also require tackling broader anxieties fueling support for RWPP. While firmly opposing xenophobia or discrimination, pro-democracy parties could potentially benefit from addressing voter concerns about the quality of life and public order. Following de la Sablonnière et al. (2020), doing so coherently and consistently is likely to reap the greatest rewards.
As Dancygier et al. (2025) and others show, voters tend to support RWPP when faced with high levels of inequality and poor service provision. Sometimes these anxieties lead to immigrant scapegoating. For example, if housing is scarce or costly, a sudden influx of immigrants is likely to elicit an anti-immigrant backlash – even if immigrants are not the ones to blame (Levitz 2024). But quality of life issues also generate support for RWPP by voters who hold more moderate views on immigration but are fed up with the status quo. The upsurge in far-right voting by naturalized immigrants in the United States and Germany (Jain and McCall 2025; Pham 2024) is a strong indicator that RWPP are tapping into cleavages that cut across ethnicity and immigration background.

Another source of anxiety is the perception that borders are out of control. This fear is often linked to concerns with rising crime. While the reality is more complicated, policymakers in Europe and the United States face pressure to demonstrate that they are in charge of who enters the country and on what terms. Their most common response, as noted by Bhatiya (2024), has been to fortify borders and recruit neighboring countries to do the same, often with dire consequences for human rights.

If this strategy actually deterred migration, it could potentially coexist with inclusive immigration policies for those who have already arrived. The problem is that it doesn't work. As long as migrants believe they can find safety and prosperity in the destination countries, they will keep coming – and the criminals who benefit from irregular migration will keep getting rich (Burgess 2024). The option preferred by RWPP is to kill migrants' dream altogether by criminalizing and deporting immigrants – which is the exact opposite of inclusive immigrant integration. It is therefore vital that pro-democracy parties come up with alternative ways to manage migration that are proactive, safe, and orderly (see Policy Brief #3). Only then are they likely to make room for inclusive immigrant integration as a way out of the democratic dilemma.

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