

# Evidence-Based Immigration and Refugee Policies

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Making evidence-based policy in the area of migration is particularly challenging for three reasons. First, migration policy involves the admission of newcomers to an existing political community, and as such inevitably raises questions of identity and belonging. As 2016 – a political *annus horribilis* – made abundantly clear, there are few forces more disruptive of national politics than identity. Second, the determination and implementation of migration policy crosses multiple bureaucratic departments – justice, interior, and foreign affairs – and the last two take different views of migration. For interior, it is a matter that requires the securing of borders and controlling migrant movements; for foreign affairs, it is a matter of good diplomatic relations. Interior ministries love, for instance, visas as they track the entry and exit of foreign nationals; foreign ministries dislike them as they vex and irritate foreign governments and disrupt the free flow of goods and services. Third, and most challenging, there is little agreement on either (a) what the goals of migration policy should be or (b) the evidence required to judge them.

## Definitions

Before developing this last point, a few definitions are in order. Migration is the movement of people from one country to another for some defined minimum period (generally one year). Migration may be voluntary or forced. Voluntary migrants include economic migrants (high- and low-skilled), family migrants (who constitute the overwhelming majority of migrants to the United States), and students. Forced migrants move, as the name implies, involuntarily, and they include those fleeing persecution, violence and perhaps – though there is no agreement on this point – poverty and hunger. As the last point suggests, the categories are ideal types and boundaries are

very fuzzy: is an individual's migration truly voluntary when he or she faces nothing but hunger, violence, and an early death in their home country and chooses to leave for a prosperous and safe one? Refugees are one category of forced migrant which is defined by the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) as those who face a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” Refugees are thus one category of forced migrants.

## The Ends of Migration Policy

There is no agreement on the purpose of migration policy because migration serves both broad, humanitarian aims as well as material interests. Humanitarian aims include providing refugee protection for the persecuted, resources for the poor, and financial relief for countries that are themselves poor and/or overpopulated. Material interests are both public and non-excludable – using immigration to expand the economy and/or raise the population – and private and excludable – providing businesses with much-needed labour and/or skills that fill shortages and/or give them an edge over rivals as well as providing immigrants with greater wealth and opportunity. The last is the greatest material benefit of migration. As ever, the categories overlap and blur: solving labour shortages for businesses may, if the sector is large enough, benefit overall economic growth.



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## Evidence-Based Migration Policy

An evidence-based immigration policy is particular difficult to achieve for general and specific reasons. In the former, any evidence-based policy is difficult at the moment as multiple actors – the president of the United States, the Russian government, the gutter press in the United States and the United Kingdom (Fox, Breitbart, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mail*, etc.), far-right parties, and a legion of Twitter trolls are in a constant battle to spread fake news, to twist, distort, and falsify evidence (for POTUS, what's real is fake and what's fake is real), and to delegitimize experts and expertise. Even before the populist wave, however, evidence for migration policy was difficult to achieve because actors on both the left and the right – including, it must be said, many academics – read their own ideological and normative commitments into their policy positions rather than sticking to facts. As a result, supporters of migration tend to exaggerate its benefits, whereas opponents exaggerate its costs. For the former, migration is a perquisite to prosperity; for the latter, it is the cause of wage depression, inequality, and all manner of social ills, including crime and sexual violence. Migration is, in fact, none of these. Its effects on wages, productivity, GDP, and population levels are modest, though modestly positive, and immigration plays a key role in addressing sectoral shortages, particular in the low-wage sector (agriculture, food services, care-giving, among others).

These difficulties naturally do not invalidate the importance of evidence-based policy in immigration and refugee policy. If anything, they make it more important. And such policy requires several components. The most basic of these are reliable data. In the case of refugee policy, source country data are the most important: evidence on patterns of persecution and levels of violence make it far easier to adjudicate asylum claims and, in the

case of mass influxes, to process large numbers. In the case of migration, we need data on both source countries and receiving countries. There should be established and reliable procedures for recognizing educational and occupational qualifications so that policymakers can open channels for the type of migrants required by local receiving economies. Setting such standards will always be an imprecise art. Canada, which operates one of the most highly developed skill-based immigration systems in the world, alternates between privileging particular high-demand occupations (say, in the mining or oil sector) and privileging immigrants with high levels of education regardless of occupation (on the assumption that such immigrants will do well regardless of job-market supply). Occupation-based admissions ensure an immediate job, but as noted that job might disappear. Rewarding educational attainment attracts educated migrants but some of those qualifications – a PhD in Russian literature for example – may translate poorly into labor market success. In the latter, policymakers need reliable data on economic conditions in various parts on the country; on labor shortages and surpluses; and on remaining capacity (or scarcity) in local housing markets, school systems and (where there is public health care) health care systems. In most if not all OECD countries, such quantitative data is available.

As I have argued for years to anyone who will listen, immigration works when migrants work: success in national labour markets is the most important element in immigrant integration. Successful integration policies thus require longitudinal studies of migrant employment levels and wages (the higher the better both for the migrants and for the state's tax receipts) and of migrant reliance on income support (the lower the better). There also has to be data on migrant access to schools, technical colleges, and universities, above all for migrant children, as this access is a powerful predictor of subsequent migrant success.



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The political economy literature draws a distinction between liberal market and coordinated market economies; it is relevant for immigration. In liberal economies – above all the United States, but also Canada and Australia, labor markets are dynamic and fluid; large swaths of the economy require little training for service-based jobs; and neither the state nor private-sector actors provide much vocational training. All things being equal, and the experience of the United States appears to bear this out, low-skilled migrants are more easily integrated into liberal market economies. The US is the model liberal market economy, and it combines high-levels of low-skilled immigration – both family and undocumented – with low unemployment levels among migrants. For migrants to succeed, by contrast, in coordinated market economies, they need access to training and particularly apprenticeship programs. In northern Europe, therefore, it is essential have data of migrant access to such programs.

With the exception of resettled refugees (worldwide some 100,000 annually, mostly by Canada, Australia, the United States, before the Trump era), refugees select themselves. On one level, this does not matter, as refugees – like all migrants – need what everyone else needs: good jobs, good housing, and good educational opportunities. Refugees nonetheless face particular challenges, particularly in the area of trauma-induced mental health issues. Beyond data on jobs, housing, and educational access, there is a great need to gather evidence on mental health challenges faced by refugees and on their access to support, whether from the state or from civil society actors.

In all major receiving countries, but particularly in the United States, undocumented migrants constitute significant flows; indeed, there are an estimated 11 million undocumented migrants in the United States. By definition, there are significant data limitations on both the

numbers of such migrants and how they made their way to receiving countries (their use of smugglers and or traffickers, for instance). Such data can only be gathered through qualitative research (anonymous interviews and posing in the countries of origin as would-be migrants).

Aside from undocumented migrants, in northern receiving countries, data limitations are not the only main challenge facing evidence-based (documented) immigration and refugee policies. Indeed, in the case of unemployment, wage, and education levels data are publicly available from government sources and/or the OECD. The real challenge, for reasons outlined at the start of this brief, is political: immigration policy is, as noted, buffeted by unsubstantiated and shrill public claims about the threats posed by immigrants as, at best, stealers of jobs, and, at worst, as terrorists, criminals, and rapists. Unless these claims can be fought back, an evidence-based immigration policy is impossible. Two steps are necessary here. First, available evidence on immigration flows, employment levels, earnings, and tax contributions need to be widely disseminated to the press, public, and policymakers. Second, borders need to be secured. As experience in United States (mid-1990s and early 2000s), Germany (1993 and today), and the United Kingdom (2004–2016) made clear, nothing turns publics against immigration faster than the perception that the states has lost control of its borders. In such conditions, a rational discussion about the benefits of immigration and obligations to refugees is not merely difficult; it is impossible.

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