

The number and proportion of immigrants in the population: international comparisons

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The proportion of immigrants varies considerably from one country to another. In some countries it exceeds half the population while in others it is below 0.1%. Where are immigrants most numerous? Where do they come from? More generally, how are they distributed across the world?

According to the United Nations [1], the United States is the country with the highest number of immigrants (foreign-born persons – see definitions in Box), with a total of 43 million in 2010, six times more than Saudi Arabia (7.3 million) or Canada (7.2 million) (Figure 1). However, proportionally to their population size, these two countries have twice as many immigrants: 28% and 21%, respectively, versus 13% in the United States. Looking at the ratio of immigrants to the total population, countries with a high proportion of immigrants can be divided into five types⁽¹⁾:

– a first group of countries, sparsely populated but with abundant oil resources, where immigrants sometimes outnumber the native-born population. In 2010, the world's highest proportions of immigrants were found in this group: Qatar (86%), United Arab Emirates (70%), Kuwait (69%), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Brunei, where the proportion ranges from 28% to 40%.

– The second group comprises very small territories, microstates, often endowed with a particular status, notably relating to tax rules: Monaco (72%), Macao (55%), Singapore (41%).

– The third group corresponds to nations formerly designated as “new countries”, with vast territories but still sparsely populated: Australia (22%) and Canada (21%).

– The fourth group, which is similar to the previous one in terms of mode of development, is that of the Western

industrial democracies, in which the proportion of immigrants generally ranges from 7% to 16%: Austria (16%), Sweden (14%), Spain (14%), United States (13%), Germany (13%), France (11%)⁽²⁾, The Netherlands (10%), United Kingdom (10%), Belgium (9%), Italy (7%).

– The fifth and last group is that of the so-called “countries of first asylum”, which receive massive flows of refugees due to conflicts in a neighbouring country. For example, at the end of 2009, around one million Iraqi refugees were living in Syria, representing the equivalent of 5% of its population, and around 350,000 refugees from Sudan were living in Chad (3% of its population).

◆ Small countries have the highest proportions of immigrants

With 23% of immigrants, Switzerland is ahead of the United States and France, while the proportion in Luxembourg is even higher (35%). The attractiveness and the size of the country both play a role. The smaller

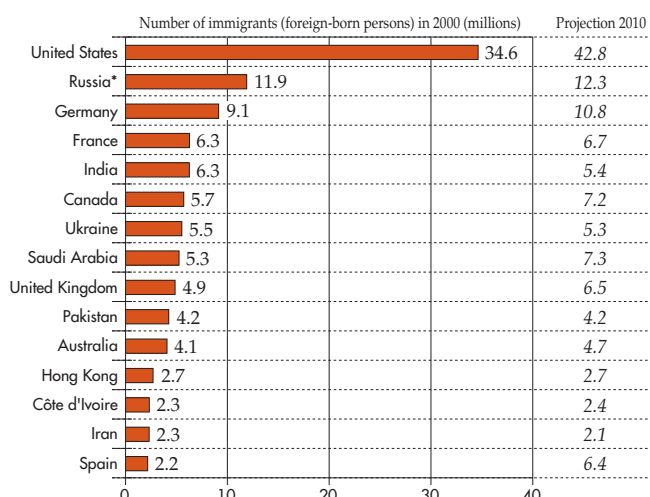
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⁽¹⁾ These are the categories distinguished by Gildas Simon in a previous edition of *Population and Societies* [2].

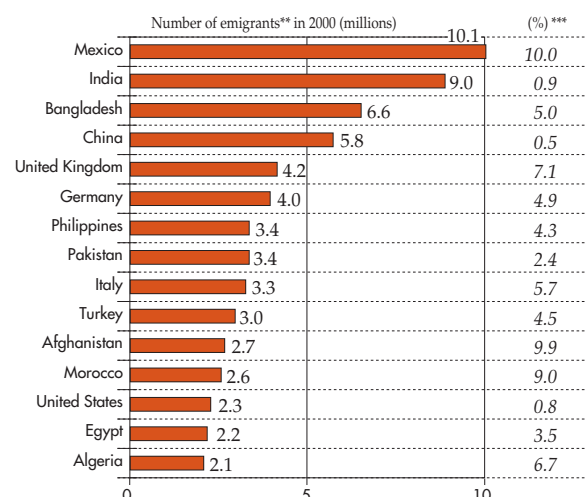
⁽²⁾ The proportion of immigrants is higher than that published by INSEE which, unlike the United Nations, does not consider foreign-born French nationals as immigrants (see the definitions in Box). If only foreigners born abroad are counted, the proportion of immigrants in France is just 8%.

Figure 1 - Number and proportion of immigrants and emigrants in selected countries

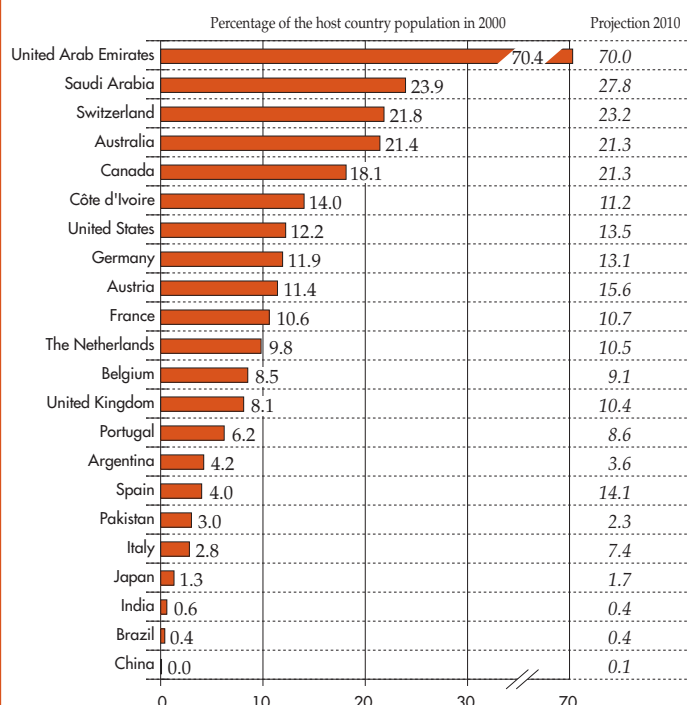
The 15 countries with the highest number of immigrants



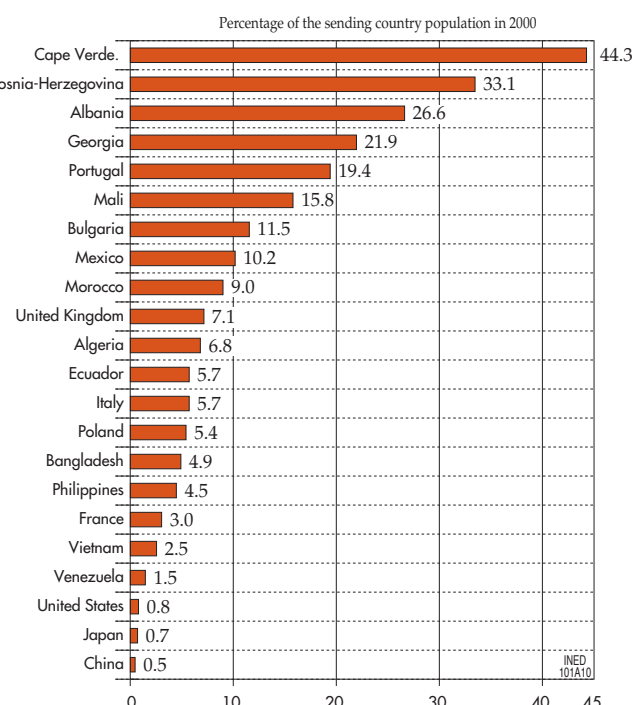
The 15 sending countries supplying the most migrants



Proportion of immigrants in selected countries



Proportion of emigrants** in selected countries



* Includes many persons of Russian or Ukrainian nationality born in a country of the former USSR (or Ukraine) and who returned to Russia or Ukraine after the collapse of the USSR. ** Persons born in the country and living abroad. *** Proportion of the sending country population.

(G. Pison, *Population & Societies*, no. 472, INED, November 2010)

Sources: United Nations 2009 [1]; Parsons et al., 2007 [3]; and author's calculations

the country, the higher its probable proportion of foreign-born residents. Conversely, the larger the country, the smaller this proportion is likely to be. In 2010, India had 0.4% of immigrants, and China 0.1%. However, if each Chinese province was an independent country – a dozen provinces have more than 50 million inhabitants, Henan has more than 100 million – the proportion of immigrants would be much higher, given that migration from province to province, which has increased in scale over recent years, would be counted as international and not internal migration. Conversely, if the European Union formed a single country, the share of immigrants would decrease considerably, since citizens of one EU country living in another would no longer be counted. The

relative scale of the two types of migration – internal and international – is thus strongly linked to the way the territory is divided into separate nations.

◆ The United States and France, old immigration countries

The proportion of immigrants in a country reflects the scale of past immigration flows. The United States, with 13% of its population in 2010 born abroad (43 million persons), is the top-ranking host country for migrants, despite the imposition of quotas by nation which considerably slowed down flows from 1924 to 1965. The United States is still an immigration country, and net

migration (difference between migrant arrivals and departures) was estimated at an average of one million persons per year over the period 2005-2010 [1].

France is also an old immigration country, with migrants coming from neighbouring countries – Belgium, England, Germany, Switzerland – during the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, after the Second World War, they came from Portugal, North Africa, and more recently, from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. During the 1950s and 1960s, net migration was, relative to the population, higher in France than in the United States (an average of four per thousand inhabitants per year, compared to two per thousand), due to the American entrance quotas. It has been the opposite since 1970. The influx has declined in France, while it has increased in the United States, notably in the 1990s. During the last two decades, mean annual net migration has stood at around four per thousand in the United States compared to slightly above one per thousand in France. Apart from these contextual differences, both countries share a long history of immigration. Although moderate during certain periods, inflows have remained almost uninterrupted for more than a century.

In these countries, the immigrant population has built up gradually over the years. Many migrants, whether they come to work or to reunite with a relative, remain in the country of destination. They start a family, raise their children, grow old and in some cases die there. Other immigrants go back to their home country or move elsewhere. The immigrant population currently residing in a host country thus represents the population built up through successive immigration waves, minus the losses due to departures and deaths.

◆ Spain, a new immigration country

In Spain, the proportion of immigrants (14% in 2010) is roughly the same as that of the United States and France, but unlike these two countries, its immigrant population became established in a very short period of time. Spain was a country of emigration until the end of the 1980s and has only become an immigration country since the early 1990s. Inflows increased progressively and reached a very high level, with positive net migration exceeding 600,000 persons per year between 2002 and 2007. In relation to the population (43 million in 2005), this corresponds to a proportion of 15 per thousand, nearly ten times higher than in France for the same period⁽³⁾. Although the duration of the immigration period was short, the migrant numbers were huge and the proportion of immigrants eventually overtook that of France. However, the immigrant populations of the two countries are different. Immigrants living in France have been in the country for longer, on average, than immigrants living in Spain, so their mean age is higher.

⁽³⁾ Recently, the inflow of migrants to Spain has declined sharply, as in other Mediterranean countries. Projections of the stock of immigrants in 2010 established in 2008 by the United Nations and published in 2009 were unable to take this decline fully into consideration and will probably be adjusted downwards.

Definitions

International migrant

Under the United Nations recommendations, an international migrant is defined as any person who changes his or her country of usual residence for at least one year, for any purpose. The crossing of an international border, with a change of usual residence, differentiates international migration from internal migration, which takes place within national borders.

Foreigner

Person who does not hold the nationality of the country where he/she resides.

Immigrant

Person born in a country other than his or her country of residence, who has thus crossed a border (or several) since his or her birth. Immigrants may hold the nationality of their home country or another nationality, notably that of the country of residence. In the first case, they are foreigners. In the second case, they are not, since they hold the nationality of the country of residence. In France, the term immigrant is only used for persons "born as foreigners, abroad", excluding persons who were born French.

Net migration

Difference between the number of persons who have entered a country during a given period, and the number who have left.

Information sources

In each country, the number of immigrants is usually estimated by census, with each resident being asked his or her place and country of birth.

The annual immigration flows are estimated through administrative sources – temporary residence or work permits issued, or population registers [5]. For emigration flows, few countries are equipped with a system to observe migrant departures from their territory. Migration statistics are thus based on the observation of arrivals in host countries.

The United Nations collects all demographic data published by national statistical offices. It corrects them if necessary and establishes its own statistics [1]. The Development Research Centre on Migration at the University of Sussex has published a double-entry table that indicates, for any pair of countries, the number of migrants born in the first and resident in the second in 2000 [3]. The OECD publishes detailed statistics of international migration both within and towards the OECD zone [6].

◆ A difficult calculation: the number and proportion of emigrants

All immigrants are also emigrants from their countries of birth. Yet the information available for counting emigrants at the level of a particular country is often of poorer quality than for the immigrants, even though, at world level, they represent the same set of people. Countries are probably less concerned about counting their emigrants than their immigrants, given that the former, unlike the latter, are no longer residents and do

not use government funded public services or infrastructure. But emigrants often contribute substantially to the economy of their origin countries by sending back money and in some cases, they still have the right to vote, which is a good reason for origin countries to track their emigrant population more effectively. The statistical sources are another reason for the poor quality of data on emigrants. Migrant arrivals are better recorded than departures and the number of emigrants is often estimated on the basis of immigrant statistics in the different host countries (see Box).

The number of emigrants varies considerably from one country to another. Mexico headed the list in 2000, with more than 10 million persons born in the country but living in another, mainly in the United States (Figure 1). Proportionally, Cape Verde, an insular country, devoid of resources, holds a record: there is one Capverdian living abroad for two living in the country, which means that one third of the persons born in Cape Verde have emigrated.

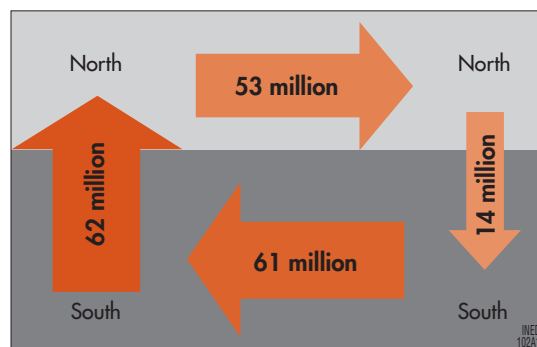
Some countries are both immigration and emigration countries. This is the case of the United Kingdom, which has almost as many immigrants as emigrants (4.9 and 4.2 million, respectively, in 2000). The United States has a considerable number of expatriates (2.3 million in 2000), but this is fifteen times fewer in comparison to the number of immigrants (35 million at the same date). Last, up until now, some countries have been relatively closed to migration, both inward and outward. This is the case for Japan, which has few immigrants (only 1.3% of its population in 2000) and few emigrants (0.7%). Contrary to popular belief, France has few expatriates; according to the detailed calculations of the OECD in the census reports of the entire world, France is one of the European countries with the fewest citizens living abroad [6].

◆ Immigrants: three percent of the world population

According to the United Nations [1], there were a total of 214 million immigrants in 2010, representing only a small minority of the world population (3.1%); the vast majority of people live in their country of birth. The proportion of immigrants has only slightly increased over recent decades (20 years ago, in 1990, it was 2.9%, and 45 years ago, in 1956, it was 2.3%). It has probably only changed slightly in 100 years.

On the other hand, the distribution of immigrants is not the same as it was a century ago. One of the changes is, in the words of Alfred Sauvy, the “reversal of migratory flows”, between North and South, with a considerable share of international migrants now coming from southern countries. Today, migrants can be divided into three groups of practically equal size (Figure 2): migrants born in the South who live in the North (62 million in 2005, according to the United Nations [4]); South-South migrants (61 million) who have migrated from one southern country to another; and North-North migrants (53 million). The fourth group – those born in the North and who migrate to the South – was dominant a century ago but is numerically much smaller today (14 million).

Figure 2 - The four large groups of international migrants
Migrant numbers in 2005



(G. Pison, *Population & Societies*, no. 472, INED, November 2010)

Source: United Nations [4]

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ABSTRACT

The United States has the highest number of immigrants (foreign born persons) in the world, with a total of 43 million, six times more than Saudi Arabia (7.3 million) or Canada (7.2 million). However, relative to their population size, the two latter countries have twice as many immigrants: 28% and 21%, respectively, compared to 13% in the United States. Small countries have the highest relative number of immigrants. Switzerland, with 23% of immigrants, is ahead of the United States, while in Luxemburg the proportion is even higher (35%). In the old immigration countries, like the United States and France, the immigrant population built up gradually. Although moderate at certain periods, like in France today, the migrant inflow has remained almost uninterrupted over more than a century. In recent immigration countries, such as Spain, the immigrant population has grown very rapidly, with massive inflows in recent years.