



Refugees and Global Migration

Europe and the United States

Today, no countries have open borders. Every state in today's global system has its own laws and policies about who is permitted to cross its borders and how they will do so. [1] These policies and laws also determine whether a person is categorized as a migrant, an asylum seeker, a refugee, or one of the many other terms available for people entering sovereign countries by a variety of means.

The laws and political climate of each country are also diverse, leading to questions of how they each perceive refugees and migrants, how they react to global migration, and the laws and policies imposed on an international level that they observe.

In 2015, there were record-breaking numbers of refugees and migrants moving across international borders, originating particularly from the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. Some fleeing conflict, persecution, poverty and other life-threatening situations, while others were just simply responding to labor and skill shortages, demographic changes, or seeking better opportunities elsewhere. [2]

Although global migration is an international phenomenon, Europe and the United States have consistently been hotspot destinations for refugees and migrants within the last decade.

Why, though? Why are there so many refugees and migrants now than before?

One perspective is that this is more than just a refugee crisis – it's a humanitarian crisis. In Europe, the Syrian civil war and other conflicts in surrounding countries flooded Europe with a mass influx of refugees in 2015. This would mark the beginning of the largest refugee crisis since World War II.[3] Thousands risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea, many dying along the way, while others have reached their destinations only to find persecution and resentment.



As Melissa Fleming of the UNHCR explains it: “The simple truth is that refugees would not risk their lives on a journey so dangerous if they could thrive where they are.” [4]

Initially, multiple countries within the European Union, such as Italy, Greece, and Germany admitted a vast majority of migrants and refugees through their borders to help quell the crisis. Now, however, there is some pushback from these countries, creating limitations on the number of migrants and refugees accepted, as well as calling on other members of the European Union to share some of the burden.

What will this mean for future refugees if European countries begin to close their borders? Will people migrate anyways, risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean, only to be sent away at shore or deported? What will the United Nations do to prevent this from becoming an epidemic?

On the other side of the globe, migration has been similarly pressing.

Since Donald Trump was elected as president in 2016, immigration policy has been integral to his administration’s agenda. He’s made headlines with his proposition for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and even declared a national emergency to finance it in 2019. [5]

The Trump administration has also brought attention to the yearly caravan of migrants that travel from Central America to the southern border. Regularly describing these migrants as “stone cold criminals,” President Trump has demanded that they return to their home countries.[6] His negative tone and controversial comments have spurred conflict and hysteria among the American people, as more migrants approach the border.

Yet when looking at the number of people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and the number of migrants apprehended on that border, there are significantly lower numbers than in previous decades. In fact, U.S. federal law enforcement apprehensions of Central Americans attempting to cross the southern border remains at its lowest level since 1972.[7] This, then, begs the question: is there really crisis at the border?



A New York Times article proposes that the current issue surrounding migration in the United States and Europe is not tied to any actual surges at borders since the refugee crisis but, rather, that it is caused by anxiety over social change. [8]

These feelings of anxiety are only reinforced when asylum seekers arrive without permission or warning at the border. The New York Times article suggests “when people feel a sense of threat or a loss of control, they sometimes become more attached to ethnic and national identities.”[9] This is apparent on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean with citizens of the host countries resorting to discrimination and prejudice, amongst other means, as a form of deterrence towards incoming migrants and refugees.

Today, no countries have open borders. The world faces a refugee crisis that has transformed in part due to a humanitarian crisis. Thousands are displaced, searching for refuge and the prospect of a safe and secure lifestyle. Whether this has become an issue of politics, economics, social change, or all three, one thing is clear – immigration policies need to change. But how?

[1] “Great Decisions 2019: Refugees and Global Migration,” Foreign Policy Association, accessed February 21, 2019, https://www.fpa.org/great_decisions/index.cfm?act=topic_detail&topic_id=82.

[2] “Refugees and Migrants: 2016 Global Response,” United Nations, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/global-response>.

[3] Ibid.

[4] “Europe Situation,” UNHCR, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/europe-emergency.html>.

[5] Efforts within Congress are being made as of February 22nd, 2019 to block Trump’s national emergency declaration.

[6] Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “Mexico should move the flag waving Migrants, many of whom are stone cold criminals, back to their countries.” Twitter, November 26, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>.

[7] “Southwest Border Sectors: Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions by Fiscal Year,” United States Border Patrol, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2017-Dec/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Apps%20FY1960%20-%20FY2017.pdf>

[8] Taub, Amanda and Max Fisher, “In the U.S. and Europe, Migration Conflict Points to Deeper Political Problems,” The New York Times, June 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/29/world/europe/us-migrant-crisis.html>.

[9] Ibid.