



# The number and proportion of immigrants in the population: International comparisons

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# Population & Societies

## The number and proportion of immigrants in the population: International comparisons

Version  
française

Gilles Pison\*

The proportion of immigrants varies considerably from one country to another. In some, it exceeds half the population, while in others it is below 0.1%. Which countries have the most immigrants? Where do they come from? How are they distributed across the world? Gilles Pison provides an overview of the number and share of immigrants in selected countries around the world.

According to the United Nations [1], the United States has the highest number of immigrants (foreign-born individuals; see definitions in Box), with 48 million in 2015, five times more than in Saudi Arabia (11 million) and six times more than in Canada (7.6 million) (Figure 1). However, in proportion to their population size, these two countries have significantly more immigrants: 34% and 21%, respectively, versus 15% 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 groups:<sup>(1)</sup>

- The first group comprises countries that are sparsely populated but have abundant oil resources, where immigrants sometimes outnumber the native-born population. In 2015, the world's highest proportions of immigrants were found in this group: United Arab Emirates (87%), Kuwait (73%), Qatar (68%), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman, where the proportion ranges from 34% to 51%.
- The second group consists of very small territories, microstates, often with special tax rules: Macao (57%), Monaco (55%), and Singapore (46%).

- The third group is made up of nations formerly designated as “new countries”, which cover vast territories but are still sparsely populated: Australia (28%) and Canada (21%).
- The fourth group, which is similar to the third in terms of mode of development, is that of Western industrial democracies, in which the proportion of immigrants generally ranges from 9% to 17%: Austria (17%), Sweden (16%), United States (15%), United Kingdom (13%), Spain (13%), Germany (12%), France (12%), the Netherlands (12%), Belgium (11%), and Italy (10%).
- The fifth group includes 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 2015, more than one million Syrian and Iraqi refugees were living in Lebanon, representing the equivalent of 20% of its population, and around 400,000 refugees from Sudan were living in Chad (3% of its population).

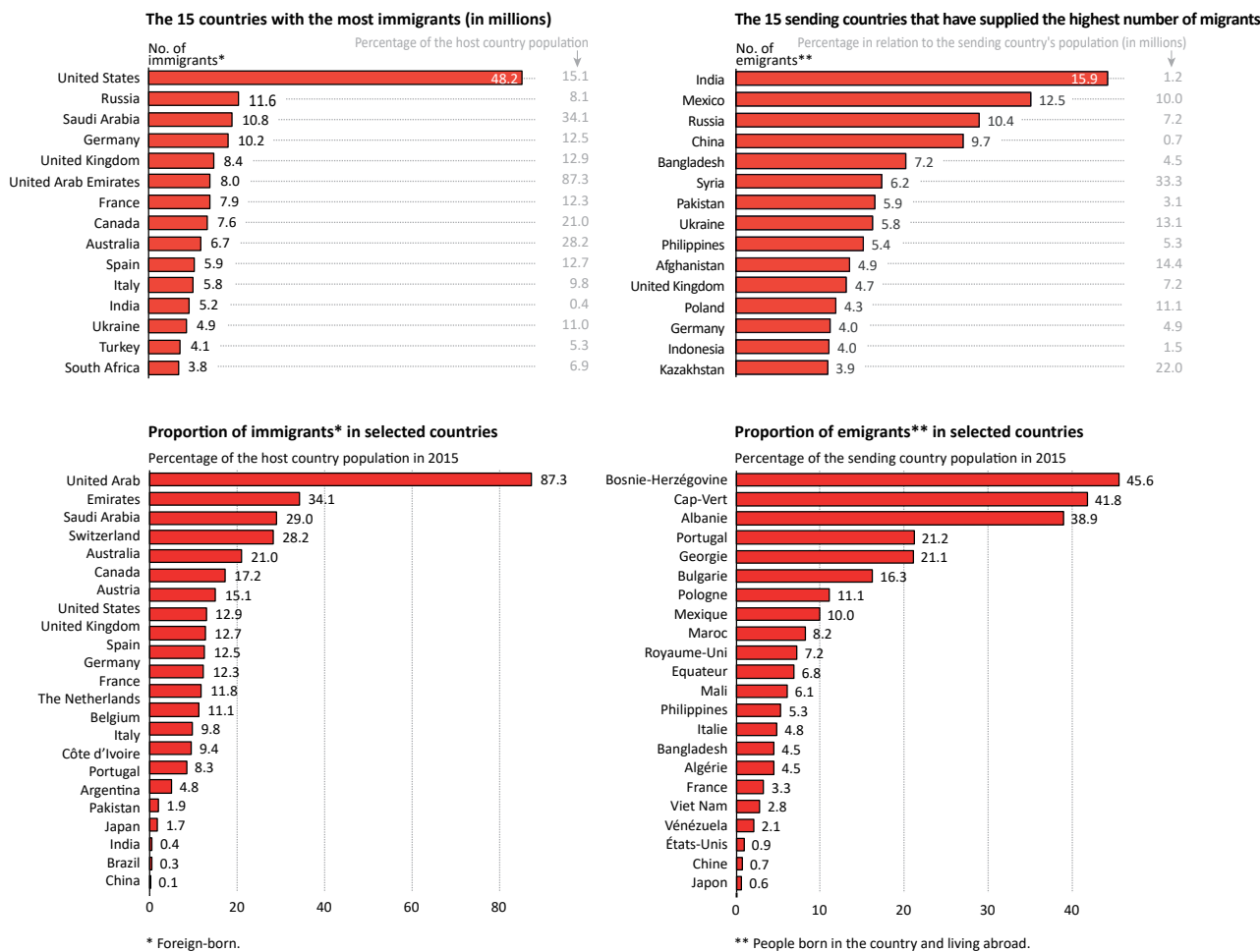
### Small countries have higher proportions of immigrants

With 29% of immigrants, Switzerland is ahead of the United States and France, while the proportion in Luxembourg is even higher (46%). Both the attractiveness and size of the country play a role. The smaller the

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(1) These are the groups distinguished by G. Simon in a previous issue of *Population and Societies* [2].

Figure 1. Number and proportion of immigrants and emigrants in selected countries (in 2015)



Sources: United Nations 2017 [1]; Gilles Pison, 2019 [3]

G. Pison, Population & Societies no. 563, INED, February 2019.

Note (for Russia and Ukraine): Includes many people of Russian or Ukrainian nationality born in a country of the former USSR (or Ukraine) and who moved to Russia or Ukraine after the collapse of the USSR.

country, the higher its probable proportion of foreign-born residents. Conversely, the larger the country, the smaller this proportion is likely to be. In 2015, India had 0.4% of immigrants and China 0.07%. However, if each Chinese province were an independent country – a dozen provinces have more than 50 million inhabitants, and three of them (Guangdong, Shandong, and Henan) have about 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, long-standing immigration countries

A country's proportion of immigrants reflects the scale of past immigration flows. The United States, with 15% of its population in 2015 born abroad (48 million people), is the top-ranking host country for migrants, despite its imposing quotas by nation, which considerably curtailed flows from 1924 to 1965. The United States is still an immigration country, and net migration (the difference between migrant arrivals and departures) was estimated at slightly above one million people in 2015 [1]. France is also a long-standing immigration country, with migrants coming from neighbouring countries – Belgium, England, Germany, and Switzerland – during the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, after the First World War, they came from Poland, Italy, and Spain; after the Second World War, they came from Portugal and North Africa, and shortly after, 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 4 per 1,000 inhabitants per year, compared to 2 per 1,000) due to American entrance quotas. It has been the opposite since 1970. The influx has declined in France, while it has increased in the United States, especially since the 1990s. From 2000 on, mean annual net migration has stood at around 3 per 1,000 in the United States compared to half of that in France, nearly 1.5 per 1,000. Besides 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 was formed gradually over the years. Whether they come to work or to reunite with a relative, many migrants remain in the country of destination. They start a family, raise their children, grow old, etc. Other immigrants go back to their home country or move elsewhere. The immigrant population residing in a host country thus represents the population formed through successive immigration waves, minus the losses due to departures and deaths.

### Spain, a new immigration country

In Spain, the proportion of immigrants (13 per 1,000 in 2015) 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. 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 high level, with positive net migration exceeding 600,000 people per year between 2002 and 2007. In relation to the population (43 million in 2005), this corresponds to a proportion of 15 per 1,000, nearly ten times higher than in France for the same period. The financial crisis of 2008 significantly reduced the flow of migrants, and some of the immigrants left the country, which has slightly reduced the proportion of immigrants. Despite the short immigration period, the inflows of migrants were considerable, and the proportion eventually equalled that of France. However, the immigrant populations of the two countries are different. On average, immigrants living in France have been in the country for longer, so their mean age is higher.

### A difficult calculation: the number and proportion of emigrants

All immigrants (in-migrants) are also emigrants (out-migrants) from their home countries. 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 the global 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

## Box: Definitions and information sources

### 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 or 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 because they hold the nationality of the country of residence. The term immigrant is only used for people “born as foreigners, abroad”, excluding those born abroad from expatriate parents, thus holding the nationality of their country of residence since birth.

**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

The number of immigrants is usually estimated in each country by the census, with each resident being asked about 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 have 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, like other organizations, collects all demographic data published by national statistical offices. It corrects them if necessary and establishes its own statistics [1].

services or infrastructure. But emigrants often contribute substantially to the economy of their home countries by sending back money and in some cases, they still have the right to vote, which is a good reason for sending 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 based on immigrant statistics in the different host countries (see Box). The number of emigrants varies considerably from one country to another. India headed the list in 2015, with nearly 16 million people born in the country but living

in another; Mexico comes in second with more than 12 million emigrants living mainly in the United States (Figure 1). Proportionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina holds a record: there is one Bosnian living abroad for two living in the country, which means that one-third of the people born in Bosnia and Herzegovina have emigrated. Albania is in a similar situation, as well as Cape Verde, an insular country with few natural resources.

Some countries are both immigration and emigration countries. This is the case of the United Kingdom, which had 8.4 million immigrants and 4.7 million emigrants in 2015. The United States has a considerable number of expatriates (2.9 million in 2015), but this is 17 times less in comparison to the number of immigrants (48 million at the same date). France is in an intermediate situation. According to census counts around the world, it had 2.9 million expatriates in 2015, as many as the United States but 40% fewer than the United Kingdom; its immigrants outnumber its emigrants by four to one [1].

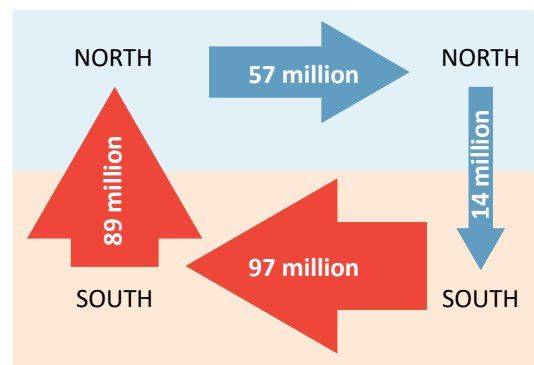
Until recently, some countries have been relatively closed to migration, both inward and outward. This is the case for Japan, which has few immigrants (only 1.7% of its population in 2015) and few emigrants (0.6%).

### Immigrants: less than 4% of the world population

According to the United Nations [1], there were 258 million immigrants in 2017, representing only a small minority of the world population (3.4%); the vast majority of people live in their country of birth. The proportion of immigrants has only slightly increased over recent decades (30 years ago, in 1990, it was 2.9%, and 55 years ago, in 1965, it was 2.3%). It has probably changed only slightly in 100 years.

But the distribution of immigrants is different than it was a century ago. One change 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 (89 million in 2017, according to the United Nations) [1]; South–South migrants (97 million), who have migrated from one Southern country to another; and North–North migrants (57 million). The fourth group – those born in the North and who have migrated to the South – was dominant a century ago but is numerically much smaller today (14 million). Despite their large scale especially in Europe, migrant flows

Figure 2. The four large groups of international migrants, migrant numbers in 2017



G. Pison, Population & Societies no. 563, INED, February 2019.

Sources: United Nations 2017 [1]; G. Pison, 2019 [3]

Interpretation: In 2017, 14 million people born in the North were living in the South (“North” and “South” designating, respectively, developed and developing countries)

generated since 2015 by conflicts in the Middle East have not significantly changed the global picture of international migration.

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### Abstract

The United States has the highest number of immigrants (foreign-born individuals), with 48 million in 2015, five times more than in Saudi Arabia (11 million) and six times more than in Canada (7.6 million). However, in proportion to their population size, these two countries have significantly more immigrants: 34% and 21%, respectively, versus 15% in the United States.

### Keywords

immigrants, emigrants, international migrations, international comparisons, world.