**Forced Displacement**

You’ve probably heard the terms refugee, asylum seeker, and *IDP*. But what do they really mean?

A **refugee** is someone who’s been forced to flee their home country due to war or violent persecution. They’ve been recognized—usually by the United Nations or a national government—as qualifying for international legal protection, known as *asylum*.

**The term asylum seeker** refers to someone who has typically fled the same dangers as a refugee, and is asking for the same legal protection, but their claim is *still being reviewed*. If approved, they’ll become a refugee. However, the asylum process is often lengthy and expensive, and requires legal representation and documentation that many have trouble obtaining.

Then there are **IDPs**—internally displaced persons. Like refugees and asylum seekers, IDPs have fled their homes seeking safety from imminent danger, but they haven’t crossed an international border. Rather, they are displaced inside their own country, and enjoy fewer international rights and protections.

All three terms are *types* of what humanitarians call **forced displacement**. In places like the United States, we tend to hear more about refugees and asylees, because they sometimes seek protection in western countries. However, among the more than 120 million forcibly displaced people in the world today, approximately 60% are IDPs who remain in their country of origin, and nearly 3/4 are hosted in low- and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

This means that, contrary to popular belief, the global refugee crisis is not only—or even primarily—a problem affecting the U.S. and Europe. Rather, most of the responsibility for hosting and protecting refugees and other displaced people is borne by disaster-affected countries and their neighbors in the developing world.

For more information:

<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-us-asylum-process-works>

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/outmatched-us-asylum-system>

[https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2025](https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2025/)

**Global Migration**

Migration is a hot button issue, frequently in the news, but migration-related terms and trends are widely misunderstood.

**Migrant** is a general term that refers to anyone who moves from one place of residence to another with the intention of staying for an extended period of time. Counter to the globalization narrative, the vast majority of the world’s migrants—approximately 80%—never leave their home country. They are known as **internal migrants**.

Those who *do* relocate to another country are called **international migrants**. According to the United Nations, there are an estimated 304 million international migrants in the world today, representing just over 3.5% of the world’s total population. While the absolute number of migrants has increased steadily over time, global migration as a share of total population has remained surprisingly consistent for more than a century.

While some migrants move *voluntarily* for work or school, or to reunite with family, others are *forced* to migrate to escape hardship like poverty, war, political persecution, or natural disasters. Data reported by the United Nations suggests that **forced migration** is a growing problem, with more than 120 million people forcibly displaced in 2024—or approximately 1 in every 67 people on Earth.

When a migrant resides in a destination country without permission, they are known as an **undocumented migrant**. Some politicians refer to them as “illegal aliens” to suggest that they are criminals and outsiders. However, most undocumented migrants have broken no criminal laws, as immigration violations are typically civil offenses, not criminal ones. Moreover, many undocumented migrants have deep ties to the communities where they live. For example, a recent study by the non-partisan Center for Migration Studies found that *over half* of the estimated 11 million undocumented migrants in the United States have lived in this country for more than a decade, and about *5.1 million U.S. citizen children* live in a household with an undocumented family member.

For more information:

<https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/>

<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2024>

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/455478/how-migration-really-works-by-haas-hein-de/9780241998762>

<https://cmsny.org/publications/2024-mass-deportation-program-devastate-american-families-101024/>