

COVID-19's Impact on Migration Patterns, Refugee and Asylum Seekers

Daniel Jefferson, Téa Johnson, Yessica Leonardo and Nazario Saint Louis

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## Abstract

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has seen drastic changes in every regard that will continue to impact generations to come. While countries close their borders to mitigate the spread of contagion, these tactics negatively affect the global economy and exacerbate global inequalities such as resource distribution. This study focuses on three developed countries that varied in severity of migration restrictions prior and post pandemic. Migration patterns from the first two quarters of 2019 and 2020 were analyzed amongst these three countries to illustrate any migratory discrepancies that could potentially be a result beyond COVID-19's impact. While these differences were taken into account to fully analyze the pandemic's disruption on migrational flows, this study will highlight the negative impact it has caused those seeking refuge within these countries; specifically the decline in refugee camp conditions and resources. Refugee camps are known to be overcrowded and undersourced which has only been exacerbated due to the pandemic's disruption on migrational flows. This has resulted in inaccessible health care, lack of resources and supplies, and the inability to properly social distance to prevent outbreaks. From our research, we have found recommendations that would best aid not only our sample countries but the global community. These recommendations include updating border closure procedures to allow humanitarian aid to reach asylum seekers and resettlement camps, the inclusion of this vulnerable population into nationwide crisis management plans, and updating camp infrastructure. Additionally, we recommend host countries to provide those seeking asylum status with proper PPE wear and sanitization materials to aid in navigating public spaces.

As of March 23, 2020, at least 174 countries have issued new or changed travel restrictions to combat the pandemic according to the UN Migration Agency.<sup>1</sup> Each country has their own set of migration policies and motivations in their reaction to Covid-19. Relative to other developed countries, the United Kingdom has more lenient standards while the United States has nearly shut down their immigration system entirely. Effective since the beginning of June, Germany has halted all travel into the country with exemptions only for EU, British, and German citizens. Exemptions were made for essential personnel within these three countries to which they defined as: health care professionals, health researchers, and elderly care professionals; frontier workers; diplomats; and passengers in transit among other defined categories. The shared exemption most pertinent to our study was those defined as persons in need of international protection or for other humanitarian reasons respecting the principle of ‘non-refoulement’. Non refoulement is a principle of international law wherein a country is forbidden from returning asylum seekers to a country where they would likely be in danger of persecution. Likewise, there is also an exemption for those individuals who can prove to not be carriers of the virus through testing however there are many factors resulting in the lack of testing availability. This reflects just one of many public health rationales that have influenced current policies in these countries.<sup>2</sup>

Migration patterns from the first two quarters of 2019 and 2020 were analyzed amongst these three countries to illustrate any migratory discrepancies that could potentially be a result

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<sup>1</sup> "DTM (COVID-19): Global Mobility Restriction Overview - 19 March, 2020 - World." ReliefWeb. Accessed July 09, 2020.

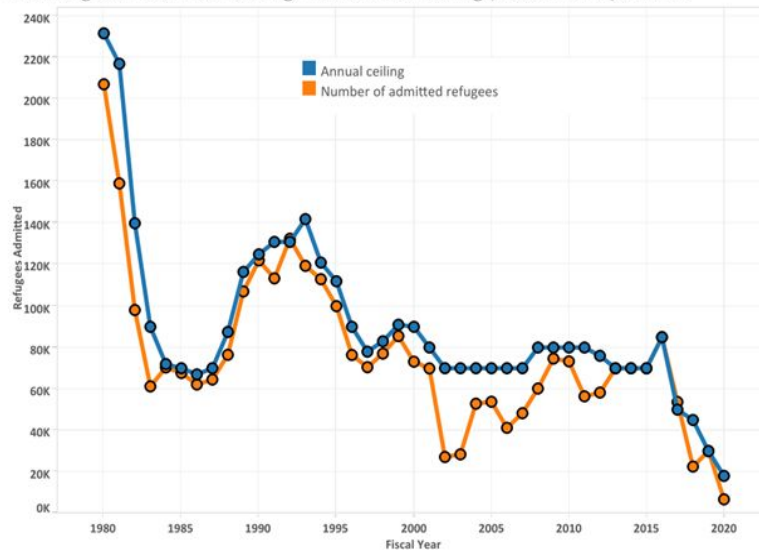
<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/dtm-covid-19-global-mobility-restriction-overview-19-march-2020>.

<sup>2</sup> German Missions in the United States, Coronavirus (Covid-19) (July 9, 2020)

beyond COVID-19's impact. While slight differences were found and acknowledged, they were not significant to negate the pandemic's severe impact on migrational flows, specifically its disruption on refugee migration and resettlement camps. According to the Department of Homeland Security, a refugee is defined as a person outside his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>3</sup> The process that a country takes into admitting refugees is at their own discretion but has been one of the vast changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## United States

U.S. Refugee Admissions and Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, Fiscal Years 1980-2020\*



Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub  
<http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>

On June 22nd, the United States outlawed all immigration for a 60 day period with exceptions for individuals considered necessary or imperative for either food supply chain or as otherwise specified by leaders in the administration.<sup>4</sup> The President of

<sup>3</sup> Department of Homeland Security. "Refugees and Asylees," April 5, 2016.

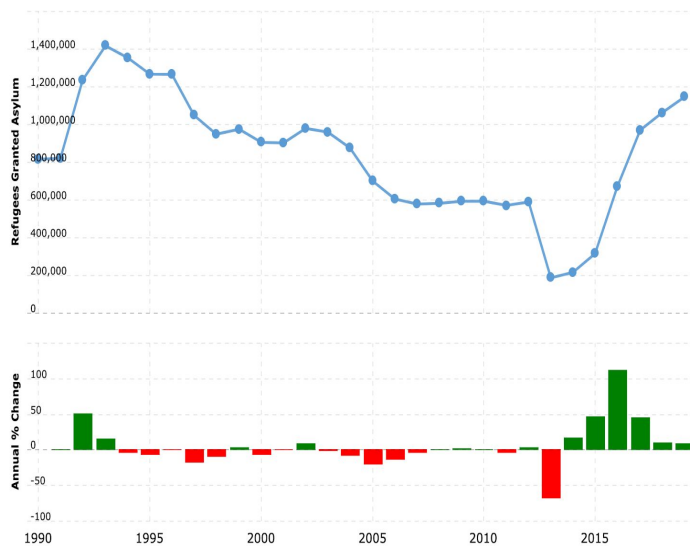
<https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/refugees-asylees>.

<sup>4</sup> President Donald Trump, Proclamation Suspending Entry of Aliens Who Present a Risk to the U.S. Labor Market Following the Coronavirus Outbreak (June 22, 2020)

the United States explicitly cited economic concerns stemming from the country's reaction to the pandemic. This suggests economically rationalized incentives for the United States policy. While quarantine restrictions have reduced the United States' economy, their fear of labor competition from an alleged threatening immigrant workforce has caused its leadership to decide to close its borders indefinitely.

As mentioned earlier, refugee admissions and its subsequent process are at the sole discretion of an individual nation-state. The United States, while fluctuating due to different presidential administrations, controls refugee resettlements in the form of an annual ceiling number cap that has never been exceeded in its history. We have included a data chart on the U.S. annual refugee admission and resettlement ceilings from 1980 but will remain within our January-June timeframe from 2019 and 2020 respectively.

## Germany



Germany does not have a ceiling limit for refugee admission but rather constructed their process for resettlement through the Asylum and the Residence Acts. The Asylum act codifies the process of granting and denying asylum while the Residence Act codifies the rules for entry, exit, stay and

employment of all foreigners. Prior to the pandemic, Chancellor Angela Merkel engaged with policies that encouraged a large percentage of refugees while offering work visas ranging from one to three years in place of asylum status. Her commitment to refugee resettlement and integration can be seen in Germany's refugee quota increasing from 1,600 to over 10,000 between 2016 and 2019.<sup>5</sup> In the image above Germany shows drastic increases in asylum grants starting in 2014. However, Germany halted all intake of refugees starting in March until reopening in July in response to COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> This drastic shift in policy has created a backlog in refugee transition countries such as Turkey and Greece.

## United Kingdom

Prior to their COVID-19 outbreak, we found that the United Kingdom experienced a steady decline in granting asylum cases and other relief aid. An even larger decline was found when evaluating those who received correspondence on their decision within the first six months of their application<sup>7</sup>. The image to the left shows a gradually stronger decrease in asylum grants since the beginning of 2014. Additionally, it is to be noted that Prime Minister Boris Johnson is known to use anti-immigration rhetoric and has openly stated his prioritization of skilled labor when formulating immigration policy. However, since the pandemic's eruption, the United Kingdom has loosened migration policies for 75 selected countries but added the condition that

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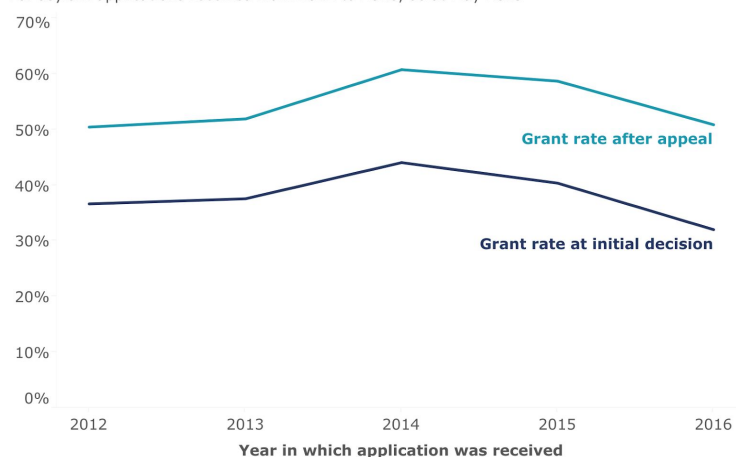
<sup>5</sup> "Refugees in Germany: Legal Entry - without Asylum: DW: 28.04.2019." DW.COM, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-in-germany-legal-entry-without-asylum/a-48515382>.

<sup>6</sup> "Refugees in Germany: Legal Entry - without Asylum: DW: 28.04.2019." DW.COM, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-in-germany-legal-entry-without-asylum/a-48515382>.

<sup>7</sup> "Migration to the UK: Asylum and Resettled Refugees," The Migratory Observatory, (The Migratory Observatory, November 8, 2019), <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>.

all entries were required to commit to self isolation for a 14 day period. While this demonstrates a commitment to public health, it limits migrants without family currently residing in these

How do appeals against initial decisions affect overall grant rates?  
For asylum applications received from 2012 to 2016, as at May 2019



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications.  
Notes: Grant rate refers to the share of main applicants granted asylum or another form of protection such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave by May 2019. Excludes withdrawn applications and cases awaiting a final outcome.



countries and effectively reduces possible resources to fully settle within its borders. The nation's asylum program continues to run but only at a limited capacity. Thus, the United Kingdom remains the least restricted country of our study as a result of their continued dependence on an international economy.

As these three countries have developed new policies to protect national security and public health, it has caused detriment to those seeking refuge from their naturalized country in the form of suitable resettlement and declining resources. In order to understand the severity and scope of the issue, it is important to note that there are currently 79.5 million displaced people.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the pandemic, refugees already lived in a vulnerable state as they are often met with cramped and unsanitary camp conditions. Refugee camps are known to be overcrowded; sparse with resources such as food and supplies, access to adequate health care and education. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these already difficult conditions and has left many refugees who are waiting for resettlement at risk for contagion. The heightened restriction on movement has ultimately halted many of the refugee resettlement programs, leaving many of

<sup>8</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Figures at a Glance," June 19, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

these individuals in a state of suspension. According to the International Organization for Migration Director General Antonio Victorino, “They are blocked, some in large groups, some in small groups, in the border areas, in very difficult conditions, without access to minimal care, especially health screenings.”<sup>9</sup> These conditions have essentially given the novel virus the ability to unfurl at an increased rate in comparison to outside the camp’s borders; making those inside more susceptible to infection.

While being one of the more organized refugee camps in Greece, the Ritsona refugee camp was recently struck by a COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>10</sup> This exemplifies that it is not a matter of who inside refugee camps will become infected but how long until an outbreak emerges. This poses immediate danger of the severity of an outbreak among large camps such as the Cox Bazar in Bangladesh which remains one of the largest refugee settlements in the world. Without substantial funding and a collaborative effort of international assistance, refugee camps are ill equipped to handle a severe outbreak on their own. Overcrowding prevents individuals from properly self-isolating. Given the declining conditions of these settlement camps, the absence of sufficient health experts also threatens the livelihood of these individuals. Nonetheless, this is the reality many people living in refugee camps face around the world and it is vital to bring awareness to these often overlooked migrant communities.

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<sup>9</sup> “Migrants Stranded 'All Over The World' and at Risk From Coronavirus || UN News,” United Nations News (United Nations News , May 2, 2020), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063482>.

<sup>10</sup> Joanna Kakissis, “Greece Records First Coronavirus Cases Among Refugees, Imposes Quarantine On Camp,” NPR (NPR, April 2, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/02/825981261/greece-records-first-coronavirus-case-s-among-refugees-imposes-quarantine-on-camp>.



Additionally, the disruption in migration flows as a result of COVID-19 has caused a decline in international humanitarian aid leading to greater resource shortages in resettlement camps. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency in regards to the east African region, countries imposing border restrictions to alleviate the pandemic's effects are straining supply chains and reducing the capacity to transport goods to customary areas<sup>11</sup> Similarly, those seeking asylum are also experiencing many of these negative repercussions as they rely heavily on humanitarian aid as well. Many countries are disregarding the non refoulement principle intended to protect asylees which have left them facing both a lack of resources, increased possibility of contracting the virus and the uncertainty of governmental protection from persecution. Failure to properly assess the needs and provide care for those living in refugee camps or stranded between borders can lead to not only a humanitarian disaster but also a public health crisis. Thus, it is vital that countries collaborate towards creating and implementing a comprehensive series of policies to effectively restore migrational flows while protecting its inhabitants from the effects of COVID-19 including refugees and asylum seekers .

Heightened in the era of COVID-19, it is imperative to emphasize the importance of our shared humanity and ensure our voices are heard for sufficient policy creation. Containing the spread of COVID-19 remains contingent on all individuals being protected under the full extent of the international community. In compliance with the Global Compact on Refugees, host countries must continue to share responsibility in ensuring that refugees receive much needed humanitarian relief during these unprecedented times. Accordingly, host countries should begin

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<sup>11</sup> "UNHCR and WFP Warn Refugees in Africa Face Hunger and Malnutrition as COVID-19 Worsens Food Shortages," How to Help Refugees - Aid, Relief and Donations, July 9, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/unhcr-and-wfp-warn-refugees-in-africa-face-hunger-and-malnutrition-as-covid-19-worsens-food-shortages/>.

adjusting their border closure procedures to safely allow for vital aid to reach those stuck between borders and resettlement camps. It is our recommendation that these countries also secure accessible rapid COVID-19 testing to diminish possible outbreaks due to close living quarters, in addition to comprehensive health coverage for treatment. To address more systemic flaws within resettlement, we recommend updating infrastructure within camps to comply with the CDC social distancing rulings and guarantee proper quarantine measures.

Our proposal for the United Nation is to approve a resolution that would redefine the international principle of non refoulement to include pandemics as rationale to accept asylees. All member states of the UN would have to legally abide by this new resolution. The UN can further its commitment to refugees and asylees by creating an additional resolution that requires member states to establish a process to grant refugees permanent residency status within 5 years of resettlement. This rule will be applicable to every member state, with limited exceptions established by the UN. Countries should increase the number of screening workers to ensure the screening process is limited to no more than 6 months. Additionally, the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany should immediately begin to update their crisis management plans to include refugees. This should also include those seeking asylum status to be provided with proper PPE wear such as reusable face masks, gloves and sanitizing materials to properly navigate public spaces. We strongly encourage all countries to formally adopt this policy, along with our other recommendations, long past COVID-19. Although this study focuses on three particular countries, these recommendations transcend any regional bias or concerns as this is a global issue. While the pandemic has economically strained all countries globally, it remains imperative that resources are allocated appropriately to ensure that refugees are protected against

the risk of infection.