Migration up 2% in OECD countries in 2018

OECD countries received about 5.3 million new permanent migrants in 2018, a 2% increase on 2017, according to preliminary data. Since 2015, European OECD countries have collectively received more permanent migrants than the United States. Nevertheless, the United States remains the largest single destination country for migrants, followed by Germany.

In 2018, the number of asylum applications in OECD countries decreased to 1.09 million. This represents a 34% drop compared to 1.65 million applications registered in both 2015 and 2016, a record high. The majority of asylum seekers came from Afghanistan, followed by Syria, Iraq and Venezuela.

Because of the drop in asylum applications, the number of registered refugees also declined. In 2017, the latest year for which detailed data by category are available, about 700 000 permits were delivered for humanitarian reasons, compared to 900 000 in 2016. Other kinds of permanent migration have been on the rise, notably labour migration (+6%), when people migrate to take up a job.

Temporary labour migration, when a person migrates for limited time for work, increased significantly in 2017, reaching 4.9 million, compared to 4.4 million in 2016. Poland is the top temporary labour migration destination, followed by the United States. In the European Union (EU) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) area, workers “posted” by their employers to work in other EU/EFTA member states represented the main channel for temporary workers, with almost 2.7 million postings.

Adjusting migration programmes and fostering integration

OECD countries continue to adjust their labour migration programmes, in order to improve selection and favour needed skills. A number of countries have also reformed their entry processes for migrant investors or have created new programmes for migrants funding start-ups. Meanwhile, some countries have introduced restrictions to family reunification procedures or streamlined their asylum procedures.

Migrants’ employment prospects continued to improve in 2018, building on the positive trends observed during the last five years. On average across OECD countries, more than 68% of migrants are employed and their unemployment rate is below 9%. Improvements in the employment of recent immigrants have been stronger in countries where employment rates were relatively high, such as Ireland or the United Kingdom. No change in recent migrants’ employment rates was observed in Italy and France, where only around 40% of recent migrants were employed in 2018.

With the continuous decrease in inflows of asylum seekers and refugees, policy attention has progressively shifted from organising the reception of new arrivals to the creation or adjustment of integration policies. Some countries have reinforced local authorities’ resources for promoting the integration of newcomers. In particular, countries have taken measures to improve immigrants’ language skills, offered courses in civic values and social norms, and set up systems for assessing and recognising formal vocational qualifications.
The impact of temporary migration on the labour market

The impact of immigration on the employment and wages of the native-born remains a core concern in the public debate. Research and policy work on the impact of immigration on the labour market has focussed on permanent immigrants. However, first OECD estimates show that temporary migrants contribute significantly to employment in many OECD countries. In 6 out of 20 countries, they add 2% or more to the total resident employed population. Among these countries, Luxembourg and Switzerland receive the most temporary labour migrants relative to population, largely due to EU/EFTA workers. New Zealand, Korea and Israel are also among the top five receiving countries. In EU/EFTA countries, free-movement labour migrants, including cross-border workers, add close to 1% to the total resident employed population. Free-movement temporary labour migrants contribute most to the construction and manufacturing sectors.

Integration and the role of family reunification

A number of recent policy debates have questioned the role of family reunification in integration and the policies needed, particularly in the context of the refugee surge in 2015/16.

New evidence for OECD countries shows that the vast majority of married migrants live together with their spouse in host countries. The share of migrants whose spouse is absent remains below 20% in almost all OECD countries. Evidence on how delayed family reunification affects the principal migrant is not clear-cut. On the one hand, principal migrants whose spouse arrived in the host country some time after them earn, even after ten years or more, significantly lower wages than those whose family reunification was not delayed. On the other hand, they are slightly more likely to work.

Delays in reunification also affect spouses and their integration prospects, especially for women. In European OECD countries and the United States, spouses whose arrival is delayed exhibit lower host-country language proficiency after five years or more in the host country than those whose reunification was not delayed. The integration outcomes of migrant children may also be strongly affected by long delays, especially in terms of their host-country language proficiency and education outcomes. Adult migrants whose parents live with them are more likely to find a job and to work longer hours, especially when they have young children.

Key findings

- After a 4% drop between 2016 and 2017, permanent migration flows to OECD countries started to rise again in 2018 (+2%) and amounted to about 5.3 million new permanent immigrants, according to preliminary data.
- More than 4.9 million temporary labour migrants entered OECD countries in 2017, an 11% increase over 2016. The number of international students enrolled in tertiary education across the OECD area increased by 7% in 2016, to over 3.5 million.
- On average across OECD countries, the employment rate of immigrants reached 68.3% in 2018 (2.4 percentage points below that of the native-born) and their unemployment rate decreased from 9.4% to 8.7% between 2017 and 2018.
- Access to employment remains difficult for specific immigrant groups, especially youth and the low-educated. By contrast, the strongest improvements in employment rates have been experienced by women and older people (55-64).
- In the European Union in 2018, more than 18% of immigrants aged 15-24 were not in employment, education or training (NEET) compared to 11% of their native peers. NEET rates were lower in non-European OECD countries.