



## Beneath the Surface

How many, and who, want to leave their countries and move to the EU and Sweden?

Mikael Elinder, Oscar Erixson and Olle Hammar

How many people residing in low-and middle-income (LMI) countries want to move to Sweden or the EU? We show that a significant proportion of the population of the world's LMI countries would like to move to another country given the opportunity, and primarily to a richer country. This willingness has increased over time. In total, over a billion people wish to emigrate. Of these, almost 200 million people want to move to an EU country, and around 10 million of these would like to move to Sweden in particular. Of those wishing to move to Sweden, approximately half reside in the following five countries: China, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Russia. Those who wish to move from their home countries differ from those who prefer to remain, in that they are often men, young and without a family, city dwellers, relatively well educated, and have higher incomes.

### Introduction

In recent years, large migration flows from low- and middle-income (LMI) to high-income countries have often been surprising and entailed substantial challenges for recipient countries. This has highlighted the importance of being able to access legitimate migration forecasts, in order to ensure a safe and orderly reception in the form of direct refugee support and more long-term integration efforts. An important piece of the puzzle for such forecasts

lies in understanding which countries people who desire to emigrate reside in, and which countries they wish to migrate to.

The aim of this report is to increase knowledge about the part of the world's LMI population that wishes to move to an EU country in general, and to Sweden in particular. We therefore ask the following questions:

- How much of the world's LMI population wants to move to the EU and Sweden?
- In which LMI countries are there a large number of people who want to move to the EU and Sweden?
- In which LMI countries is there a substantial proportion who want to move to the EU and Sweden?
- In which LMI countries has the number of people wanting to move to Sweden increased the most during the last decade?

## Method

Our analyses are based on migration willingness data from Gallup World Poll (GWP), the world's most comprehensive interview survey regarding people's opinions, thoughts, living conditions, and behaviour. GWP is based on annual interview surveys in more than 160 countries. GWP started in 2006 and represents 99 percent of the world's adult population today. Over two million people have been interviewed, either by telephone or in person. During the period of 2016 to 2021, a total of 415,000 people in the world's LMI countries responded to a question regarding migration willingness. This is the time period that we mainly focus on.

### **Our analyses emanate from the following question:**

If you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country or would you prefer to continue to live here?

Those who answered that they would like to move permanently to another country are then asked which country they would like to move to. We use this information together with population statistics from the World Bank in order to study the percentage and number of people who wish to emigrate from the world's LMI countries to the EU and Sweden.

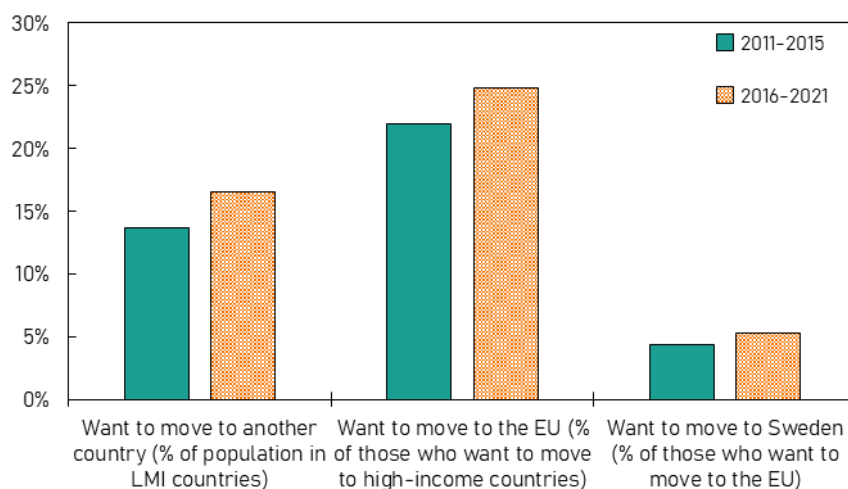
## Results

Data from GWP shows that, of the 6.6 billion people living in the world's LMI countries, an average of 17 percent wish to move permanently to another country. Thus, altogether, this amounts to about 1.1 billion people who would like to move to another country if given the opportunity.

Of these 1.1 billion people, 28 percent want to move to another LMI country, while 72 percent wish to move to a high-income country. Of those who wish to move to a high-income country, about a quarter—an equivalence to 194 million individuals—indicated that they would like to move to an EU country if given the opportunity.

**Figure 1: Trends for migration willingness from LMI countries**

Percent (%)



**Note:** The first pair of bars indicates the percentage of the population in the world's LMI countries who want to move to another country. The second pair of bars indicates how many (percentagewise) of those who want to move to high-income countries want to move to an EU country. The third pair of bars indicates how many (percentagewise) of those who want to move to the EU want to move specifically to Sweden.

Source: Own calculations based on GWP.

Of those who wish to move to an EU country, 5 percent (which corresponds to about 10 million people), stated that they would prefer to go to Sweden. Considering that Sweden's population constitutes about 2 percent of the EU's population, one can consider Sweden to be more popular as a destination country than the average EU country.

If we compare how the willingness to emigrate from LMI countries has changed over time, we find three interesting patterns (see Figure 1):

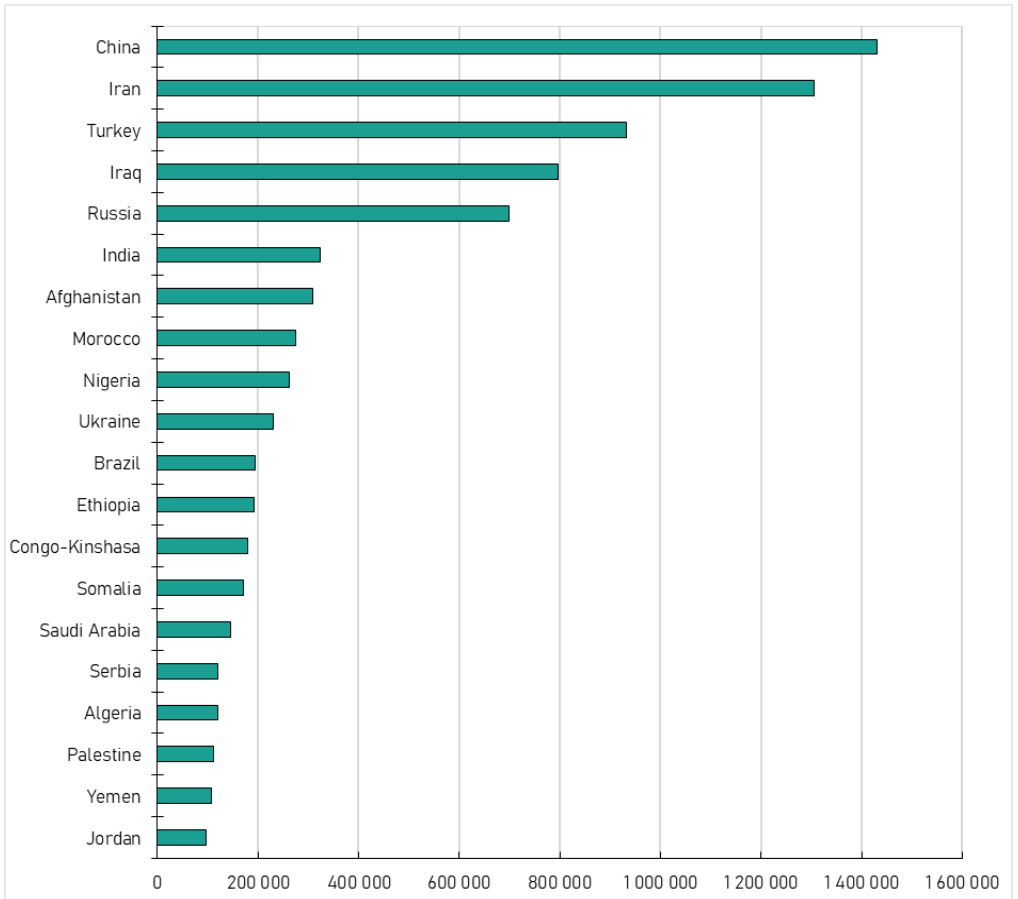
1. The percentage who states that they want to move to another country has increased from 14 percent of the world's LMI population during 2011 to 2015, to 17 percent during 2016 to 2021. Even the number of people who want to emigrate from LMI countries has increased over the past decade.
2. Of those who state that they want to move from a LMI country to a high-income country, the percentage who want to move to the EU has increased from 22 to 25 percent during the corresponding period.
3. Sweden has grown in popularity as a destination country. Among those who state that they want to move to the EU, the percentage of those who want to move to Sweden has increased from 4 to 5 percent.

However, the figures in Figure 2 show the number of people who would like to move permanently to Sweden—if given the opportunity. That is to say, if there were no obstacles whatsoever, for example, regarding the possibility of leaving one's country of origin, obtaining a residence permit in Sweden, financial resources and so forth, about 5 million people in China, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Russia would want to move to Sweden. By comparison, there are around 2 million people living in Sweden today who are born in another country. Approximately 340,000 of these people are born in one of these five countries just mentioned. A contributing factor as to why relatively few people born in a foreign country live in Sweden and other EU countries in relation to how many people have expressed a desire to move here, is most probably a result of many different obstacles that make it difficult for people to move and thereby follow through on their wishes to migrate.

As far as trends are concerned, three countries in particular stand out when it comes to a sharp increase in the number of people that want to move to Sweden since the period of 2011 to 2015: China, Iran, and Turkey.

Those who want to move from their home countries differ from those who would prefer to remain in that they are more often men, young and without a family, city dwellers, relatively well educated, and have higher incomes, see Table 1. Compared to those who want to move to other EU countries, those who want to move to Sweden stand out in that they are less religious, experience more health issues, have somewhat of a lower income, are more often city dwellers, and have families.

**Figure 2. Amount of people in different LMI countries that would like to move to Sweden if given the opportunity.**



**Note:** A total equivalent to 8 million people indicate that they would want to move to Sweden from these 20 countries, if given the opportunity.  
**Source:** Own calculations based on GWP.

**Table 1 Individual factors and willingness to migrate**

Individual factors	LMI countries	Want to move	To the EU	To Sweden
Man (%)	50	58	60	62
Age (years)	38	31	32	32
Single (%)	36	49	52	45
Have children under the age of 15 (%)	61	56	54	59
Live in a city (%)	30	39	40	47
Primary school education (%)	52	33	25	35
High school education (%)	40	53	60	44
Post-secondary education (%)	8	13	16	20
Income per year (USD)	3816	5740	6194	5194
Religious (%)	70	66	65	48
Satisfaction with life (1-10)	4.9	4.9	5.2	5.1
Health issues (%)	24	19	16	39
Number of observations	415,396	113,914	29,165	1,228

Source: Own calculations based on GWP

## Reflections

Migration is inherently difficult to predict as it is determined by complex processes, both on an individual and country level. Forecasts for future migration flows have often been based on historical flows. The refugee crisis of 2015, when 1.3 million people from primarily Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea made their way to the EU and Sweden, is an example of a situation where the prognostic values of previous flows was limited. At the same time, it highlights the importance of being able to predict migration flows in order to ensure a safe and organized reception of migrants, both short- and long-term. A new refugee crisis occurred in the spring of 2022, due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the span of nine months, almost 8 million Ukrainians had fled to seek protection somewhere in Europe. Our analyses shows that Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine had a common characteristic in that before the refugee flows began, there were many people residing in these countries who expressed wishes to move to another country, not least to Sweden. This data was available but was not utilized. To map what the willingness to migrate in the world looks like is therefore important in order to better able predict and plan for future migration flows. At the same time, this research is in its infancy. We need more variety when it comes to measuring the willingness to migrate, for example, how strong the will to migrate is, whether one has real plans to move and, if so, how far one has come with

their planning, as well as information about underlying motives. It would also be valuable to better understand how one's willingness to migrate and migration plans change during an ongoing crisis, both among those who remain in the country, and among those who are already on foot. Hopefully, in the future, we will see great progress in knowledge production in terms of how individuals' migration decisions are shaped, so that we can better understand and manage future migration flows.

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