

Understanding Migration: Mixed Migration

Part of an occasional series

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In an earlier [brief](#), we discussed the common push-pull model of migration. To recap, push factors and pull factors are approximations—part of a cognitive model of how migration operates—to describe the reasons that individuals might emigrate (push factors) and the reasons why individuals might settle in a particular location (pull factors). However, the push-pull model is not supported by research. The two-factor model does not work for empirical modeling; factors that are neither push nor pull—such as social networks—intervene in the process, and migration decisions are commonly overdetermined.

This brief focuses on the concept of “mixed migration” to continue that earlier discussion. “Mixed migration” has recently made a comeback, such as in [the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#) and presently in discussions of migration to Europe. Mixed migration refers to both (1) mixed composition of groups who travel from one country to another, and (2) the mixed motivations of many individuals who migrate. The most common depiction contrasts refugees to economic migrants—refugees have been forced to flee, while economic migrants search out new destinations in search of opportunity. When approaching large aggregate flows of migrants, most flows are “mixed,” meaning that they contain groups of people, some of who qualify as refugees or asylees and some of whom do not. Similarly, individuals’ choices are only very rarely fixed. Most people who travel undocumented through the Americas, for instance, have more than one factor that fully accounts for the decision to leave home. The conditions that force people to flee are real. But the distinctions between classes of migration—for

example, economic migrants versus refugees—are political distinctions.

As will be discussed, mixed migration is useful as a concept because it helps policymakers and bureaucrats to understand that there are no shortcuts for evaluating individuals’ protection claims. Each case needs to be handled individually. However, mixed migration is limited as a concept because it seems to describe push factors and pull factors by other words, and because mixed-migration discussions often assume that individuals’ protection needs align with individuals’ ability to gain legal status. The category of refugee derives from international agreement and refers to the sources or reasons for protection. The legal instruments are choices for which kinds of harm qualify for protection and which do not; they do not describe when migration is forced and when migration is voluntary.

Mixed Flows of Mixed Migration

When referring to heterogeneous flows, mixed migration incorporates two ideas. First, that individuals in transit can be divided into economic migrants and refugees, however messily. Economic migrants move to new countries to improve the material circumstances of their lives. Refugees must flee, either to prevent harm to themselves and loved ones or to preserve their rights and freedoms. Second, that when discussing aggregations of people who journey from a sending country to a receiving country, the movements and flows are composed of a jumble of individuals, of whom [some are economic migrants and some are refugees](#). Refugees and irregular economic migrants will use the same routes, the same means of transport, and often will

travel together in small groups that are mixed. Consequently, how an individual arrives in a country bears no relationship to whether that individual needs protection. Because there is no empirical relationship between methods of travel and the presence or absence of a valid legal claim to protection, governments should not adjudicate protection claims based on choices about the form and method of travel.

The legal basis for the distinction between economic migrant and refugee lies in the international agreements to protect refugees: the UN's [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) and the [1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#). The agreements defined the kinds of persecution that entitled individuals to protection in countries other than their own, both in the scope of cases that merit international protection (race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership in a particular social group) and the severity of consequences if an individual is forced to stay ("a well-founded fear of being persecuted"). Conceptually, the agreements lay out a standard for involuntary migration. Strictly speaking, refugees comprise a subset of migrants, just as a square is a special kind of rectangle.

There is a [paradigm of forced migration and voluntary migration](#). The categories are not taken as nested, but as contrasting. For example, in both the 2014 child-migration crisis and the 2018, journalists and political leaders offered [two frames](#) for understanding the individuals migrating and increases in asylum applications at the border. In one frame, the individuals involved were people forced to migrate by violence in Central America. In the other, the individuals were economic migrants. For proponents of the former, rising asylum claims reflected rising need. For the other, rising asylum claims reflected abuse of the U.S. asylum system. In short, those forced to migrate were sympathetic and in some sense worthy, and those who came for economic opportunity were unsympathetic and unworthy. The critical distinction between the two lay in the question of whether the migration was forced or voluntary.

Mixed Migration and Individual Motivation

A secondary definition focuses on individuals' motivations for moving, and how a single decision to emigrate may result from a combination of factors. There are two key points to understand. First, individuals often have multiple reasons for leaving home, many or most of which are not voluntary. Consequently, nearly all individual journeys are not either "voluntary" or "forced," but better understood as [a mix of involuntary and voluntary factors](#). Second, and related, complex social forces structure the context for migration decisions. For many migrants, poverty and lack of economic opportunity coexists with government corruption, weak state institutions, human-rights violations, and ethnic discrimination. In the current system, some of these motivations would validate protection while others would not, even though an individual migrant may not perceive them as separate or even able to be separated.

An example may be helpful here. Several years ago, I interviewed a Central American migrant who had come to a shelter in Guadalajara, Mexico. The shelter is part of the [REDODEM](#) network, and part of the network's standardized intake asks about why the individual left his or her country of origin. As normal, I asked, "Why did you leave your country?," to which the migrant replied that he had left for "economic reasons." At this point in my fieldwork, I had learned that *por razones económicas* could sometimes include motivations better described by crime—gang extortion, for example—or fear of persecution. Gently, I asked the migrant to explain more. He told me that he was from an agricultural area and worked as a farm laborer with a set rotation—a few months on one farmer's land cultivating maize, a few more months cultivating beans somewhere else, then peppers, then sugar cane, then back to the first farmer. But a drought had come, and the farmers did not need farm laborers. His family wouldn't survive if he didn't work, so he went to a city that was a regional center. There most employers lacked extra money to pay wages for new workers because the drought was widespread. Even

more, many other farm laborers had come looking for work, creating a large pool of unemployed men. Instead of staying in the city, he decided to leave for the U.S. “And so, because there are not jobs, I’m leaving,” he concluded. Another version of his story, just as valid, might have concluded that he left because of the drought, that is, for environmental reasons.

In the example, the migrant left both because of widespread drought and lack of economic opportunity. The former is involuntary—the drought lasted [five years](#) – and the latter is voluntary, at least ostensibly. But the two are not separable analytically. A lack of rain and a lack of economic opportunity each fully explain why the migrant chose to depart, because the two are a single event. More broadly, migration decisions are commonly made by individuals who act on behalf of [households](#)—not just in Latin America but around the world—and many or most undocumented migrants have multiple factors that [fully account for the decision](#) to leave home. To return to the example, even if one ended the generalized poverty the migrant might still depart because of the drought. And in the reverse situation, economic deprivation alone might [provide a claim for international protection](#), at least on some accounts. Although a strong case can be made that the migration was involuntary, the migrant would not have qualified for protection under U.S. law.

Implications for Policy

If many involuntary movements are not recognized as forced, where does that leave policy? First, international agreements like the Refugee Convention are legal instruments. The instruments make choices for whom to protect, but they do not and cannot provide a comprehensive description of all forms of involuntary migration. The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees offers a broader definition of individuals who merit protection, including those who lived in dangerous environments but who have not been individually targeted by criminal actors. As conditions change, and as advocates and researchers learn more about the current protection needs of

individuals, agreements should be updated to meet updated protection needs. The scope of protection should be broadened rather than restricted, as a general principle.

Second, a dichotomy of forced migration and voluntary migration is often unhelpful because the description it provides is not actionable. A goal such as “addressing the forced migration crisis”—from a [recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee report](#)—is laudable. But it is extremely difficult to address forced migration, much less to end forced migration. The causes of forced migration are diverse, variable, deep-rooted, and mostly outside of the possibility for U.S. intervention. Policymakers and advocates would better serve marginalized people by focusing on tractable policy goals, such as ending unsafe migrations. In this example, rather than trying to focus on the nebulous but enormous project of reducing all migration determinants, ending unsafe migrations offers a concrete set of actions: namely, to tackle those factors that endanger the lives and safety of people who migrate, many of whom are already marginalized.

Third, migration motivations and states’ legal obligations to individuals do not have to align. An individual might narrate her decision to leave as prompted for “economic reasons,” but have a strong legal case for legal status. In fact, a single individual may give distinct accounts for the decision to leave at different points in his or her journey without either account being a lie. A focus on the individual motivation for migration, even when justified in individual cases, can [imply](#) that much or all migration is unnecessary and therefore unjustified. Discussions of motivation tend to confuse the issue. Advocates should refocus discussions around protection needs—can this person live a dignified life in her home country?—rather than allowing discussions of motivations to have space to breathe.