



Disparities of wealth within countries can be significant and even greater between countries. This disparity can drive migration. Seen here: a Mumbai cityscape with a big contrast between poverty and wealth; Getty/Adrian Catalin Laza

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“The migratory flows of our times are the expression of a complex and varied phenomenon that, to be properly understood, requires a careful analysis of every aspect of its different stages, from departure to arrival, including the possibility of return.”

- Pope Francis, 2023 [World Day of Migrants and Refugees](#)

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Pope Leo XIII observed in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* that “men would cling to the country in which they were born, for no one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means of living a decent and happy life.”<sup>1</sup> While it is true that in our global world people choose to migrate for a variety of reasons – for love, adventure, and job opportunities in distant lands – Pope Leo XIII’s point is that most people are predisposed to remain where things are familiar if given the opportunity to do so. The familiarity of local customs and language provide a sense of belonging and identity that can be difficult to replicate elsewhere. It is difficult to pick up and emigrate to a country where the language is absent different, might inspire the desire to emigrate,

access to gainful employment is hard to come by, and social mores different. But we live in a world where the choice to remain is not always a realistic one.

To understand global migration, it is thus important to understand the root causes that motivate people to migrate, often against their own desires. Within a migration context, both push and pull factors play off one another; push factors being the reason(s) why people would want to leave their home country and pull factors being the reason(s) why people would want to come to a new country. So, for example, in a country or region where endemic poverty is pronounced and economic opportunities severely limited, the promise of gainful employment elsewhere can

function as the pull factor for a person to migrate to a particular place. A myriad of other push and pull factors can also play into the decision to leave:

PUSH	PULL
Persecution, Violence, War	Safety and Stability, Freedom
Poor Wages, Lack of Jobs	Higher Wages, Job Prospects
Crop Failure, Famine, Natural Disaster	Food Availability, Better Environment
Limited Opportunities, Family Separation	Better Quality of Life, Family Reunification

## Persecution, Violence, and War

Safety factors can cause danger to individuals, prompting them to migrate. Persecution and discrimination based on nationality, race, religion, political beliefs, or membership status in a particular social group<sup>2</sup> will prompt people to move large distances in search of living conditions where safety can reign over their lives. Danger can be imposed upon individuals by something formal, like war<sup>3</sup>, or informal, such as internal strife<sup>4</sup> or widespread organized national criminal activity. For example, the turbulent<sup>5</sup> Northern Triangle of Central America, composed of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, was described in 2018 by the U.S. Department of State as a region that “suffers from high rates of violence and crime with weak judicial systems to prosecute criminals and protect those affected.”<sup>6</sup> Countless thousands of people have left a multitude of war-torn or unsafe countries, some of whom receive little coverage in international news.<sup>7</sup> Very many of those leaving their home countries have travelled through irregular means seeking safety and security in other regions of the world.<sup>8</sup>



Internally displaced Syrians, including children, at a refugee camp near the Turkish border in Atme, Syria; Getty/Joe Carillet

## Economics and Related Social Factors

Economic migration, whether permanent or seasonal, is a commonly cited reason for migration.<sup>9</sup> In general, it is believed that in economic migration people move from poorer developing areas into richer areas where wages are higher and more jobs are available.<sup>10</sup> Immigration from Brazil in the last decade of the 20th century provides an example of the way in which economic factors contributed to migration patterns in the case of Brazilian immigrants in the U.S., who have cited economic reasons for leaving their home in search of prosperity elsewhere. Many sought to escape the hyperinflations that plagued Brazil up until 1994. Yet even since the late 1990s, when inflation subsided and prices stabilized, middle and lower-class Brazilians experienced an average loss of a third of purchasing power in their salaries, resulting in a wave of migrants to the United States knowing that they can earn as much as four times what they earned in Brazil working the same jobs.<sup>11</sup> Declining or stagnant wealth, paired with the promise of economic prosperity elsewhere, can function as a significant impetus to migrate.

Social factors motivating migration grow from the human needs and the desire to seek opportunities absent in their homeland. Migrants often move to ensure better opportunities for themselves or their family, like sending their child to a better, safer school or finding a job that would have not only a sufficient salary, but also important benefits and career growth prospects. In terms of education, United States colleges and graduate programs have been a particularly strong attraction for young, talented individuals around the world.<sup>12</sup>

## Environmental Displacement

Migration caused by environmental factors is increasingly spontaneous and undertaken with little regard for personal well-being at the time. Environmental factors such as hurricanes<sup>13</sup>, crop failure<sup>14</sup>, pollution, and climate change<sup>15</sup> may result in immediate or long-term health risks, loss of shelter, lack of viable food sources locally, or unfeasible solutions<sup>16</sup> for people residing in impacted regions. In *Laudato si'* (2015), Pope Francis highlighted the rise in migrants fleeing environmental degradation and calls for collective global action on both crises. The Holy Father was prescient in his calls when a few years later Hurricanes Eta and Iota rampaged through Central America and resulted in the International Red Cross estimating 1.5 million being displaced by the disasters of a “climate crisis.”<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that more than one root cause can trigger migration of people. More importantly, a consistent component of the various root causes of migration is family unity. Thus, representatives of the international Catholic church<sup>18</sup> and U.S. Catholic bishops<sup>19</sup> have spoken clearly about the need to maintain family units in immigration agreements and national legislation. For Catholics, it is necessary to incorporate the principles and values of Catholic social teaching equally within the context of the root causes of migration. Catholic concepts that include human life and dignity, the common good, a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, the dignity of work, solidarity, subsidiarity, integral human development, and welcoming the stranger.

In *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the U.S. and Mexican catholic bishops emphasized the root causes that contribute to irregular migration and the importance of addressing these factors so as to stabilize local communities. Here they wrote that “Catholic teaching also states that the root causes of migration – poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts – must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their families.”<sup>20</sup>

## Endnotes

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- 8 “Crossing the Darien Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S.,” Council on Foreign Relations (2022): <https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darien-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>; “Hundreds of Afghans risk 11-country trek to seek haven in United States,” Reuters (2023): <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hundreds-afghans-risk-11-country-trek-seek-haven-united-states-2023-02-01/>
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- 15 “Survey of American Attitudes on Climate Change,” Catholic Relief Service (2022): [https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/climate\\_change\\_survey\\_report\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/climate_change_survey_report_-_final.pdf)
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