

Metrics for Asylum Policies (MAP) Project

International Rescue Committee | November 2024

The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises, helping to restore health, safety, education, economic wellbeing, and power to people devastated by conflict and disaster. Founded in 1933 at the call of Albert Einstein, the IRC is at work in over 40 countries and 28 U.S. cities helping people to survive, reclaim control of their future, and strengthen their communities.

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Executive Summary

How should states measure border and asylum policies?

Global narratives around migration paint a sensationalized picture of historically high numbers of people on the move, and particular focus is given to the daily, monthly, or annual arrival numbers at wealthy countries' borders. For example, US politicians and reporters closely monitor the monthly number of "encounters" reported by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at the Southwest border to judge the effectiveness of the government's border policies. Similar reporting drives narratives in the UK and EU about "crises" based on the number of irregular arrivals. Policymakers use these figures to justify increasingly restrictive laws that attempt to control arrival numbers.

Conversely, humanitarian stakeholders such as the UN agencies and INGOs—including the IRC—regularly point to rising arrival numbers as a proxy for historic total numbers of displaced people, even though data show that global refugee figures have remained relatively stable for decades at around 0.3% of total global population. Further, prevailing narratives often completely omit global context: more people migrate within the Global South than from the Global South to the Global North, and most people who are forcibly displaced never cross an international border, remaining within their own countries.

This rapt attention on daily arrivals at borders, akin to monitoring a stock ticker, distorts the complex factors that cause people to leave their homes and seek entry into a new country. Furthermore, policymakers often conflate asylum policy, which is based on the fundamental obligation to not return people to situations of persecution, with overall migration policy. This leads policymakers to craft overly simplistic responses, which ignore the complicated incentives that underlie both forced and voluntary migration, and often fail to achieve their goal of lowering arrivals.

From a good-governance premise that policymakers should base their decisions on evidence-based policies to achieve clearly articulated goals, the singular focus on arrival numbers is conceptually flawed. Arrival numbers are only weakly tied to domestic policy. History has shown repeatedly that destination countries' immigration policies have only marginal impacts on arrivals. Events often beyond the control of destination countries, including war, climate change, economic factors, and "migrant diplomacy" (also referred to as "weaponization" or "instrumentalization") can all have more significant impacts on arrivals than domestic policy. Measuring policies by their impact on a variable that is not closely correlated to those policies is a recipe for failure.

Additionally, the reliance on arrival numbers is overly simplistic. They tell only one small part of a complex story about global migration and its relationship to national policies. Numbers of arrivals give us no information about the reason people are arriving at borders, what happens to them during or after arrival, the impacts of such arrivals on host communities, and other causes and effects of these movements. Policies with the express goal of reducing arrivals are usually meant to achieve some underlying goal, such as creating more order or predictability at borders; protecting economic, cultural, or national interests; or promoting a fairer immigration system. Arrival numbers may be a convenient proxy by which to judge asylum and border policies because they are relatively easy to ascertain and generally reported regularly, but they should not be the primary measure.

A better way forward: alternative metrics for better policy outcomes

To address these challenges, the Policy & Solutions team at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is working on the Metrics for Asylum Policies (MAP) project. This project looks at the ways asylum and border policies are currently designed and measured and then suggests better and more nuanced alternatives. By examining the various data sets already available and cataloguing the information they provide, as well as suggesting new sources for information, the MAP project provides policymakers with more effective tools to design, implement, and measure policies meant to impact asylum systems and border procedures. While specific policy design will depend on national legislation, this project looks at examples from countries and regions where the IRC works that can inform design and evaluation across contexts. This project draws on the IRC's on-the-ground experience working with displaced people in over 40 countries across contexts of origin, transit, and destination in the Global North and South.

The MAP project guide and companion report suggest alternative metrics by which to track progress toward and measure the impacts of asylum and border policies. To satisfy the diverse motivations of policymakers, indicators are organized by thematic area: compliance with national and international law; the protection and safety of migrants and refugees; the economic impacts for sending and receiving communities; the integrity of national security and orderly procedures; and progress toward global responsibility sharing.

Conclusion

Policymakers should move beyond their focus on arrival numbers and apply more nuanced methodologies to evaluate asylum and border policies. There are myriad other frameworks that can be used to design effective policies that integrate measurable indicators and describe a realistic theory of change based on existing evidence. By articulating in advance the goals of a policy and how progress will be measured, policymakers can ensure that data is consistently collected, new theories are tested, and proposals are based on the best available evidence. Centering conversations on the true impacts of asylum and border policies will not only result in better policy design but may also increase opportunities to promote protection and compliance and reduce unintended harms to those seeking protection.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to the International Rescue Committee's Policy & Solutions team with questions: Dan Berlin, Policy Director daniel.berlin@rescue.org