

## TIME FOR A RESET?

*This paper is part of a series of short “think pieces” by IOM’s Migration Research High Level Advisers on the potential changes, impacts and implications for migration and mobility arising from COVID-19. Designed to spark thinking on policy and programmatic responses to COVID-19 as the impacts continue to emerge globally, the papers draw upon existing and new evidence and offer initial exploratory analysis and recommendations.*

August 2020

COVID-19 and the transformation  
of migration and mobility globally

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# Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age?



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## COVID-19 and the transformation of migration and mobility globally

# Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age?

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### The Age of Migration

*The Age of Migration* by Stephen Castles and Mark Miller was first published in 1993, at the knee of an upcurve in international migration that began after World War Two. After the war, net migration flows grew globally from 2.6 million in 1950–1955 to 20.6 million in 2005–2010 (figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Global migrant stocks have increased by 150 per cent in absolute terms since 1960, and by 40 per cent as a fraction of the global population in the past 30 years.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, international tourism has grown from 25 million arrivals worldwide in 1950 to 1.4 billion arrivals in 2018 – a 56-fold increase in less than three-quarters of a century.<sup>4</sup> Until recently, it was widely estimated that more than a million people were literally flying through the air at any given moment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> UN DESA, 2019b.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Roser, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Avakian, 2017.

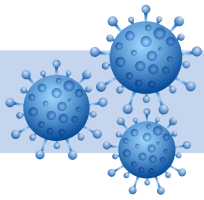
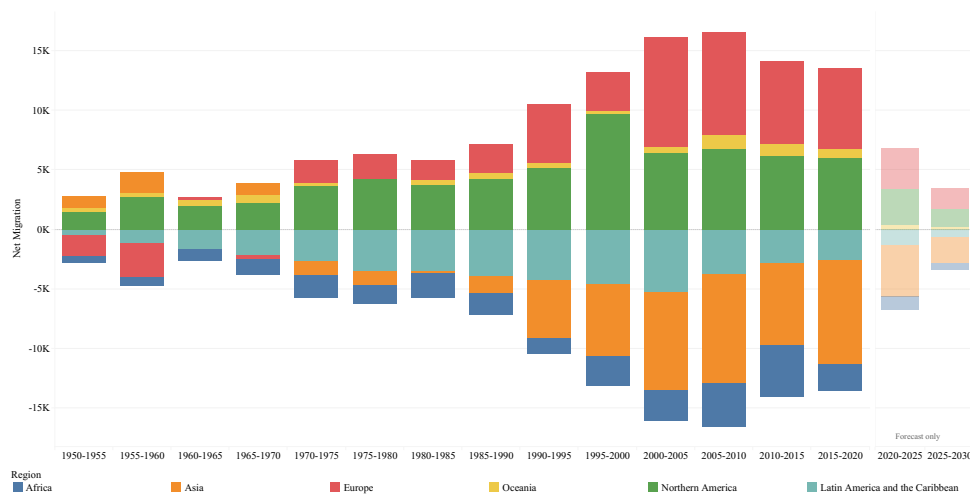


Figure 1. Average annual net number of immigrants by region, from 1950–55 to 2015–20 (millions)



Source: UN DESA, 2019a. Forecast added. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

However, the age of migration itself may now be coming to an end. A recent Pew Research Center analysis found that 91 per cent of the world's population lived in countries with coronavirus restrictions on foreign arrivals.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations World Tourism Organization announced that these “represent the most severe restrictions on international travel in history”.<sup>7</sup> The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently told the *New York Times* that, of some 120 countries under lockdown, only around 30 “are giving any consideration to the claims of asylum seekers”, while the resettlement of recognized refugees “has stopped for all practical purposes”.<sup>8</sup> Does the COVID-19 lockdown represent a temporary trough in global population movements, or the end of the most recent age of migration? This paper sets an agenda for research on the future of human migration and mobility after the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

## 1. Will countries need less labour migration?

Unemployment has mushroomed during the pandemic. With corporate borrowing at a historic high, many firms now lack the revenue to service debt and are either folding or cutting staff. Unemployment in the United States of America is “at its highest level since the Great Depression”.<sup>9</sup> Things may get worse before they get better. The International Monetary Fund is predicting the worst downturn since the Great Depression, beginning with a global economic contraction of 3 per cent in 2020.<sup>10</sup> The European Union is predicting its worst depression ever.<sup>11</sup>

6 Graham-Harrison and Smith, 2020.

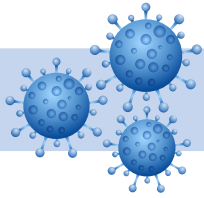
7 UNWTO, 2020.

8 Semple, 2020.

9 Wolfers, 2020.

10 Gopinath, 2020.

11 New York Times, 2020.



Such high unemployment rates will depress demand for immigrant labour. Surviving firms will have access to a large recruitment pool of unemployed native workers and will face political pressure to hire them instead of immigrants. Some workers may not retrain for new jobs, or accept jobs below their skill level. The impacts will vary by sector and skill level, as migrants cluster in essential jobs at the high- and low-skill ends of the skill spectrum.<sup>12</sup> Even so, the net result will be an economy less dependent overall on immigrant workers to fill seasonal and skill shortages in the labour force – a reversal of a decades-long trend.

## 2. Will migrant decision-making change?

The pandemic may also reshape decision-making about migration. Some types of people may be *less* likely to move. Research shows that disasters like earthquakes can make people less risk tolerant and less patient.<sup>13</sup> The pandemic may have similar impacts. If so, some migrants will not risk moving for a medium-term loss of savings, career and social status. Other people, however, may become much *more* likely to move. In developing countries, many households decide to send a family member abroad, so that they can send back money.<sup>14</sup> Given that many migrant workers have lost work and/or returned “home”, the World Bank forecasts a 20 per cent drop in remittances this year.<sup>15</sup> Some families may be desperate to send family members abroad as soon as lockdowns end. By making some people less likely to migrate and others more likely, the pandemic may result in a period of unpredictable and fast-changing migration flows. As one expert explained to the *New York Times*, “Once you turn the faucet back on, it’s not going to immediately flow ... and when it does flow, it’s not necessarily going to flow in the same direction.”<sup>16</sup>

## 3. Will anti-immigrant sentiment grow?

Economic downturn usually goes hand-in-hand with increased anti-immigrant sentiment,<sup>17</sup> often in the form of age-old myths about immigrants stealing jobs or lazing around on unemployment benefits. Neither stereotype finds strong support in migration research. Immigrants typically have higher employment rates than native workers and contribute more in taxes than they consume in benefits. They also stimulate domestic demand by purchasing local products and services. Their effect on native wages and unemployment is small to zero,<sup>18</sup> because they tend to do different jobs.

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12 Kuestenmacher, 2020.

13 Dupuy and Beine, 2020.

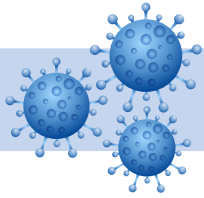
14 Taylor, 1999.

15 World Bank, 2020.

16 Semple, 2020.

17 Quillian, 1995:586–611. Also see Ruist, 2016:125–134 and Finseraas et al., 2016:60–73.

18 *Channel 4 News*, 2019.



Since they may look or sound different, migrants and minorities make convenient scapegoats in troubled times. Anti-immigrant sentiment has been on the rise at least since the Global Financial Crisis.<sup>19</sup> However, the pandemic is exacerbating xenophobia, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment worldwide. For example, in Australia, hundreds of people wrote to the national ABC news network to report seeing or experiencing “racially charged incidents in supermarkets, on the streets and in their cars throughout the lockdown period”, including people being “coughed on, insulted and spat at” in public places such as supermarkets.<sup>20</sup> Similar trends have been highlighted across Asia, as well as in the United States, Hungary and Italy, among other places.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Will autocrats suppress diversity?

As *The Economist* puts it, “autocrats are using COVID-19 as an excuse to grab more power”, by insisting that “strong measures are needed to keep the public safe”.<sup>22</sup> The pandemic has prompted unprecedented displays of state economic power, in the form of colossal stimulus packages. It has also prompted classic authoritarian emergency measures, such as cancelling public events, restricting gatherings and internal movement and public transportation, launching public information campaigns, tracing who contacts whom, limiting freedom of press, speech and expression, and suspending protections for minorities and private individuals.<sup>23</sup>

People who look or sound different are particularly vulnerable when governments seize emergency powers to enforce compliance and conformity. Allegations of police brutality against ethnic minorities during lockdown led to rioting in Paris.<sup>24</sup> In Singapore, the main Chinese newspaper published a letter blaming migrant workers for a new coronavirus outbreak, because of “poor hygiene habits that they had acquired from backward countries”.<sup>25</sup> Malaysian authorities entrapped and detained hundreds of undocumented migrants,<sup>26</sup> including young children, during immigration raids conducted under cover of virus testing.<sup>27</sup> Myanmar’s military has been accused of carrying out “war crimes” against ethnic minorities, emboldened by special extended powers intended to help control the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>28</sup> During lockdowns in various countries, “people speaking differently have been denied access to restaurants, lodging and public transport, and physically assaulted.”<sup>29</sup>

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19 Zamora-Kapoor and Vereva, 2014:131–134.

20 Walsh, 2020.

21 Vertovec, 2020a.

22 *The Economist*, 2020a.

23 Roser et al., 2020.

24 *The Sun*, 2020.

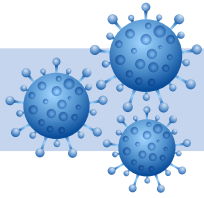
25 Badalge, 2020.

26 Sullivan et al., 2020.

27 Sukumaran, 2020.

28 Wright and Watson, 2020.

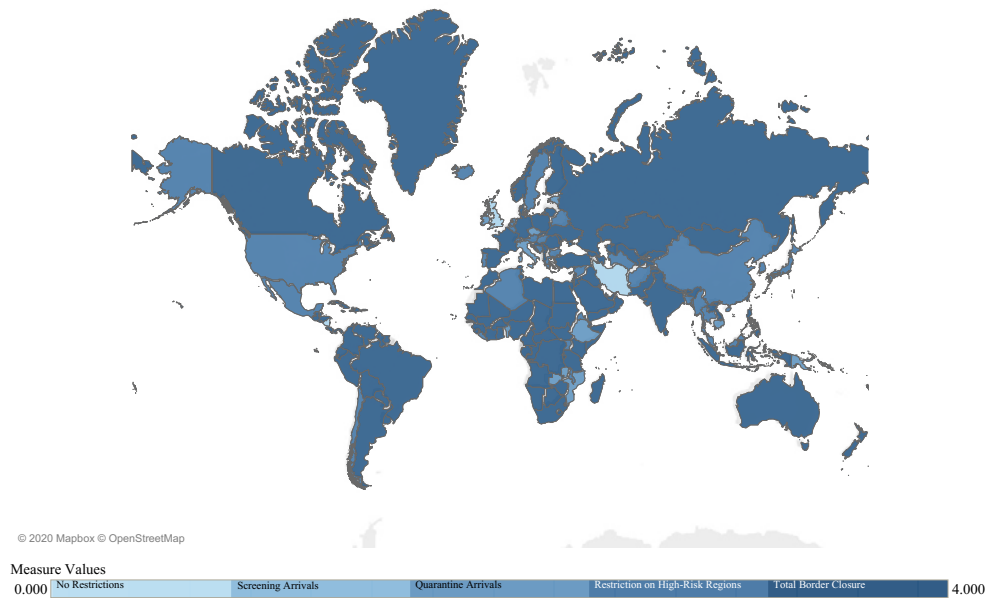
29 Dubinsky et al., 2020.



### 5. Will migration restrictions proliferate?

In such an economic, social and political climate, government migration politics will probably continue their restrictive trend. Temporary labour migration programmes and immigration points systems are particularly likely to proliferate. The former allow foreign workers into the country to fill spikes in demand for labour, such as during harvests, while restricting worker numbers and rights, and repatriating them after the spike.<sup>30</sup> At the height of lockdown in early April, countries like Germany were flying in seasonal workers, such as asparagus pickers, “from Eastern European countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Hungary”.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, governments cannot quickly or easily train all the workers needed in the highest-skilled jobs. Instead, they increasingly rely on skills-selective immigration points systems modelled on those of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. One example is Britain, which intends to use a points system to help it “bring overall migration numbers down”, while keeping the United Kingdom open to “the brightest and the best from around the world”.<sup>32</sup> As Steven Vertovec put it, many countries are facing “Singapore Futures”, involving a welcoming climate for high-skilled migrants and a tightly controlled temporary guest worker environment for low-skilled migrants.<sup>33</sup>

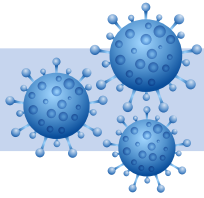
Figure 2. International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: Hale et al., 2020. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

30 Ruhs, 2013.  
31 Rising, 2020.  
32 Aranda, 2020.  
33 Vertovec, 2020b.



## 6. Will “travel bubbles” become economic regions?

The travel industry is a major casualty of the pandemic; industry experts are unsure that it will ever recover.<sup>34</sup> Global travel will remain severely restricted at least until a vaccine can be mass produced – the time frame for which is more likely to be years, rather than months. With such timelines in mind, an emerging alternative to reinstating global travel is forming “travel bubbles” between States that have successfully controlled the spread of the pandemic within similar timeframes. Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were first to establish such travel bubbles,<sup>35</sup> the *Financial Times* opined that “New Zealand’s travel bubble could be a model” that other States could follow.<sup>36</sup> These travel bubbles may evolve into economic regions, with production systems and supply chains mirroring travel patterns. The *Economist Intelligence Unit* is advising businesses to prepare for “the regionalisation of global supply chains” due to the coronavirus restrictions, noting that “COVID-19 will push more companies in other sectors to relocate parts of their supply chains”, and that “as more firms make this decision, therefore, the shift to regionalised supply chains will be an enduring outcome of this crisis.”<sup>37</sup>

## 7. Will international student migration recover?

In the last 25 years, “export education” has become a massive global business, involving over 5.3 million international students,<sup>38</sup> with an estimated annual economic impact of USD 300 billion.<sup>39</sup> Many universities now rely on international student fees to cross-subsidize the research that underpins their institutional status.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, international students employ multitudes of recruiters, administrators, counsellors, landlords and suppliers. While studying, they fill demand for casual unskilled labour, and after they graduate, they provide a vital recruitment pool for high-skilled jobs.<sup>41</sup> Entire economies therefore now depend on international students.

The pandemic is upending this business model. By late April 2020, the number of United States’ colleges at risk of closing had risen from 10 per cent to 20 per cent.<sup>42</sup> The United Kingdom predicted a 47 per cent decline in international student enrolments, at a cost of 1.5 billion pounds to the sector. Universities Australia predicted the loss of up to 21,000 jobs in higher education and a 23 billion

34 Graham-Harrison and Smith, 2020.

35 Chapman, 2020.

36 *Financial Times*, 2020.

37 *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2020.

38 UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.

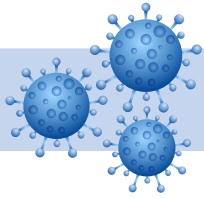
39 Choudaha, 2019.

40 Kunkler, 2020.

41 IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact, 2018.

42 Fies and Hill, 2020.





Australian dollar (USD 14.5 billion) drop in export income. Governments have all largely excluded universities from their bailout measures, in part because of a perception that universities are just big, inefficient companies.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, a lot is riding on whether or not international student migration rebounds after the 2020 pandemic.

#### 8. Will commuter travel decline?

The pandemic is accelerating digital transformation. Social media usage has skyrocketed during the lockdowns,<sup>44</sup> and more companies are shifting to e-commerce.<sup>45</sup> Of all changes, however, the switch to remote working may be the most significant. Business analysts are anticipating that 25–30 per cent of the workforce will transition into working remotely permanently by 2021.<sup>46</sup> In December 2019, approximately 1 in 20 people worked from home. *The Economist* quotes a source at Deloitte suggesting that the pandemic has brought about a “five-year acceleration” in the remote working trend.<sup>47</sup> This is turbo-charging the uptake of digital conferencing and collaboration tools. In late April, the video-conferencing application Zoom announced a 50 per cent increase in daily users over the previous month, leading to a sudden 12.5 per cent increase in the company’s share price.<sup>48</sup> The resulting stimulus to tech companies involved in communications research and development may hasten the development of technologies that make remote working even more feasible and attractive. By flipping the prevailing norm that business meetings should happen virtually only if they are truly not possible in person, the COVID-19 lockdowns will result in some enduring changes to work-related mobility and the nature of work itself.

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43 Kunkler, 2020.

44 Holmes, 2020.

45 *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2020.

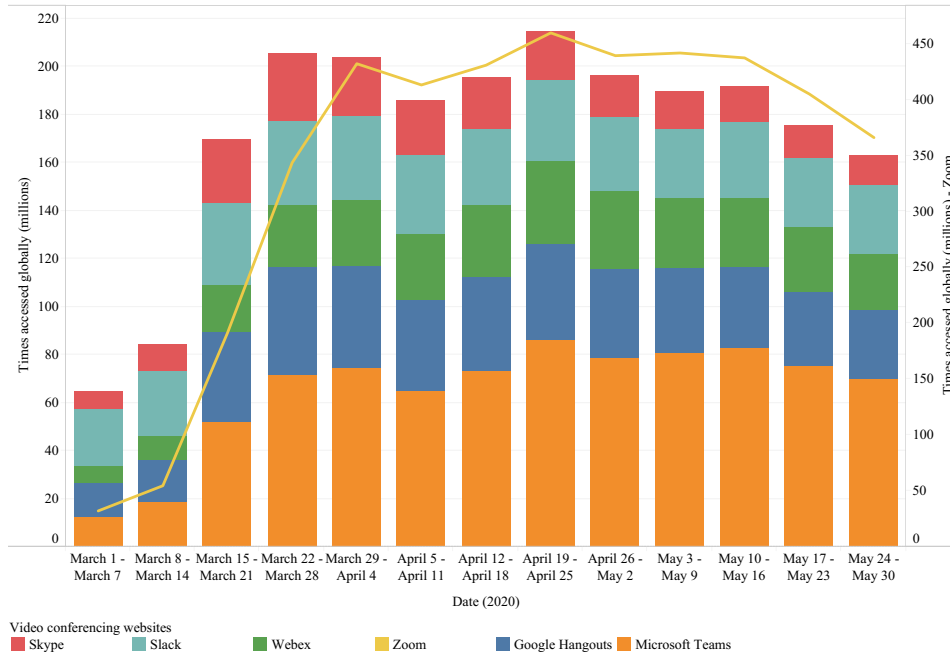
46 *Ibid.*

47 *The Economist*, 2020b.

48 Bursztynsky, 2020.



Figure 3. Change in global access to video-conferencing sites 1 March–30 May



Source: SimilarWeb, 2020. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

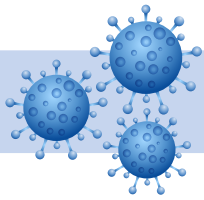
### 9. Will immobility reshape cities?

If commuter flows dwindle, cities may change profoundly. For one thing, companies may no longer need central city headquarters. Many firms are already reviewing what proportion of employees will be allowed or asked to work from home permanently.<sup>49</sup> More broadly, though, as the *New York Times* notes, before the pandemic, “entire economies were molded around the vast flow of people to and from offices, from the rush-hour schedules of subways, buses and commuter rails to the construction of new buildings to the survival of corner bodegas. Restaurants, bars, grocery stores and shops depend on workers for their survival.”<sup>50</sup> Questions will also be raised about urban planning decisions made prior to the pandemic. Experts are already asking whether Melbourne will still need its planned AUD 32 billion infrastructure programme, designed to address concerns about congestion and house price inflation due to rapid population growth.<sup>51</sup> Many countries are predicting house-price declines in double-digit percentages over the next 18 months. Will the middle classes move “out-and-up” to larger, leafier blocks beyond decimated inner-city zones, as happened during the 1970s and 1980s? Will population diversity rise in rural and regional areas, from where it is suddenly possible and permissible to “telecommute”?

49 Haag, 2020.

50 Ibid.

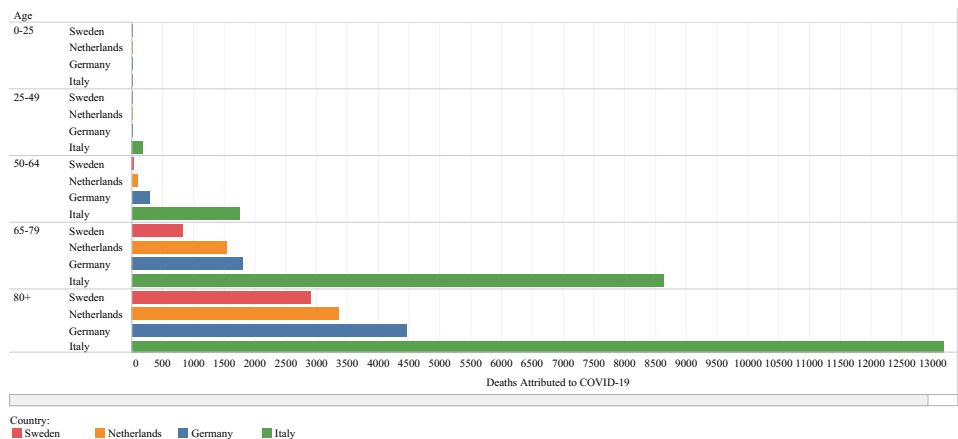
51 Monash University, 2020.



### 10. Will demographic and mobility transitions change course?

COVID-19 takes its heaviest toll among the elderly, and reported COVID-19 deaths are only a subset of actual deaths from the disease. If high mortality rates persist until a vaccine can be mass produced, the overall death toll could amount to a significant portion of the elderly cohort. **If the pandemic devastates a specific generation, it will affect long-term dependency ratios and dynamics of demographic transition.** It could reduce the proportion of dependent elderly people in the population and the financial cost of aged care, while generating a boom of babies conceived in lockdown. In addition, as cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky noted, processes of demographic transition interact with macroshifts in the mobility patterns of a society. By nudging mortality and birth rates, COVID-19 may tweak the demographic inputs to population growth and socioeconomic development in ways that complicate or even reverse prevailing patterns of urbanization and net migration.

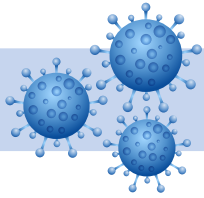
Figure 4. Coronavirus case fatality rates by age



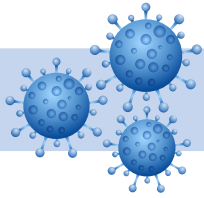
Source: ECDC, 2020. Image credit: Stephanie Daborn.

### The end of an age of migration?

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic has led to a global crisis of an order not seen since the first half of the twentieth century, and this has major implications for the future of human mobility and migration. Are the current lockdowns a temporary trough, or the end of the long post-war global migration boom? The answer depends on many decisions that have not yet been made, but it is fair to say that the 2020 pandemic has accelerated a range of existing trends so rapidly that the world has already sunk into the migration equivalent of an economic recession. It is all but inevitable that the numbers of people crossing borders, especially on a permanent and long-term basis, will fall further before they bounce back – if they ever do. As *The Economist* recently

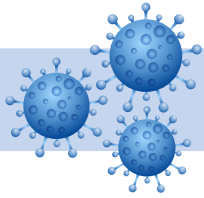


put it, “as a result of COVID-19, it is likely that [the current] period of globalisation will not only come to a halt, it will reverse.”<sup>52</sup> A key part of this shift is the potential end of the most recent age of migration. In the coming months and years, migration and mobility researchers will play an important role in monitoring the impacts of the 2020 pandemic, and highlight key questions about the best role for international migration and human mobility in the new normal that emerges.



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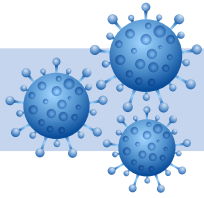
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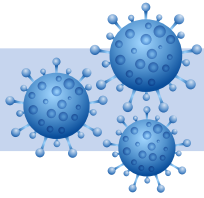
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