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Searching for clarity: Defining and mapping youth migration

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Introduction

In 2014, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon stated that “the intersection of migration and youth remains a large, inadequately addressed challenge for governance in countries worldwide” (UN, 2014). Since then, several international initiatives have paid specific attention to young people, making connections between youth, political participation, economic and social development. This includes the 5th African Union–European Union Summit in 2019 focusing on “investing in youth” and the launch, in September 2018, of the UN strategy titled Youth 2030 aiming to “scale up global, regional and national actions to meet young people’s needs, realize their rights and tap their possibilities as agents of change” (UN, 2018). Yet these initiatives have rarely drawn links with international migration.

At the same time, a series of limitations hamper current policymaking on youth and migration. There is no single accepted definition of “youth” or “young people” in research or policymaking. Some define young people in reference to an age range, but they do not use consistent boundaries for the ranges adopted. For example, in initiatives by the European Union young people may range from 13 to 30 years of age (European Commission, 2011). The UN and Global Migration Group define youth as any individual aged from 15 to 24 (Global Migration Group, 2014). Other international organizations make reference to young people being aged between 10 and 24 years (UNFPA, 2014; WHO, 2019). The African Union’s Youth Charter defines youth or young people as every person between 15 and 35 years of age (African Union, 2006). This elasticity sees youth potentially range from mid-adolescence through into adulthood, in contrast to the clearer, sharper definition in international law of a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years” (UN, 1989).

There are also gaps in the evidence-base on youth migration. Migration studies have tended to focus on the mobility of adults, and pay less attention specifically to young people. Data on youth migration at a global level, and in the Global South in particular, is inconsistent and limited. In the Horn of Africa, for example, data on young people who migrate has been criticized as being “partial” and “highly fragmented” (Save the Children and RMMS, 2016). Statistics from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) on global migration stocks show how many people in particular age ranges are migrants in each country, but does not provide information on their countries of origin. Moreover, available datasets are also limited due to the way that they are structured, in particular when data providers use different age categories for disaggregation of statistics on migration.

Against this backdrop, in this paper we undertake a review of the available evidence and data on youth migration in order to take a step towards greater clarity in research and policymaking. In the following section we review the available research with a view to setting out youth migration’s main characteristics and drivers. This prepares the groundwork for the subsequent section which focuses on the available data on migration of young people around the world. The conclusions summarize the main characteristics of youth migration, looking into future scenarios and paving the way for further research.

Defining youth migration

Over the past 50 years there has been a marked increase in the production of research on youth migration. This is evidenced by a search for the terms youth and migration in the Scopus database, the world's largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature.¹ This returned a total of 388 publications from between 1969 and the present day. The rate of publication per year has increased in particular from the mid-2000s (although this reflects in part a general increase in the scale of peer-reviewed publishing). Within these publications, there has been greater attention placed on youth migration in countries of the Global North, with 62 per cent of the publications collated from the past decade focusing on the migration of young people there as opposed to the Global South.

Two principal perspectives on youth migration permeate this body of research. On one hand, youth migration is presented as a challenge or problem. This comes particularly in studies focused on the Global North, which associate youth emigration with the depopulation of rural areas as young people move to urban environments. Migration is also presented as a source of hardship for the people who move, in particular in terms of individual's mental health, educational outcomes and earnings. For destination countries and cities, youth migration is also associated with a risk of increased crime (although the evidence on this is ambivalent). On the other hand, youth migration has also been presented as an opportunity. This is particularly the case in studies focusing on countries in the Global South, in which a link is made between spatial mobility and social mobility, such as through accessing education and employment opportunities elsewhere. These reflect general findings in research on international development which shows how migration can be a form of investment for individuals and insurance for families, diversifying their income in order to hedge against shocks in individual countries (de Haas, 2010). Moreover, migration can also bring about a dramatic increase in freedom and independence in contrast to the limitations and expectations imposed by traditionalist cultural norms in some places of origin.

But what is specific about youth migration and how can we define it beyond these contrasting perspectives? Based on our review of the available literature, in this paper we consider youth migration to be a form of mobility which is part of ongoing, formative personal transitions and embedded within broader familial and social transformations.

Viewing youth migration as a transition recognizes the way that it involves both personal and physical movements between ages, social groups and statuses, and places. Youth is an intermediary stage of life when people transition from childhood to adulthood, which in turn involves interconnected transitions from school to work and from dependency on families to greater economic, political and social independence. As Juarez et al. state (2013:7), youth is a time of life when people “experience enormous changes due to physical maturation, which is accompanied by cognitive, social/emotional, and interpersonal changes”. Similarly, migration represents a transition from one place to another, which brings with it a shift in political, economic and social context. Migration can in this way be disruptive, resulting in a need to adapt behaviours in response to new social structures, interpersonal networks, and attitudes and expectations of others (ibid.:8). Experiences during these transitions shape a young person's subsequent opportunities, rights and identities as adults (Jones, 1999; Van Geel and Mazzucato, 2018).

¹ The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles and book chapters in the social sciences and arts and humanities. The results were cleaned and filtered to include only those entries which explicitly refer to “youth” and “migration”. Studies on second generation youth who were born in a country their parents had migrated to, but had not migrated themselves, were excluded. Internal and international youth migration were both included.

Zenteno et al. (2013:35) also argue that “the determinants of migration operate differently during adolescence than in the later life course”. On one hand, the available evidence highlights how economic opportunity and the presence of social networks are key drivers of migration for young people (Long, 1988; Migali et al., 2018). In north and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, youth unemployment has been presented as a particularly pressing issue and driver of youth migration (Dibeh et al., 2018; Kristensen and Birch-Thomsen, 2013). It should also be noted that young people are over-represented in contexts of forced migration. As Maguire notes, “in violent conflict, it is mostly adolescents and youths – female and male – who are conscripted into armed groups or targeted for sexual violence” (2012:4). For young people from Eritrea, for example, emigration has been perceived as the only way to escape from indefinite conscription and protracted crisis (Belloni, 2019). Research has also highlighted how emigration from the Syrian Arab Republic was a necessity for those young people whose education was interrupted and who faced being forced into military action (Crawley et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, on the other hand, there is also a broad range of evidence highlighting how migration of young people is shaped by more than only economic factors. Migration for youth is frequently referred to as a cultural process or lifestyle choice at a time of personal development and change. For young people, migration can be formative and highly consequential for the transition to more stable adult identities. For example, in Mali migration from rural to urban settings is described as representing a move towards modernity and “a way of life free of the constraints operating in the countryside” (Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2013). Kandel and Massey suggest that migration from Mexico is a rite of passage for adolescent boys who share a “culture of migration”: those who move away enjoy raised social status on their return, whereas those who do not emigrate are viewed negatively by peers (Kandel and Massey, 2002). Similar findings were made in Mali (Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2013). Belloni also highlights how young Eritreans' migration patterns, even in a context of forced migration, can be shaped by personal aspirations as well as communal and familial values (2019). In contrast, Laoire has also highlighted how feelings of attachment and rootedness in local settings where there are social expectations of young people staying can discourage young people from emigrating (2000:239). Youth migration thus responds not only to structural conditions but also to sociocultural expectations and discourses which are particular to young people and their familial and societal setting.

Research and policy need to be aware not only of how the specificities of “youth” drive and shape migration, but also, in turn, how experiences of migration shape young peoples' transitions to adulthood. Defining youth migration as ongoing and formative recognizes that both youth transitions and migration experiences evolve over time and place, shaping and being shaped by one another. As noted by Laoire in her study of rural out-migration in Ireland (2000:233), “migration decision-making by rural youth must be conceptualised as being bound up with all of the other transitions and decisions that occur during youth”. Historical studies have also recognized youth migration as a “life course transition” (Kok, 1997). In the Global South in particular, it has been said that “the migration experience ... both within and across country boundaries, is an integral part of the transition to adulthood” (Juarez et al., 2013:7). Hertrich and Lesclingand similarly state that labour migration is a key part of the transition into adulthood in West Africa (2013). Young people who are displaced by violence and crisis may lose the guidance of adults and have to take on adult responsibilities sooner in their formative years (Maguire, 2012:4).

An understanding of how and why young people migrate must therefore reflect how their migration decisions interact with the broader personal, familial and social transformations which they face during this particular stage of their life (Beegle and Poulin, 2013; Zenteno et al., 2013). On a personal level, young people who migrate are generally likely to have less need to establish households and meet the economic needs of dependent family members than older generations. As a result, first migration experiences in younger life can be expected to be more flexible and dynamic than those of older generations, involving multiple moves to different locations (Zenteno

et al., 2013). This has been witnessed in empirical research in Mexico (ibid.), Mali (Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2013) and Malawi (Beegle and Poulin, 2013). In West Africa, observers have found migration of adolescents to be usually temporary as they then return to their place of origin to marry (Hertrich and Lesclingand, 2013). In his study of youth migration within the United States of America, Bailey found that migration history is associated with higher rates of re-migration. This means that people who migrate when young are more likely to migrate again when older, although this varies for different groups (Bailey, 1993:324). Moreover, on a family level, youth migration can also serve particular purposes. Young people may migrate to reunite with family members who have gone before them, or to fill the gap of an adult who through death or illness is not able to provide for the family by moving internationally to opportunities elsewhere (Crawley et al., 2017). Migration tendencies also run in the family: one study of youth migration in the Scottish borders found that most out-migrants had parents who had been in-migrants to the region, whereas most people who stayed were part of families which were local there (Jones, 1999:5). Young people whose parents have migrated before may learn to cope more easily with change and have greater transferable cultural capital than in families which are more rooted in particular communities.

Mapping youth migration

The previous section has set out the main characteristics of youth migration as a personal and physical transition which is embedded within broader social transformations. But this definition means it is difficult to tie youth migration to a specific age group. One survey found that considerations of when being “young” began and ended were not universally shared and that the younger people are, the earlier they place the boundaries (Smith, 2018). Youth cannot be easily defined as a category; varying schooling ages and economic structures mean people enter the workplace at different phases in their lives from place to place, and diverging cultural expectations mean that men and women may be considered to become independent adults at different times to others (Zenteno et al., 2013).

However, boundaries are important for research and policy, defining which people with more or less similar characteristics are to be examined together or for whom an intervention is designed. For this article, defining the boundaries of “youth” enables us to compare different countries and regions across the world. With this in mind, we adopt the ages of 15 to 29 years. This is an age range which is broad enough to include most of the economic, political and cultural transitions to adulthood described in the previous section, whilst being narrow enough to distinguish it from the different character of later life and migration patterns of older generations. In practical terms, in order to give a global overview, the definition of youth should also correspond to the boundaries of the age cohorts in available statistics. However, these ages are a guide rather than a hard boundary between categories; region-specific behaviours linked to different age groups may lead to a need to refine the age group selection.

Two sources provide a global overview of migrants between the ages of 15 and 29 years: UN DESA and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).² These organizations produce data on the presence of migrants (stock) by age. UN DESA statistics have the largest coverage in terms of country of destination and time. However, when data are disaggregated by age, they do not provide any information on migrants’ countries of origin. The OECD Database on Immigrants in OECD and non-OECD Countries (DIOC) fills this gap, as it includes bilateral stocks from 200+ countries of origin; yet, the number of countries

² UN DESA Workbook: [UN_Migrant StockByAgeAndSex_2019.xlsx](#). OECD Database on Immigrants in OECD and non-OECD Countries (DIOC) and extended DIOC.

of destination is narrowed down to OECD countries only.³ The extended version of DIOC (DIOC-E) compiled by the OECD and the World Bank broadens the coverage to approximately 100 destination countries, but the age is known for migrants in only 37 per cent of the country pairs.⁴ Furthermore, by only showing changes in the overall migrant stock, these datasets cannot distinguish new arrivals from changes affecting the migrant population already present in a country, i.e. from births, deaths or ageing. To overcome this, estimates of migration flows can be derived from data on stocks, but datasets available which do this are not disaggregated by age and so cannot focus on young people specifically (UN DESA, 2015; Abel, 2017; Abel and Cohen, 2019).

When restricting the focus to EU and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, there is more data available. Eurostat provides data on bilateral stocks as well as flows by migrants' country of birth or citizenship and age groups with five-year intervals, from 2008 onwards. Statistics on the reason by which a residence permit has been issued, asylum applications and decisions, irregular migration (orders to leave, persons found to be illegally present and persons returned) are also disaggregated by broad age groups. However, datasets of a comparable breadth and detail on a global level are sorely lacking. Table 1 provides an overview of available statistics.

Table 1. Data mapping on youth migration

| Topic | Source | Country of birth | Country of residence | Age disaggregation | Time coverage |
|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Stocks of migrants | UN DESA: Stock by age 2019 | n.a. | Global destination | 5-years intervals (0-4, 5-9, etc.) | 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2019 |
| Bilateral stocks of migrants | OECD: DIOC 2015/16 | i) continents ii) 200+ countries | i) specific OECD country ii) OECD as a whole | 0-14; 15-24; 25-64; 65+, or 5 years groups | 2015/16 |
| | OECD: DIOC 2010/11; 2005/2006; 2000/2001 | 200+ countries | OECD destination | 0-14; 15-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+ (2010-11); otherwise 0-14; 15-24; 25-64; 65+, or 5 years groups | 2010/2011 |
| | OECD: DIOC-E 2010/11 | 200+ countries | 91 countries | 0-14; 15-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+ (file 1), 12-24; 25-26; 65+ (file 2) | 2010/11 |
| | OECD: DIOC-E 2000/01 | 200+ countries | 100 countries | 15-24; 25-64; 65+ | 2000/01 |
| | Eurostat: All valid permits by age, sex and citizenship on 31 December of each year [migr_resvas] | Global | EU+EFTA | 5-years intervals (0-4, 5-9, etc.) | 2008-2018 |

³ Moreover, while for the years 2000/01, 2005/06, 2010/11 data provide information both on the country of origin and the OECD country of destination, for the years 2015/16 data cover either region (continent) of origin and individual OECD countries of destination or individual countries of origin and OECD area as a whole as destination.

⁴ In particular, 37 per cent of country pairs have age disaggregation for at least 70 per cent of migrant population. Country pairs with fewer than 10 migrants were excluded.

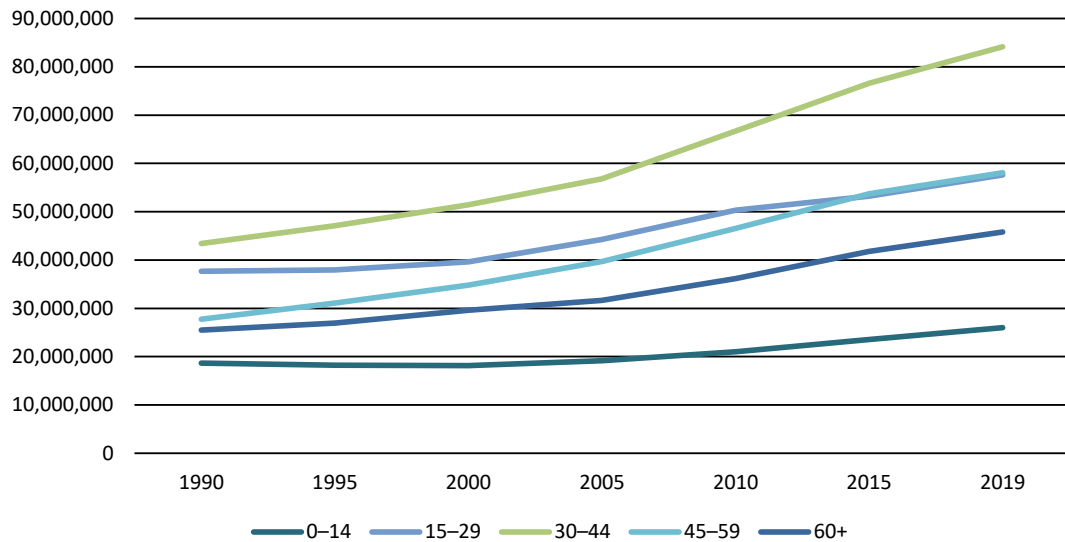
| Topic | Source | Country of birth | Country of residence | Age disaggregation | Time coverage |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| | Eurostat: Population on 1 January by age group, sex and country of birth [migr_pop3ctb] | Global | EU+EFTA | 5-years intervals (0–4, 5–9, etc.) | 1998–2018 (with some missing until 2013) |
| Bilateral flows of migrants | Eurostat: Immigration by age group, sex and country of birth [migr_imm3ctb] | Global | EU+EFTA | 5-years intervals (0–4, 5–9, etc.) | 2008–2018 |
| | Eurostat: First permits by reason, age, sex and citizenship [migr_resfas] | Global | EU+EFTA | 5-years intervals (0–4, 5–9, etc.) | 2008–2018 |
| Asylum applications | Eurostat: Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex [migr_asyappctza] | Global | EU+EFTA | <14, 14–17, <18, 18–34, 35–64, >65 | 2008–2018 |
| Asylum decisions | Eurostat: First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex [migr_asydcfstj] | Global | EU+EFTA | <14, 14–17, <18, 18–34, 35–64, >65 | 2008–2018 |
| Found to be illegally present | Eurostat: Third country nationals found to be illegally present [migr_eipre] | Global | EU+EFTA | <14, 14–17, <18, 18–34, >35 | 2008–2018 |
| Orders to leave | Eurostat: Third country nationals ordered to leave [migr_eiord] | Global | EU+EFTA | <14, 14–17, <18, 18–34, >35 | 2008–2018 |
| Returns | Eurostat: Third country nationals returned following an order to leave [migr_eirtn] | Global | EU+EFTA | <14, 14–17, <18, 18–34, >35 | 2008–2018 |

What do global data tell us about youth migration?⁵ UN DESA data show that, in absolute terms, the number of people aged between 15 and 29 years who have migrated has increased during the past 30 years, from 37.7 million in 1990 to 57.6 million in 2019 (a 53% increase) (figure 1). This is alongside an increase in the global population (and in the global youth population specifically) and in the total stock of international migrants. The global population increased by 45 per cent, from 5.3 to 7.7 billion between 1990 and 2019, with the number of people aged 15 to 29 in particular increasing by 25 per cent, from 1.4 to 1.8 billion. However, this increase is relatively small compared to that seen for older age groups.⁶ In fact, the share of youth over total population decreased from 27 per cent in 1990 to 23 per cent in 2019.

⁵ The aim of this paper is to present a general overview of youth migration. We recognize that gender differences are undoubtedly significant for transitions to adulthood and migration patterns, but to unpack this in detail requires a more in-depth analysis than cannot be provided here.

⁶ The 30–44 age group increased by 60 per cent (from 1 billion to 1.6 billion), the 45–59 age group by 106 per cent (from 627 million to 1.3 billion), and the over 60 by 109 per cent (from 488 million to 1 billion). Only the 0–14 group registers a smaller increase than the 15–29 (i.e. 13%, from 1.7 billion to 2 billion).

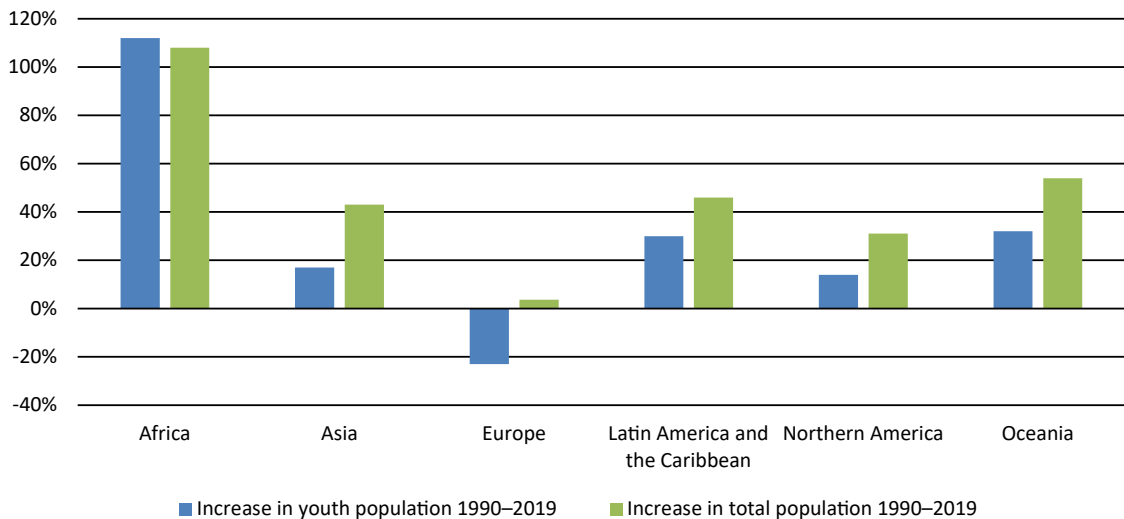
Figure 1. Evolution of world migrant population by age, in absolute numbers



Source: UN DESA, 2019.

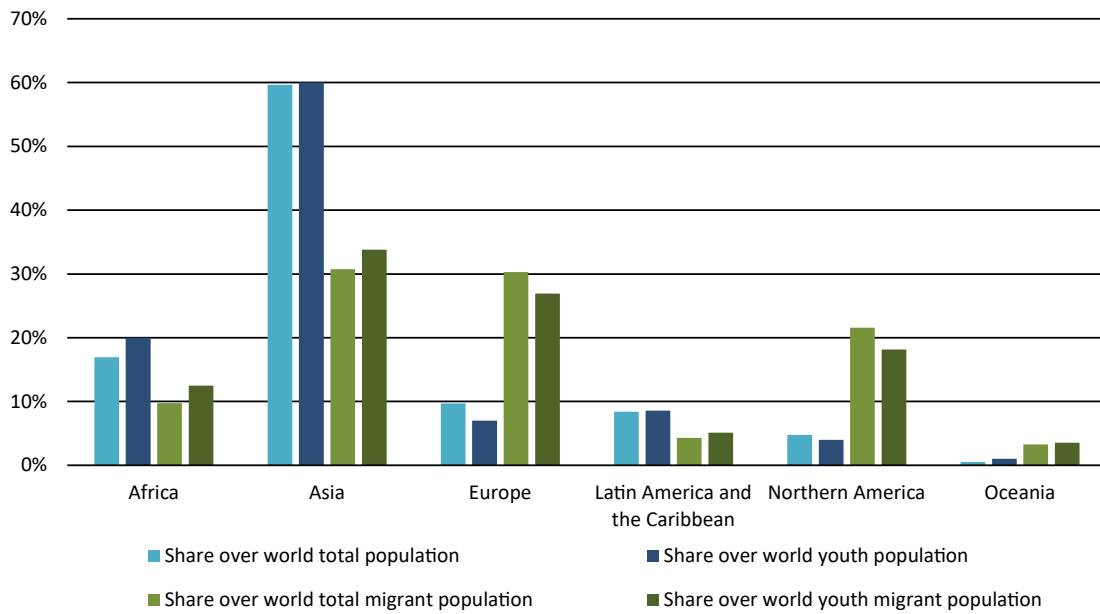
Yet within these figures, there are significant regional differences. Demographic changes in Africa, for example, have seen the youth population register an increase of 112 per cent from 1990 to 2019, against an overall increase in the population of 108 per cent (figure 2). This is in striking contrast to the population change in Europe, where the overall growth has been limited (4%), and the growth of younger population specifically has been negative (-27%). Today, 60 per cent of the global youth population (15–29) lives in Asia, reflecting the distribution of the total population (figure 3).

Figure 2. Increase in the total world population and in the youth population by continent in the period 1990–2019



Source: UN DESA, 2019.

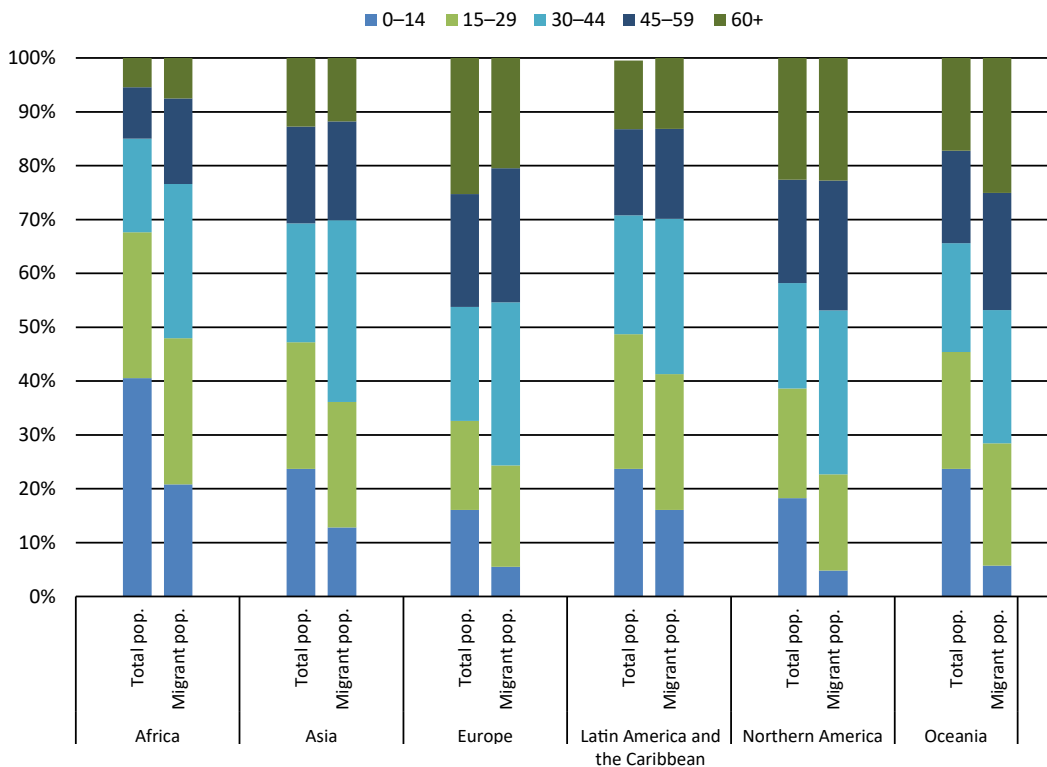
Figure 3. Distribution across continents of the global total and global youth population, and of the migrant and youth migrant population in 2019



Source: UN DESA, 2019.

Looking within each continent, Africa is the continent with the youngest population, with 27 per cent of its population aged between 15 and 29 years. In Asia and Latin America, the share is 25 per cent, and in Oceania 22 per cent. The lowest figures are for Northern America and Europe, where respectively 20 and 17 per cent of the population are aged between 15 and 29 years (figure 4).

Figure 4. Age distribution of overall population and migrant population, by continent in 2019



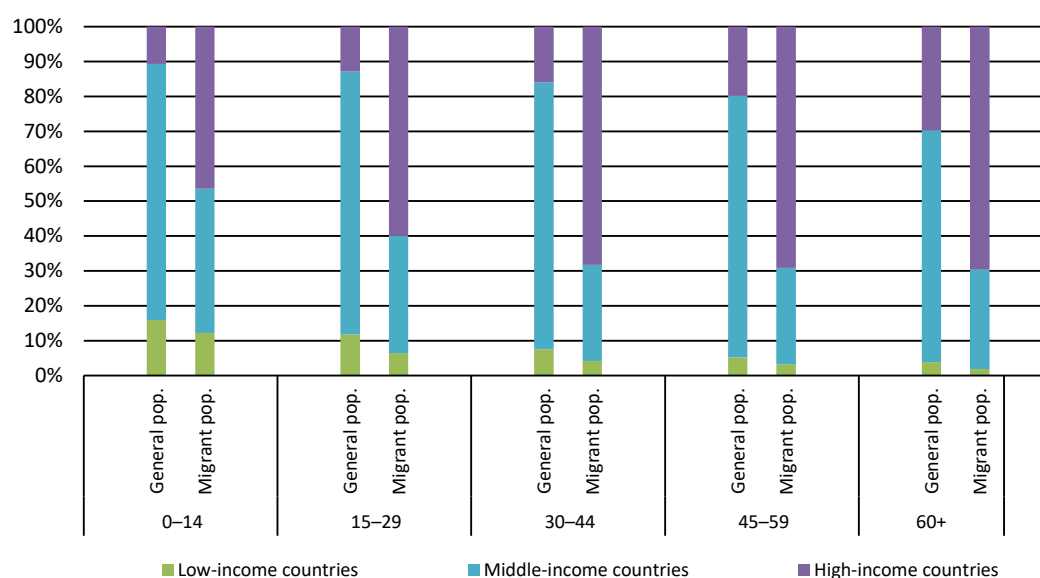
Source: UN DESA, 2019.

Over the 1990–2019 period, the international migration stock increased by 78 per cent from 153 to 271.6 million. However, while the absolute number of migrants has increased for all age groups, the age composition of the global stock of migrants over time has been approximately constant over the last 30 years. If the total number of international migrants is divided into 15-year age cohorts, the largest cohort is consistently those aged between 30 and 44 years, which represents approximately 30 per cent of all migrants during the entire period of 1990 to 2019. People in the age range of 15 to 29 years have represented the second largest cohort of international migrants since 1990, although this has fallen from 25 per cent of the total of all migrants in 1990 to 21 per cent in 2019.

However, within these figures too there are important regional differences. The relative majority of the global young migrants (34% of those between 15 and 29 years of age) lives in Asia, followed by Europe (27%). This distribution of young migrants is overall similar to the distribution of migrants in general, except for young migrants being slightly overrepresented in Africa and Asia and slightly underrepresented in Europe and North America (figure 3). The share of migrants aged 15–29 over total migrants by continent is very similar to the share of people aged 15–29 over the general population, ranging from 27 per cent in Africa to 18 per cent in Northern America (figure 4).

When looking at country classification by income level, the large majority of young people reside in low- and middle-income countries (87%).⁷ This figure is only slightly higher than the distribution of the general population in these countries (84% of the total global population lives in low and middle-income countries). In contrast, only 40 per cent of the world's young migrants reside in low and middle-income countries (figure 5). This reflects the fact that the largest migration flows have been registered from middle to high-income countries and within high-income countries (Migali et al., 2018). The specific distribution of young migrants vis-à-vis other age groups sees the 15–29 group more represented in low- and medium- income countries, compared to older age cohorts (figure 5), suggesting different mobility patterns at different stages in life. As a result, the composition of the migrant population in low- and middle-income countries is younger than in high-income countries.⁸

Figure 5. Distribution of general population and migrant population in countries by income level, by age group in 2019



Source: UN DESA, 2019.

⁷ For a discussion on the use of the development and income criteria when analysing migration data, see Ingleby et al., 2019.

⁸ In 2019, 28 per cent and 23 per cent of migrants in respectively low- and medium-income countries is aged 15–29, vis-à-vis 20 per cent in high income countries (UN DESA, 2019).

This mapping exercise, based on the stock of migrants by age groups, gives a broad overall picture of the global population. However, it is not able to show young people's mobility patterns, i.e. whether they are more likely to move, from where and to which destinations. Analyses of migration intentions show that the likelihood to express a wish to migrate is higher in younger age groups and decreases with age (Migali et al., 2018). The expectation is therefore that young people are also the most mobile. Verifying this expectation at the global level requires data on global migration flows by age which are currently missing. Data at EU level, however, provides some evidence: migration inflows during the period 2013–2017 shows that the most mobile group of migrants was represented by people aged 15–29 (figure 6). Specifically, mobility peaked when people were aged 25–29, and started decreasing afterwards (figure 7). This trend is shared by all EU member States, with very few exceptions,⁹ as well as by all regions of origin of migrants. The extent to which this is a general trend will need to be further analysed.

Figure 6. Absolute number and share of immigrants in the EU+EFTA countries during the period 2013–2017, by age

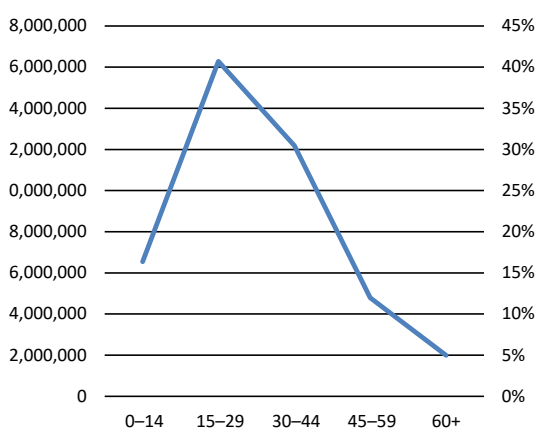
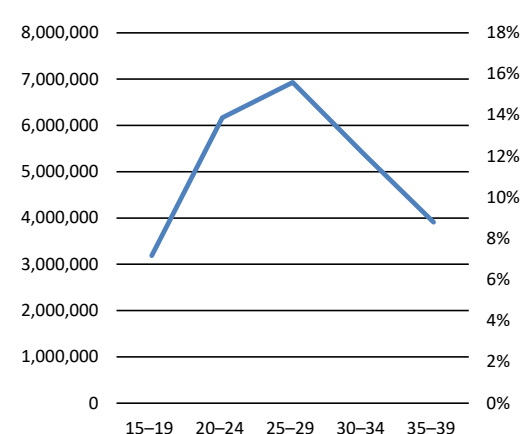


Figure 7. Absolute number and share of immigrants in the EU+EFTA countries during the period 2013–2017, within the 15–39 groups



Source: Eurostat, migr_imm3ctb.

Note: Austria, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Romania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom are excluded as they do not provide age disaggregation.

⁹ In Bulgaria, Latvia and Poland, migrants tend to arrive older, with the age group 30–44 being the most represented.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the available research and data on youth and migration in order to give an overview of the global evidence base. In doing so, it highlights how youth migration has a series of characteristics which differentiate it from migration of other generations. During their transition from child- to adulthood, young people often migrate to search not only for economic opportunity but also for personal freedom or to provide for families as they take on greater adult responsibilities. Their migration trajectories are ongoing, dynamic and evolving, shaping also their social and economic status and adult relationships and identities. As a result, policies which focus on empowering youth and improving outcomes for young people should be aware of how migration can play a part in shaping their personal and social development.

These characteristics suggest that migration of young people is likely to continue into the future, with potentially significant implications for economic, political and social development in the Global South in particular, where the youth population is largest and expresses the greatest wish to migrate. However, the necessary data to track global trends of youth migration is lacking. Statistics on global migration flows are not disaggregated by age, and those on migrant stocks only cover countries of destination. In order to better understand and prepare for the scale, direction and implications of youth migration in the future, broader and more consistently disaggregated global data is needed.

What lies ahead? Demographic projections show that the number of young people around the world is expected to increase (Lutz et al., 2019) and evidence points to the fact that young people are more mobile than other age groups. Demographic change is thus likely to drive a growth in number of young migrants as the current population of children (0 to 14), particularly large in Africa, mature into young adults. Looking at Africa in particular, overall the evidence points to the fact that youth migration will increase both within and outside the continent (Natale et al., 2018). The extent to which this will be the case and the share that young people will represent over the total population, however, will depend on development scenarios (Lutz et al., 2019). It may also have varying implications for men and for women. Together with the descriptive analyses set out above, this provides a starting point for future research which seeks to better understand the scale, direction and implications of migration by and for young people.

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