

It's Relative: A Crosscountry Comparison of Family-Migration Policies and Flows

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Executive Summary

While family migration is a central part of immigration systems worldwide, the policies that govern the number and types of family members eligible and the conditions attached to their admission differ considerably. In a number of countries, policymakers are revisiting issues related to family migration. Debates about which family members should be eligible to join their relatives in the United States have attracted widespread attention since President Trump's administration began questioning the value of family-sponsored immigration. Meanwhile, at the height of the 2015–16 European migration crisis, policymakers in Germany and Sweden put in place restrictions on the family-reunification rights of some recently arrived asylum seekers, amid concerns that generous unification rules may be serving as a “pull factor” for prospective refugees and migrants.

Against this backdrop, this issue brief explores family-migration trends and policies in nine Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries that receive large numbers of family migrants: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It draws on data from national migration and statistics agencies for the years 2011 to 2016. Because countries use different methods for categorizing and recording admissions, direct comparisons across all nine countries are not always possible. For Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the brief examines data on permanent-residence grants (i.e., family members sponsored by citizens and permanent residents). The data available for the European countries (excluding the United Kingdom), on the other hand, measure the total number of first residence permits issued, whether temporary or permanent; they include both immigrants sponsored to join family members already living in Europe and relatives who accompany a migrant admitted through other categories (e.g., a spouse accompanying a temporary worker). Nonetheless, this analysis sheds light on a number of commonalities—and some key differences—in family migration to these countries.

Among the top findings:

- ***Across countries, family-based migration accounts for an important part of immigration flows—especially when family members who arrive through both family and other admissions streams are considered.*** In France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden, the largest share of first residence permits were issued for “family reasons” (ranging between one-third and nearly half of all admissions) between 2012 and 2016. In Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, family migrants accounted for between 27 percent and 29 percent of all permanent-resident visas granted during the same period; the share was about two-thirds in

the United States. But some family admissions are not captured by these figures; when a family member accompanies a noncitizen relative entering the country through another, non-family stream, some countries record these family migrants as dependents within that other stream (e.g., as the dependent spouse or child of an economic migrant). In Canada and the United Kingdom, where economic migrants make up the largest share of permanent-residence grants, dependents account for about half of economic admissions. If these dependent family members are reclassified as family migrants, family admissions become the largest immigration stream in Canada and the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States (the three countries for which data were available)—comprising 57 percent of permanent-residence grants in the United Kingdom, 66 percent in Canada, and 81 percent in the United States.

- ***When adjusted for population size, Australia, Canada, and the United States admit family migrants at similar rates.*** But while the United States takes in family immigrants at roughly the same rate annually as Australia and Canada (2.1 admissions per 1,000 people, compared to 2.6 and 2.0 admissions, respectively), it admits far fewer economic migrants compared to its overall population (0.5 admissions per 1,000 people, compared to 5.5 and 4.5 admissions, respectively). When dependent family members admitted through other immigration streams are considered as family migrants, this picture changes again; this reclassification shows Canada taking in nearly twice as many family migrants each year as the United States relative to its population (4.8

versus 2.6 family migrants per 1,000 people, respectively).

- ***Most family migrants admitted are spouses (or partners) and children across all countries studied, but whether and how many extended family members are admitted vary.*** Spouses and children make up two-thirds of permanent resident visas to Canada and the United States (countries that also admit large numbers of parents and other relatives), and this figure is even higher for Australia and the United Kingdom (85 percent and 97 percent, respectively). In Sweden and the Netherlands, spouses and children comprise more than 90 percent of all first residence permits issued for family reasons, and in Germany and Italy, they make up roughly 80 percent of such permits. Beyond the nuclear family, options to bring in other relatives vary (and are generally more limited). For example, Australia, Canada, and the United States all allow the sponsoring of parents, but Canada also makes it possible to sponsor grandparents, the United States allows adult children and siblings, and Australia has an option for sponsoring a relative who can provide long-term care to the sponsor or their family member.
- ***Backlogs and long waiting times are common, and in some cases may make family reunification nearly impossible.*** In Australia and the United States, delays in family reunification reflect a high level of demand that has far outstripped the supply of numerically limited visas year after year. For certain categories, these delays can amount to years or even decades (e.g., the wait time in Australia for certain parent visas is 30 years; in the United States, the wait for Filipino and

Mexican siblings of U.S. citizens is more than 20 years), making certain types of family reunification nearly impossible. In Europe, recent delays in family reunification processes have been linked to the 2015–16 migration crisis, which strained the capacity of many national migration agencies to accommodate large numbers of requests. In Sweden, for example, the wait for some spouses of Swedish citizens had reached two years as of early 2018.

I. Introduction

Family migration is a central part of immigration systems around the world. It accounts for nearly 40 percent of all immigration flows across Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries,¹ ranging from more than 60 percent in the United States to just 7 percent in Luxembourg.² The policies that govern these movements differ from country to country in terms of the number and types of family members eligible as well as the conditions attached to their admission. In many countries, demand for family reunification outstrips supply, with eligible applicants waiting in long backlogs.

Policymakers across a number of OECD countries are grappling with the rights and conditions attached to family admissions, and how to balance family unity with other immigration priorities. This has been the case in the United States, where the Trump administration has raised questions about the value of family-sponsored immigration and suggested that legal immigration should be significantly cut and rebalanced in favor of “merit-based” admissions.² Meanwhile, policymakers in Germany and Sweden introduced restrictions on the family-reunification rights of some recently arrived asylum seekers at the height of the 2015–16 European migration crisis, due in part to concerns that such policies may serve as a “pull factor” for further arrivals.

This issue brief compares family-migration trends and policies in nine OECD countries that are major recipients of family migrants: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁴ It examines both family-migrant admissions and what family-sponsorship options different countries offer—that is, who can sponsor which types of relatives for admission, under what conditions, and what rights sponsored immigrants have after arrival.

II. Which Family Members Qualify, and What Rights Do They Have?

Policymakers in each country set the parameters for citizens and in some cases permanent or long-term temporary residents to petition for family members to join them (i.e., family reunification), though EU Member States are expected to heed certain common, EU-wide standards.⁵ The resulting policies vary considerably along three primary lines: (1) who can sponsor a family migrant; (2) which family members are eligible; and (3) what status the relative receives (with implications for the rights they hold).

A. Who Can Sponsor a Family Migrant?

While citizens in all of the countries studied can sponsor family members, the picture for noncitizens is more mixed. Some countries offer preferential treatment to sponsors who are citizens of particular countries; others distinguish between citizens and permanent residents, or between permanent residents and temporary migrants. Countries also vary on which temporary migrants can sponsor family members, and under what conditions.

1. *Preferential Treatment for Sponsors Who Are Citizens of Certain Countries*

Countries that are part of a free movement regime (such as the European Union, or the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement that links Australia and New Zealand) offer preferential family-migration conditions to residents who are citizens of another participating country. Under EU law, the Free Movement Directive that allows EU citizens to live and work in other Member States also applies to their family members (regardless of their nationality).⁶ For example, a French citizen who is living in Germany could have their spouse/partner and minor children (and other descendants, such as grandchildren) from a non-EU country join them. Similarly, citizens of New Zealand living in Australia can apply for a special visa to have their spouse/partner and children join them in Australia.

2. *Conditions for Other Noncitizens Sponsoring Family Members*

Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States apply one set of rules to citizens and permanent residents, who can sponsor their family members for permanent residence, and another to temporary migrants, who can apply to have family members accompany or join them on a temporary basis. (These two categories of family migration are sometimes distinguished by referring to the former as “family reunification” and the latter as “accompanying family members.”) The United States is unusual in that it distinguishes between citizen and permanent-resident sponsors for some aspects of family reunification (see Section B). In some countries, certain categories of temporary migrants, such as seasonal workers in Australia and Canada, are not eligible to bring their relatives with them or apply for them to join them.

In the other European countries studied (barring the United Kingdom), citizens, residents who are nationals of other EU Member States,

and non-EU nationals who legally reside in an EU Member State can all apply for family reunification, subject to certain conditions. The Family Reunification Directive requires EU Member States (except the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark, who are not signatories) to allow non-EU nationals who have been legally residing in a Member State for a certain period of time and who hold a residence permit of at least a year’s duration to sponsor family members to join them.⁷ This right is subject to certain conditions (e.g., proof that the sponsor can support his or her family members financially), and Member States may choose to offer more favorable terms, such as reducing minimum residency requirements. Certain categories of migrants, such as holders of the EU Blue Card for highly skilled workers from countries outside the European Union, are exempt from the minimum legal residence requirement.

In all of the countries examined in this study, beneficiaries of international protection (i.e., refugees and asylees) are permitted to apply for family reunification, often with reduced requirements for minimum income, accommodation, health insurance, or integration measures.

B. Which Family Members Are Eligible?

Across the countries studied, all allow spouses/partners and children to be sponsored as family migrants. Opportunities to sponsor other relatives, such as parents, vary by country and may hinge on the sponsor’s citizenship or residence status.

Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for example, all allow citizens and permanent residents to sponsor parents,⁸ and Canada offers an additional option to sponsor grandparents. The United States also allows its citizens to sponsor their siblings and adult children, while Canada and Australia have set a higher cut-off age for unmarried

children—22 and 23 years old, respectively—compared to the 18-years-old limit in many EU countries. Some of these categories may be subject to caps, however.

Most of the countries studied allow residents and citizens to sponsor dependent adult relatives, and Australia allows sponsors to bring in relatives who will provide them or their family member with long-term care. More unusually, Canada offers citizens and permanent residents the option to sponsor one extended family member (of any age) if the sponsor does not have a close relative who is a Canadian citizen or resident, and they also do not have a close living relative they could sponsor instead (i.e., a spouse or partner, child, parent or grandparent, sibling, aunt or uncle, or niece or nephew).⁹

C. What Status Does the Family Member Receive?

Some countries issue temporary residence permits to all family migrants, while others issue either temporary or permanent residence permits depending on who is sponsoring the immigrant.

In the European countries studied (barring the United Kingdom), all family migrants receive temporary residence permits, although some groups may become eligible for permanent

residence or citizenship sooner than others. For example, while temporary residents usually become eligible for permanent residence after five years in Germany, the foreign spouse/partner or child of a German citizen becomes eligible to apply after three years.¹⁰

As noted above, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States distinguish between family reunification for citizens and permanent residents on the one hand, and for temporary migrants on the other. Family migrants who fall into the first category usually receive permanent residence; those in the latter category receive a temporary permit, the duration of which is linked to the status of their sponsor (see Table 1).

When temporary migrants apply to bring their family members with them, the accompanying relative remains in the country on the same temporary basis as the main visa holder, and may face restrictions on the ability to work. The Family Reunification Directive allows EU Member States to bar family migrants sponsored by non-EU nationals from working for up to a year. Meanwhile, the United States bars family members sponsored by certain work- or student-visa holders from working.¹¹ The United Kingdom, by contrast, allows most family members of temporary-visa holders to apply for work permits, but bars them from working in certain occupations (e.g. as a professional sports person, dentist, or a doctor in training).¹²

Table 1. Comparing Family-Migration Pathways in Nine OECD Countries

	Who Can Sponsor?	Who Can Be Sponsored?	Are There Caps?	Status Awarded
Australia	Citizens and permanent residents; eligible New Zealand citizens*	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 23), parent, dependent relative, orphaned child relative, relative who will provide long-term care	Caps for some parents, dependent relatives	Permanent residence**
	Some temporary migrants; other New Zealand citizens*	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried and under age 23, unless dependent)	No	Temporary permit
Canada	Citizens and permanent residents	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 22), parent, grandparent, orphaned child relative, or in certain cases one other family member	Caps for parents, grandparents	Permanent residence
	Some temporary migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 22), dependent relatives	No	Temporary permit
France	French citizens; EU-citizen residents; non-EU permanent residents and long-term migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, age 19 or under), dependent relative	No	Temporary permit
Germany	German citizens; EU-citizen residents; non-EU permanent residents and long-term migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried and under age 18, unless dependent)	No	Temporary permit
Italy	Italian citizens; EU-citizen residents; non-EU permanent residents and long-term migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 18), dependent relative	No	Temporary permit
The Netherlands	Dutch citizens; EU-citizen residents; non-EU permanent residents and long-term migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 18), dependent relative	No	Temporary permit
Sweden	Swedish citizens; EU-citizen residents; non-EU permanent residents and long-term migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age of 18), dependent relative	No	Temporary permit
United Kingdom	Citizens and permanent residents	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 18), dependent relative	No	Permanent residence***
	EU-citizen residents; some temporary migrants	Spouse/partner, child (unmarried, under age 18)	No	Temporary permit
United States	Citizens and permanent residents	<i>Citizens and permanent residents</i> : spouse/partner, child (minor and adult unmarried)	<i>Citizens</i> : caps for adult children and siblings	Permanent residence***
	Temporary migrants****	<i>Citizens only</i> : parent, sibling, adult married child	<i>Permanent residents</i> : caps for partners and children	Temporary permit

* Australia defines an "eligible New Zealand citizen" as someone who holds a "protected Special Category Visa (SCV)", which is similar to permanent residence and held only by persons who arrived before February 26, 2001; New Zealand citizens who arrived after this date receive non-protected SCVs.

** Two of the four parent visas Australia offers provide temporary, rather than permanent, residence (with options to later apply for permanent status).

*** In the United Kingdom, children and dependent relatives can be sponsored for permanent residence, but spouses/partners receive a five-year visa prior to permanent residence. The United States issues conditional permanent residence to spouses/partners of U.S. citizens and permanent residents if the marriage is less than two years old; recipients can petition to remove this conditional status (and become full permanent residents) after holding it for two years.

**** Some categories of temporary migrants are not permitted to bring family dependents, such as Q-1 visa holders (cultural exchange participants).

Notes: Some of the conditions described in this table are waived or relaxed for refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection seeking to have family join them. The definition of "partner" varies by country (e.g., on whether unmarried partners or same-sex partners are included).

Sources: See Appendix for full list.

III. Assessing the Scale of Family Migration in Different Countries

In addition to policy differences, the nine countries in this study vary in terms of the scale of family-migration flows relative to other forms of migration, and on which types of family members are admitted.

A. How Large Are Family-Migration Flows?

Family reunification accounts for a significant share of immigration in all of the countries studied. Although data limitations prevent direct comparisons between EU and non-EU countries (see Box 1), the data set out below reveal that family sponsorship accounts for a large share of permanent migration in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, especially when adjusted for population size or to

Box 1. Data Sources and Limitations

In exploring recent trends in family migration, this brief draws on data from national migration and statistics agencies and from Eurostat for the years 2011 through 2016. Because each country has different methods for categorizing and recording admissions, direct crosscountry comparisons are not always possible. Two particular challenges of these data are:

- **Temporary versus permanent migration.** National data used here for Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States capture the number of permanent settlement visas granted. For EU countries (excluding the United Kingdom), this brief uses Eurostat data on “first residence permits,” which include an array of country-specific residence visas, some temporary and some permanent. Though temporary family migration does occur in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (e.g., when a spouse joins a temporary migrant for a limited stay in the country), the data on temporary migration are inconsistent across these countries, and thus are not of use for this comparative brief.
- **Accompanying family members.** While some family migrants are sponsored to join relatives already living in another country, others accompany their noncitizen relatives as they enter the country through other, non-family streams. The latter group are generally granted visas as dependents of a migrant gaining residence for educational, economic, humanitarian, or other reasons. National data for Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States do not classify such dependents as part of the family stream; instead, they are grouped with the principal applicant in the relevant stream (e.g., as a dependent within the economic stream). Among these four countries, all except Australia distinguish between principal applicants and their dependents within data on each migration stream. Taking a different approach, the Eurostat data used to analyze trends in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden include data on persons admitted for “family reasons”—both those joining an existing resident via family reunification and those accompanying family members entering the country as migrants in other streams; the two groups cannot be disaggregated from publicly available data.

With these limitations in mind, the data are nonetheless broadly complete, making it possible to sketch a general profile of family migration in the nine countries in question and to draw comparisons where data align.

Note: Data on permanent residents for Australia, Canada, and the United States include conditional or provisional permanent residents, while data on permanent settlement in the United Kingdom do not include persons on a presettlement probationary period.

Sources: UK Home Office, *User Guide to Home Office Immigration Statistics* (London: UK Home Office, 2018), 48, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/682186/user-guide-immigration-statistics.pdf; Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2015–16 *Migration Programme Report* (Canberra: Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016), 13, www.homeaffairs.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/2015-16-migration-programme-report.pdf.

include dependents recorded in other migration categories. Similarly, in the EU countries examined (excluding the United Kingdom), data show the largest share of first resident permits are issued for family reasons.

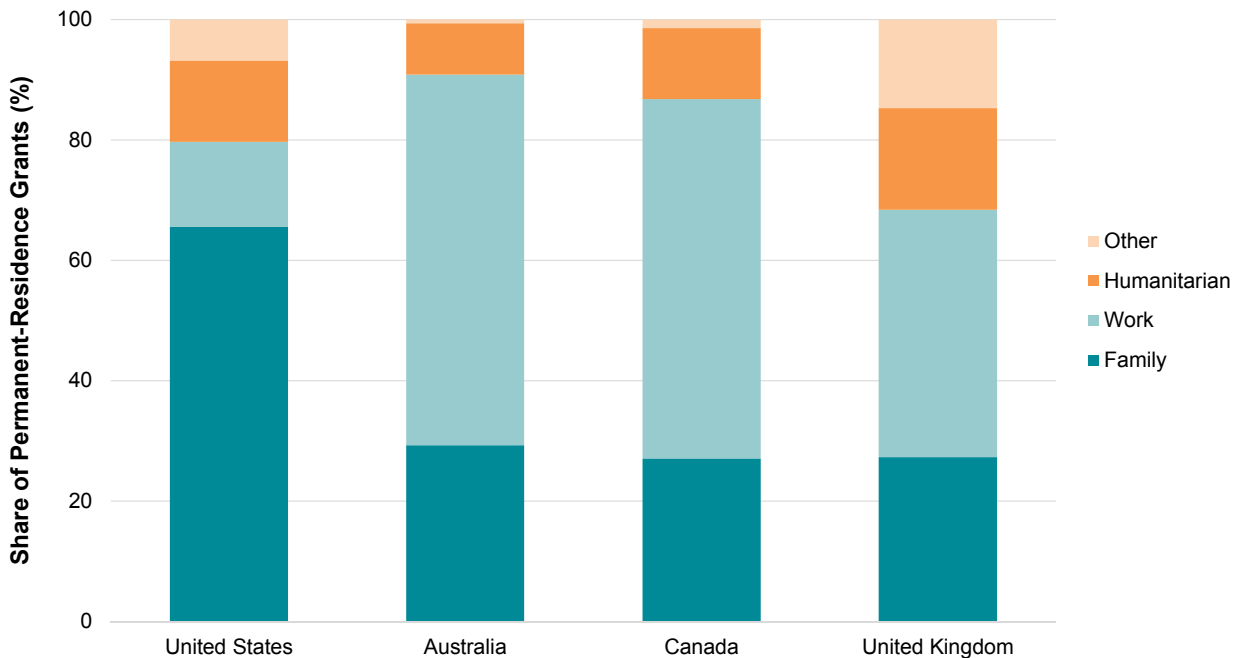
1. Family-Migration Trends in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States

As Figure 1 illustrates, migration through the family stream accounts for a much larger share of permanent migration in the United States than in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In the United States, family migration accounted for nearly two-thirds of all permanent-residence

grants between 2012 and 2016, surpassing grants for work or humanitarian reasons (14 percent each). By contrast, migration through the family stream accounted for between 27 percent and 29 percent of all permanent migration flows in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, behind grants for work, which ranged from 41 percent in the United Kingdom to 62 percent in Australia.

However, when these family data are adjusted for population size, they paint a different picture. Relative to the size of its population, the United States takes in family migrants at roughly the same rate as Canada and Australia, but it admits far fewer economic migrants. Between 2013 and

Figure 1. Permanent-Residence Grants, by Reason for Admission, 2012–16



Note: The types of migrants included in the “other” category vary between countries. For example, in the United States, these include (among others) diversity-visa holders, while in Canada, they include humanitarian and compassionate residence grants beyond the common humanitarian channels.

Sources: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics – Table 6,” accessed April 5, 2018, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/YRBK%202016%20LPR%20Excel%20Final.zip; Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Migration Programme Statistics—Migration Programme Reports,” Years 2012–13 through 2016–17, accessed April 5, 2018, www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/reports-publications/research-statistics/statistics/live-in-australia/migration-programme; UK Home Office, “Immigration Statistics, October to December 2017: Data Tables Second Edition: Settlement Tables - se_01 to se_06,” accessed April 5, 2018, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/681244/settlement-oct-dec-2017-tables.ods; Government of Canada, “Facts & Figures 2015: Immigration Overview – Permanent Residents – Annual IRCC Updates, Canada – Permanent Residents by Category,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_FFPR_02_E.xls.

2015, the United States admitted 2.1 family migrants per 1,000 people annually, while Australia and Canada admitted 2.6 and 2.0, respectively. Over the same period, Australia and Canada admitted 5.5 and 4.5 economic migrants each year per 1,000 people, respectively, while the United States admitted 0.5 economic migrants per 1,000 people.¹³

It must be noted, however, that these data omit family members who accompany migrants obtaining permanent residence through other streams (for example, a spouse accompanying a high-skilled worker would be counted as a dependent within the economic-migrant category). If these accompanying family members—who are spread out across economic, humanitarian, and other migration streams—are reclassified as “family migrants,” the picture for family admissions in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States looks quite different.¹⁴ After reclassifying accompanying family, Canada accepts nearly twice as many family migrants as the United States relative to its population size (4.8 versus 2.6 family migrants per 1,000 persons, respectively).¹⁵

When these accompanying relatives from other admissions categories are counted as part of the family stream, family admissions become

the largest migration category in Canada and the United Kingdom. In the United States, where they were already recorded as the largest, their share of admissions also grows. Notably, family members account for about half of admissions through the economic stream in all three countries. As Table 2 shows, shifting these dependents from the economic to the family category causes the economic-migrant share of Canada’s permanent-residence grants to fall from 62 percent to 28 percent, while its family category rises from 27 percent to 66 percent. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the economic-migrant share of new permanent residents decreases by almost half (from 42 percent to 22 percent) and the family share nearly doubles (from 32 percent to 57 percent). Finally, in the United States, this reclassification reduces the economic-migrant share of new permanent residents from 14 percent to 7 percent while the family share grows from 65 percent to 81 percent.

2. Family-Migration Trends in EU Member States (Excluding the United Kingdom)

Across the EU Member States studied in this brief (excluding the United Kingdom), family migration comprises the largest share (although not the outright majority) of first residence

Table 2. Major Migration Streams as a Share of All New Permanent Residents, before and after Reclassifying Accompanying Family as Family Migrants, 2011–15

Admissions Stream	Canada		United Kingdom		United States*	
	Original	Adjusted	Original	Adjusted	Original	Adjusted
Family	27%	66%	32%	57%	65%	81%
Economic	62%	28%	42%	22%	14%	7%
Humanitarian	10%	5%	14%	7%	14%	8%
Other	1%	1%	13%	13%	7%	4%

* U.S. figures in this table exclude several small visa categories for which the DHS “Yearbook on Immigration Statistics” does not provide totals due to the low numbers of recipients.

Notes: This table compares “original” permanent residency data, as reported by national migration and statistical authorities, with “adjusted” figures that reclassify family members recorded as dependents within other streams (economic, humanitarian, and other) as part of the family category. These data are averaged for the 2011–15 period to reduce the prominence of year-to-year fluctuations. Sources: UK Home Office, “Immigration Statistics, October to December 2017;” Government of Canada, “Facts & Figures 2015: Immigration Overview;” DHS, “Yearbook of Immigration Statistics—Table 7,” Years 2011 to 2015, www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook.

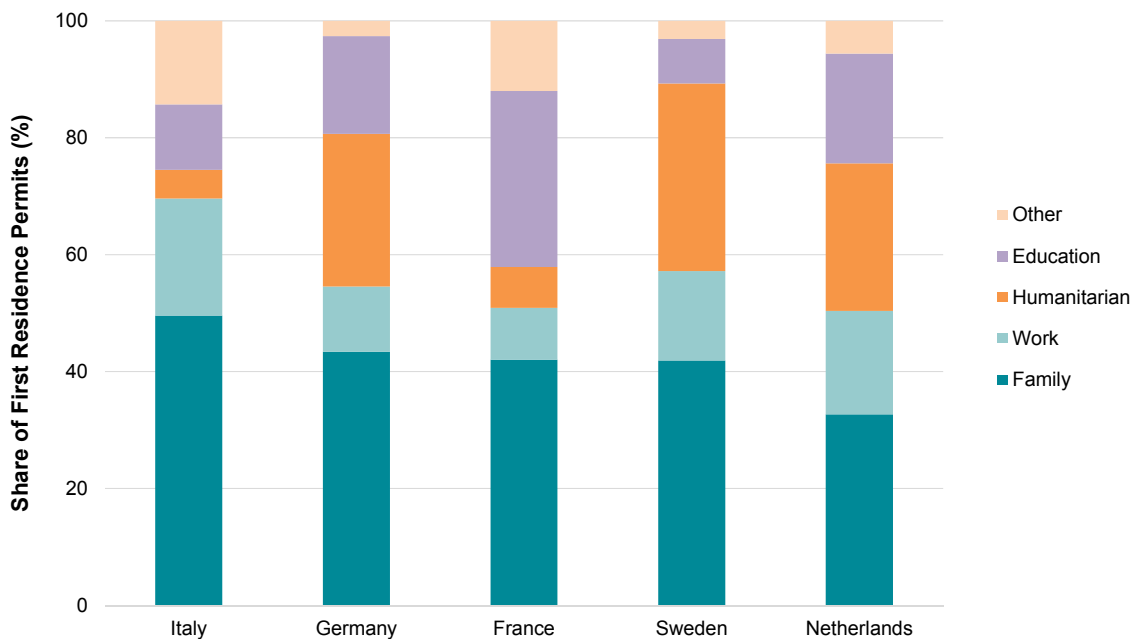
permits issued between 2012 and 2016. This can partly be attributed to the European data categorizing accompanying family members as part of the broader category of migrants admitted for “family reasons” (e.g., a non-EU-national spouse entering Italy with a temporary worker).

The share of first residence permits issued for family reasons ranges from about one-third in the Netherlands (33 percent) to half in Italy (50 percent) (see Figure 2). After family, the second-largest share of permit grants were for migrants admitted for humanitarian reasons in three of the five countries, ranging from 25 percent and 26 percent in the Netherlands and Germany, respectively, to 32 percent in Sweden. The second-largest stream in the two remaining countries differed; in France,

30 percent of residence permits were given for education reasons, and in Italy, 20 percent were given for work. The share of permits issued for work reasons ranged from 9 percent in France to 20 percent in Italy.

Many of the people issued resident permits for family reasons were joining relatives who were not EU citizens. The share varies widely between countries.¹⁶ In Sweden, 97 percent of individuals issued resident permits for family reasons between 2012 and 2016 were joining non-EU citizens. By comparison, the equivalent share was about two-thirds (63 percent) in Italy, and slightly more than half (55 percent) in Germany. The opposite is true in France, where the majority (60 percent) of people issued resident permits for family reasons between 2012 and 2016 were joining

Figure 2. First Residence Permits Granted, by Reason for Admission, 2012–16



Notes: The types of migrants included in “other” category vary between countries; they may include, for example, admissions on the basis of religious or health reasons. The humanitarian category was created by combining several subcategories within the “other” category that describe humanitarian reasons for admission (i.e., international protection status, refugee status and subsidiary protection, humanitarian reasons, unaccompanied minors, and victims of human trafficking).

Sources: Eurostat, “First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity, and Citizenship [migr_resfirst],” updated February 16, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/migr_resfirst; Eurostat, “First Permits Issued for Other Reasons by Reason, Length of Validity, and Citizenship [migr_resoth],” updated February 16, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/migr_resoth.

EU citizens. One factor that may help explain this country-to-country variation is historical ties: that is, European countries with long-standing immigration flows based on colonial, economic, or other ties may see a larger share of family migrants join relatives who are already citizens. In France, the top countries of origin for migrants issued residence permits for family reasons in 2016 were Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—all of which have colonial ties to France; nearly two-thirds of recipients of family-based residence permits from these countries were joining EU citizens.¹⁷

B. Which Family Members Migrate?

Across all countries studied, most family migrants are either spouses/partners or children. As the eligibility criteria set out in Table

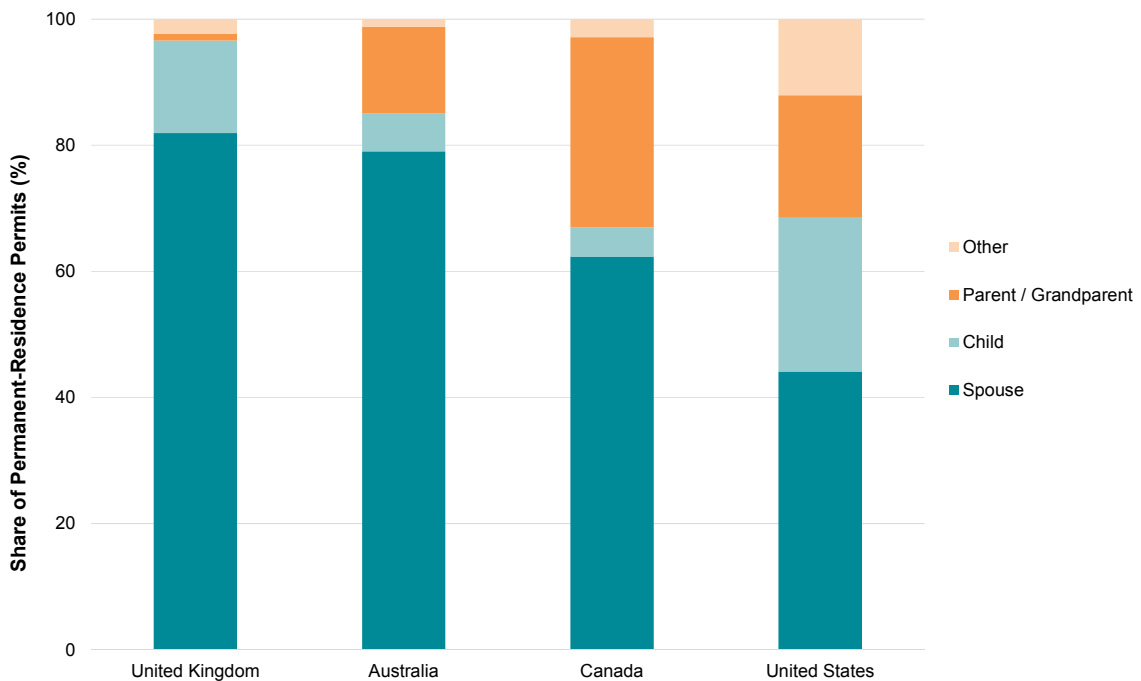
1 would suggest, beyond the nuclear family, options to bring in other relatives—such as parents, grandparents, or siblings—vary (and are generally more limited).

1. *The Profile of Family Migrants in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States*

Across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the vast majority of family migrants are either spouses or children. Between 2012 and 2016, spouses and children combined received between 67 percent and 97 percent of family-stream permanent-residence permits across these four countries (see Figure 3).

Among the other family members obtaining permanent residence, parents, grandparents, and siblings are the most common, though

Figure 3. Permanent-Residence Permits Granted for Family Reasons, by Relationship, 2012–16*



* Data for Canada are for 2012 to 2015 since the data available for 2016 do not distinguish between the children and spouse/partner categories.

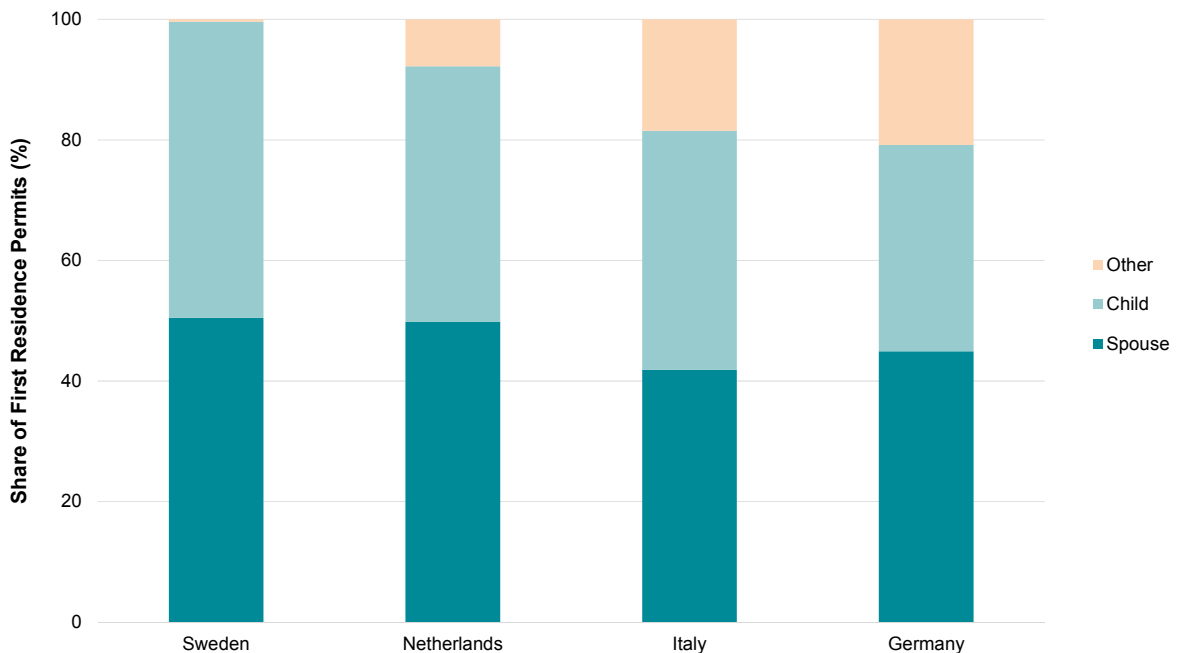
Note: Canadian and UK data count parents and grandparents, while U.S. and Australian data count only parents
Sources: UK Home Office, "Immigration Statistics, October to December 2017;" Government of Canada, "Facts & Figures 2015: Immigration Overview;" Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, "Migration Programme Statistics—Migration Programme Reports," Years 2012–13 through 2016–17; DHS, "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics—Table 7," Years 2012 to 2015.

sometimes limited by numerical caps (as in Australia, Canada, and the United States) and/or the citizen versus permanent-resident status of the sponsor (the United States).¹⁸ Parents accounted for 14 percent of permanent-residence grants to family migrants issued by Australia between 2012 and 2016, and 19 percent of those issued by the United States during the same period. In Canada, parents and grandparents (combined) accounted for 30 percent of family-based residence permits, but in the United Kingdom, they made up just 1 percent of permits (see Figure 3). The United States, somewhat predictably, had the largest share of “other” family migrants (12 percent), due to pathways beyond those available in the other three countries for citizens to sponsor siblings and adult married children, albeit with numerical limitations.¹⁹

2. *The Profile of Family Migrants in EU Member States (Excluding the United Kingdom)*

While data for Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden include a breakdown of family-related first residence permit grants by the relationship between the family migrant and the person they are joining, data for France do not. Across the four countries that provide this type of detailed data, spouses and children comprise approximately 80 percent or more of people issued residence permits for family reasons (see Figure 4). And while these countries do not break out data on parents/grandparents specifically, the “other” family-member category (i.e., not spouses or children) accounted for roughly 20 percent of the family-migrant first residence permits granted

Figure 4. First Residence Permits Granted for Family Reasons, by Relationship, 2012–16



Note: France is not included in this table, as the methodological notes that accompany this Eurostat dataset state the distribution of permits by family-member type is not available.

Source: Eurostat, “First Permits Issued for Family Reasons by Reason, Length of Validity, and Citizenship [migr_resfam],” updated February 7, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/migr_resfam.

in Italy and Germany between 2012 and 2016, and less than 10 percent in the Netherlands and Sweden. All four of these countries limit the migration of other family members to cases of dependency, particular hardship, or guardians of unaccompanied minor refugees or asylum seekers.²⁰

C. Who Sponsors Family Migration?

Among countries that allow citizens and permanent residents to sponsor family members for permanent settlement, data available for the United States and United Kingdom suggest that citizens sponsor the majority of migrants.²¹ Between 2012 and 2016, U.S. citizens sponsored on average 85 percent of all family migrants to receive permanent residence in the United States.²² UK citizens also sponsored the vast majority of spouses in this time period (82 percent), although data broken down by sponsor status were not available for other categories, such as children.²³

In the other European countries studied in this brief, the ratio of family migrants joining citizens to those joining noncitizens has fluctuated in recent years, reflecting shifting migratory trends and other current events. In Germany, the drop in the share of sponsors who were German citizens between 2011 and 2015 (from 50 percent to 36 percent) reflected a 96 percent increase in the number of migrants arriving through family reunification who were sponsored by noncitizen residents, a change likely due in part to the rapid growth of the Syrian refugee population in Germany.²⁴ Similarly, Swedish national data show that between 2011 and 2015, first residence permits granted to family members of refugees increased by more than 400 percent.²⁵ Following this increase in family-based arrivals, Germany and Sweden both introduced legislation in 2016 to temporarily restrict family reunification for some recently arrived asylum seekers with the aim of limiting what some policymakers worry may be a “pull factor” for prospective asylum seekers (i.e., the prospect of moving entire families).

IV. Waiting Times and Numerical Caps

Demand for family reunification often far outstrips the number of places available or, in some cases, the capacity of officials to process applications in a timely manner. In Australia, Canada, and the United States, certain visa categories for family members are capped. Combined with high demand for family reunification, this often produces large backlogs and long wait times.²⁶ For example, Australia caps two of its four parent visas, and with demand far greater than supply, wait times for these two visas now stretch to roughly 30 years.²⁷ In Canada, the backlog of sponsorship applications for parents and grandparents reached 165,000 in 2011, with wait times averaging six years.²⁸ Despite increasing the annual number of visas on offer from 15,000 to 25,000 and imposing a two-year moratorium on applications, as of 2018, Canadian officials are still processing applications from 2014.²⁹ The United States sets quotas for some forms of family-sponsored immigration (including those sponsored by a permanent resident, and for siblings or adult children of U.S. citizens). It also caps annual family-sponsored immigration by country, which has resulted in particularly long backlogs for certain nationalities.³⁰ For example, Filipino and Mexican siblings of U.S. citizens must currently wait more than 20 years to be admitted as a permanent resident.³¹

In several European countries, the migration crisis strained the capacity of national migration agencies to accommodate large numbers of requests for family reunification, resulting in long waiting periods. As of early 2018, processing times in Sweden for spouses from some key countries³² who were sponsored by Swedish citizens, EU citizens, or permanent residents ranged from 11 to 24 months. These wait times varied considerably by the nationality of the family migrant: in early 2018, the expected wait time for applications for spouses who are Iraqi nationals was 11 to 16 months, while wait times for those who were Somali ranged between 21 and 24 months.³³ Both of these average wait

times also exceed the requirement set out in the EU Family Reunification Directive that Member States process family reunification applications within nine months. In addition to long processing times, applicants can also face prolonged waiting periods just to lodge their application. As of mid-2016, wait times for a family-related visa appointment averaged 15 months at the German embassy in Beirut, while those at the German embassy in Erbil, Iraq were around 2 years.³⁴

V. Conclusions

Family migration is at the heart of many immigration systems, even as countries set different rules, rights, and requirements for family migrants. While analyses of family migration tend to focus narrowly on migrants recorded as entering through family-sponsored channels, this is only part of the picture; taking the dependents of migrants who enter a country through other visa categories into consideration reveals more fully the centrality of family migration in many countries.

In all nine countries studied, most of the family migrants admitted are close, nuclear family members—spouses or partners and children. Beyond immediate family, countries have a more varied set of rules on who can be admitted and who can act as a sponsor. While some countries

allow sponsorship of parents or grandparents, siblings, or adult children (albeit generally in much smaller numbers than spouses and children), others restrict their admission to those who are dependent on a citizen or permanent resident, or who would experience significant hardship without them.³⁵

Another commonality across the countries studied is the existence of backlogs for family reunification. In Europe, delays are linked to the lingering effects of the 2015–16 migration crisis, but in other countries they are a more longstanding issue. In Australia and the United States, for example, long wait times reflect the extent to which demand has consistently surpassed supply year after year. With delays in certain visa categories amounting to years—or even decades—this can render certain types of family reunification effectively impossible.

Whether the changes contemplated in some countries to the laws that govern family migration are taken up, and whether they manage to shift the size and composition of these diverse flows remains to be seen.³⁶ In immigrant-receiving countries, determining which family members to admit, in what numbers, and under what conditions, while balancing the principle of family unity against other immigration priorities, is likely to remain a vexing and multifaceted policy challenge.

Appendix. Sources for Table I

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Endnotes

- 1 The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental economic organization with 35 member countries, founded in 1961 to stimulate economic progress and world trade. Created by 18 European countries, the United States, and Canada, members are largely advanced economies but also include emerging economies such as Chile, Mexico, and Turkey. For more, see OECD, “About the OECD,” accessed April 8, 2018, www.oecd.org/about/.
- 2 Data are as of 2014 and are from OECD, “Permanent Immigrant Inflows,” accessed February 28, 2018, <https://data.oecd.org/migration/permanent-immigrant-inflows.htm>; OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2017* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), 107, www.oecd.org/migration/international-migration-outlook-1999124x.htm.
- 3 Peter Baker, “Trump Supports Plan to Cut Legal Immigration by Half,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/us/politics/trump-immigration.html.
- 4 Countries were selected on the basis of their central role in ongoing migration debates and on the availability of data.
- 5 Within the European Union, most Member States (and all EU countries in this study except the United Kingdom) must also comply with the terms of the EU Directive on the Right to Family Reunification (2003/86/EC), which sets out common standards for the migration of non-EU family members. The directive stipulates that family reunification applies at a minimum to nuclear family members (partners and children); that it should be available to long-term migrants and beneficiaries of international protection; and that family migrants can access education, employment and self-employed activity, and vocational guidance. The directive also outlines additional requirements that Member States may place on family reunification, such as (for the sponsor) a minimum residency period, minimum income, or accommodation, and (for the family member) health insurance or predeparture/postarrival integration conditions. See “Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the Right to Family Reunification,” *Official Journal of the European Union* L 251/12, October 3, 2003, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32003L0086&from=en>.
- 6 The Free Movement Directive (Directive 2004/38/EC) sets out the right to free movement and residence for EU citizens. This allows EU citizens to live in another EU country for up to three months without conditions, and to reside in another Member State indefinitely provided they are employed or self-employed, seeking work, or are otherwise financially self-sufficient. The same rights apply to their family members, who may be EU or non-EU citizens. See “Directive 2004/38/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the Right of Citizens of the Union and their Family Members to Move and Reside Freely within the Territory of the Member States Amending Regulation (EEC) No 1612/68 and Repealing Directives 64/221/EEC, 68/360/EEC, 72/194/EEC, 73/148/EEC, 75/34/EEC, 75/35/EEC, 90/364/EEC, 90/365/EEC and 93/96/EEC,” *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 158/77, April 30, 2004, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2004/38/oj>.
- 7 “Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the Right to Family Reunification.”
- 8 In the UK case, this is mostly for parents (or grandparents) who need care in the United Kingdom.
- 9 Government of Canada, “Find out If You’re Eligible to Sponsor Relatives,” updated May 19, 2017, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/family-sponsorship/other-relatives/eligibility.html.
- 10 See Government of Germany, “Act on the Residence, Economic Activity, and Integration of Foreigners in the Federal Territory,” Section 28, updated March 11, 2016, www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_aufenthg/englisch_aufenthg.html.

- 11 In the United States, for example, H-4 visa holders (the spouses of high-skilled workers who hold H-1B visas, or agricultural workers who hold H2-A or H2-B visas) and TD visa holders (the spouses of Mexican or Canadian professionals who hold TN visas) do not automatically have work authorization, while all dependent spouses of E and L visa holders do. See U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “Temporary (Nonimmigrant) Workers,” updated September 7, 2011, www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/temporary-nonimmigrant-workers. The Obama administration in 2015 began allowing H-4 visa holders to qualify for work; the Trump administration has indicated it intends to end this work authorization, affecting some 71,000 H-4 visa holders. See Sarah Pierce and Julia Gelatt, *Evolution of the H-1B: Latest Trends in a Program on the Brink of Reform* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/evolution-h-1b-latest-trends-program-brink-reform.
- 12 Family members of a Tier 4 (General) Student are not allowed to work if the student’s course of study is below the degree level (unless they are a government-sponsored student and the course is longer than six months) or if the course is less than 12 months long (barring the previous exception). See UK Visas and Immigration, *Points Based System (Dependant) – Policy Guidance* (London: UK Visas and Immigration, 2018), www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/680612/PBS_Dependant_Guidance_02-2018.pdf.
- 13 Authors’ calculations based on data from: Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), *2013-14 Migration Programme Report* (Canberra: DIBP, 2014), www.homeaffairs.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/report-migration-programme-2013-14.pdf; Australian Government, DIBP, *2014-15 Migration Programme Report* (Canberra: DIBP, 2015), www.homeaffairs.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/2014-15-Migration-Programme-Report.pdf; Australian Government, DIBP, *2015-16 Migration Programme Report* (Canberra: DIBP, 2016), www.homeaffairs.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/2015-16-migration-programme-report.pdf; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), “3101.0 – Australian Demographic Statistics, Jun 2013,” updated December 17, 2013, www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3101.0Main+Features1Jun%202013?OpenDocument; ABS, “3101.0 – Australian Demographic Statistics, Jun 2014,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3101.0Main+Features1Jun%202014; ABS, “More Australians Reaching 100” (news release, December 17, 2015), www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/3101.0Media%20Release1Jun%202015; Government of Canada, “Facts & Figures 2015: Immigration Overview – Permanent Residents – Annual IRCC Updates, Canada – Permanent Residents by Category,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_FFPR_02_E.xls; Statistics Canada, “Population by Year, by Province and Territory (Number),” updated September 27, 2017, www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo02a-eng.htm; U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics – Table 6,” accessed April 5, 2018, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/YRBK%202016%20LPR%20Excel%20Final.zip; U.S. Census Bureau, “U.S. and World Population Clock,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.census.gov/popclock/.
- 14 Reclassification was only possible for the countries that had permanent settlement data (Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and that provided a breakdown of their data into principal applicants and dependents. Australian annual reports on the Migration Programme do not provide detailed data on dependents and spouses granted permanent residency through non-family streams.
- 15 Authors’ calculations based on data from Government of Canada, “Facts & Figures 2015;” Statistics Canada, “Population by Year, by Province and Territory (Number);” DHS, “2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics – Table 7d,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/YRBK%202015%20LPR%20Excel%20Final_1.zip; DHS, “2014 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics – Table 7d,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/YRBK%202014%20LPR%20Excel%20Final.zip; DHS, “2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics – Table 7d,” accessed January 10, 2018, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/LPR%202013_1.zip; U.S. Census Bureau, “U.S. and World Population Clock.”

- 16 Eurostat, “First Permits Issued for Family Reasons by Reason, Length of Validity, and Citizenship [migr_resfam],” updated February 7, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/migr_resfam. Eurostat methodological notes state that it is not possible to distinguish between third-country nationals (non-EU citizens) joining an EU citizen and those joining another non-EU citizen in the Netherlands. As a result, the analysis in this paragraph covers only France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. See Eurostat, “First Permits Completeness,” accessed April 5, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/Annexes/migr_res_esms_an2.pdf.
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- 19 USCIS, “Family of U.S. Citizens,” updated March 23, 2018, www.uscis.gov/family/family-us-citizens; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Visa Bulletin for February 2018” (bulletin no. 14, vol. X, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, 2018), <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-bulletin/2018/visa-bulletin-for-february-2018.html>.
- 20 In Germany, for example, other family members are only permitted to join sponsors in cases of particular hardship, including being dependent on the sponsor; parents of a minor who has been granted asylum, recognized as a refugee, or received subsidiary protection; or other family members of an unaccompanied minors facing special hardships. See Janne Grote, “Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals in Germany” (working paper 73, European Migration Network Germany National Contact Point, German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, Nuremberg, 2017), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/11a_germany_family_reunification_en_final.pdf.
- 21 Neither Australia nor Canada make data publicly available regarding the citizenship status of family reunification sponsors.
- 22 DHS, “2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics – Table 6,” accessed January 8, 2018, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/YRBK%202016%20LPR%20Excel%20Final.zip.
- 23 UK Home Office “Immigration Statistics, October to December 2017: Data Tables Second Edition: Settlement Tables - se_01 to se_06,” accessed April 5, 2018, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/681244/settlement-oct-dec-2017-tables.ods.
- 24 These data exclude EU citizens. See Grote, “Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals in Germany,” 48-49.
- 25 Swedish Migration Agency, “Migration and Asylum 2005-2015 (First Permits),” accessed January 10, 2018, [www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.2d998ffc151ac38715985f2/1485556064118/Over-view-2005-2015%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.2d998ffc151ac38715985f2/1485556064118/Over-view-2005-2015%20(2).pdf).
- 26 Backlogs in the United States were around 4 million as of November 1, 2017. See U.S. Department of State, “Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-Sponsored and Employment-Based Preferences Registered at the National Visa Center,” updated November 1, 2017, https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/WaitingList/WaitingListItem_2017.pdf.
- 27 Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs, “Parent Visa Queue.”

- 28 Xiaobei Chen and Sherry Xiaohan Thorpe, "Temporary Families? The Parent and Grandparent Sponsorship Program and the Neoliberal Regime of Immigration Governance in Canada," *Migration, Mobility & Displacement* 1, no. 1 (2015): 67-80, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/article/view/13308/4419>.
- 29 Ibid.; Government of Canada, "Check Application Processing Times," updated March 21, 2018, www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/times/.
- 30 No country can receive more than 7 percent of U.S. capped family-sponsored visas in any year.
- 31 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Visa Bulletin for February 2018."
- 32 The countries include Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria.
- 33 Swedish Migration Agency, "Time to a Decision," accessed February 28, 2018, www.migrationsverket.se/English/Contact-us/Time-to-a-decision.html. Data were gathered from this tool using the following conditions: living with someone in Sweden; applying for a first-time residence permit; the prospective beneficiary is going to live with is a Swedish citizen, EU citizen, or permanent resident sponsor; application completed online; Swedish Migration Agency has not asked for more information; and the prospective beneficiary and their sponsor have lived together outside Sweden for more than two years with proof.
- 34 Grote, "Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals in Germany."
- 35 The United Kingdom, for example, allows family reunification for adult children in "exceptional" circumstances that could include situations where they are unable to live independently due to physical or mental limitations, they have no means of support and face destitution, or they are left alone in a conflict zone or dangerous situation. See European Migration Network (EMN), *Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals in the EU Plus Norway: National Practices* (Brussels: European Commission, 2016), 21, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00_family_reunification_sr_final.pdf.
- 36 For more on how potential changes in the U.S. context could affect flows, see MPI Data Hub, "Modeling Potential U.S. Legal Immigration Cuts, by Category and Top Countries, FY 2016," accessed April 9, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/modeling-potential-us-legal-immigration-cuts.

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