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Assumptions on migration

Refugee immigration to Sweden, 2012-2018: a comparison of observed and projected numbers

Note by Statistics Sweden*

Summary

This study provides an evaluation of the assumptions about the immigration due to asylum made in the population projections published between 2012 and 2018 by Statistics Sweden. Projected numbers are compared to the observed numbers. The rapidly changing number of people seeking asylum together with the changes in immigration policies have made it especially difficult to predict the number of refugees entering the country in the period from 2012 to 2018. For population forecasters, this scenario in recent years meant additional challenges. We show that between 2012 and 2014 the official projections have underestimated refugee immigration to Sweden. Assumptions were adjusted over time to try to accommodate the changing scenario. In 2015 and 2016, on the other hand, the projections overestimated refugee immigration. We were not able to fully anticipate the large decline in immigration due to policy changes and more restricted immigration rules in Sweden and the EU. In 2017 and 2018, with lower and more stable refugee immigration, the projections were also closer to the observed numbers. Those short term variations have also changed the long term assumptions about refugee immigration to Sweden.

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I. Introduction

1. In April of each year, Statistics Sweden publishes its population projection for the country. It contains assumptions about the future trends for fertility, mortality, immigration and emigration. This study provides an evaluation of the assumptions about the immigration due to asylum made in the population projections published between 2012 and 2018. Projected numbers are compared to the observed numbers.

II. Immigration in the population projection of Sweden

2. When the population projection is produced, separate assumptions are made for the influx of: persons born in Sweden (i.e., return migration), persons born in the Nordic countries, persons born in the European Union (EU) and persons born outside of the EU. The last group is further broken down into six categories according to the type of residence permit granted at immigration: asylum, work, studies, family reunification, EU-citizenship (e.g., a person born in Turkey who had German citizenship at the time of immigration to Sweden) and a residual group which includes those without information on the type of residence permit. Finally, the category of residence permits granted due to asylum is broken down into two groups: main applicants and the family members of main applicants. The present study compares the observed and projected figures for the immigration of main applicants of asylum.
3. Information about residence permits is administered by the Swedish Migration Agency and data is available from 1987 onwards. This information is based on administrative registers and it is linked at Statistics Sweden to other demographic characteristics via personal identification numbers.
4. The projection of immigration consists of assumptions about the short run (5 to 10 years ahead) and long run (10+ years ahead). The projections discussed in this study are of the first type, as only the period 2012 to 2018 is analysed.
5. Assumptions about the short run are updated every year by Statistics Sweden. One of the main inputs used are the yearly forecasts provided by the Swedish Migration Agency. Those give, among other things, an expected number of asylum seekers and the number of residence permits expected to be granted to those seeking asylum. The forecasts are a part of the Migration Agency's planning for allocation of permits in relation to the budget of the Swedish government.

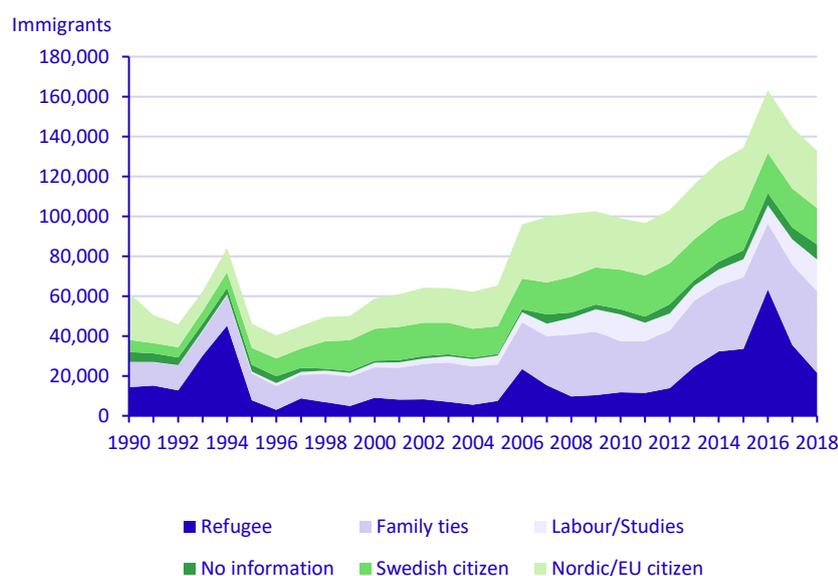
III. Background on refugee immigration

6. Immigration to Sweden by people seeking protection from war, conflicts and political instability is not a recent phenomenon. During World War II, a considerable number of people fled from Finland and the Baltic States to Sweden. The post-war immigration of refugees consisted largely of people born in Poland or former Czechoslovakia. Civil war in countries such as Ethiopia and Lebanon, as well as political repression in Chile and Iran, increased the number of people seeking protection in Sweden during the 1980s. The war in the Balkans in the early 1990s led to an increasing number of people who sought protection in other countries in Europe, including Sweden.

7. After the high levels of refugees from the Balkans, immigration stayed at relatively low numbers until the mid-2000s (see Figure 1). At the end of 2006, a temporary change in the law regarding asylum immigration was decided. It led to the introduction of a new permit bases for granting residence permits. The temporary amnesty meant that many asylum seekers who had been rejected had their application apply again. For a limited period, a relatively large number of people, mostly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, were granted permits. After the temporary amnesty for asylum seekers in 2006, the level that immigrated was stable at around 10 000 immigrants per year until around 2010.

Graph 1

Immigration to Sweden by citizenship and reason for residence permit, 1990–2018



8. Immigration due to asylum started to increase again around 2010 and more rapidly from 2012 (see Figure 1). Immigration from Syria is one of the main reasons for this recent influx. The situation peaked in 2016, with more than 60 000 asylum claims granted. Total immigration reached over 160 000 persons that same year. In the beginning of 2015, a number of actions were taken by the EU in order to reduce the number of people entering the EU and also to reduce the possibility to travel within the union for people without resident permits. A number of actions and changes in the asylum law took place in Sweden as well. As a consequence, the number of immigrations due to asylum declined in 2017 and 2018.
9. For population forecasters, this scenario in recent years meant additional challenges. The rapidly changing number of people seeking asylum together with the changes in immigration policies have made it especially difficult to predict the number of refugees entering the country in the period from 2012 to 2018.

IV. Observed vs. projected refugee immigration

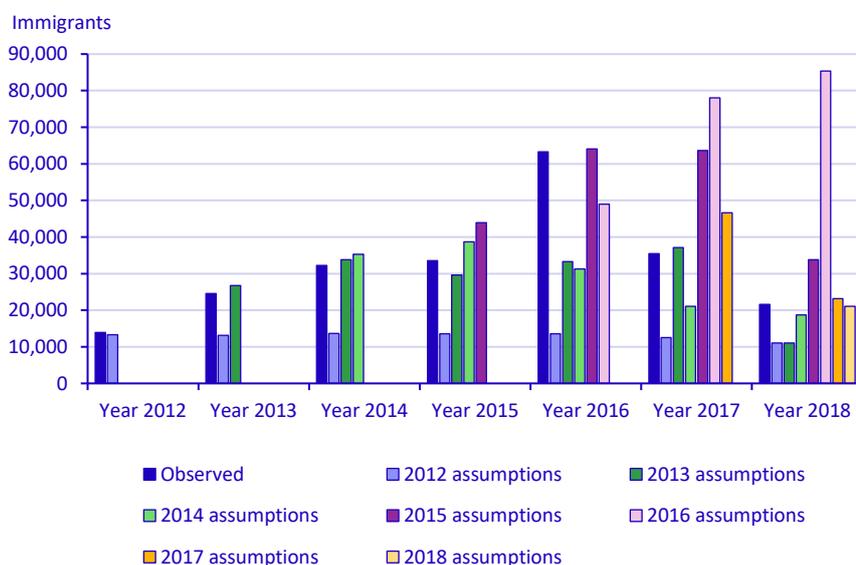
10. Figure 2 presents the eight different projections on immigration of refugees that were made from 2012 to 2018, together with the actual figures recorded during each respective year.
11. In 2012, there were a large uncertainty about the coming development of refugees seeking asylum in Sweden due to the emerging conflict in Syria and how that could affect new flows of migrants. There was an increasing number of applicants in the beginning of 2012 but the Swedish Migration Agency stated that the uncertainty for the coming years was very high

and the provided forecasts were to be used with the knowledge of this (Migrationsverket, 2012). In the main alternative made by the Swedish Migration Agency, the projected numbers of immigrated refugees were assumed to be at the same level as it had been during recent years. The level of immigrants due to asylum in the long run were set as an average on lower levels than the short run due to an optimism on the future development in the world (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

12. The 2012 projection of the number of immigrated refugees for year 2012 did almost set out as projected with an error on about 700 persons. But then, during year 2013, the situation changed and the number of asylum seekers increased considerably. In June 2013 Sweden had a changed legal position for Syrian citizens, up until then Syrians were given temporary residences permits but now they had the possibility to get permanent residence permits. Something that also increased the chance for family reunification and could be one main reason why Sweden became one of the primary receiving country for asylum seekers in Europe during this period.
13. In 2013 and 2014, the further development of the Syrian conflict and how the refugee situation would look like meant a high uncertainty in a Swedish context. The Migration Agency stated that it was not possible to make forecasts more than for the coming 2 years and that the rest of the forecast period (short term) was based on a hypothetical scenario about a possible development with a reduced level of conflict in Syria which would mean a decreasing number of asylum seekers (Migrationsverket, 2013).

Graph 2

Observed and projected immigration due to asylum, 2012–2018



14. The next projection was set out in spring 2015 and the situation of the future development of immigration was still uncertain. The driving force to leave countries such as Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Eritrea were still very strong. But it was stated that it is not changed conditions in the countries of origin but rather the accessibility along the migrant routes and the distribution of asylum seekers among European countries that will have the greatest impact on the number of applicants for asylum in Sweden in the next coming years (Migrationsverket, 2015a). Assumptions about an increasing inflow of asylum migrants, mainly from Syria, during 2016 and 2017 and then a decreasing trend.

15. During the second semester of 2015, the EU's common principles for regulated asylum migration were put into play when the control for the external Schengen border ceased to function. It was the beginning of an acute and rapidly escalating refugee situation whose rapid progress and scale is unprecedented in Europe (Migrationsverket, 2015b). The total number of asylum seekers in Sweden was 163 000, levels that have never been documented before.
16. In order to control the flow of refugees, a number of control measures were introduced, both in Sweden and in other EU member states. In November 2015, Sweden introduces border controls where all who travel to Sweden were required to show passport or national identification. At the same time, countries on the Western Balkans, a common transit route for refugees, establish a selection of those who may pass the borders, only those from conflict areas, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, may pass further on in the EU. In January 2016, increased border controls were adapted in Sweden which meant difficulties to enter Sweden for groups who have generally difficult to obtain ID documents that are acceptable by Swedish authorities. The number of applicants in Sweden decreased somewhat but were still at high levels.
17. The next projection was set in early 2016 and the number of asylum immigrants were assumed to increase until 2018 and then decrease during 2019–2020. At the same time, the Swedish government announced a new temporary law (from 2016 to 2019) which means that the Swedish regulations for asylum immigration are adapted to the minimum requirements of international conventions and EU law (Sveriges Riksdag, 2016). One aspect of the temporary law was temporary instead of permanent residence permits for those asylum refugees whose application were granted. The law was set into force during the first semester of 2016 and were considered by the Swedish Migration Agency in their forecast. About at the same time, EU closed a deal with Turkey, a deal that means that refugees passing Turkey into the EU are stopped at the Turkish border and states on the Western Balkan closed their border for all refugees trying to travel into the EU. These actions are seen to have been one of the major reasons for the coming decrease of refugees seeking protection in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2016).
18. The predicted number of asylum migrants in the short run in 2017s projection were at considerably lower levels compared to the previous year. Still a difficult refugee situation in many parts of the world but the number who seek asylum in Sweden had maintained low. The above mentioned actions presumably affected the possibility to come to Sweden and also the attractiveness among refugees to choose to go to Sweden. After the end of the temporary law an increase of asylum seekers was assumed, resulting in a temporary increase of immigrants during a couple of years. Although there was still a high uncertainty what would happen after 2019 (Statistics Sweden, 2017).
19. In the 2015 projection, new assumptions on the long run were made. Assumptions on that conflicts, insecurity and political repressions would continue to cause people to seek protection in other countries would persist. One of the reasons why people choose to come to Sweden for protection were argued to be, besides the advantageous asylum laws, the existing communities of diasporas living in Sweden. It was further argued that there would be a reduction in future conflicts considering the future development of demographic and socioeconomic factors as well as previous conflicts in countries and regions. The future movements of refugees were assumed to originate from African countries south of the Sahara since they face an increasing population growth while poverty and low level of education are assumed to persist together with an increased share of the population in younger ages. Factors that are associated with high risk of conflicts (Hegre, et al., 2011; Bilal & Urdal, 2009; Cincotta, 2003; Urdal, 2006). Countries with medium HDI are at the same time assumed to have an older age distribution in the future (UN, 2012), which then would imply a lower risk of conflicts in these countries. Countries where most of those applying for asylum in Sweden during recent decades have come from. Existing migration corridors between African countries and the old colonial states would then play a crucial role

for the future pattern of refugees, implying somewhat lower levels coming to Sweden. The long term level of asylum migrants were set by an average for each of the different birth country groups but lower for countries with medium HDI due to above mentioned assumptions.

20. In 2018, the number of asylum applicants had been stable and the Swedish Migration agency lowered their forecast on new asylum applications in the coming years (Migrationsverket, 2018). Resulting in lower levels of granted permits compared to 2016 years projection. The bulge due to the end of the temporary law was now smaller, mostly due to an expected lower inflow of applicants during this period.
21. In 2019, the assumed levels of asylum seekers on the short term were further reduced (Migrationsverket, 2019). Fewer people managed to travel in to the EU were many border controls that stopped refugees still persisted and the temporary residence permits given to asylum seekers had made Sweden less popular as a receiving country. In addition, assumptions were made that the EU-Turkey deal would persist. The temporary law was also extended to year 2021, eliminating the bulge seen in previous projections in 2019 and 2020.
22. The long run projection was set in 2018 and had about the same assumptions as in 2015 on from where the future inflow of refugees would come from. Although there was no assumption on that the average would be lower than it have been during the period of which there are information about types of residence permits, leading to slightly higher average levels compared to the assumptions made in 2015.

V. Conclusions

23. Immigration is perhaps the most difficult component to predict in a population projection since changes can occur both quickly and without any premonition. The migration policy carried out by Sweden and by the EU is very much decisive for the number of immigrants to Sweden. Events such as paradigm shifts or conflicts that creates involuntary or forced migration are of course very difficult to predict, not least in terms of the extent of the number that have the intention to go to Sweden and also have the possibility to do so.
24. Immigration of refugees have been the group were the numbers have varied as most. The pattern have been a sudden increase of numbers of people seeking asylum from a certain region or country up to a certain level that lasts for a couple of years and then, by various reasons, decreases. The high levels during recent years have been due to peaks generated by conflicts in Iraq, Somalia Syria and political insecurity in countries such as Afghanistan and Eritrea. The recent development in the number of refugees around the world do imply that this is something that will persist since political, religious and ethnical continues to be a source to conflicts (Sander et al., 2013).
25. We show that between 2012 and 2014 the official projections have underestimated refugee immigration to Sweden. Assumptions were adjusted over time to try to accommodate the changing scenario. In 2015 and 2016, on the other hand, the projections overestimated refugee immigration. We were not able to fully anticipate the large decline in immigration due to policy changes and more restricted immigration rules in Sweden and the EU. In 2017 and 2018, with lower and more stable refugee immigration, the projections were also closer to the observed numbers. Those short terms variations have also changed the long term assumptions about refugee immigration to Sweden.

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