

Safe Pathways for Refugees – 2026 update

Data Brief

OECD-UNHCR study on pathways used by refugees linked to family reunification, study programmes and labour mobility between 2019 and 2024

1. Background

The OECD and UNHCR “Safe Pathways for Refugees” project began in 2018 and compiles statistical information from OECD countries and Brazil on yearly permit grants since 2010 to nationals of eight refugee origin countries. Specifically, it collects data on pathways of family reunification, education and labour mobility for Afghans, Eritreans, Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Somalis, Venezuelans, and as of the last report published in 2025, Sudanese nationals.



The eight nationalities covered under this collaboration typically represent those with the highest number of international protection status awarded in OECD countries plus Brazil. This brief adds in new data from 2024 and monitors trends to build a foundation of evidence on complementary pathways linking with objectives in the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#) and the [Third Country Solutions for Refugees: Roadmap 2030](#) (Roadmap 2030).

2. Highlights (2019-2024)

Around **1.2 million** nationals from **Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela** and **Sudan** were granted **permits by OECD countries** and **Brazil** for **family, work** and **study purposes**.



Almost **2 in 3** issuances were **family permits** (752,000).

18%: student permits 
19%: labour permits 

Study and work permits accounted for ca. 210,000 and 219,000 permits issued, respectively.



123,000 sponsorship permits were issued via private sponsorship by Canada and Australia.

3:1 ratio between permits and resettlement



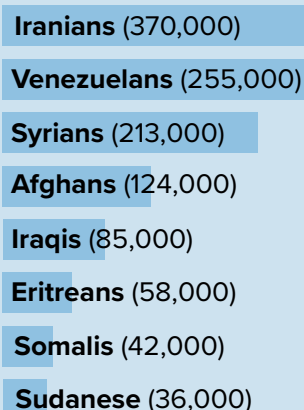
■ Permits ■ Resettlement

1.2 million individuals of the 8 nationalities were granted first-time residence permits in OECD countries and Brazil, while States reported 427,000 resettlement arrivals of refugees of these nationalities in these destinations.

Top 5 destination countries



Permits per nationality



3. Methodology

Data cover a total of 38 destination countries, including 37 OECD Member States (all except for Türkiye) as well as Brazil, whose authorities volunteered to participate in this data collection. The unavailability of comparable data for Türkiye is a significant source of undercoverage, as Türkiye is a key host country for refugees for several of the eight nationalities observed, especially Syrians. Further, with the exception of Brazil, non-OECD countries – which include some major refugee host countries – fall outside the coverage of this study, leading to further undercoverage. For consistency and comparability, the data presented in this update mirror the methodology applied in the [Safe Pathways for Refugees V](#) with some exceptions listed below.

Changes since previous edition

For Canada, 2024 student data are estimated based on a separate series on stocks of international students by nationality. It is assumed that the series on first-time student permits exhibits the same percentage change in 2024 as the series on student stocks. The methodology for generating data for New Zealand has been revised and

retrospectively applied to ensure a comprehensive and consistent time series between 2010 and 2024.

Colombian data for 2022 and 2023 have been revised following the availability of published information, addressing earlier gaps in family-level coverage. For Spain, the dataset has been consolidated from 2022 onwards. For Mexico, the 2023 data have been updated, as earlier estimates carried forward 2022 values owing to data unavailability. Finally, for Luxembourg, family permit data have been subject to minor revisions.

Population and country coverage

The eight nationalities have been selected on the basis of their high representation in the global refugee population and their generally high recognition rates. Moreover, taken together, the eight nationalities account for the majority of the world’s refugees recognized under UNHCR’s mandate in each year between 2019 and 2024 (Table 1). Data on named sponsorship permits are presented separately for Australia and Canada, the only OECD countries where information on these programmes is available and comparable over time.

Table 1 Worldwide population of refugees and other people in need of international protection by country of origin (end-year figures).

Country of origin	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Afghanistan	2,727,556	2,594,827	2,712,869	5,661,717	6,403,144	5,766,586
Eritrea	504,300	524,738	511,911	512,674	559,853	551,296
Iran	128,998	135,018	142,994	122,764	151,757	158,171
Iraq	336,274	333,200	343,899	287,446	329,032	305,504
Somalia	901,596	812,356	776,678	786,794	842,044	894,120
Sudan	734,780	787,823	825,290	837,188	1,496,923	2,094,373
Syria	6,615,249	6,702,910	6,848,865	6,559,736	6,355,788	5,952,174
Venezuela	3,675,441	4,033,214	4,605,634	5,447,849	6,103,058	6,245,528
All other countries	8,372,677	8,599,862	8,965,577	14,430,366	15,151,172	14,865,807
TOTAL	23,996,871	24,523,948	25,733,717	34,646,534	37,392,771	36,833,559
8 nationalities as a % of the global refugee population (incl. others in need of international protection)	65%	65%	65%	58%	59%	60%

Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder (2026)

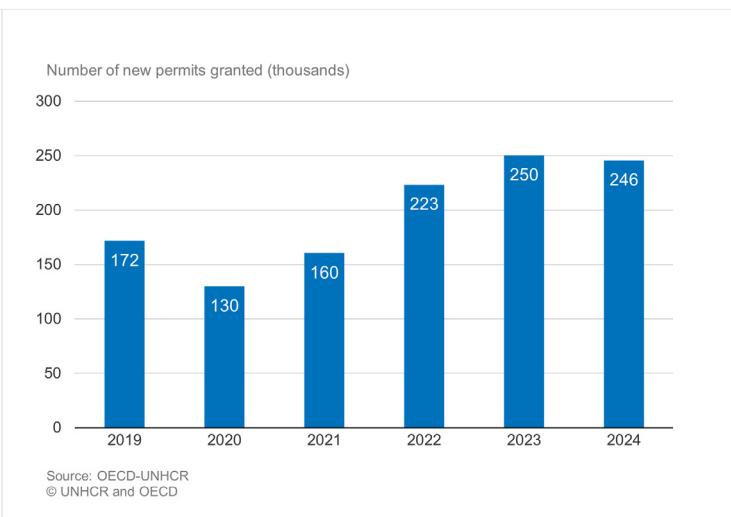
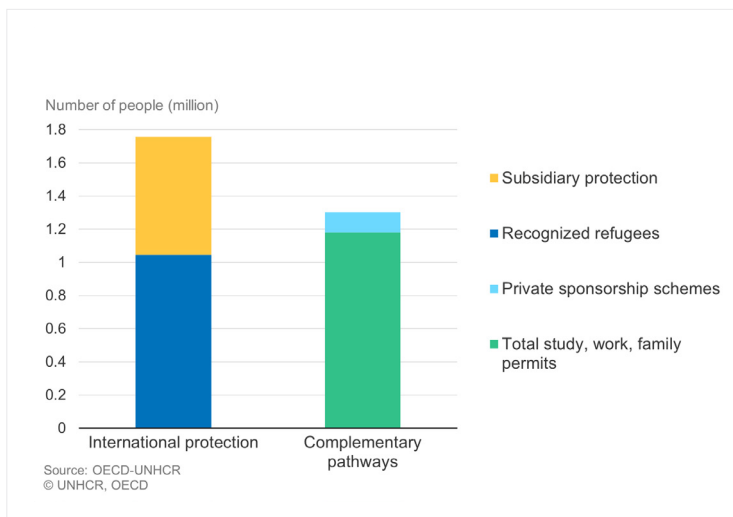
4. Analysis of admission trends over the period 2019-2024

After overall high figures in 2023, the number of permits in 2024 remained at a high level (246,000 or a decrease of less than 2 per cent compared with 2023). Around 1.2 million first-time residence permits were granted by OECD countries and Brazil to nationals of these eight countries for family, work or education reasons over the 2019-2024 period, including nearly 496,000 in 2023-2024 alone. In parallel, approximately 123,000 individuals were provided named sponsorship permits over the full period.

Over the same timeframe, close to 1.8 million individuals from these eight nationalities were granted refugee status on an individual basis (including around 1.1 million recognized refugees under the 1951 Convention and 709,000 granted subsidiary protection). Additionally, 427,000 resettlement arrivals were reported by States.

Figure 1 (left) | Beneficiaries of international protection on an individual basis and work, study, family and sponsorship permits in OECD countries and Brazil (selected eight nationalities), 2019-2024.

Figure 2 (right) | Total work, study and family first permits granted by OECD countries and Brazil (selected eight nationalities), 2019-2024.



4.1. By type of permit

Reviewing the 2019-2024 period, family permits represented the majority of permits (64 per cent or 752,000), while work and study permits represented smaller percentages, less than 20 per cent each. Growth in 2021-2022 was driven by strong rebounds in labour and student permits following the COVID pandemic. In 2023-2024, total permits stabilized at historically high levels (around 250,000 annually), with a 2 per cent decline in 2024, as reflected by trends in total flows for these categories in the OECD in 2024 (OECD, 2025).

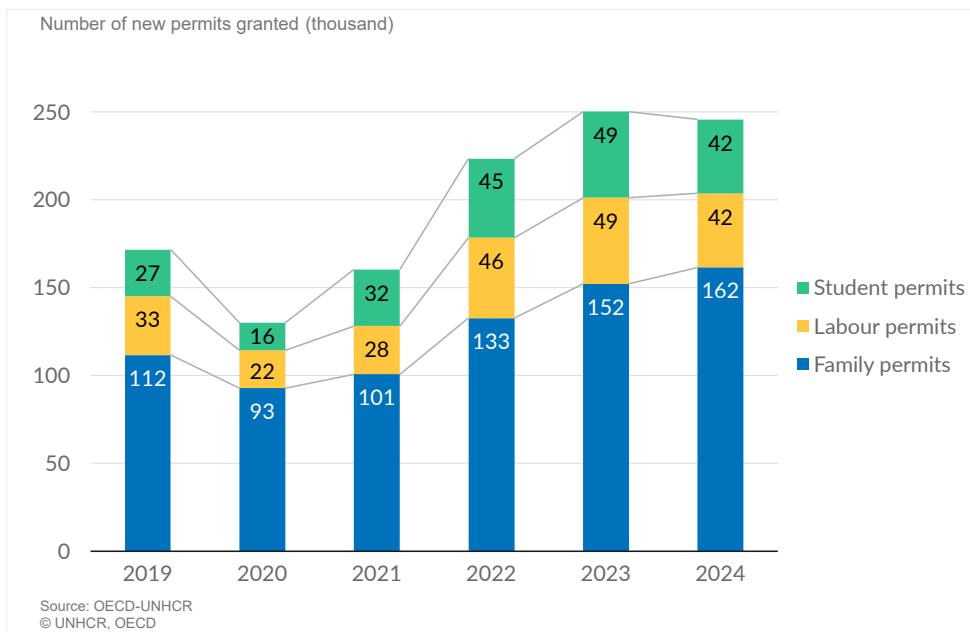
Family permits remained dominant every year and were less affected by the 2020 pandemic downturn. They continued to increase, reaching around 162,000 in 2024 (+6 per cent year-on-year), while labour and student permits both declined to about 42,000 each (-14 per cent each).

In three out of five receiving countries, family permits remain the main category in 2024, accounting for at least half of all permits granted. It continues to account for very high shares in Norway, Belgium and Chile (at least 90 per cent), followed by Sweden, Greece, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany (around 80 per cent).

At the same time, labour permits are the most prevalent in Costa Rica and Colombia (over 80 per cent), with substantial shares also observed in Poland and Portugal (at least two thirds).

Student permits are the most often granted by Hungary (around 74 per cent), Czechia and Italy (around two-thirds), and account for sizeable shares in Lithuania, Latvia, France and Korea (more than 40 per cent).

Figure 3 | Distribution of permits issued for selected nationalities in OECD countries and Brazil, by type (2019-2024).



A closer look at sponsorship as a complementary pathway

Named (nominated or private) sponsorship refers to programmes that allow individuals, groups or organizations to directly support refugee admission by identifying and assisting persons in need of international protection in a process distinct from UNHCR-assisted resettlement.

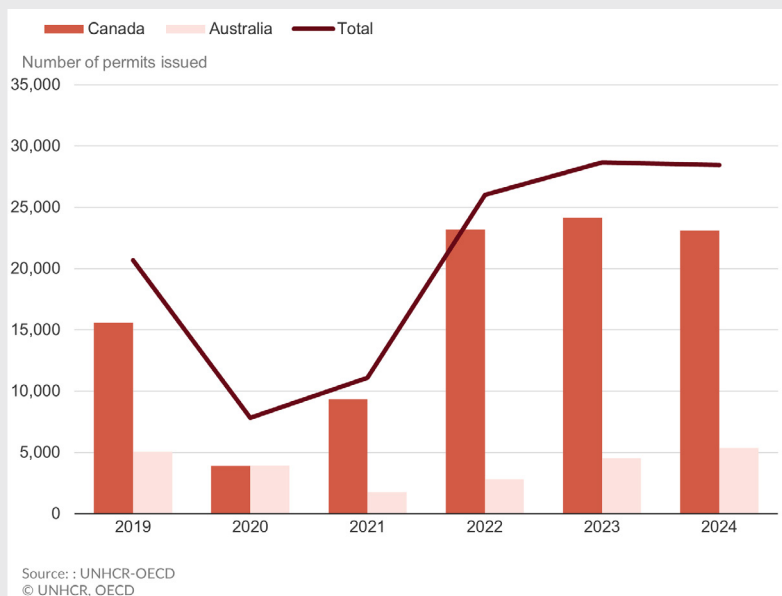
In 2023-2024, sponsorship levels remained at record highs (around 28,000 annually). Canadian programmes continued to drive overall volumes, reaching 23,000 permits in 2024 (-4.3 per cent year-on-year), while Australia saw a large increase to 5,300 (+18.4 per cent) continuing the strong growth observed since 2021 and reaching a similar level to 2019.

In Canada, sponsorship has remained broadly similar in scale to work, study and family permits over 2019-2024 (except during 2020–2021 when it declined sharply in both absolute and relative terms).

In Australia, while sponsorship levels were comparable to other pathways in 2019, their relative importance has since decreased, with volumes falling to around 44 per cent of those recorded for work, study and family permits combined in 2024.

In the overall period (2019-2024), Eritreans (40,600), Afghans (31,400), Iraqis (20,400) and Syrians (17,300) benefitted most from named sponsorship schemes, followed by Somalis (10,000), Iranians (2,300), Sudanese (600) and Venezuelans (less than 100).

Figure 4 | Number of permits issued via named sponsorship schemes, 2019-2024.



4.2. By destination country

Over the 2019-2024 period, the top destination countries for nationals of the eight origin groups being granted work, study or family permits remained broadly stable, with some shifts in relative ranking. The leading countries were Germany (209,000), Canada (147,000), the United Kingdom (128,000), the United States (123,000), Spain (87,000), Sweden (81,000), and Colombia (54,000). Compared to 2019-2023, Spain ranks ahead of Sweden, reflecting sustained increases in recent years, while Colombia remains seventh despite more variable trends.

In 2024, Germany remained the top destination (46,000), followed by the United Kingdom (32,000), the United States and Canada (27,000, each). Spain (18,000) remained fifth. A noticeable decline is registered in Canada and Germany in 2024 and over the period in Sweden while the other top countries noted small increases.

In line with previous years, trends for Germany continued to be driven primarily by Syrian nationals, who remained the largest group in 2024, though their numbers declined compared to the 2023 peak. Afghan and Iranian nationals also received

significant numbers of permits, but both showed decreases in 2024, contributing to the overall decline in permits.

For Canada, Iran continued to be the main origin country, shaping overall trends despite a 27 per cent decline in 2024 compared to 2023. Decreases were also observed for most other nationalities, although at a more moderate pace, with the exception of Afghans, who recorded a 12 per cent increase in 2024, while flows from Syrians and Venezuelans remained broadly stable.

In the United Kingdom, Iranians remained the largest group in permit issuances, followed by Syrian and Afghan nationals, all of whom contributed to continued growth in 2024. In contrast, trends in the United States shifted markedly, with a strong increase for all nationalities, with the exception of Iranians.

For Spain, trends continued to be overwhelmingly shaped by Venezuelan nationals, who accounted for the vast majority of permits in 2024, although at a lower level than in 2023.

Figure 5 | Trends among top seven destination countries in the overall period, 2019-2024.

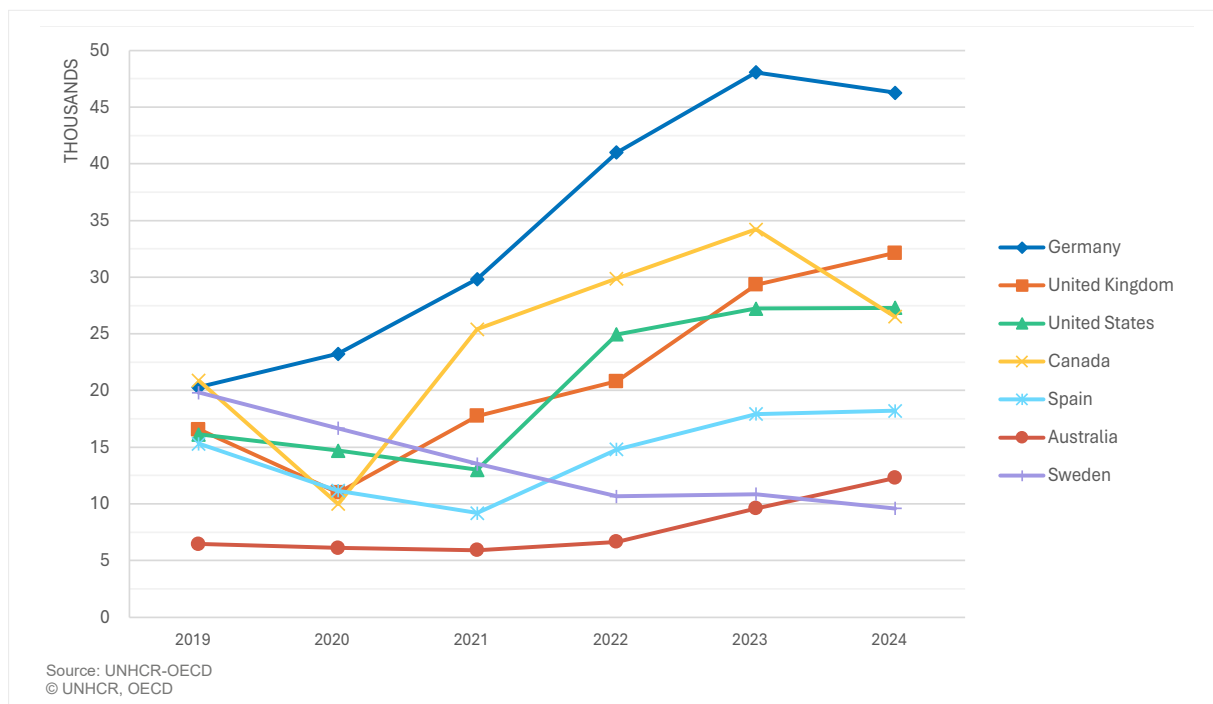


Table 2 | First permits granted to Afghans, Eritreans, Iranians, Iraqis, Somalis, Sudanese, Syrians and Venezuelans by destination country, in 2024 and over the period 2019-2024.

DESTINATION	2024				2019-2024			
	Family	Work	Study	Total	Family	Work	Study	Total
Australia	9,291	1,787	1,207	12,285	33,498	8,569	4,957	47,024
Austria	1,876	285	767	2,928	7,206	1,432	2,474	11,112
Belgium	6,033	118	365	6,516	25,560	736	1,769	28,065
Brazil	422	139	104	665	1,699	1,184	583	3,466
Canada	7,255	11,650	7,606	26,511	40,801	60,031	46,065	146,897
Chile	8,317	911	30	9,258	19,214	3,063	221	22,498
Colombia	38	4,181	975	5,194	16,881	31,025	6,315	54,221
Costa Rica	68	1,084	28	1,180	629	6,475	466	7,570
Czechia	72	51	233	356	452	300	1,535	2,287
Denmark	2,445	618	1,008	4,071	9,994	2,550	3,830	16,374
Estonia	25	34	5	64	255	555	167	977
Finland	2,528	440	402	3,370	13,373	2,699	1,422	17,494
France	1,354	677	1,485	3,516	6,365	2,658	6,985	16,008
Germany	36,862	3,125	6,292	46,279	168,039	13,933	26,768	208,740
Greece	1,008	126	71	1,205	4,286	332	418	5,036
Hungary	364	527	2,536	3,427	2,672	1,185	7,485	11,342
Iceland	84	13	10	107	287	64	73	424
Ireland	287	242	235	764	1,075	1,562	1,357	3,994
Israel	0	1,145	13	1,158	0	1,785	88	1,873
Italy	1,761	163	3,290	5,214	11,244	976	15,645	27,865
Japan	338	508	180	1,026	2,660	2,248	1,166	6,074
Korea	115	126	174	415	791	472	868	2,131
Latvia	6	3	7	16	53	21	87	161
Lithuania	52	27	88	167	244	87	583	914
Luxembourg	213	54	55	322	735	264	249	1,248
Mexico	2,088	1,170	67	3,325	15,975	7,369	692	24,036
Netherlands	7,420	760	1,104	9,284	35,690	4,895	4,080	44,665
New Zealand	752	184	121	1,057	2,605	667	608	3,880
Norway	2,585	83	77	2,745	17,653	837	1,124	19,614
Poland	153	1,816	660	2,629	802	3,311	2,810	6,923
Portugal	325	932	174	1,431	4,461	4,070	947	9,478
Slovak Republic	63	74	37	174	493	435	461	1,389
Slovenia	52	25	14	91	301	147	53	501
Spain	12,413	3,060	2,732	18,205	54,369	21,398	10,825	86,592
Sweden	8,104	845	645	9,594	69,264	7,930	3,951	81,145
Switzerland	1,336	154	237	1,727	6,087	873	1,576	8,536
United Kingdom	26,245	2,450	3,442	32,137	96,431	11,273	19,883	127,587
United States	19,190	2,560	5,550	27,300	79,550	12,020	31,750	123,320
TOTAL	161,540	42,147	42,026	245,713	751,694	219,431	210,336	1,181,461

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4.3 By population

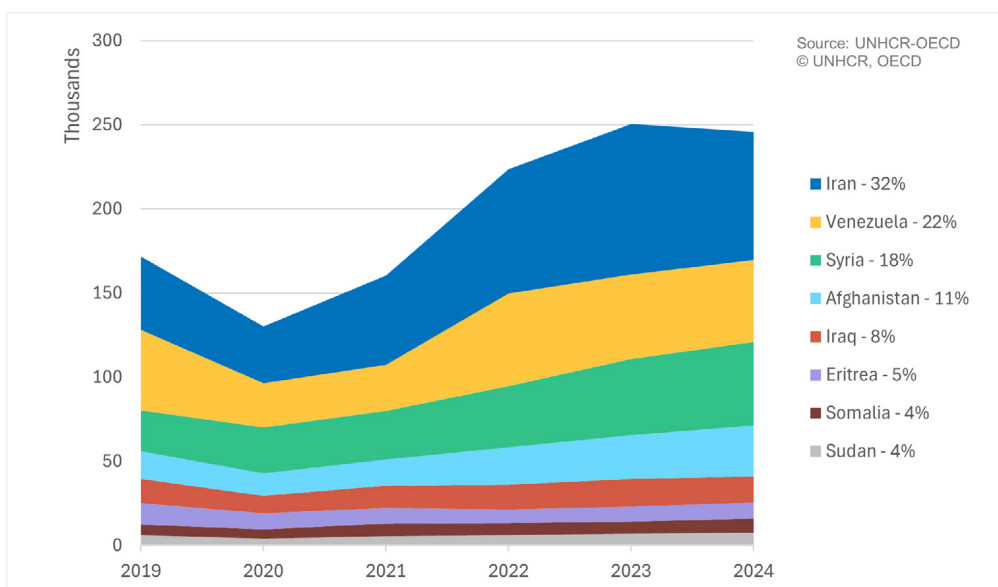
Over the 2019-2024 time series, Iranians were granted the highest work, study and family permits to OECD countries and Brazil, followed by Venezuelans then Syrians. In 2024, Iranians (77,000), Syrians (50,000), Venezuelans (49,000) and Afghans (30,000) were the nationalities receiving the highest number noting a change in order as Syrians ranked before Venezuelans.

Despite still ranking first, Iranians noted a decline (-15 per cent) in permit issuance from 2023 to 2024. To a lesser extent, permit numbers for Venezuelans and Iraqis also declined. Afghans noted the highest percent annual increase (16 per cent) followed by

Sudanese (12 per cent), Somalis (12 per cent), Syrians (10 per cent) and Eritreans (6 per cent).

Differences in permit type issued by nationality are pronounced. Eritrean and Somali nationals received almost exclusively family permits, with similarly high shares for Syrian and Afghan nationals. Iranians were primarily granted study permits. Alongside family permits, Venezuelans accessed labour migration permits. Iraqi and Sudanese nationals followed more diversified patterns, combining family permits with significant shares of student permits and some labour visas, particularly in the case of Sudanese nationals.

Figure 6 | Total permits issued to eight nationalities to OECD countries and Brazil, by nationality and year, 2019-2024.



5. Recommendations for States

A core objective of the Safe Pathways for Refugees report is to inform evidence-based policy. Strengthening the quality and completeness of the data compiled and analyzed in the report can help bridge evidence gaps and provide a picture that reflects refugee access to safe and regular migration pathways more accurately.

Key recommended steps towards this direction include:

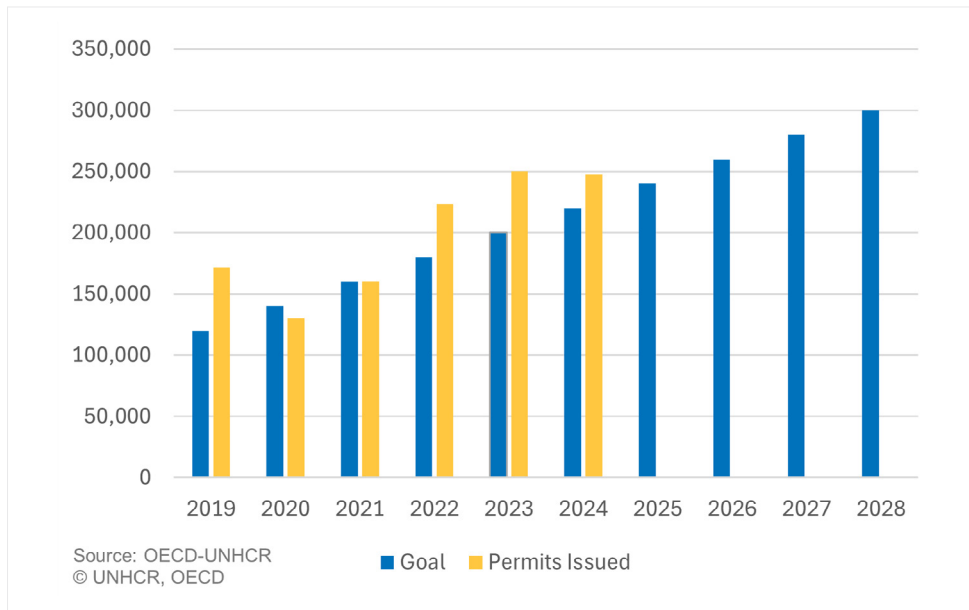
- Expanding participation in the Safe Pathways for Refugees project to new non-OECD countries and ensuring full participation for all OECD Member States.
- Collecting data on applicants' last country of residence and legal status to more clearly understand international protection needs and how legal status might affect access to permits.
- Recording visa issuance points to better understand movement trends and linkages to destination countries.
- Differentiating between nationality, country of birth and country of asylum to improve accuracy in data reporting.
- Recording the types of travel documents used to assess how they facilitate mobility.
- Differentiating between initial permits, renewals and status changes to prevent overcounting.
- Disaggregating data by sex and age to monitor trends and inclusion.
- Reducing data lag to improve responsiveness to changing needs.
- Tracking arrivals in addition to permits issued.

6. Conclusion

In 2024, OECD countries and Brazil issued 246,000 family, work and student permits to the eight nationalities covered in this report. Although this figure represents a -2 per cent change compared to 2023, it still remains the second highest level recorded since the beginning of this exercise.

Between 2019 and 2024, close to 1.2 million permits have been issued, rising to 1.3 million with sponsorship permits included. In 2024, work, study and family permit figures were 3 times larger than resettlement arrivals, underscoring the growing role of complementary pathways as an additional tool to protection-focused resettlement.

Figure 7 | Family, study, work and sponsorship permits provided to the eight nationalities to Brazil and OECD countries 2019–2024 compared to the Roadmap 2030 annual benchmarks.



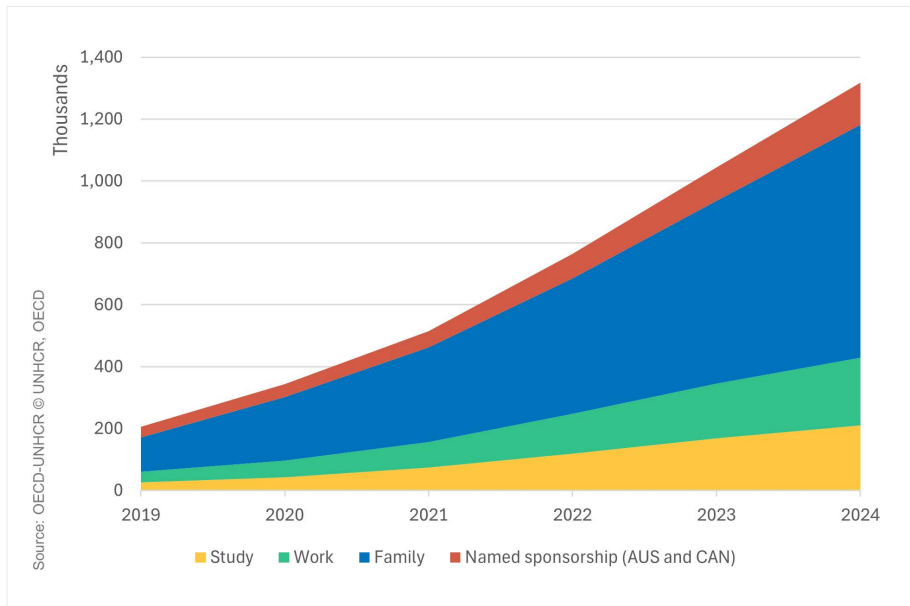
Overall, progress remains encouraging, but there are concerning indications to monitor. For the fourth consecutive year, the number of permits issued met or exceeded the Roadmap 2030 annual target. The 2024 figures for work, study, family and sponsorship permits to OECD countries and Brazil for the eight nationalities indicate that we have achieved about 62 per cent of the 2.1 million target collectively set by the international community.

However, political and operational developments in 2025 and 2026 risk severely undermining progress to the 2030 target. Although data on the tangible impact of the shrinking policy and funding environment observed in several countries on permit issuances will become available in next year's data collection, it is essential to sustain efforts to grow complementary pathways.

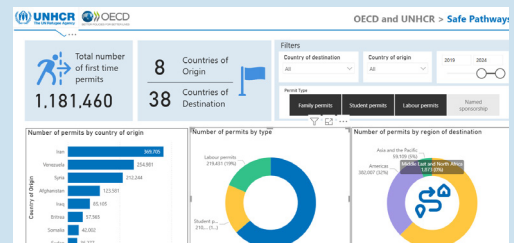
By offering refugees the chance to secure a future using their skills, family links or other social factors, such pathways promote refugee self-reliance. Complementary pathways also provide a concrete alternative to dangerous onward movements, and support State efforts to combat smuggling networks.

To ensure that safe pathways are more accessible for refugees, a whole-of-society approach is essential via the engagement of governments, international organizations, NGOs, academia and refugee-led and diaspora groups. The fulfilment of the pledges made in the 2023 Global Refugee Forum and their implementation by 2027 will also be crucial towards achieving the goals of Roadmap 2030.

Figure 8 | Overview of work, study, family and sponsorship permits provided over 2019-2024 from OECD countries and Brazil of the eight nationalities covered in the report.



For a comprehensive overview of the report data, please see the [interactive dashboard](#).



7. References

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