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Still in Limbo: About a Million Asylum Seekers Await Word on Whether They Can Call Europe Home

About half of Europe's 2015-16 asylum applicants had decisions still pending at end of 2016

BY *Phillip Connor*

FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:

Phillip Connor, Senior Researcher
Mark Hugo Lopez, Director of Global Migration and Demography
Stefan Cornibert, Communications Manager

202.419.4372

www.pewresearch.org

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Terminology

The term “**Europe**” is used in this report as a shorthand for the 28 nation-states that form the European Union as well as Norway and Switzerland, for a total of 30 countries. At the time of production of this report, the United Kingdom was still part of the European Union, even though the country triggered Article 50 on March 29, 2017, to begin its withdrawal from the EU. These countries are bound by the [Dublin Regulation](#): Asylum seekers must apply for asylum in the first EU country they enter, and if they do not, they can be returned to the first country they enter for the processing of their applications. Most EU countries, Norway and Switzerland are also part of the Schengen agreement, which permits people to cross between countries without border checks.

The terms “**asylum seekers**” and “**asylum applicants**” are used interchangeably throughout this report and refer to individuals who have applied for asylum in a European country after reaching Europe. All family members, whether male or female, children or adults, file individual applications for asylum. Seeking asylum does not mean applicants will necessarily be permitted to stay in Europe. However, if an asylum application is approved, the asylum seeker is granted refugee status or some other humanitarian (sometimes temporary) status and is given the right to remain in Europe and work for a delimited amount of time. Data in this report note both the country of citizenship (**nationality**) of applicants and the country where the asylum application was filed (**country of application**).

“**Refugees**” denotes both the group of people fleeing conflict to a nearby country and those whose asylum applications in Europe have been approved. For the latter group, the term “refugee” denotes a legal status after an asylum application is approved.

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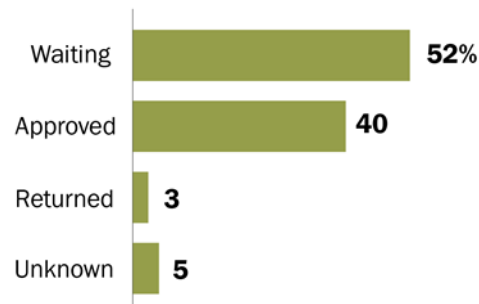
About half of Europe's 2015-16's asylum applicants had decisions still pending at end of 2016

About a million people (1.1 million) who sought asylum in Europe in 2015 and 2016 still did not know by Dec. 31, 2016, whether they would be allowed to stay, according to new Pew Research Center estimates based on [government data](#). Those in limbo make up about half (52%) of the 2.2 million¹ people who applied for asylum during one of the [largest refugee waves](#) ever to arrive to the European Union, Norway and Switzerland.²

Some [1.3 million first-time asylum applications](#) alone were filed in EU countries, Norway and Switzerland in 2015 and an [additional 1.2 million](#) were filed in 2016. Together, these two years account for 20% of all asylum applications received by Europe since the mid-1980s, making this wave of asylum seekers the biggest the continent has seen since World War II. Top countries of citizenship for asylum seekers during the record surge included Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, countries whose ongoing conflict has contributed to the [sudden increase in displaced people worldwide](#). These three countries accounted for more than half (53%) of all 2015-16 applicants.

About half of Europe's 2.2 million asylum seekers from 2015-16 still waiting to learn their fate

% of 2015-16 asylum seekers at end of 2016



Note: "Europe" consists of the EU-28, Norway and Switzerland. "Waiting" refers to those with an initial application or appeal still pending; "approved" refers to those granted refugee status or a temporary stay; "returned" refers to those with rejected applications who have been returned to their home country or other non-EU country; "unknown" refers to those with rejected applications whose location is unknown. See methodology for how estimates were calculated.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on Eurostat data, accessed Aug. 3, 2017.

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¹ About 2.5 million first-time asylum applications were filed in 2015 and 2016. This is reduced to about 2.2 million applications once withdrawn applications are removed. See methodology for details.

² In recent months, Eurostat data reports that the [number of pending applications](#) has fallen just below a million as countries continue to work through the backlog of applications and, at the same time, more asylum seekers continue to enter Europe.

Most asylum seekers during the surge entered Europe through Greece or Italy. Migration along [the Eastern Mediterranean route](#) between Turkey and Greece stalled after [a deal between the EU and Turkey](#) was implemented in March 2016 to contain the flow. Thousands more migrants, however, crossed the Central Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy in a steady flow through most of 2016.

Many asylum seekers did not stay in Mediterranean countries. Instead, they traveled north. Germany received roughly half (45%) of Europe's asylum seekers during 2015 and 2016, with hundreds of thousands also applying in Hungary and Sweden. For some European countries, the sudden movement of so many asylum seekers changed the demographics of those countries noticeably: Immigrant shares of total populations [increased](#) by more than 1 percentage point in countries like Sweden and Austria between 2015 and 2016.

Among Europe's asylum seekers from the 2015-16 surge who were waiting on decisions as of the end of 2016, an estimated two-thirds (or about 760,000) had not had a decision made on their case. Another third (about 385,000) were appealing the first decision after being rejected.

Meanwhile, an estimated 885,000 asylum seekers applying between 2015 and 2016 had their applications approved by the end of 2016, meaning they may stay in Europe, at least temporarily.³ A remaining 75,000 applicants are estimated to have been returned to their home countries or another non-EU country during this time period. The current location of about 100,000 applicants whose applications were rejected is unknown. It is possible that they stayed within Europe illegally, left Europe or applied for some other immigrant status.

These are some of the key findings from Pew Research Center estimates based on data from [Eurostat](#), the European Union's statistical agency. For details about the source data and the method used to estimate the status of asylum seekers, see the [methodology](#).

³ Asylum seekers granted protection by European countries can either be permanent (Geneva Convention Refugee status) or temporary until conditions change in their home country ([subsidiary protection](#)).

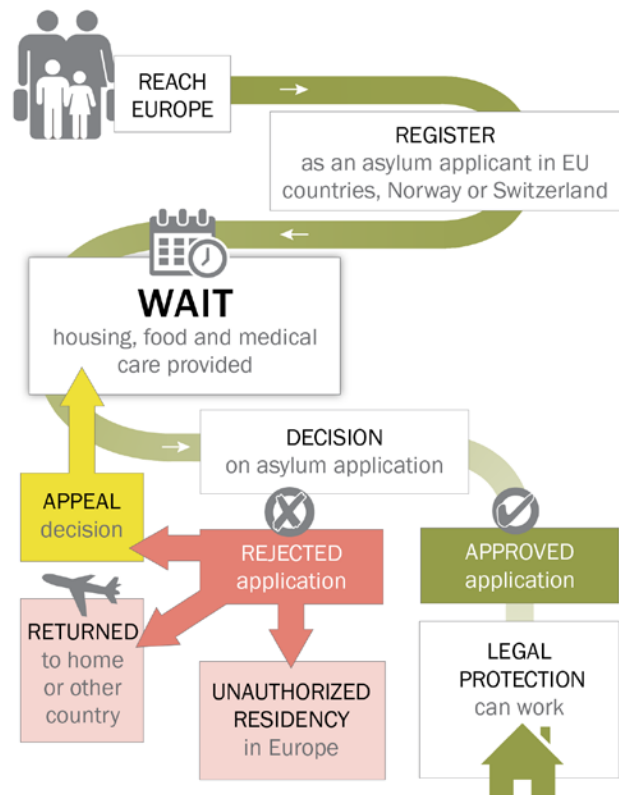
Applying for asylum in Europe

All refugees in Europe, whether minors or adults, are required to individually apply for asylum with the authorities of the country where they first arrived. The wait for an application to be adjudicated can vary considerably from country to country, even though European Union countries, Norway and Switzerland have agreed to [common principles](#) in dealing with asylum seekers.

Some of the shorter wait times have been for Syrians in [Germany](#), where the average adjudication period for Syrian applicants has been about three months during 2015 and 2016. By contrast, the average wait time for asylum seekers in [Norway](#) has been more than a year. These widely ranging timelines are dependent on a number of factors, including processing capacity, origin of an asylum seeker, and political pressure on authorities to either accelerate or slow the processing of asylum applications.

While their applications are processed, many asylum seekers await decisions in government-run facilities such as [repurposed](#) schools, hotels or airports, where they are provided [food and medical care](#). Some asylum seekers, especially those from Syria, have been fast-tracked and have waited just a few months before receiving decisions. Others have lived in refugee quarters for months or longer, awaiting final verdicts on whether they will be able to stay. In most European countries, asylum seekers are initially [prohibited](#) from working, though they sometimes have [access to the labor market](#) if the application process is delayed beyond several months, depending on the European country.

Europe's asylum seeker process



Source: European Commission (Home Affairs).
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If an asylum seeker's application is approved, she or he receives residency status for a certain number of years, depending on the situation and the country of application.⁴ The asylum grantee is also permitted to obtain legal employment. If an application is rejected, an individual can file an appeal and wait, again, for a new decision. Appeals can add several months, if not more, to an asylum seeker's overall wait time. Alternately, applicants who are rejected may be returned to their home countries or sent to a non-EU country. Some also remain in Europe as unauthorized immigrants.

Compared with Europe, the number of people claiming asylum in the United States has numbered only in the thousands in recent years, not the millions seen in Europe. Instead, many seeking protection in the U.S. are resettled as refugees through the State Department's Refugee Resettlement Program. These refugee applicants are processed outside the U.S.

⁴ Reports indicate an increasing number of Syrian asylum seekers are receiving subsidiary status for a year or longer. This is a renewable permit to remain in Europe temporarily, but not official refugee status.

Estimating the status of Europe's refugee surge

[Eurostat](#), Europe's statistical agency, regularly releases figures on the number of asylum seeker decisions in European Union countries, Norway and Switzerland. But these numbers do not indicate *when* applications were filed, whether it was a few weeks before or several years earlier. Consequently, the status of the refugee surge that peaked between 2015 and 2016 is unknown to the public. For the first time, Pew Research Center has estimated the status of this refugee flow based on publicly available data from Eurostat and other sources as of the end of 2016. Full details on how the status of Europe's refugee surge was estimated can be found in the [methodology](#).

Some 2.2 million applications are estimated to have been filed in 2015 and 2016, excluding withdrawn applications. Omitting withdrawn applications improves the accuracy of asylum-seeker estimates by reducing the chance of double-counting individuals who applied in multiple countries or who returned back home on their own before seeing their applications processed.

The number of approved and rejected applications was estimated using the number of decisions among first-time applicants in each quarter of 2015 and 2016, as provided by Eurostat. Some countries take longer than others to reach a decision on applications. Average wait times in each country were collected from reports of nongovernmental organizations [on the ground](#). The number of application decisions (approvals or rejections) used in the estimates is based on how long applicants waited on average in each European country to see their applications adjudicated. Applicants with pending cases include those waiting to have their first-time applications decided, as well as those appealing initial rejections. The estimated number of appeals is based on annual calculated appeal rates from rejected applicants in 2015 who were likely to apply for a review in their case in 2016, taking into account the applicant's nationality and country of application.

The remainder of those in Europe's refugee surge have returned to their home countries or another non-EU country after receiving an order to do so, either voluntarily or by force. For others, their location is unknown following a rejected refugee claim. These latter groups of asylum seekers are estimated using 2016 data on annual returns from EU countries, Norway and Switzerland.

Majorities of asylum seekers from many countries don't know whether they can stay in Europe

About half (52%) of all asylum seekers who had applied in European Union countries, Norway and Switzerland during 2015 and 2016 still were waiting for word on their applications or appeals at the end of 2016. A smaller, yet substantial, share (40%) had been approved to stay. The remaining applicants (about 8%) have either returned to their home or another non-EU country or their location is unknown. The status of Europe's asylum seekers can be examined in two ways: by their nationality and by their countries of application.

For asylum seekers from certain countries, the share that is waiting is much higher than the share that has been approved for protection in Europe, according to the new estimates. For example, an estimated 89% of Albanian applicants between 2015 and 2016 were waiting to know their status in Europe at the end of 2016.

Majorities of many nationalities among Europe's asylum applicants were waiting for decisions at end of 2016

Estimated 2015-16 asylum seekers waiting for application decisions at end of 2016, by country of origin

		Waiting applicants	Total 2015-16 applicants
Albania	89%	75,000	80,000
Kosovo	77	50,000	65,000
Afghanistan	77	240,000	310,000
Iran	77	45,000	60,000
Serbia	74	15,000	20,000
Russia	72	20,000	25,000
Pakistan	67	45,000	70,000
Ukraine	65	20,000	25,000
Iraq	62	130,000	215,000
Somalia	56	20,000	40,000
Sudan	56	10,000	20,000
Bangladesh	55	15,000	30,000
Nigeria	55	40,000	70,000
All nationalities	52	1,145,000	2,205,000
Gambia	42	10,000	25,000
Eritrea	29	25,000	80,000
Syria	20	130,000	650,000

Note: "Europe" consists of the EU-28, Norway and Switzerland. Percentages based on unrounded estimates. Figures rounded to the nearest 5,000. "Waiting" refers to those with an initial application or appeal still pending at end of 2016. "Total applications" refers to the net number of first-instance asylum applications after application withdrawals are removed. Figures with an estimated 20,000 or more total asylum applicants during 2015 and 2016 shown. See methodology for how estimates were calculated.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on Eurostat data, accessed Aug. 3, 2017. "Still in Limbo: About a million asylum seekers await word on whether they can call Europe home."

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Also, about 77% of Afghan asylum applicants were waiting for first-time or final decisions on appeals. This means that there were more than three times as many applicants from Afghanistan

waiting (240,000) as approved ones (70,000) at the end of 2016. A large share (77%) of Iranian applicants and more than half of those from Iraq (62%) were also still waiting on first or final decisions at 2016's end.

At the same time, about three-fourths of asylum seekers from top European nationalities during the surge, such as those from Kosovo (77%), Serbia (74%) and Russia (72%), were waiting on word on first-time or appeal decisions as of the end of 2016.⁵

Between half and two-thirds of top applicants from South Asia such as Pakistan (67%) and Bangladesh (55%) were waiting on application decisions as of the end of 2016. Meanwhile, more than half of applicants from several leading African countries of the surge, such as Somalia (56%), Sudan (56%) and Nigeria (55%), were waiting on application decisions at the end of 2016.

Not all nationalities of asylum seekers follow the same pattern of more waiting than approved applicants. For example, the future for most Syrian applicants applying for asylum in 2015 and 2016 is largely certain in Europe, at least for the next several years. Only an estimated 130,000 of the 650,000 applications received by Syrians (20%) had not been decided by the end of 2016, either for the first time or because of an appeal.

Some European countries established fast-track processing for several nationality groups, including Syrian asylum applicants, the top country of origin for asylum seekers during the 2015-16 surge. In [Germany](#), for example, Syrians often received first-time asylum application decisions within three months of their applications during 2015 and 2016, with many being approved [without an appeal](#). In [Belgium](#), nongovernmental organizations report that decision wait times averaged around one month for Syrian asylum seekers.

Similarly, well fewer than half of 2015-16 applicants from Gambia (42%) and Eritrea (29%) were still awaiting decisions on their applications at the end of 2016, according to Pew Research Center estimates. In the case of Gambians, an estimated 10,000 out of 25,000 applicants applying in 2015 and 2016 were still waiting to hear results for their asylum applications or appeal by the end of 2016. For Eritreans, about 25,000 of the 80,000 applicants applying in these years did not know their status. Asylum applicants from Gambia are often granted refugee status because of ongoing [political strife](#), while Eritreans are largely escaping [forced military conscription](#).

⁵ Among nationalities with 20,000 or more applicants during the 2015-16 surge.

More than half of asylum applicants in several European countries are waiting for decisions

The status of Europe's asylum seekers is largely dependent on where applications are submitted. Wait times and application decisions made by countries can vary greatly.

Several European countries on the front lines of the refugee surge in 2015-16 had high shares of asylum applicants waiting for decisions on their applications as of the end of 2016, according to Pew Research Center estimates. For example, it is estimated that about nine-in-ten applicants in Hungary (94%)⁶ and Greece (90%) were still waiting for decisions as of Dec. 31, 2016.

According to the new estimates, about two-thirds of applicants in Austria (66%) and 59% of those in France – other countries that received large numbers of asylum seekers in 2015-16 – were waiting for application decisions.

Several countries of application have high shares of applicants waiting for decisions

Estimated 2015-16 asylum seekers waiting for application decisions at end of 2016, by country of application

		Waiting applicants	Total 2015-16 applicants
Hungary	94%	65,000	70,000
Greece	90	45,000	50,000
Spain	69	20,000	25,000
Finland	67	20,000	30,000
Austria	66	80,000	125,000
Norway	64	20,000	35,000
France	59	85,000	145,000
United Kingdom	59	40,000	70,000
Switzerland	55	30,000	55,000
Denmark	53	10,000	20,000
All countries	52	1,145,000	2,205,000
Sweden	50	75,000	155,000
Germany	49	530,000	1,090,000
Belgium	47	25,000	50,000
Netherlands	39	25,000	60,000
Italy	28	55,000	185,000

Note: "Europe" consists of the EU-28, Norway and Switzerland. Percentages based on unrounded estimates. Estimates rounded to the nearest 5,000. "Waiting" refers to those with an initial application or appeal still pending. "Total applications" refers to the net number of first-instance asylum applications after application withdrawals are removed. Figures with an estimated 20,000 or more total asylum applicants during 2015 and 2016 shown. See methodology on how estimates were calculated.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on Eurostat data, accessed Aug. 3, 2017. "Still in Limbo: About a million asylum seekers await word on whether they can call Europe home."

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⁶ Withdrawn applications have been removed from the total asylum applications for 2015-16 in the Pew Research Center estimates, based on Eurostat data. For Hungary, the majority of applications (66%) during 2015-16 are estimated to have been removed, either by asylum seekers themselves or by officials after asylum seekers did not appear for a scheduled interview. By contrast, statistics provided by the [Hungarian government](#) for the number of withdrawn asylum applications show an even greater number than those reported in [Eurostat](#). As a result, the Hungarian government reports fewer applicants waiting for a decision on their application. Many of these applicants may have [migrated to other countries](#) like Germany and Austria to apply for asylum there.

Although Germany received close to half (45%) of Europe's asylum applicants in 2015 and 2016, it appears to have been more efficient than many other countries in processing asylum applications. As of Dec. 31, 2016, about 530,000 asylum applicants – or 49% of those arriving in 2015 and 2016 – are estimated to be waiting for decisions, a slightly lower share than the 52% Europe-wide.

Sweden, another top receiving country of asylum seekers, had a similar share (50%) to Germany for applicants awaiting decisions at the end of 2016, or about 75,000 applicants.⁷ About the same number (75,000) of applications had been approved by Swedish authorities as of Dec. 31, 2016.

Few rejected asylum seekers in Europe have been returned to home countries

Some 75,000 rejected asylum seekers, about 3% of all applicants from Europe's 2015 and 2016 surge, had been returned to their home countries or sent to a non-EU country by the end of 2016, according to Pew Research Center estimates (see [methodology for details](#)). Germany, the country receiving the most asylum seekers during this period, also returned more asylum applicants than other countries.⁸

Note: This section has been updated to clarify that it applies to rejected asylum seekers only.

Location of a small number of rejected asylum seekers is unknown

The current location of an estimated 100,000 rejected asylum seekers who applied for asylum in 2015 or 2016 is unknown. These applicants could be living in or outside European Union countries, Norway and Switzerland. This amounts to less than 5% of the total number of asylum seekers who applied during 2015 and 2016, according to Pew Research Center estimates.

These asylum seekers had their applications rejected and are believed to have been neither in the appeal process nor returned to their home countries by the end of 2016. If these individuals were still in Europe at the end of 2016, they were likely unauthorized immigrants and subject to deportation if found.

⁷ Reports indicate Germany and Sweden [hired external consultants](#) to help advise them on their asylum seeker procedures in an effort to reduce the application backlog. Such assistance may explain why countries like Germany and Sweden have seen a greater share of processed applications compared with many other European countries.

⁸ These return estimates are based on the estimation techniques described in the methodology and not reports provided by national governments.

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Methodology

The estimates presented in this report are based on data from [Eurostat](#), Europe's statistical agency. Eurostat is a central repository of the European Union's economic, environmental and population data. Its goal is to provide high-quality statistics that enable comparisons across countries. Eurostat also provides nationality and country of application data for asylum applications. It contains data on the number of asylum applications submitted, the number of applications withdrawn, application decisions (first-time and final decisions) and data on those ordered to leave, also known as returns. These publicly available data are not linked together. Consequently, Pew Research Center arranged these data to produce estimates for the status as of the end of 2016 of Europe's asylum seekers who applied in 2015 and 2016.

The method used to estimate the possible status of asylum seekers as of the end of 2016 is based on this formula:

$$\text{TOTAL} = \text{Approved} + \text{Rejected} + \text{Waiting}$$

Public data on Europe's asylum seekers are anonymized, meaning that analysts cannot track individuals across various stages of their asylum application process. This anonymization does not allow analysts to determine quickly the legal status of asylum seekers in a specific migration wave. Consequently, estimation methods must be used to calculate the number of people in each possible phase of the application process (approval, rejection and waiting for a decision as of the end of 2016).

The estimates in this report are based on calculations using both country of application and asylum seeker nationality information. For example, the total number of Syrian asylum applicants across Europe is based on calculations for the number of Syrian applicants in Germany plus the number of Syrian applicants in France plus the number of Syrian applicants in Sweden and so on. In the same way, the total number of asylum applicants in Germany is based on individual estimates by nationality, or, for example, the number of Afghan asylum applicants in Germany plus the number of Iraqi asylum applicants in Germany and so on.

All estimates were conservatively rounded to the nearest 5,000 to avoid overstating the level of precision associated with the estimates. Detailed estimates by nationality *and* country of application are provided only for asylum seeker groups of 20,000 or more in this analysis.

Complete data from Eurostat were used through the end of 2016. Consequently, the figures in this report on the status of asylum seekers applying for refugee status in 2015 and 2016 reflect applicants' status as of Dec. 31, 2016.

Estimating the total number of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016

Across the European Union's 28 member countries plus Norway and Switzerland, [some 2.5 million first-time asylum applications](#) were filed in 2015 and 2016. With the sudden movement of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers into Europe during these years, however, it is likely that this total for 2015 and 2016 includes applications filed by the same people in multiple countries. It is also possible that some asylum seekers returned to their home countries or were remaining in Europe in some other legal status before proceeding further in the asylum seeker process. Consequently, it is important to obtain an estimate of the unique (or "net") number of applicants across Europe during this time period.

Applications are not the same as arrivals. It can take several months for newly arrived asylum seekers to make formal applications for asylum and get included in monthly statistics. Applications represent individuals, however, not households. Regardless of age or family relationship, each person claiming refugee status must file an asylum application. It is possible some people in refugee situations entering Europe never submit an asylum application. This report does not include those people.

EU countries as well as Norway and Switzerland lawfully agree to the [Dublin Regulation](#), which states that asylum seekers are to apply for refugee status in the first European country they enter. Germany [temporarily waived their participation](#) in the regulation during the refugee surge of late summer and early fall of 2015. Consequently, many refugees traveled through Greece, making their way north and west to Germany and other destinations using a route through several Balkan countries as well as EU member countries such as Hungary and Austria. Some asylum seekers applied for refugee status in transit countries before making it to their desired destination of Germany or other countries. Many asylum seekers who applied in Hungary and Austria, for example, later had their applications withdrawn.

To avoid double counting, the total number of asylum seekers used in this report is reduced by the [number of withdrawn applications](#) from April 2015 through March 2017 – a total of 350,000 applications. This adjustment allows for a three-month buffer for earliest arriving applicants in early 2015 and applicants arriving in late 2016 to see their application withdrawn.⁹ Withdrawn applications are either implicit (applicant did not appear for meetings with officials and thus had their application withdrawn by the country of application, probably moving onto a different country to apply) or explicit (applicant requested their application be removed).¹⁰

Estimating the number of approved asylum seekers

Once asylum seekers submit their applications, they are given food, medicine and shelter as they wait for their case to be reviewed for the first time by immigration personnel. This wait time can range from a month to more than a year, depending on the nationality of the asylum seeker as well as the country of application.

Eurostat provides [quarterly decision data \(acceptance or rejection\)](#) for first-time asylum applications. But, since it can take some time for those applying in early 2015 to hear a decision on their case, quarterly decision data used in these estimates needed to be delayed by the application wait time in each country. For example, if a European country's average wait time for application review was six months, then decision data for the third and fourth quarters of 2015 (allowing for six months for asylum seekers filing applications in early 2015) and all of 2016 were used.

Researchers primarily used estimated wait times from [AIDA \(Asylum Information Database\)](#), a database service that collects data on the asylum seeker process for selected European countries. Most wait times are in months, and the nearest quarter of asylum decision data from Eurostat (usually the following quarter after the reported average waiting period) was assigned to the country of application.¹¹ In some countries of application, wait times are specific to certain nationalities.

⁹ Eurostat provides [statistics](#) on requests from a country of application to move applications to the first country asylum seekers entered. However, the number of transfer requests in 2015 and 2016 were far fewer than actual withdrawals stated by application countries. It is likely that Dublin procedures are ongoing and take additional time to process than actual withdrawals. In order to provide a more accurate number of total applications, removing withdrawn applications from the total number of asylum applications was a more favorable approach for this study.

¹⁰ A small number of nationality/country of application groups had more applications withdrawn than total applications during the period. This amounted to only 0.3% of total withdrawn applications. The net number of applications for this small number of nationality/country of application groups was assumed to be zero.

¹¹ Countries of application with no reported wait times were assigned the third quarter of 2015, the most frequently used decision quarter among countries with reported wait times.

All positive decisions were recorded as approvals, regardless of the kind or length of stay for refugee status granted to the applicant (e.g., Geneva Convention, humanitarian, subsidiary).¹² For the Pew Research Center estimate, the number of approvals was recorded by country of application and nationality of the applicant.¹³

Estimated wait times for asylum applications in Europe for 2015-16 and application decision quarters used in estimates

Country of application	Nationality of applicants	Estimated wait time (months)	Starting quarter for application decisions
Austria	All	6*	2015 Q3
Belgium	Syria	<1	2015 Q1
	All others	3-6	2015 Q3
Bulgaria	All	4-6*	2015 Q3
Croatia	All	3-6*	2015 Q3
Cyprus	All	6+	2016 Q1
Denmark	All	9-10	2015 Q4
France	All	5-7	2015 Q3
Germany	All	7	2015 Q3
	Syria	4	2015 Q2
	Afghanistan	9	2015 Q4
	Iran	12	2016 Q1
	Iraq	6	2015 Q3
	Pakistan	16	2016 Q2
	Rep. of Macedonia	5	2016 Q3
	Russia	16	2016 Q1
	Serbia	9	2015 Q4
	Hungary	All	0-3
Ireland	All	<6	2015 Q3
Latvia	All	3-12	2015 Q3
Malta	All	<6	2015 Q2
Netherlands	All	6-9*	2015 Q3
Norway	All	12+	2016 Q2
Poland	All	3	2015 Q2
Spain	All	6-18	2016 Q1
Sweden	All	11	2015 Q4
Switzerland	All	8	2015 Q4

Note: *Based on legal limit. Countries not shown were assigned an average wait time of six months (2015 Q3 for application decision quarter), the most common response across European countries. Wait times for 2015 used when 2016 data unavailable.

Source: AIDA (Asylum Information Database) except for Denmark (refugeeswelcome.dk), Latvia (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs), and Norway (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration).

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¹² Number of approvals does not include rejected applicants applying in 2015-16 that may have gone through an appeal process and won that appeal before the end of 2016. Given the backlog in applications from the refugee surge, it is assumed this number of approved applicants after appeal is small.

¹³ In some country of application and nationality pairings, the number of decisions was larger than the net number of applications for the 2015-16 period, possibly because some decisions were based on applications in earlier years. In these cases, all applications were assumed to be decided and were separated proportionally by the total breakdown of positive and negative decisions found in the data. The number of decisions exceeded the number of applications in 355 country-of-application/nationality cases.

Estimating the number of rejected asylum seekers

Decision data from Eurostat also provide the number of asylum seekers whose applications were **rejected**. The estimated average wait times in calculating the number of rejected applications were used in the same way as approved applications to estimate the number of rejected applications from 2015-16. As with approved applications, only data on applications yet to receive a first decision were used.

Once an application is rejected, there are three possible directions the applicant's status can take: (1) appeal the decision – a process that can take months or years to pursue while they remain in Europe on a temporary, yet legal basis; (2) be returned to their home country or some other non-EU country; or (3) continue to reside in Europe, despite being unauthorized to do so. Pew Research Center estimated the likely number of applicants in each category.

Number of rejected asylum seekers that were likely appealing their first application decision

Annual counts of rejected asylum seekers with **appeal decisions** are available from Eurostat. However, the submission date of their application appeal is unknown. Consequently, data for the number of appeals are comprised of rejected, first-time applicants from as little as a month prior to several years before. An estimation procedure is needed to calculate the share of rejected, first-time applications during 2015 and 2016 that were likely in the appeal process as of the end of 2016.

Historical appeal *rates* were calculated using the number of applicants with an appeal decision (positive or negative) in 2016 divided by the number of rejected decisions a year earlier in 2015 for each country of application and nationality combination. The appeal rate expresses the likelihood that an asylum seeker of a given nationality group applying for asylum in a particular country of application would appeal a rejection. This appeal rate was applied to rejected applications for each country of application and nationality group in 2015 and 2016.¹⁴

If the appeal rate exceeded one (in other words, the number of appeals in 2016 for an application country and nationality group was greater than the number of rejected first-time applications in

¹⁴ For many countries, appeal decisions are generally granted within a year. Thus, this appeal rate is based on the assumption that all those applicants who had a first-time, rejected application in 2015 had a final appeal decision (positive or negative) the following year. This assumption may not always be true as some applicants may have been rejected at the end of 2015, but did not get an appeal hearing until early 2017, or later. Nonetheless, without monthly appeal data, this is the best rate measure that can be applied to the study.

2015), then it is assumed that all applicants in that country of application/nationality group appealed their negative, first-time decisions.¹⁵

Number of rejected asylum seekers that were likely returned to their home countries or other non-EU country

A portion of asylum seekers each year are returned to their home countries or another non-EU country after having their application rejected. The [annual number of foreign nationals](#) who were ordered to leave and have effectively left EU member countries, Norway and Switzerland is available from Eurostat. These data, however, are not specific to asylum seekers. The data represent any person (asylum seeker, migrant worker or visitor) found to be living illegally in Europe.

Estimates for the number of rejected asylum seekers in 2015-16 who have been returned is based on the assumption that any returns in 2016 from a specific country of application and for a particular nationality group not first estimated to have been in the application appeal process are asylum seekers that have been returned to their home or other non-EU country.¹⁶

Number of rejected asylum seekers that were likely unauthorized to live in Europe

Remaining, rejected applicants not estimated to have appealed the rejection decision or who have not been returned to their home or other non-EU country were deemed to be asylum seekers residing in Europe without authorization. In some countries it is possible that a portion of this group may have some kind of temporary, legal status, such as humanitarian need, to temporarily remain in Europe. Others may not be in Europe and had left before the end of 2016.

Estimating the number of asylum seeker applications waiting for a first decision

The remaining number of asylum applications that have been neither approved nor rejected using the estimation techniques earlier explained are considered to have been under review for the first time as of the end of 2016. In other words, these applicants are waiting for their initial application decision. This number of applications is calculated by subtracting the total number of decisions (approved and rejected) from the total number of applications (or “net” after the removal of withdrawn applications) received in 2015 and 2016.

¹⁵ The estimates in this study may tend toward a greater number of rejected applicants filing for appeals as the appeals were considered first before returns. However, [court dockets](#), at least in Germany, suggest that the most common step among rejected, first-time applicants is to file an appeal, not wait for deportation or remain in Europe unauthorized. Thus, it makes sense for the appeal rates to first be applied to rejected, first-time applicants rather than data on returns.

¹⁶ It is likely that some of the rejected, first-time asylum seekers estimated to have returned to their home or another non-EU country might be foreign nationals that entered Europe before the recent refugee surge of 2015-16.

Eurostat provides a monthly tally of the [number of pending applications](#) yet to be processed, but the actual submission date of these applications is unknown. Consequently, the total number of pending applications includes all previous submission dates, as little as a month prior to several years before. And, Eurostat's number of pending applications can also include duplicate applications that would later be found to exist across two or more countries. Nonetheless, the Center's estimates of net applications received in 2015 and 2016 still under review as of the end of 2016 were compared with Eurostat's number of [pending applications](#) also at the end of 2016. In most countries of application, the number of pending applications reported by Eurostat was the close to the number of pending applications estimated in this study.

For the purposes of results presented in this report, "waiting" applicants include those both waiting for a result in their initial application (the estimate calculated in this last step) as well as those waiting for an appeal decision (rejected applicants who were likely in the appeal process) explained earlier.

Appendix A: References

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