

Study: Information about climate-induced migration spurs negative attitudes about immigrants

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Reading about climate-induced immigration prompted negative, nativist attitudes among people toward the affected migrants—an unintended,

perhaps even paradoxical effect of many delivering the original messages, according to researchers at the University of Michigan and elsewhere.

The findings, the researchers say, raise cautionary flags for reporters, advocates and other communicators in their work related to forced [migration](#) caused by [global climate change](#).

The research was published in *Climatic Change* and represents one of the first known experimental tests of messaging about the effects of [climate](#)-induced immigration on opinions about climate change and immigration.

"Our studies uncovered a conundrum: People who already knew about how climate change may spur migration tended to want to take actions to help immigrants and help slow climate change. But telling people about the connection between climate and migration had the opposite effect," said Kaitlin Raimi, associate professor at U-M's Ford School of Public Policy.

Raimi and colleagues surveyed U.S. residents both male and female, with most being white and having at least some college education. The research incorporates two studies: A correlational pilot study consisting of 350 participants and an experimental messaging study incorporating more than 1,000.

Initial results of the pilot were promising: Those aware of the connection between climate change and immigration also reported greater perceived climate concerns and policy support as well as more positive immigration attitudes and greater support for immigrants.

However, results from the main study provided preliminary evidence that exposing participants to information about climate-induced

immigration—relative to solely climate change or immigration—did not increase prosocial responses on climate change or immigration. In fact, it resulted in more negative attitudes toward immigrants.

Researchers also were surprised the backfiring effect was present among both Republicans and Democrats—though to a lesser degree among the latter group.

The authors say it's possible that learning about climate-induced immigration engenders an initial, defensive reaction, followed by a longer-term change in attitudes toward a more prosocial direction. More work is needed to understand the conditions that can spur empathic vs. nativist responses.

Dealing with the disconnect now is critical, as global climate change starts to cause widespread forced migration to countries in the Global North, such as the United States.

"One thing that I'd hope reporters take away is that stories about climate migration may not have their likely intended effect of increasing [public concern](#) about climate change and empathy toward migrants," Gillis said. "Instead, they may invoke a nativist response, making people view migrants more negatively and possibly less human."

The [research article](#) advises caution among communicators, and recommends that fellow researchers "focus intently on developing effective methods of inoculating the public from nativist reactions to climate-induced immigration."

"If the goal is spur action on [climate change](#) and helping migrants, communicators may do better by focusing on these issues separately," Raimi said. "We need more work to find better ways to talk about climate-induced migration that don't result in a backlash against

immigrants."

More information: Ash Gillis et al, Climate change–induced immigration to the United States has mixed influences on public support for climate change and migrants, *Climatic Change* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10584-023-03519-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03519-y)

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