The UN Refugee Agency’s annual Global Trends study found that 65.6 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2016 - a total bigger than the population of the United Kingdom and about 300,000 more than the previous year. On average, 20 people were driven from their homes every minute last year, or one every three seconds - less than the time it takes to read this sentence.

The scale of the migration crisis that the world faces can be put into context if we imagine the UK’s entire population being forced from their homes and on the move - while all the time facing the risk of rejection and violence. The scale of the crisis is massive and cannot be solved without the effort and cooperation of the entire international community.

Why people leave their homes

People become refugees and migrate for many varied reasons, but the principal reason is that they have no other choice. People can be forced out by violent conflict, religious intolerance, natural disasters, environmental crises and poverty. They may also leave because their government will not, or cannot, protect them from human rights abuses or meet their basic needs. Some governments are also responsible for persecuting their own citizens, forcing them to become refugees. Whatever the reason, refugees leave their homes because they fear for their own safety or that of their family.

Worldwide, on a daily basis there are people making life-changing decisions about leaving their families, friends, home, possessions and local community for an uncertain, unfamiliar, and often frightening life elsewhere in a country that is not their own. Financial gain is rarely the motivation for leaving.

“The idea that people are drawn to Europe by pull factors is at odds with our research findings. The majority of our participants said they fled persecution, war, famine and personal insecurity, and only 18% described their motivation as economic,” says Brad Blitz, who is Professor of International Politics at Middlesex University and Principal Investigator of EVI-MED, a research project that is collecting current evidence of Mediterranean migrations.

In the summer of 2015, there was a surge in the number of people making perilous Mediterranean sea-crossings from North Africa and Turkey in an effort to reach a better life in Europe. Most had travelled for days and weeks across arid landscapes with little food or water to reach the Mediterranean coast.
Definitions of refugees and economic migrants

Refugee - the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees lays down basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees and, in Article 1, defines a refugee as:
“A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his/her former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

Economic migrant - Economic migrants are people who leave their homes and countries of their own free will to find work and a better life. In 2015 the UN estimates that there were 243 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants (people moving for work within their own country), mainly in China and India. Economic migrants’ motives are different from refugees who flee because their personal safety is threatened. Normally an economic migrant can go back home if he or she wishes; will not face any threats upon return; and will resume receiving protection from his or her government once back.

Increasingly, however, it is difficult to distinguish between refugees and economic migrants who may be fleeing extreme poverty and general insecurity. Consequently, references to ‘refugees and migrants’ are often seen linked together in news items, official statements and research reports.

“There are very good reasons why people undertake long and dangerous journeys trying to reach places of safety – Britain along with other European countries has been identified as such a place. The source of the migration crisis is often seen as being in North Africa, but that is not so,” says Professor Blitz.

“It lies in the countries of origin from which the people are coming. It’s where the instability begins and the point at which people start to map out their journeys, their exit strategies that take them thousands of kilometres across deserts before they arrive at the Mediterranean. By the time people get to Europe they will have endured many dangers along the way.”

Washed up remains of a dinghy used by migrants.

At its peak from 2015 to 2016, thousands of people of all ages took to (and continue to do so) overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels provided by people smugglers, who, motivated by money, had little regard for human life or safety. Inevitably, boats broke down and became stranded, or capsized, or were caught up in storms and wrecked. Thousands of people did not make it and drowned - bodies of adults and children were often dragged from the sea by volunteers and professionals trying to help.

Currently, the situation is little changed. Over 2,000 people drowned or went missing in the Mediterranean in the first six months of 2017, the UN estimates.

Journey full of dangers
Perilous journeys are not just taking place on the high seas. Heaven Crawley, Research Professor at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University and principal investigator
of MEDMIG, which looks at the experiences of migrants’ journeys, reports: “Many people witnessed death and experienced violence during their migration. Experiences of violence and death were not limited to sea crossings, but could be found along the entire route. More than three quarters (76%) of respondents who were interviewed said that they had directly experienced physical violence and nearly a third (29%) had witnessed fellow travellers dying.”

Struggling to cope with people in transit
For those who did make it to the two main countries of arrival, Italy and Greece, there were chaotic scenes as overwhelmed officials struggled each day to check and document boatloads of people from many different parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. There were further journeys to be made in Europe, often on foot, as migrants made their way to countries further north, seeking somewhere secure to settle and resume their lives in safety. Although kindness was often shown to the travellers, others encountered hostility and barriers to their journey. Some were forced to remain in temporary shelters, such as the ‘Jungle Camp’ at Calais in France, or in reception centres while awaiting a chance to move on elsewhere.

By July 2017, Italy considered that it had become overwhelmed by migrants. The leaders of the country threatened to impound ships operated by charities that patrol the Mediterranean picking up people in unseaworthy vessels and have recently closed the ports to them; the crisis continues.

Research aims to help alleviate migrants’ plight
In response to the on-going migration crisis, the ESRC provided funds to support a Mediterranean Migration Research Programme. The programme is supporting UK social scientists who are conducting eight separate research projects with migrants and refugees coming to Europe. Co-funded by the Department for International Development, it is providing evidence to inform the development of policy and responses by governments, European agencies, and charities.

Further information
EVI-MED and MEDMIG are two of the projects making up the Mediterranean Migration Research Programme funded by the ESRC.

Universities involved include: University of Warwick, University of York, Durham University, Coventry University, Loughborough University, and Queen Mary, University of London.

Forced Migration Review: www.fmreview.org/destination-europe/gidron-bueno.html