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Is the Rwanda plan acting as a deterrent? Here's what the evidence says about this approach

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Matilde Rosina

Assistant Professor in Global Challenges, Brunel University London

Tensions are rising between the UK and Ireland, as asylum seekers cross into Ireland from Northern Ireland, reportedly fearing that if they remain in the UK, they will be sent to Rwanda.

Rishi Sunak has claimed that this shows the Rwanda plan is working as a deterrent. For over two years, the government has insisted that the policy to remove asylum seekers to the African country would deter potential asylum seekers from making dangerous journeys across the English Channel. But transferring the problem to Ireland adds to the evidence that deterrence approaches don't stop migration – they just change where people end up or how they get there.

Deterrence is a strategy to reduce migration by threatening those who violate immigration rules with negative consequences. The core idea is that, if the costs of irregular migration are made higher (for instance, through transfer to Rwanda), then people will not migrate.

What's happening in Ireland is an example of the so-called "balloon effect". As the former US border patrol union president T.J. Bonner put it, borders are like "a big, long, skinny balloon. When you squeeze in one part, it comes out in another. It doesn't disappear."

In my research on deterrence policies throughout Europe, I have found plenty of evidence suggesting that increased controls only change the nature of migration, they don't stop it. For example, a study of 29 European countries found that a 10% rise in short-term visa rejections resulted in a 4-7% rise in irregular entries.

Likewise, after France reintroduced border controls in 2015, migration from Italy did not stop. Instead, many crossed further north, in the mountains near Bardonecchia, or attempted riskier routes, including walking on the motorway.

With the Rwanda plan implemented, people coming to the UK may turn to other dangerous routes to enter and remain in the country. The government's decision to detain asylum seekers attending routine appointments at immigration service offices might cause many people already in the country to avoid these meetings altogether, leading them into increased irregularity and clandestine lives.

Why deterrence fails

At the heart of deterrence is an assumption that people act based on the costs and benefits of different actions. But this ignores the complexities involved in migrants' decisions about migration.

To begin with, criminologists have long argued that the certainty (rather than the severity) of a punishment should be high. Here is where the Rwanda plan runs into its first issue.

Indeed, it is unlikely that all asylum seekers arriving in the UK on small boats will be sent to Rwanda. Initial provisions are being made for the transfer of about 300 migrants, roughly 1% of the 29,437 small boat arrivals the UK had in 2023.

More fundamentally, deterrent measures such as the Rwanda plan merely increase the costs of migration, without considering, or being able to address, the fundamental causes of migration, such as poverty, conflict and insecurity.

Researchers have found that people who live in countries with high levels of corruption are 36% more inclined to migrate. The Rwanda plan does nothing to address such factors, leaving the main incentives for migration unchanged.

In an impact assessment of the policy, the Home Office itself acknowledged the academic consensus that there is "little to no evidence" that restrictive policies discourage people from migrating.



The Rwanda plan is unlikely to stop people making dangerous journeys. Sean Aidan Calderbank/Shutterstock

Deterrence plans also regularly overestimate the amount of information that migrants have about their destination. Interviewing more than 100 migrants in Italy, I found that two-thirds of them were not aware of any of the sanctions for irregular migration (like fines, detention or deportation). The few who did know about sanctions only learned about them once they arrived in Europe.

Just 12% relied on the internet for information on how to migrate, with most relying instead on family, friends and smugglers. And researchers are sceptical that government campaigns are effective in reducing this information gap.

Read more: I've spent time with refugees in French coastal camps and they told me the government's Rwanda plan is not putting them off coming to the UK

The nature and timing of the Rwanda plan demonstrate that, ultimately, its core objective is political: improving the Conservative party's standing in the upcoming local and national elections.

Estimates have emerged on the incredibly high costs of the Rwanda scheme to taxpayers, with the Home Office revealing that removing each asylum seeker to Rwanda will cost £63,000 more than keeping them in the UK.

This is the price the government is willing to pay to attempt reversing the polls ahead of the next elections. Yet, as the public's concerns with migration decline, the plan may not pay back as expected.

Also, if migrants arriving irregularly are denied the opportunity to seek asylum in the UK, and yet removals to Rwanda remain logistically difficult, many will end up in a state of limbo, neither protected in the UK nor removed to another country – only more likely to disappear within the system.

