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Southern Europeans Flock to Germany

By [NINA ADAM](#)

FRANKFURT—Immigration to Germany hit a 17-year high last year as more Southern Europeans flocked north to escape economic recession and search for jobs, according to data released Tuesday.

The report from the German statistics office was sure to fuel an debate over the consequences of immigration for the country.

In all, 1.08 million people moved to Germany last year, or 13% more than in 2011, Germany's statistics office said, indicating that the euro zone's debt crisis is reshaping the fabric of European society as well as the economy. The biggest increases in percentage terms came from people moving from the stricken economies of Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy.

"Until recently, Germany was an emigration country, but now people are flocking to Germany in search of work, as their home countries are mired in recession," said Wolfgang Nagl, a labor market expert at Germany's Ifo institute.

The number of people moving to Germany from Spain jumped 45% in 2012 from a year earlier, excluding German expatriates, to 30,000. About 42,000 people moved to Germany from Italy, marking an increase of 40%, while the number of immigrants to Germany from Greece and Portugal rose 43% for each country in 2012, an acceleration of a trend that began in 2010 after the Greek crisis erupted.

While some German cities, such as Duisburg in North Rhine-Westphalia, are reportedly struggling to cope with the influx of poorer Roma families from Bulgaria and Romania who often don't speak German and whose children need to be quickly integrated into schools and apprentice schemes, most economists believe that Germany is benefiting from the immigration boom.

They argue that the influx of foreign workers will help alleviate shortages of skilled labor in some sectors of the economy—such as engineering, information technology and health care—as unemployment in Germany remains near its lowest level since reunification in 1990.

"Germany certainly benefits from the recent rise in immigration," Mr. Nagl said. "The Greeks, Spaniards and other people moving to Germany contribute to economic activity. They rent out flats, they go to the shops to purchase food and other things, they pay taxes and generally contribute to the social security system."

According to the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration, or SVR, immigrants are on average 10 years younger than Germany's native population and are also more likely to have a university degree.

"Germany is reaping the measurable rewards of free movement thanks to skilled immigrants from other EU countries. This has received too little attention to date," said SVR chairwoman Christine Langenfeld.

Like in previous years, most immigrants in 2012 came from neighboring Poland, the statistics office said, with 176,000, excluding German expatriates. That was followed by Romania with 116,000 and Bulgaria with 59,000. Immigration from Slovenia was up 62% as the transition period toward free labor movement ended in May 2011. The number of Hungarians moving to Germany rose 31%.

Costanza Biavaschi, an economist at the Bonn-based IZA Institute for the Study of Labor, also dismissed concern that Southern Europeans move to Germany to live off its social welfare system. "It's not true that immigrants have higher welfare take-up rates," she said. They "are usually well educated, young and ambitious and I don't see compelling evidence that they are benefit scroungers."