

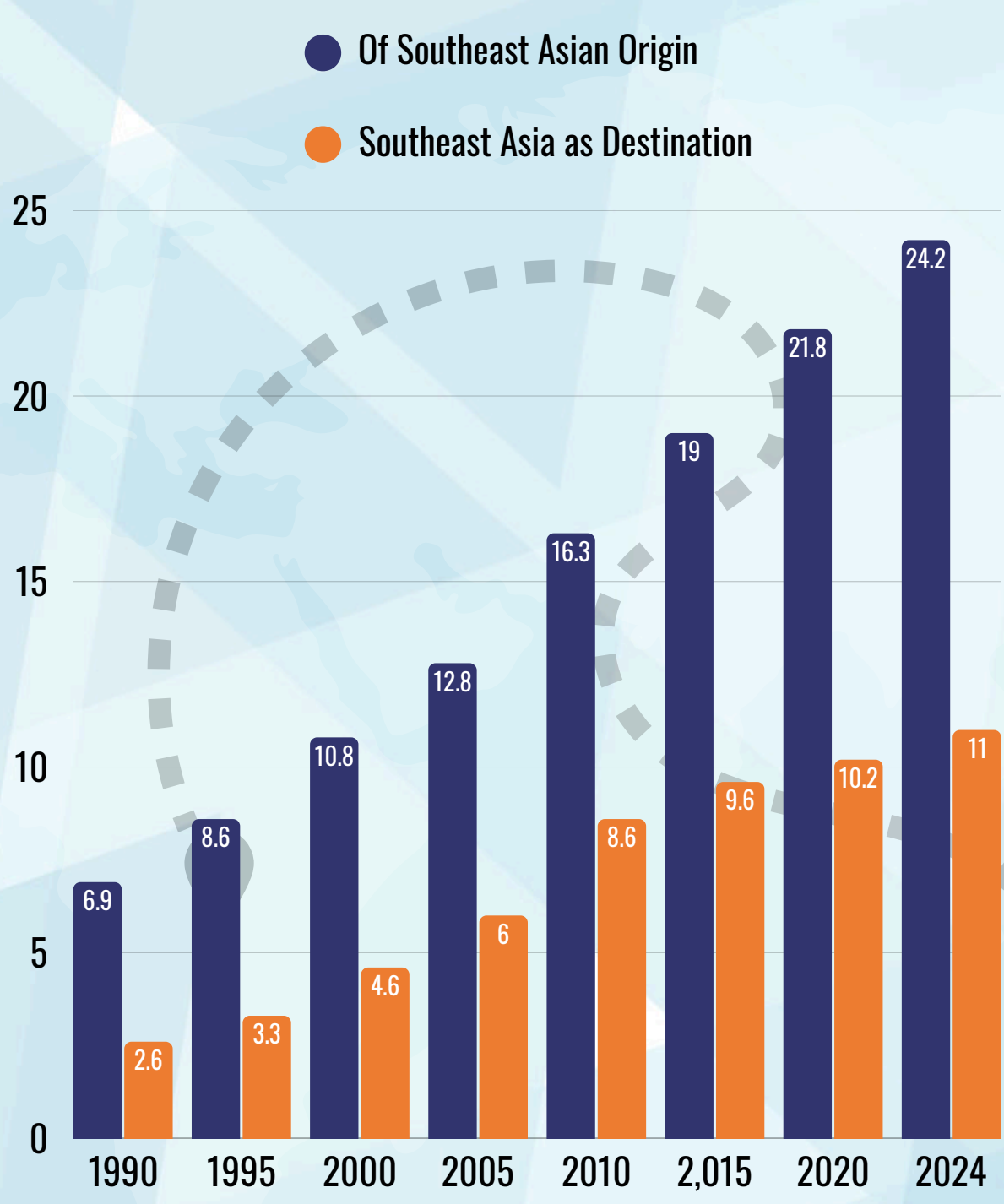
## HUMAN MOBILITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Compiled by Adam Hansen

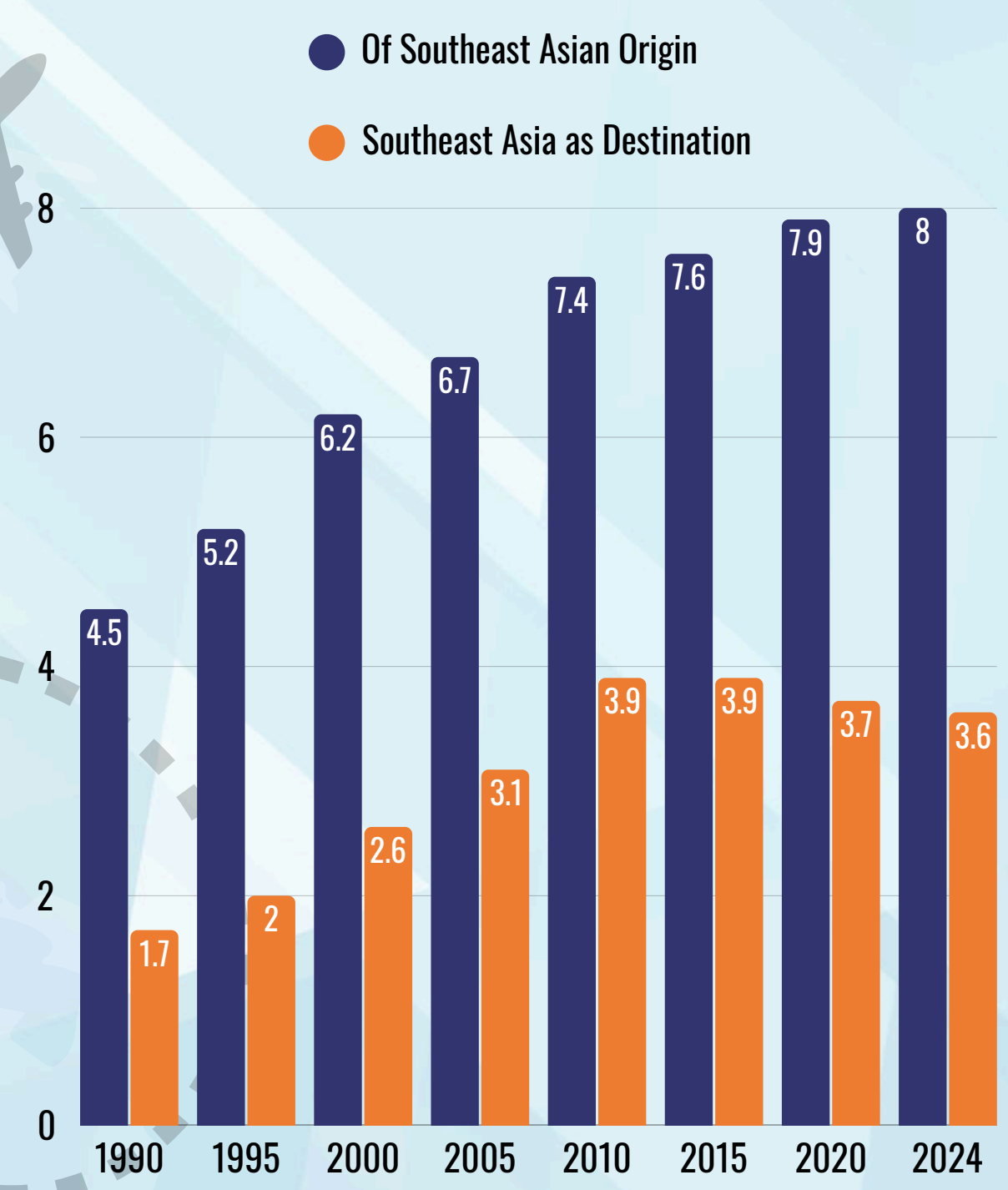
When carefully managed, migration can help address several issues facing Southeast Asia: ageing societies, labour shortages, and skills mismatches. Well-regulated and safe migration systems help protect individuals from crises, while providing opportunities to increase earnings and improve living standards. Yet, some mobility patterns, such as those emerging from sudden crises or from irregular (undocumented or otherwise unauthorised) migration, present security challenges to the region. Without adequate policy responses, these dynamics may impact the livelihoods and wider social well-being of communities, including through labour integration issues and xenophobia. Criminal actors also undermine safe migration pathways, exposing individuals to serious threats including human smuggling, trafficking, and forced labour. These issues, intersecting with socio-political crises and intensified environmental effects in Southeast Asia, continue shaping migration challenges in the region.



International Migration Flows to and from Southeast Asia, 1990-2024 (millions)



Global Share of International Migrants to and from Southeast Asia, 1990-2024 (%)



A large proportion of Southeast Asia's migrant population consists of migrant workers. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), migrants account for close to 30% of Singapore's work force, 24.5% in Brunei Darussalam, 10.2% in Malaysia, and 2.2-5.2% in Thailand. With some migrant workers in the region remaining undocumented, these figures may underestimate actual numbers.

Source: Compiled from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2024). "International Migrant Stock." UNDESA Population Division, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 31 March 2026.

International migration statistics primarily capture documented mobility across international borders. However, mobility in Southeast Asia takes multiple forms, including:

### Irregular Migration



Movement of people across international borders outside regulatory norms, including unauthorised or undocumented pathways. Irregular migration may expose migrants dangers such as human smuggling, trafficking, and forced labour.

Irregular migration persists in parts of Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and is often underrepresented in official data, particularly where migrant workers are informally employed. It is often shaped by conflict, including the ongoing Myanmar Civil War.

### Rural-Urban Migration



Movement of people from rural areas to towns and cities, often driven by socio-economic motivations, including aspirations for better employment, education, and other public services.

Southeast Asia's urban population share is rapidly expanding and projected to rise from roughly 54.9% in 2026 to 67.9% in 2050. Rural-urban migration is especially concentrated in major cities such as Jakarta, Bangkok, and Manila.

### Forced Displacement



Mobility caused by conflict, violence, persecution, or disasters which forces individuals to leave their homes. Those who remain within their country's borders are classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In 2024, Southeast Asia accounted for the largest share of disaster-induced internal displacements globally (44%). The Philippines alone recorded 9 million disaster-related internal displacements in the same year.

Source: Compiled from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2025). "World Population Prospects 2025." UNDESA Population Division, <https://population.un.org/wup/>, accessed 1 April 2026; Compiled from Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2024). "IDMC Data Portal." IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/>, accessed 1 April 2026.

