



Statistical aging: It is not because of their healthy diets that immigrants in Germany live to be almost 15 years older than Germans, but rather because of erroneous numbers.

# The Myth of the Healthy Migrant

The official statistics would have us believe that the “immigrant fate” guarantees a long life – and not only in Germany. According to official figures, the life expectancy of migrants far exceeds that of their fellow host-country citizens. **Rembrandt Scholz**, a researcher at the **Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research** in Rostock, is investigating whether this is due to a healthy lifestyle or to errors in the recorded statistics.

TEXT **TOMMA SCHRÖDER**

Suddenly Rembrandt Scholz's gestures come alive. He leans back, rocks on his chair and plants his glasses in his curly gray hair. Laughter lines play around his eyes as he leafs through pages filled with masses of numbers in black and white. “I find looking at charts rather fun,” he says, unable to refrain from grinning slightly at himself. Especially when they have a lot to say.

And the charts lying before the researcher from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock have a fair amount to say. About Berlin. About life. Which, in Zehlendorf – so say the numbers – happens to last considerably longer than in Kreuzberg. To be more precise, it lasts more than eight years longer. While a newborn in Kreuzberg could, in 1994, expect to live just 65.5 years on average, a boy born just a few kilometers further southwest had an average of almost 74 years ahead of it.

Rembrandt Scholz saw these columns of numbers for the first time in the 1990s, when he was still working at university hospital Berlin Charité. He

had obtained them through the state health administration authorities – the first researcher ever to do so. The demographer actually hoped these numbers would tell him how life expectancy was influenced by socio-economic conditions: unemployment, average income, healthcare.

## CONTRADICTIONARY NUMBERS RAISE DOUBTS

But quite incidentally, the numbers also told him something else. “Something had to be wrong,” says Scholz, and points to the chart that boils down the life of Kreuzberg residents to the surprisingly small figure of 65.5 years. At the same time, Scholz could see from the data that the share of foreigners living in Kreuzberg in 1994 was over 30 percent.

But the life expectancy ought to be quite high in areas where many foreigners reside. After all, according to the official data of the statistical offices of the 16 German states, migrants in Germany have a much higher life expectancy

than the indigenous population. This observation is often summed up as the “healthy migrant effect.” But if that's true, how can a neighborhood with such a high percentage of foreigners have such a low life expectancy? “It's a contradiction.” Rembrandt Scholz's eyes light up. He likes these moments, “when you find something that didn't exist before.” A trail, a lead, a contradiction. “Of course it's exciting to catch such a break,” he says. Since this discovery, the researcher has diligently chipped away at the crack. He has managed to at least partially uncover the secret of the long-lived migrants.

Today, a migrant in Germany who is 65 years old has, on average, a good two-thirds of his life behind him. After all, he can expect to live another 30 years, reaching an age that exceeds even the current record held by Japanese women. A German of the same age, in contrast, has, on average, just half that long left to live, namely exactly 15.6 years. At least that is what the calculations yield when the numbers of the regional statistical offices

» The traditional way of life and the supporting role of the family are considered to be key factors for a longer life.

are used. Neatly and scientifically determined from the number of living and dead. Readily reviewable and verifiable by all.

Science has four different explanations for this great difference between native and immigrant populations, which can also be observed in many other migration countries. The first cites the healthy migrant effect. According to this theory, it is primarily healthy, fit, resilient people who immigrate, since those who are ill wouldn't be able to overcome the hurdles of an unfamiliar environment and language.

Immigration laws amplify this effect. A German-Italian agreement from 1956, for example, stipulated that labor migrants (*Gastarbeiter*) from Italy had to pass a health test before they could immigrate. Those who didn't pass it

weren't allowed to come to Germany. Since this resulted in only healthy people immigrating, also the life expectancy of the immigrants was higher than that of the native population, went the explanation.

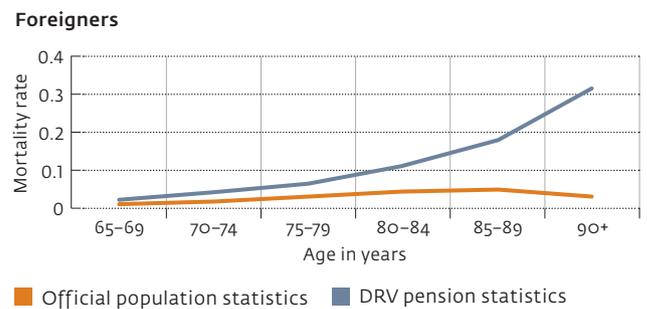
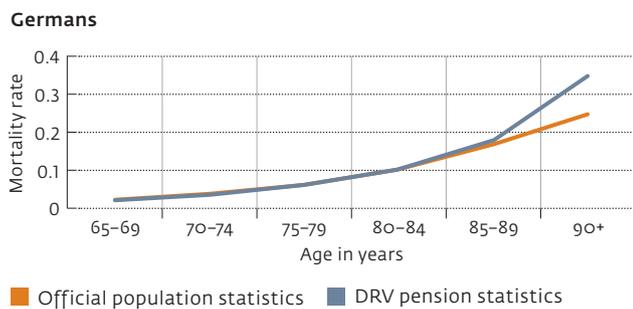
**OLDER PEOPLE OFTEN RETURN TO THEIR BIRTHPLACE**

The second theory is also based on the health of the migrants. It assumes that, thanks to their culture, many migrants have a healthier lifestyle than the citizens of western industrialized nations and immigration countries. Studies in the US show, for instance, that Latin Americans there drink less alcohol than Americans. And for migrants in Germany, the traditional way of life and the supporting role of the family were identified as key factors for a longer life.

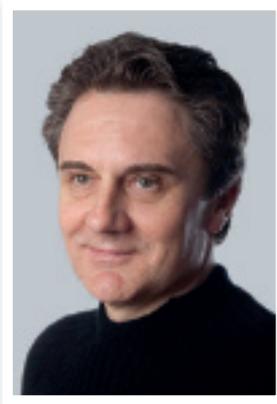
In conflict with this, however, is the fact that migrants have many disadvantages, such as, frequently, lower income and poorer education opportunities. For these reasons, also a very different explanation for the high life expectancy of migrants is offered: the salmon error.

Actually, to be scientifically accurate, it is called the "salmon bias," and refers to a known, generally human phenomenon: "In older persons, there is apparently a deep-seated desire to see one's homeland again," explains Rembrandt Scholz. Like salmon that repeatedly swim upstream to lay their eggs in the place where they were born, migrants, too, are drawn back to their birthplace – often when they are old and sick.

Such a connection has already been proven for Mexican and Latin American migrants in the US. There, studies



Errors in the data: The illustrations show that something can't be right here. While the mortality rates in the official population statistics and the DRV pension statistics are nearly congruent for Germans, the numbers for foreigners diverge considerably. Not only does the pension data include 33 percent fewer foreigners than the official statistics, but it also shows 33 percent more deaths.



Tomislav Kovačević



Tomislav Kovacic



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Four in one: Migrants sometimes have multiple identities in civil registers. This is due to the various possibilities of spelling foreign names. When a migrant with multiple entries in the civil register dies, it can happen that some of his identities live on.

showed that immigrants who returned to their homeland were in poorer health than migrants who stayed in the US. Since the ill or very old immigrants emigrate back, the average life expectancy of those who stay in their new country increases.

### STATISTICS IS THE IDEAL PLACE FOR ETERNAL LIFE

It could also be a similar situation in Germany, says Scholz. He suspects there is even more behind the salmon error: "It often happens that older people who want to visit their native country for just a short time actually also die there." This fact doesn't always make it into the German registration statistics. Instead, the migrant lives there for quite a while longer and possibly reaches extreme old age before any administrative institution notices that a person included in the statistics is no longer there.

This brings Rembrandt Scholz to the fourth and final explanation, and the one that he finds most plausible: that migrants in Germany don't, in fact, live to an older age than the indigenous population. The incredibly high life expectancy calculated for migrants is due, very simply, to data errors. Not a mystery, but a myth.

This could also explain why the average life expectancy for Kreuzberg residents is so low despite the fact that many of them are foreigners who, according to Germany-wide statistics, ought to reach a nearly biblical age.

The data from Berlin would then simply be less error-ridden, more up to date and more precise than the data for Germany as a whole. But how did the myth of the long-lived migrant – the errors in the nationwide data – come about? Demographers can and must live and deal with the fact that official statistics always entail a certain error rate. But errors that add up to a life expectancy at least 15 years higher than it actually is?

Rembrandt Scholz believes this is certainly possible, as the reported figures can be correct only if citizens report them truthfully. For many migrants, however, there are good reasons to keep quiet about certain things. "Immigrants who are not from the EU lose 30 percent of their pension entitlements if they return to their native country," says Scholz, naming one example. Many immigrants thus don't report their departure when they leave Germany, and in this way they can, theoretically, live for eternity – at least according to German statistics. The situation is similar for migrants who do actually go back to their native country for a specific period, but who don't report their departure for fear of losing their right to naturalization.

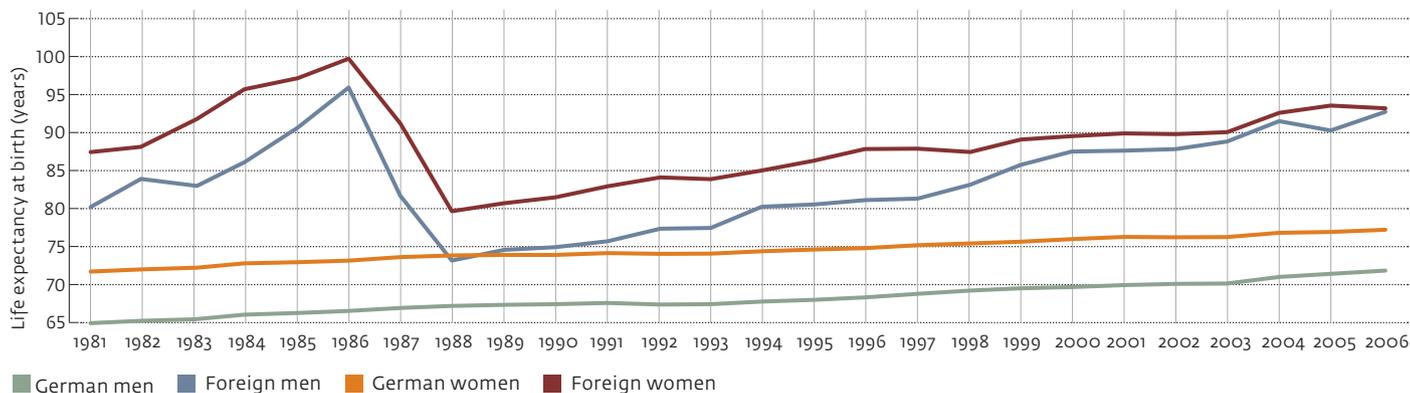
Last but not least, there is also the simple issue of names. German often has widely varying spellings for foreign names. It can thus easily happen that a person ends up with two or three names, and therefore also identities, in the civil register. Then, when this per-

son dies, his further identities live on in the registers indefinitely. These are the so-called dead files – a nuisance, as persistent as it is unpleasant, that accompanies demographers everywhere and at all times. These dead files are particularly numerous in the data on older people because, here, more and more errors accumulate over time. "Such dead files," says Rembrandt Scholz, "can also live on indefinitely."

### LAW HINDERS DETECTION OF ERRORS

But it isn't the fault of the official statisticians that it is so difficult to remove them from the statistics, says the demographer. They can't and, in fact, aren't allowed to correct individual cases – this is stipulated by law in Germany. Specifically, the official statistics fundamentally cover only anonymized data; only case numbers are known, no names.

Only the civil register and registrar's offices handle personal details – that is, municipal administration in townships and city districts that are not yet covered by official statistics. The latter start only with the statistics offices at the regional or city level, which are separate from the administrative process and to which the registers and registrar's offices submit their data only in anonymized and cumulative form. There is no chance of it being traced back to an individual case. Changes to the register are forbidden



Confusing numbers: While the statistical life expectancy of Germans is continuously increasing, that of migrants is subject to strong fluctuations. Foreign women born in 1986, for instance, could expect to live 100 years – and German women at the same time 26 years fewer. Foreign women born in 1988, in contrast, had a life expectancy of just 80 years.

by law even when errors and inconsistencies in the totals of the official statistics can be proven through mathematical methods.

**REVISION REVEALS MORE THAN 500,000 DEAD FILES**

This system is intended to protect data and make the official statistics independent. The other side of the coin is that errors in the official statistics data are compounded: once when regional statistical offices total the anonymous data from their cities and regions, and once again when the Federal Statistical Office adds up the columns of all the states. The figures for each classification level are kept up to date only by what is known as continuation: the cumulative changes in the figures – positive or negative, depending on the development – are simply added to the last count. In this way, once errors enter into the system, they stay in the system forever.

It was thus a great stroke of luck that Rembrandt Scholz was allowed to revise the Central Register of Foreigners (*Ausländerzentralregister*, abbreviated AZR). From 2000 to 2003, proprietary data was compared with that of the regional registrar's offices, the welfare offices and other authorities. This is possible

in the AZR because it doesn't fall under the strict data protection of the same laws as the official statistics. Merely identifying duplicate persons uncovered more than half a million dead files, relates Scholz.

He was given access to all AZR details on gender, age, nationality, and entry and departure dates of those registered. This data was, of course, completely anonymized, as is always the case when science conducts research on official numbers. However, Scholz received not one, but two sets of data: one from the status before the revision and one from the status afterwards – a unique insight into the sources of errors in these statistics. "And I thought to myself: Now I have something, so I have to put it to use," he says. And put it to use he did.

Whereas the life expectancy for foreigners that Scholz had calculated based on the official statistics was 96.5 years for men, the data from the Central Register of Foreigners (AZR) yielded a very different number: 80.8 years. This is still more than German men at the same point in time (2004) could expect from life. But a difference of 4.6 years is considerably smaller.

In comparing the AZR data and that of the Federal Statistical Office, it was striking that, particularly with the old-

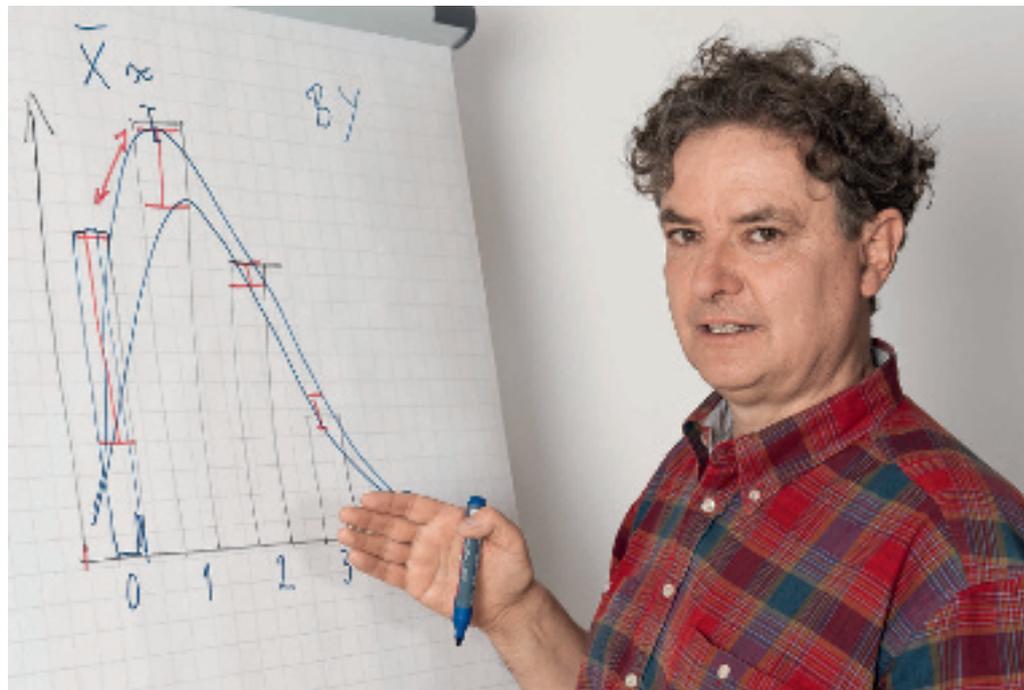
er migrants over 80, as many as 20 percent of the people included in the statistics were no longer even living in Germany. Also for younger age groups from 0 to 65, it turned out that up to 10 percent of the foreigners recorded in the statistics were not present.

**CALCULATED MORTALITY DATA PROBABLY TOO HIGH**

Because such errors were never cleansed from the official statistics, the AZR data is much more accurate. It shows, according to Scholz, how much the official statistics data differs from reality. But the calculated life expectancy for the migrants is probably still too high in the Central Register of Foreigners data, thinks the demographer. After all, not all of the authorities participated equally in the data revision.

Another study indicates, in contrast, that the life expectancy of migrants could even be lower than that of the native population. Together with his colleague Eva Kibele from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Scholz also analyzed data from the Federal German Statutory Pension Scheme (*Deutsche Rentenversicherung Bund*, DRV). Although this data doesn't include all foreigners, as not all of them are eligible to receive a pension, the

"We always act as if we know everything, but the statistics could be so much better." Demographer Rembrandt Scholz suspects that foreigners are actually at a disadvantage in terms of life expectancy – contrary to what official statistics show.



data that is recorded is very precise. This is because not only statistics are concerned, but also money. Those who die stop receiving a pension, so this is closely monitored – for instance with the aid of so-called life certificates. Those who live outside of Germany and collect a pension must submit this officially certified document to the DRV once a year. Only when this document

confirms that the "pension recipient is alive" do the pension payments continue to that account.

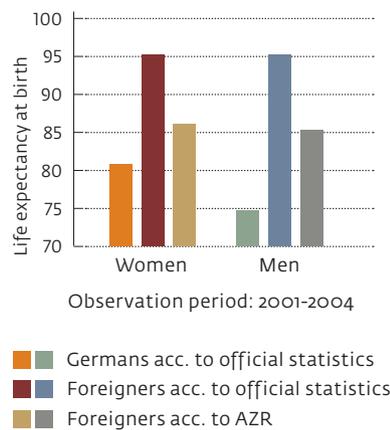
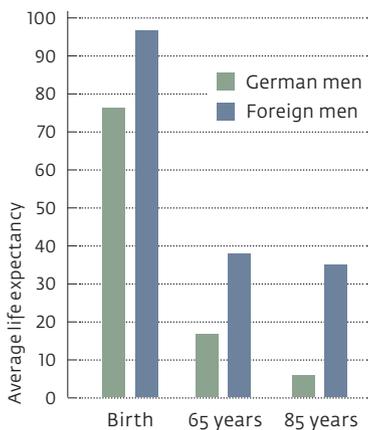
### MANY CIVIL REGISTERS FALSIFY COLLECTED DATA

For the German population, the DRV's mortality and population figures are very similar to those in the official sta-

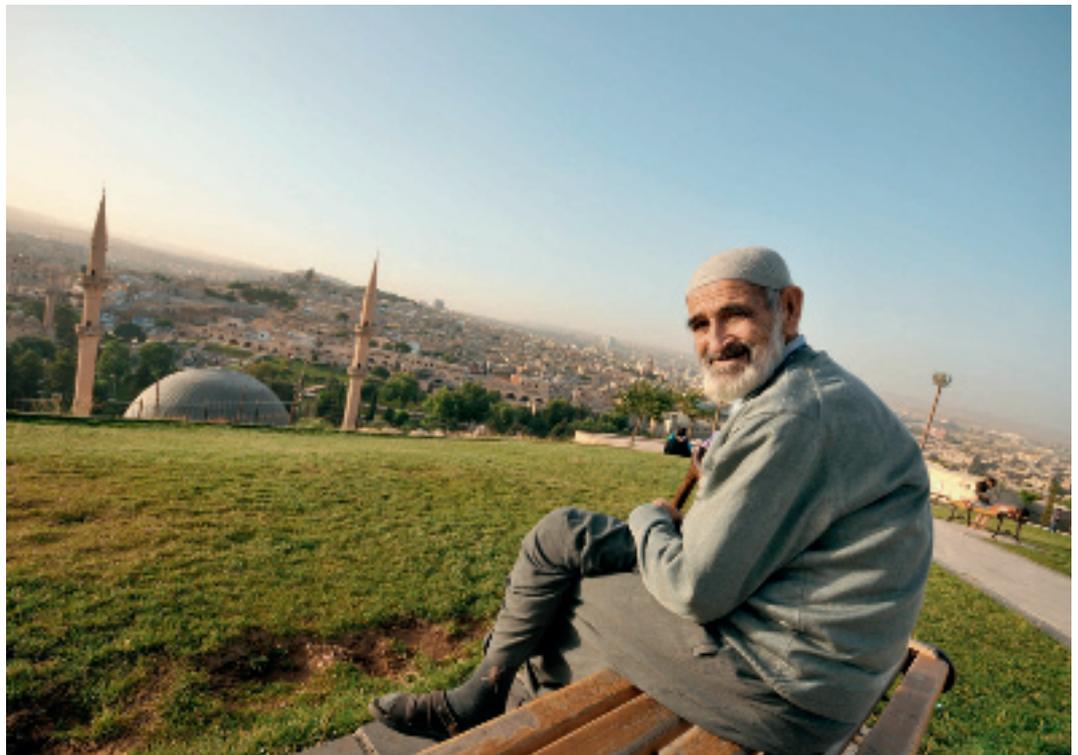
tistics. However, this does not apply to the approximately 130,000 migrants without German citizenship who were included in the pension data. Not only are there 33 percent fewer foreigners included in this data, but there are also 33 percent more deaths than in the official statistics. Using this data as the basis, the life expectancy of 65-year-old foreigners is no longer an additional 30 years, but just half that, or exactly 15 years. This would mean that foreigners have even a somewhat shorter remaining lifetime than German 65-year-olds (15.6 years).

"We always act as if we know everything, but the statistics could be so much better," says Scholz, glancing at the very different results. Other countries also have the same difficulties that Germany has collecting data on migrants. In fact, the Germans are very thorough in comparison, as Rembrandt Scholz knows. But the demographer feels that the many different civil registers in Germany are problematic – there are nearly 13,000. Many municipal units have their own civil register, and often also their own software. "I don't even want to know how many errors happen there," says Scholz, who advocates a central register.

Moreover, particularly the townships often have no great interest in



According to official statistics, the average life expectancy for German men at birth is 76.18 years. If they have already reached the age of 65 or 85 years, they have on average another 16.58 or 5.65 years remaining; for foreign men, these figures are significantly higher (left). The Central Register of Foreigners (AZR) life expectancy data for migrants differs greatly from that of the official statistics.



The salmon effect: It is a typical phenomenon that older people are drawn to return to their native country. Some die there, but they live on in German registers, promoting the myth of the healthy migrant.

keeping their civil registers up to date, at least when it comes to departure notices, as dead files mean money for the municipalities. Often even for the mayor, whose pay grade, says Scholz, just as financial transfers to the municipality, increases in step with the population.

“There are mayors who have issued instructions that no departure notices are to be effected by their offices.” But that is precisely what is supposed to happen when a registration office determines that someone who is included in the statistics is no longer present.

### “WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THOSE WHO COME TO US”

There could be a bit of a drop in the number of dead files after the current census is completed. And, as a result, a correction in the population figures for one mayor or another. “I’m already looking forward to doing the recalculations,” says Rembrandt Scholz. But it is questionable whether this year’s census will help to finally and conclusively resolve the mystery of the long-lived migrants. The last census, in 1987, did provide better data. In retrospect, however, and compared with the data from the Central Register of Foreigners and the German pension insurance, Scholz thinks the life expectancy ascertained

back then, which was a good five years above that of the native population, is still too high. “Registers always tend to accumulate too many registrations, and thus to keep alive and present in the official books people who have died or moved away,” he explains.

Numbers tell many stories, but they can also deceive. “We always have only the final result,” says Scholz. “And we think back from the result.” Stumbling upon dead files and having to track down data errors and statistical artifacts that are beyond realistic spurs the demographer on. “You have to really be passionate about this work,” he says. Or to put it somewhat differently: “You have to concentrate and fight your way through the data jungle until it clears.”

In the case of the high life expectancy of migrants, much is still in the dark, believes Scholz. He suspects that something like the effect of the healthy migrant does, in fact, exist, but that it is offset by other aspects, such as the poorer social and economic standing. “Foreigners are probably rather disadvantaged in terms of life expectancy,” concludes the demographer, “because their socio-economic disadvantage impacts them for a longer period than the rather short-term effect of having been healthy at the time of immigra-

tion.” He hopes that, in the coming years, it will become possible to determine the life expectancy of migrants more accurately, and also to break it down by nationality. “After all,” says Scholz, “we are responsible for those who come to us.”

### GLOSSARY

#### Federal Statistical Office

Provides the realms of politics and business, but also the general public, with statistics on such diverse topics as population development, imports and exports, and energy supply.

#### Healthy migrant effect

One possible explanation for why the life expectancy of immigrants is higher, according to official statistics, than that of the native population. According to this theory, this is due to the fact that only healthy people emigrate, because only they are capable of building a new life in a foreign country.

#### Central Register of Foreigners

Administered by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and comprises more than 23 million records of all foreigners who hold a residence permit that gives them the right to reside in Germany for a limited or unlimited time, and of all people who have applied for or been granted asylum.