

Spotlight on refugee integration: findings from the Survey of New Refugees in the United Kingdom

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This report summarises the results of the Survey of New Refugees (SNR), a longitudinal study of refugee integration in the UK. Integration was considered in terms of the English language skills, employment and housing of new refugees. The research was initiated by Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management (ARK) within the UK Border Agency, which commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to undertake the longitudinal data analysis and preparation of this report.

Methods

This report is based on an analysis of data from the SNR, conducted between 2005 and 2009. The survey included all new refugees aged 18 or over who were granted a positive decision of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain between 1 December 2005 and 25 March 2007. A postal questionnaire was issued soon after the asylum decision (the baseline) and then 8 months, 15 months and 21 months later. More than 5,600 new refugees participated in the first sweep of the survey, decreasing to around 940 respondents at the 21-month sweep. Analysis methods included generating

basic descriptive statistics and multivariate regression analyses. The data were weighted so that results are representative of all new refugees who entered the UK within this time period. Weighting also controlled for the loss of respondents between sweeps (attrition), although this may still have affected the results of later sweeps. Only statistically significant differences are reported.

Some refugees participated in the Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services (SUNRISE) pilots, which were designed to assist the integration of new refugees in the UK. However, due to the small number of SUNRISE participants who responded to the SNR the research team was unable to assess the effectiveness of this programme over time.

Summary of research findings

Profile of new refugees

New refugees who were granted asylum in the UK between 1 December 2005 and 25 March 2007 came from more than 100 different countries, the majority from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Individuals from Eritrea and Somalia

Contents

Summary	i
1. Introduction	1
2. Key findings: a synopsis	2
3. Thematic summary	9
Explanatory notes	18
Acknowledgements	18
Appendix A: Additional Tables	19
References	23

Keywords

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accounted for around one-third of all new refugees. More than 60 per cent of refugees were men. The majority (70%) were aged 18 to 34, while only two per cent were aged 65 or over. Almost one-half of new refugees had been in the UK for less than a year when they received the decision on their asylum claim, although 22 per cent had already spent five or more years in the country.

Trends in the English language skills, employment and housing of refugees over time

The English language skills of new refugees improved over time. Between the baseline (sweep 1) and 21-month follow-up (sweep 4) the proportion of new refugees reporting a high level of English language ability, compared with a native speaker, increased from 26 per cent to 38 per cent. The proportion of refugees with a low level of English language ability decreased from 38 per cent to 15 per cent.

Employment rates of new refugees also increased over time. The proportion of refugees who were employed increased from 34 per cent at 8 months (when first recorded) to 49 per cent at 21 months. However this remained well below the UK average of 80 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2009a).¹ More than one-half of new refugees in employment felt that they were over-qualified for their jobs.

At the time of the asylum decision nearly one-half of refugees lived in accommodation provided by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). The majority of refugees (75%) moved home at least once in the eight months following their asylum decision. At all time points almost one-third of new refugees lived in London, and over time refugees rarely moved out of the area where they originally settled. A small proportion (4%) of the refugees who participated in every sweep of the SNR lived on the streets at some point between the baseline (sweep 1) and 21 months (sweep 4). This is likely to underestimate the true proportion of refugees who experience homelessness, since the SNR was a postal questionnaire that required a fixed address.

Factors found to influence refugee integration

A range of factors were associated with refugees' integration in the UK (Figure 1). The most important factors identified in this study were:

Country of origin

Differences in refugees' English language skills at the time of the asylum decision (sweep 1) by country of origin were

¹ This comparison did not correct for differences in the age, sex or qualifications of new refugees relative to the UK workforce.

most notable. This is important since good English language skills are associated with better integration, in particular increased entry of refugees into employment.

Time in the UK

The longer the time spent in the UK prior to their asylum decision, the better refugees' English language skills and the sooner their entry into employment. Refugees who had spent a longer time in the UK before their asylum decision were also more likely to be living with friends or family, rather than in NASS accommodation, at the time of their asylum decision. This was associated with a lower risk of homelessness over time. Support covering the transition from NASS accommodation to more permanent housing may provide a more stable environment and reduce the risk of homelessness among refugees. Demand for English language training and NASS accommodation may increase with the introduction of faster case conclusion rates through the New Asylum Model (NAM+).

English language skills

At all time points refugees with higher English language skills were more likely to be employed than refugees with lower language skills. Refugee service providers should continue to promote participation in language courses at the earliest opportunity.

Age and sex

Men typically had better English language skills than women, and were more likely to be employed. The same was true for refugees (men and women) below the age of 45. Women and older refugees may need additional support to improve their English language skills and find employment.

Health

Refugees had poorer health than the general population of England and Scotland. Those who described themselves as being in good health were more likely to be employed than other refugees. Poor health was also associated with slower improvement in English language skills over time. The healthcare needs of refugees may need to be addressed before other objectives, such as language learning and entry into employment, can be achieved.

Previous education and employment

Refugees who had spent 16 or more years in education were more likely than others to report a high level of English language ability (compared with a native speaker). Similarly, refugees who had been educated for six or more years before arriving in the UK were more likely than others to be employed eight months after their

asylum decision. Refugees who had been employed (or studying) before entering the UK were also more likely to find a job within eight months of their asylum decision. However, more than one-half of new refugees who were employed at 21 months (sweep 4) felt that they were over-qualified for their jobs. Refugees with degrees or A-level qualifications, and those currently employed in low-skilled occupations, were most likely to express this view. Service providers may wish to consider supporting initiatives which seek to improve job to skills matches among refugees.

Family and friends

Refugees who were living with their family were less likely than others to move home within eight months of their asylum decision, and were less likely to experience homelessness at any point over the next 21 months. Single refugees were more likely than others to move outside the region they had originally settled in. Refugees who were parents/guardians of a child and who had a low level of English language ability were particularly unlikely to improve their language skills over the following 21 months. These refugees may need special assistance, such as flexible programmes of learning or signposting to specialist language courses. Refugees who did not have regular contact with friends or family in the UK at the time of the asylum decision were more likely to report improved English language skills over time than refugees who had frequent contact with friends or family.

The timing of change

New refugees typically described most changes in their employment, housing and English language skills within the first eight months after receiving their asylum decision. During this time refugees were most likely to change accommodation, take up employment and attend English language classes. Support for refugees therefore needs to be most intensive during the early months following the asylum decision.

Figure 1 Summary of factors associated with refugee integration

