

Larger ethnic communities help new refugees find work, research shows

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Ethnic enclaves are often viewed as a negative for the integration of

immigrants with natives in their new country. But it turns out that ethnic communities can help newly arrived refugees find work, according to a new Stanford study that analyzed a cohort of asylum seekers in Switzerland.

Researchers at the Stanford Immigration Policy Lab found that new refugees were more likely to become employed within their first five years if Swiss officials assigned them to live in an area with a larger community of people who share their nationality, ethnicity or language.

"Our study shows that ethnic networks can be beneficial for the economic status of refugees at least within the first few years of their arrival in the host country," said Jens Hainmueller, a professor of political science at Stanford and a co-author on the [research paper](#), published July 29 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Hainmueller is also a faculty co-director of the Stanford Immigration Policy Lab.

The paper was co-authored by Linna Martén, a researcher at Uppsala University, and Dominik Hangartner, an associate professor of public policy at ETH Zurich in Switzerland and a co-director of the Immigration Policy Lab, which has a branch in Zurich.

Digging into Swiss records

Researchers analyzed governmental data of 8,590 [asylum seekers](#) who were granted temporary protection status when they arrived in Switzerland between 2008 and 2013. The data also included five years of information on each refugee, including whether they found employment and in which industry.

In Switzerland, immigration officials randomly assign each new refugee to live in one of the country's 26 cantons, which are member states. The

refugees' preferences typically are not considered as part of the process unless they have a family member already living in a particular canton. In addition, new refugees with temporary protection status cannot move outside of their assigned canton within their first five years in Switzerland, Hainmueller said.

Analysis of the data revealed that no more than 40 percent of refugees had a job during their fifth year in Switzerland. But those refugees who were assigned to cantons with a larger ethnic network were more likely to have found work.

If a group of new refugees was assigned to a canton with a large share of others from their country, about 20 percent of those new arrivals became employed within three years of living in the country. But if that same group was settled in an area with a small share of co-nationals, only 14 percent of the new arrivals had a job three years later.

"Given that refugee employment is generally very low, the increase in employment is an important effect," Hainmueller said. "This is just one piece of a bigger puzzle on what helps refugees integrate within their host country."

Informing asylum, refugee policies

In European countries, many people view ethnic enclaves as a result of a failure to integrate immigrants with natives. But those negative perceptions are not grounded in evidence, Hainmueller said.

In part, because of this general concern, officials in countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland have designed policies for dispersing newly arrived refugees to avoid the creation of ethnic enclaves.

"What this research suggests is that those dispersal policies come with

some costs, in terms of new refugees not benefitting from the positive effects of ethnic networks," Hainmueller said. "It doesn't mean that these policies are generally bad, but it does highlight that there is one potential benefit of geographically concentrated ethnic networks that European officials are not capturing."

In the U.S., people who arrive as part of the [refugee](#) resettlement program which includes an extensive background check conducted through the United Nations Refugee Agency, are assigned to live in areas based on where there is available space. Unlike in some European countries, new refugees are allowed to move after their initial settlement.

"U.S. officials and the public have a slightly more positive view of ethnic enclaves because ethnic neighborhoods formed at the foundation of this country," Hainmueller said.

The new study is a part of a bigger project at the Immigration Policy Lab that aims to examine how the asylum process and its implementation affect the subsequent integration of refugees both in the U.S. and Europe, Hainmueller said.

"We are interested in a lot of different asylum policy choices, such as how asylum seekers are geographically located and what rules govern their access to the labor market," Hainmueller said. "There are a lot of rules that affect refugees and asylum seekers, and they aren't necessarily grounded in solid evidence. Our research agenda is to try to quantify the impacts of those policy choices and point the way to policies that might work better."

More information: Linna Martén et al., "Ethnic networks can foster the economic integration of refugees," *PNAS* (2019).
www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1820345116

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