

Taking in refugees does not strongly influence xenophobia in East German communities

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The reception of refugees in East German communities did not lead to changes in voting behavior or attitudes to migration. This is the main

finding of a study conducted by Max Schaub (WZB), Johanna Gereke (MZES), and Delia Baldassarri (New York University). In the over 200 East German communities they examined, negative attitudes to migration were widespread. However, the arrival of refugees in the immediate neighborhood had hardly any influence on these attitudes.

"Widespread reservations about migration appear to have less to do with the local situation than with the impact of migration on society as a whole," explained Max Schaub, research fellow at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

236 East German Communities with and without refugees

The [social scientists](#) looked at 236 communities in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Thuringia, and Saxony where there had been relatively few foreigners before the so-called [refugee](#) crisis of 2015: fewer than 1.5 per cent of the total population. Xenophobic attitudes were widespread in all the communities under study. Migrants were taken in by half of these otherwise comparable communities. This allowed the researchers to examine how attitudes and behavior developed in communities with and without immigration. In addition to analyzing local election results between 2013 and 2017, they carried out extensive interviews with over 1,300 people in these communities.

Personal experience with refugees does not appear to be the deciding factor

"Our aim was to discover whether the attitudes and behavior of locals towards immigrants changed when they were living side by side. It was conceivable that exposure to refugees could boost xenophobia. At the

same time, contact with refugees might also lead to more positive attitudes towards foreigners," as Johanna Gereke of the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES) explained. Neither proved to be the case. The researchers conclude that personal experiences with refugees do not appear to be the most important factor guiding attitudes and voting behavior.

These findings do not mean that the arrival of refugees had no influence at all on the voting behavior and attitudes of the established population—only that local exposure had no such effects: "On the one hand, it is plausible that the reception of numerous refugees since 2015 led to growing ill feelings and to the rise of the AfD in recent years. But our study shows that it did not depend on whether people were exposed to refugees in their immediate context," Gereke and Schaub explain.

'Right-wing' and 'left-wing' viewpoints come a little closer

The research team made another interesting observation: even though the attitudes towards refugees in the communities under study did not change on average, the researchers found evidence that attitudes converged in the municipalities receiving refugees. They found that the presence of refugees had a somewhat moderating effect on individuals with more right-wing, anti-migration attitudes. Vice versa, people with more left-wing, migration-friendly attitudes became more critical.

More information: Max Schaub et al, Strangers in Hostile Lands: Exposure to Refugees and Right-Wing Support in Germany's Eastern Regions, *Comparative Political Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0010414020957675](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020957675)

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