Americans' views towards refugee resettlement: Not-in-my backyard (NIMBYism) and media frames

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A Dartmouth study finds that Americans are consistently less supportive of refugee resettlement within their own communities than nationally,

illustrating the prevalence of not-in-my-backyard syndrome (NIMBYism). The manner in which the media links refugee issues to national security concerns was also found to affect public support for resettlement. The findings are published in *Science Advances*.

"This study demonstrates the collective action problems countries face when seeking to increase the scale of refugee resettlement programs. While these policies are national in scope, their impact is primarily local. Yet citizens who ostensibly support these humanitarian policies appear to be less comfortable with the possibility of hosting refugees within their own communities," says Jeremy Ferwerda, an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth, who served as one of the co-authors of the study.

Following President Donald Trump's January 2017 executive order barring U.S. entry for citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries, Dartmouth researchers conducted a survey experiment to investigate how people's attitudes towards refugee resettlement are influenced by the geographic location of resettlement and media framing of refugees. In the experiment, participants were presented with one of two media frames: one frame depicted refugees as threatening to national security and the other attempted to rebut the security threat argument. Participants were then asked questions about their support for local and national refugee resettlement.

Regardless of age, gender, race, income, education, employment status, ideology, or partisanship, participants were less supportive of refugee resettlement in their own community compared to national resettlement. This finding suggests that NIMBYism is widespread across citizens with diverse demographic and political backgrounds.

Participants were also significantly less likely to support refugee resettlement after reading the threatening media frame.

Counterarguments rebutting the argument that refugees posed a national security threat did not appear to sway minds. These media framing results are consistent with prior research, which finds that negative framing of immigrants are more consequential for public opinion than positive frames.

However, the study also finds that people's reactions to negative media frames vary depending on local refugee population, which may serve as a proxy for prior contact with refugees. Specifically, participants living near large refugee populations were less responsive to threatening media frames compared to those living in areas with smaller or no refugee populations. This suggests that proximity to refugees may help mitigate the influence of threatening media frames.

Given that the January executive order instructs the government to consider a system in which localities may opt out of refugee resettlement, the findings provide insight into the challenges that could lie ahead for placing refugees in communities throughout the country.

More information: J. Ferwerda el al., "Explaining opposition to refugee resettlement: The role of NIMBYism and perceived threats," *Science Advances* (2017). advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/9/e1700812 , DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.1700812

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