

One municipality size does not fit all

The employment of refugees settled in different municipalities in Norway

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Abstract

Refugees coming to Norway are assigned to a municipality where they start their integration into the Norwegian society. Municipalities are very diverse in their population size, centrality, labour market conditions, share of immigrants, housing characteristics etc., and thus offer very different contexts for refugees' access to employment. Using rich register data, we study how the 'optimal' municipality for refugees' integration into the labour market (both at extensive and intensive margins) varies by gender and education. Results show that those assigned to small and medium sized municipalities in central areas are more likely to be employed five years after assignment. Location matters more for low skilled refugees. As high skilled refugees have a higher likelihood of being employed, we focus on how earnings and job quality vary by location in this group. Low skilled men seem to benefit from being assigned to municipalities with a large share of non-western immigrants, but suffer more than both women and high skilled men from being assigned to municipalities with high unemployment rates (especially in central locations). The Norwegian introductory program improves the labour market prospects of low skilled women.

1 Introduction

To ensure that refugees have similar opportunities as native workers or economic migrants to enter the labor market and access jobs that match their credentials, the successful labor market integration of refugees remains high on the political agenda in the international community (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). Receiving countries have implemented several policies to promote integration. In this paper, we focus on one such tool: the system for placement of refugees in Norway, where a central agency distributes new refugees to large and small Norwegian municipalities. The system was adopted in the 1990s, not only to limit the concentration of refugees in metropolitan areas and reduce the fiscal burden of integration from some municipalities, but also as an explicit strategy to accelerate integration (Valenta & Bunar, 2010). However, not much is known about what municipality characteristics promote the successful integration of refugees into the labor market, and even less is known about whether, and if so how, the ‘optimal’ municipality of settlement varies between different refugee groups.

Increasing our knowledge on this topic can not only be helpful for those who make decisions on where refugees should start their integration into the host society; it can also shed light on important general mechanisms for integration of immigrants. For instance, while small places may have advantages such as more close-knit and transparent communities and jobs that are easier for refugees to access, cities may have larger ethnic enclaves that help newly arrived refugees to navigate, as well as larger and more diverse labor markets and better access to higher education. Using the settlement of refugees into different municipalities as an analytical tool to disentangle the effect of such mechanisms and how the effect differs between refugee groups, can thus improve our general understanding of the factors that boost integration.

Municipality type can matter for integration in many ways, and many mechanisms may be at work simultaneously. In this study we focus on a set of characteristics that can help explain refugee’s integration into the labor market. In particular the focus of the paper is on the centrality (closeness to a large urban center) and (population) size of the municipality, as well as how centrality and population size interact with each other and with the local labor market conditions (e.g. municipal unemployment rates). The centrality of a municipality impacts the residents’ access to both labor markets and to public and private services such as healthcare, educational institutions, library services etc.. Furthermore, the size of the municipality itself may matter in other ways including the proximity to neighbors, and the housing structure.

Below we outline a few potential mechanisms that may be at play. In section 3, we introduce the main variables we use to aim at measuring them.

1.1 How municipality size and centrality may matter for integration

Smaller and close-knit societies may facilitate interaction with neighbors. This may be true both in central small municipalities as well as more remote ones. In those contexts, newly arrived people don't disappear in the crowd as they may in a large city. Contact with natives can, in turn, provide valuable language training and information about job vacancies, education opportunities as well as acquisition of host-country specific human capital, such as cultural norms. Also, small places are often more straightforward to navigate, so coping with a new life may be less demanding. Furthermore, employers in smaller places may have a stronger sense of local commitment, which may induce them to take extra responsibility for providing refugees opportunities in their business (Marks 2014). The labor market in small places might also be more favorable for refugees, for instance if it is more based on manual or low-skilled personnel. Recent trends observed in the US show that high skilled workers are now more over-represented in large cities than ever before (Autor, 2019). In more remote areas, by contrast, lower labor supply from depopulation may ease the entry of refugees into the labor market.

On the other hand, large places have other advantages. The labor market is larger, making it easier for refugees with various qualifications to find relevant jobs. Access to higher education is usually easier in the cities than in the countryside. The cities also have many low-skilled jobs, e.g. in transport, construction and the service industries. Further, ethnic enclaves may have positive effects for integration, through several channels. Groups of ethnic peers may disseminate useful information in a language that refugees are more familiar with (Bertrand et al. 2000), they may have knowledge of job vacancies in ethnic businesses or ethnic niches, jobs that might be easier to obtain partly because of lower wages and less need for speaking the natives' language. Previous research show mixed effects of ethnic enclaves on refugees' integration (Beaman, 2012; Damm, 2009; Edin, Fredriksson & Åslund, 2003).

Larger and more central municipalities are bound to have larger population densities and relatively more apartment blocks than in small and rural places where most families live in single-family houses. The type of housing stock and level of segregation within the municipality is key for how and what type of information interactions about employment opportunities take place. Crowded housing is also bound to affect refugees stress and ability to productively search for jobs. If unemployment is relatively high in the assigned

municipality, this problem may compound. Smaller municipalities, particularly those in less central areas, are less likely to suffer from these problems.

Finally, attitudes toward migrants may also vary both by centrality and population size. In an environment of large anti-immigrant sentiment, it might be more difficult and stressful for refugees to find employment. Often, people in urban places tend to have more positive attitudes towards immigration than rural residents. Data shows this to be the case in the US where rural Americans are more likely to support restrictive immigration policies than individuals in urban and suburban communities (Fennelly & Federico, 2008). Similar findings are related in Denmark where refugee allocation to the most urban municipalities had – if anything – a negative effect on the vote shares for anti-immigration parties in those municipalities (Dustmann, Vasiljeva, & Damm, 2016), and in Norway, where the attitudes to immigrants and immigration are generally most positive in places with populations above 100,000 (Blom, 2017).

2 Previous studies on integration and settlement policies

There are few large studies on the effects of refugee dispersal policies in multiple countries. A noticeable exception is Fasani, Frattini, & Minale (2018), who study the effect of dispersal policies on labor performance of refugees in several European countries. They find that refugees who arrived when a dispersal policy was in place had *worse* outcomes than those who could settle based on their own preferences, a finding they explain by the absence of ethnic networks, placement in disadvantaged areas and a lack of geographic mobility. However, their results show that as refugees start relocating within the host country, the initial detrimental effect of having been dispersed fades out. In Sweden, (Edin, Fredriksson, & Åslund, 2004) have evaluated the introduction of the placement policy in the mid-1980s, and they conclude that immigrants affected by the new policy experienced substantial long-run losses in their labor market integration. However, the bulk of this effect seems to stem from another policy change (from labor market assimilation to income support) which was also part of the reform.

All the Scandinavian countries currently have systems for refugee placements, but the design differs from country to country (Djuve & Kavli, 2007). Placement/settlement policies have become somewhat controversial, and Edin, Fredriksson, & Åslund (2004) note that some of the major arguments *in favor* of settlement policies have been the goals of avoiding the formation of ethnic enclaves and the distribution of the fiscal burden of immigrant

assimilation across municipalities. Many researchers have used the Swedish refugee placement policy to study causal effects on a number of outcomes, and find that local labor market conditions have a significant effect on refugees' employment and earnings (Åslund, Östh, & Zenou, 2010; Åslund & Rooth, 2007; Bevelander & Lundh, 2007). In other words, where a refugee is placed matters for his or her later labor market prospects. In a rare causal-design paper on the Norwegian placement policy, (Godøy, 2017) found that for resettlement refugees, being placed in a labor market where other non-OECD immigrants do well, increases own labor earnings up to 6 years after immigration.

A number of studies have also investigated the effect of ethnic enclaves – which is often correlated with the size of the municipality – and the general finding from Sweden is that ethnic peers positively influence newly arrived refugees when it comes to earnings (especially educated peers) (Edin et al., 2003), school achievement (Åslund, Edin, Fredriksson, & Grönqvist, 2011), youth crime (Grönqvist, Niknami, & Robling, 2015), welfare dependency (Åslund & Fredriksson, 2009) and self-employment (Andersson, 2018). They also find that the composition or quality of the enclave can be decisive for the direction of the effect (Andersson, 2018; Åslund & Fredriksson, 2009; Edin et al., 2003). In Denmark, for instance, (Damm, 2009, 2014) found that both the size and the quality of the enclave matters: Refugees in ethnic enclaves earned more than non-enclave members, and an increase in the enclave size raised the refugees' earnings. Also, a higher employment rate of co-national men in the neighborhood increased refugee men's real earnings. In the U.S., (Beaman, 2012) similarly found that increased social networks where the network members had recently arrived, and hence possessed limited social and cultural capital, lead to a deterioration of a political refugee's labor market outcomes whereas more tenured network members improved the probability of employment and higher wages.

Although the Norwegian refugee placement policy has received remarkably little attention from researchers working on causal identification, many descriptive studies have been conducted on refugees in Norway. Contrary to much of the research above from other Nordic countries, studies by Blom & Enes (2015) and Lillegård & Seierstad (2013) indicate that refugees who are placed in less central municipalities fare better (measured by whether they are employed or in education) than those who were placed in more central municipalities, when the strong and significant effect of local unemployment is controlled for. Blom and Enes (2015) show that lower local unemployment at time of settlement increases the chances of employment later on. Whether large central cities are the optimal place for settlement

across all education levels is also now under scrutiny in the US. Recent work by Autor (2019) notes how high skilled workers are more and more over represented in large central municipalities, at a rate not seen before within the US. Niches of employment for less educated may be found elsewhere.

From this literature, we would expect that refugees who are placed in large municipalities fare relatively better if there are many well integrated ethnic peers there. However, municipality size and the number of ethnic peers are not perfectly correlated, and the effects of these two factors should be separated to precisely estimate effect of being placed in a large or small municipality.

3 Research strategy

In the Norwegian system for refugee settlement, the level of coercion is generally higher than in for instance Sweden, with more limited possibilities for refugees to choose their own municipality (Valenta & Bunar, 2010). A central agency – IMDi – assigns each refugee to a municipality, according to an agreement between the government and each municipality on how many refugees the municipality accepts. If a refugee declines the proposed location and settle somewhere else, he or she may lose state sponsored assistance for housing, language training and economic support provided through an introduction programme for refugees. This settlement system is the same for quota/replacement refugees and asylum seekers who have been granted permission to stay. The system is thoroughly described in Tønnessen & Andersen (2019).

One essential question in this context is how random the settlement has been, and thus to what degree it can be used to draw causal conclusions about the effect of the municipality the refugees were settled in. As shown by Tønnessen & Andersen (2019), some refugee characteristics, for which we control in the analysis, correlate with some characteristics of municipality. Considering the way in which the policy was implemented, we argue that, once we control for refugee characteristics available in our data (and to which officers had access to), we will be relatively close to random assignment with limited remaining systematic sorting on unobservables. Unobserved characteristics of refugees are thus not likely to be correlated with key characteristics of municipality of interest that affect earnings capacity and employment.

Under these conditions we can use characteristics of the assigned municipality at the time of the allocation as key explanatory variables in the integration of refugees to the Norwegian

labor market. Our estimates are *intention to treat* estimates since we focus on the assigned municipality regardless of whether refugees have or not moved since. However, most refugees stay in the municipality they were assigned to: Five years after settlement, 7 out of 10 refugees were still living in the same municipality.

None of the country assignment policies (mostly in Nordic countries) revised in section 2 were completely random, and the following challenges of selection are recognized in all papers in some form or another. Compared with the country with most literature on the reform – Sweden – Norway provides the stronger case as compliance with assignment municipality was good. This was in part due to the existence of an introductory program finance via the municipality of assignment. We therefore believe that the Norwegian placement policy is an untapped opportunity to identify causal effects between municipality characteristics and integration outcomes for refugees settled there – perhaps even to a larger degree than in Sweden, where researchers lately have discussed whether it is actually possible to draw causal conclusions from that policy (Dahlberg, Edmark, & Berg, 2017; Nekby & Pettersson-Lidbom, 2017).

Our analytical strategy is closely related to that of Godøy (2016) in Norway and similar to that of Edin, Fredriksson, and Aslund (2003) and Damm (2009) in Sweden and Denmark. As robustness analysis, in the final paper we will re-run the models in a subsample of refugees arriving during the years 2008-2010 for whom the correlation between their characteristics and those of the municipalities they were settled in was mostly insignificant. This was particularly the case for quota refugees.

3.1 Data and methods

Norwegian register data allows us to explore many different individual outcomes and include a rich set of demographic characteristics. For each refugee, we have put together a dataset with register data on age and sex, employment and earnings, education, onward migration, marriages/divorce, fertility etc. Our period of observation spans from 2002 to 2015 covering 104,577 including refugees and their children.

We combine this dataset with information on all the municipalities in Norway that have received any refugee in this period (the large majority of them). Municipality characteristics include geographical and demographic characteristics (e.g. area, centrality, municipality economy, population size, age composition etc.), socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. level of education, income level, employment, business structure, etc.), degree of social problems (e.g.

unemployment, poverty) and integration-related characteristics (e.g. immigrant density and ethnic peers).

We link each individual to the characteristics of the municipality to which the refugee was assigned in either the year of placement or the year before (for robustness).

3.2 Outcome variables

To understand the process of integration in the labor market we focus both on the extensive and intensive margins of employment. Our outcomes of interest include 1) whether the individual is employed or not, 2) type of employment among those employed (self/salaried; full/part time; general sector; and 3) earnings.

To understand the dynamics of integration in the labor market we produce two types of analysis.

1) Study at the employment situation of refugees five years after arrival (for which we already have some basic results);

2) Analyze annual changes in employment and job characteristics during the first 8 years after arrival. In a similar way, previous papers in the literature have looked at annual progress (Edin et al 2004; Godoy; Damm (2009); Beaman et al). A focus on annual changes are interesting and they may be relevant across groups for different reasons. On one end the high skilled may be able to access employment relatively fast but may experience transitions to different jobs and improve characteristics and earnings after some time in Norway. Annual changes will allow us to look at how progress is contingent on municipality characteristics. For less skilled who may take longer to successfully enter the labor market, we are particularly interested in identifying municipal characteristics that ease that transition.

We run our analysis separately by gender and by education.¹ Further, we look at whether results are similar across types of refugees, whether quota refugees arriving directly from outside Norway or asylum seekers, assigned after their arrival and regularization.

¹ Missing education is a usual problem when dealing with refugee data. In our sample the percentage of missing is particularly large for a few countries, for which educational attainment is traditionally low (i.e. Eritrea (around 25%), Ethiopia (around 25%), Somalia (40%), Afghanistan (35%)). Not to lose those observations we will first, pool them together with low educated (as shown in sample tables at the end) and further conduct some multiple imputation analysis.

In addition to gender and education, we take into account whether the individual participated in an introductory program to see if this policy provides a pathway toward more stable work later on; faster entry into the labor market.

3.3 Municipality Characteristics

Our main characteristics of interest is whether the municipality is located or not in a central location within Norway. We use Statistics Norway's 2008 classification of centrality² for urban settlements in Norway that first divides urban settlements into 4 categories:

- a. Regional center (Oslo, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø)
- b. (other) settlements with population of more than 15.000
- c. Settlements with population 5000-14999
- d. Settlements with population below 5000

Next, the municipalities are categorized by distance to these settlements:

Centrality 3: Less than 75 minutes travel time from regional center (90 minutes from Oslo)

Centrality 2: Less than 60 min travel from settlement with population more than 15.000

Centrality 1: Less than 45 min travel from settlements with pop 5000-14.999

Centrality 0: All other municipalities

Travel time is defined as quickest travel type (apart from airplane)

This is the crosstab between the population size of refugee-receiving municipalities and their centrality³:

	Large city	Medium town	Small town	Minitown
Centrality 0			3	95
Centrality 1		1	9	33
Centrality 2		16	9	52
Centrality 3	10	28	45	69

² <https://www.ssb.no/klass/klassifikasjoner/128/versjon/468/koder>

³ The sums do not add up completely to the number of Norwegian municipalities, because a) some municipalities did not receive refugees in this period, and b) some municipalities are registered in two groups if they switched size group in the period.

In an additional analysis we will also include a new measure of centrality just released (Høydahl, 2017) that takes into account the number of workplaces and service functions that can be reached within 90 minutes of car driving. We believe that comparing the results of both measures of centrality may provide a better sense of mechanism. Nonetheless both measures alone do not capture the role of the size of the municipality on its own.

In addition, we combine those measures with dummies for municipality size. We define different types of municipalities by population size as follows: Minitown (<10k); Smalltown (10-20k); Mediumtown (20k-60k); Largecity (>60k).

Local unemployment is a critical variable in our analysis as we posit that arriving into a municipality with relatively high unemployment may hinder the changes of entering the labor market smoothly.

The general unemployment and employment rates differ little on average between Norway's smallest and largest municipalities, with just a few very remote municipalities in centrality 0 portraying relatively high unemployment rates. Within each centrality level, however there is relatively large heterogeneity on unemployment rates across municipalities, as show in the table below for the year 2017.

During the period we cover in the analysis, 2002-2018, average (and dispersion) of unemployment rates across municipalities did not suffer the same degree of cycles as in other European destination countries. Norway was comparatively not very hard hit by the financial crisis.

Unemployment (nov 2017)					
		Average	Max	Min	Variance
Centrality	0	1,8308725	9,8	0,2	1,4403918
	1	1,8755102	4,3	0,3	0,6131378
	2	2,1089744	4,5	0,9	0,5268015
	3	2,1285714	4,8	0,3	0,5334247

In addition, data on employment rates of immigrants in Norway's municipalities (Statistics Norway, 2018) suggest that there are, on average, no big differences between municipalities by degrees of centrality (the employment rates for Non-Western immigrants are marginally

higher in the least central and most central municipalities, and marginally lower for the middle categories).

Additional municipality variables employed in the analysis are:

1. Share of non-western migrants; whether the impact varies by municipality location
2. Employment rate of non-western migrants
3. Number of recently arrived refugees
4. Density and housing structure; settlement (% living in spaces where houses less than 50 meters apart and more than 200 people) and share of apartment blocks
5. Population age structure (share of 50-74 over 15-74)
6. Employment sectors and/or occupation of residents at municipality to proxy for employment opportunities.
7. Share of public employment
8. Income per capita municipality
9. Political preferences: 1) % vote for Progress party in the municipality (both municipal and national elections) to capture anti-immigrant sentiment. 2) % left (parties more willing to spend in welfare provisions) in municipal and national elections (we use party manifestos to code them)

4 Preliminary Results and Additional Analysis

We have already conducted some analysis on the likelihood of being employed five years after assignment. Below we summarize a few of those findings.

1. Small/medium municipality in centrality 2 and 3 seem to be associated with more employment after 5 years. Within centrality 3, other large cities that are not the capital do better than Oslo.
2. Location is more important for less skilled in terms of finding a job than for high skilled. As most high skilled find jobs, the interesting variation in that group will likely arise in the analysis of the quality of jobs. This is something that we will do in the paper.
3. Local unemployment detrimental for all refugees, but particularly for low educated men.
4. The share of non-western in municipality assigned seem to be positively associated with employment of low and mid-educated men.
5. Participating in the introductory program for refugees in the municipality seems to help less educated finding employment, and particularly low educated women, but not high educated refugees.

We look at whether the impact of some key municipality characteristics, such as the level of unemployment at arrival and the share of immigrants, impact chances of employment of newly arrived refugees differentially by the size of municipality. We find that:

1. A large share of Non-Western migrants does not seem to ease transition to jobs for higher educated refugees settled in central locations (centrality 2 and 3), but is positive for low educated, particularly in non-central locations.
2. The negative impact of high local unemployment found among low skilled men is especially detrimental in municipalities in centrality 2 and 3. Among high skilled men

and women, local unemployment does not affect chances of employment regardless of the degree of centrality. We hypothesize that it should have an impact on the quality of jobs and earnings and we intend to study this.

5 Conclusions

The results of this study will shed light on how placement in small or large municipalities affect labor market progress among refugees. This can have implications for how refugees are dispersed to municipalities in the future.

The study will also make it possible to draw conclusion on how different groups of refugees respond differently to the conditions in the municipalities, shedding light on important mechanisms for integration of different types of immigrants. For instance, families with children may benefit from other surrounding than single adults. There may also be differences between men and women; conditions that make it easier for men to participate in working life, may seem completely different for women because of local structures and sectors.

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