



Refugees in Norway: Stay or Leave Rural Areas?

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Key Message

There is limited research on how the contextual characteristics of residential areas influence the patterns of refugees' voluntary emigrations from the host country. Most existing empirical studies focus on return aspirations rather than actual emigrations and are often based on small samples covering a short time period. This policy brief provides unique, systematic evidence on actual emigration patterns for all cohorts of refugee families resettled in Norway between 1990 and 2018, with a follow-up period of up to 33 years, and who were subject to a spatial dispersal policy. Our findings reveal that the majority of resettled refugees remain in Norway indefinitely. However, families settled in rural areas are significantly more likely to emigrate compared to those in central locations. Those who emigrate tend to do so within a short time after arrival and, on average, they are less integrated into the labor market. Rather than promoting stability for the refugees, the dispersal policy appears to contribute to both migrations and emigrations from rural areas, which may reduce the effectiveness of local integration efforts and increase costs for the involved municipalities.

Main points

- We study emigrations out of Norway, and with few exceptions, the rates of emigration for refugee families are very low: four out of five resettled refugee families remain in Norway indefinitely.
- Temporary protection refugees are the main exception to this rule. People with temporary collective protection have a four times higher probability of emigration compared to individual asylum seekers with permanent residence permits.
- The majority of the emigrations occur during the first years of resettlement.
- Although 50 % of the refugees emigrating have not registered where they travel to, our data shows that 25% of all those who emigrate return to home country and 25% to another country. The top other destinations are Serbia and Montenegro, Great Britain and other Nordic countries.
- Emigration rates are 60% higher for families settled in rural municipalities. We find higher emigration rates for both male and female headed families, but there are indications that the effects are stronger for men. Descriptive statistics also reveal higher secondary moves within Norway for people residing in the most rural areas in comparison to more central places.
- Our data shows that immigrant employment rates are lower in rural areas compared to central areas. Moreover, rural areas lack urban amenities such as a variety of educational institutions, ethnic networks and a diverse labor market. These contextual features may drive the higher rates of emigration in rural areas.
- We use register data at the individual-level, which implies that we adjust for gender, country of origin, age, family situation, legal status, education and year of arrival. We also have information about changes in the family situation, moves within Norway, employment, and residential area features from 1990 until 2022. This information combined with so-called quasi-experimental features of the Norwegian settlement policy, implies that effect of residential place, whether it is urban or rural, is reliable and could be measured without serious bias.

Context and Background

Around 3,300 working-age refugee families were settled in Norway annually between 1990 and 2018, which makes up about 97,000 families. The dispersal policy is a central part of Norway's resettlement and integration policy, and consequences of the settlement policy and the efficiency of the integration program are very important as the refugee families by and large remain in Norway. Our estimate shows that 82% of the families remain after 20 years. Those that do emigrate out of Norway were often refugees from ex-Yugoslavia. This may be because they initially received temporary protection and because especially the Kosovo-war (1998-99) was brief. The share of working-age families remaining in Norway year-by-year is illustrated in Figure 1 for selected cohorts.

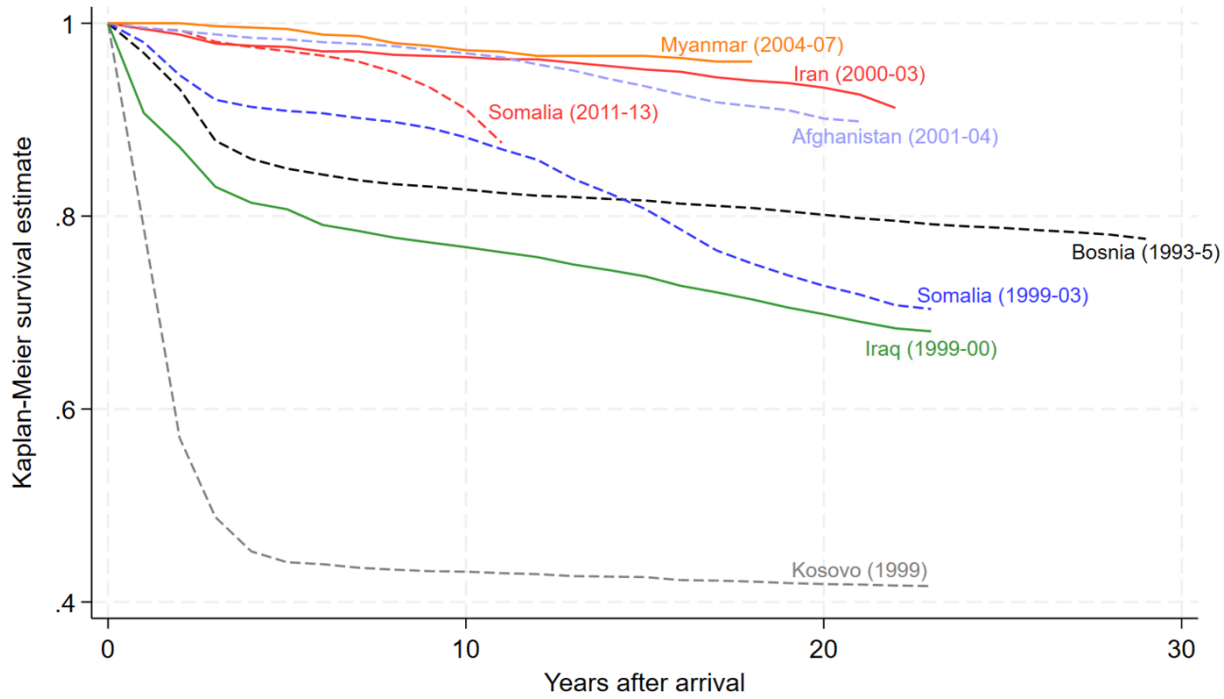


Figure 1 The curves visualize the probability of remaining in Norway for selected groups of refugees. Refugees from Kosovo arriving in 1999 have the lowest probability of remaining in Norway, and around 40 % are still in Norway after 20 years.

To share the responsibility of settlement and integration, to avoid ethnic concentrations in central areas, and to promote a rapid settlement, Norway employs a spatial dispersal policy, where families are assigned to a host municipality in an as-if random manner (e.g. Andersen et al 2023). Most municipalities in Norway contribute to the re-settlement task, and it raises the questions of whether there are different outcomes of the integration process and if the dispersal policy gives rise to variations in later observed rates of emigration. The differences in the local context facing newly arrived families are illustrated in Table 1 as non-western employment rates are much higher centrally compared to rurally.

Note that the distinction between urban and rural settlement is operationalized via adapted centrality classes derived by Statistics Norway (Høydahl 2017). Class 1 represents the most central municipalities (Oslo and surrounding areas) and class 5 are the most rural (e.g., Utsira island with 208 inhabitants in 2018). The basis for the centrality hierarchy, is the number of jobs and service institutions one can reach by car within 90 min from each residential area, adjusted for population size (ibid.). We find that the centrality classes are well suited to describe and capture contextual differences in areas of settlement and their relationship to the probability of emigration, as centrality reflects rural-urban characteristics such as employment opportunities, ethnic networks, and amenities (e.g., education, public transport, shops, religious institutions, or the degree of open land and nature).

Table 1: Employment rates, municipal average, for the non-western population, 2005-2018

	Municipal centrality					Total
	1, central	2	3	4	5, rural	
Men, non-western	60%	57%	54%	49%	41%	50%
Women, non-western	44%	42%	40%	38%	38%	40%
Number of municipalities	6	19	51	71	209	356

Note: Percent of municipal working-age non-western population with gross earnings of NOK 250,000 or more. We define “rural” municipalities as class five or higher according to the centrality index of Statistics Norway (2023). Source: Statistics Norway administrative data and authors’ calculations.

Findings and Methods

Our results show that the likelihood of emigration increases the more rurally the family is placed, as measured by the centrality class of the host municipality. For male-headed families, the rate of emigration is on average 60% higher for a family settled in one of the most rural municipalities ('5', see Table 1) as compared to a family settled in a central municipality ('1', see Table 1). Compared to this, families settled gradually *less* rural have gradually lower rates of emigration. For example, the rate of emigration is 37% higher for male-headed families settled in a municipality with an intermediate centrality class ('3', see Table 1), as compared with a similar family settled in one of the most central municipalities.

For female-headed families, the average rate of emigration is 37% higher when settled most rurally as compared to a central placed family. Female-headed families settled in municipalities with an intermediate centrality ('3', see Table 1), have an increased rate of emigration of 20% compared to families settled centrally. Overall, families who appear less successful in their labour market integration, have higher rates of emigration. This pattern, combined with the evidence of a higher secondary mobility from rural to central municipalities, may suggest integrational challenges in rural areas.

From which population has these results been derived? We include families where the head is 15-64 years of age on entry, and they all have a residence permit. The group consists of asylum seekers (80%), quota refugees (13%) and people granted temporary protection (7%). Moreover, the results are derived from models studying the time from immigration to Norway until the first recorded emigration event. Emigrations are observed from 1990 through the end of 2022, with a maximum follow-up of 33 years. We consider emigration to be a family-level decision, and our administrative data consists of approximately 97,000 families who entered between 1990 and 2018. Since each family is uniquely identified in various administrative registers, we can track them from arrival and link information about the legal status in Norway, age, gender, family type, education, country of origin, year of arrival as well as the municipality of residence over time.

In addition, tax register data on earned income from Statistics Norway allows us to determine the employment status of the family head. These data reveal that families in which the head successfully obtains employment have significantly lower rates of emigration. This association suggests that labor market integration may be a key factor influencing the decision to stay or emigrate.

Finally, as Statistics Norway's monitor for secondary mobility (Strøm et al. 2020), our data also reveals higher rates of internal mobility within Norway for families settled rurally, and that those who have moved at least once within Norway have lower rates of emigration. Bernard and Perlales (2022) and Skjerpen and Tønnessen (2024) have shown that these two types of moves may be alternative responses to similar conditions, such as variation in contextual characteristics related to different classes of centrality. So overall, being settled in rural areas seems to induce greater refugee mobility rather than stability.

Conclusions

- Based on historical observations, newly arrived refugees are likely to remain in Norway indefinitely. Only temporary protection refugees from ex-Yugoslavia had substantially higher rates of emigration.
- The place of settlement in Norway is not a free choice for the refugees. Families assigned to rural municipalities have substantially higher rates of emigration from Norway in the following years.
- Secondary mobility within Norway is also higher for families settled rurally. A higher mobility from rural areas may be linked to a lack of job-opportunities or other amenities that constitute the attractiveness of a place. Difficulties with settling in may ultimately lead to a decision to relocate internally that may cause a further delay in the labour market entry and integration into labour markets.

Policy recommendations

Our research aims to inform policymakers about central consequences of the settlement policy in relation to the probability of emigration of refugees in Norway. One important question is how our historical findings relate to future policies when it comes to voluntarily emigration, but also to integration processes.

- A stronger focus on systematic quantitative and qualitative evaluations of how the national integration policies are implemented and its effects on geographic mobility and individual outcomes; especially evidence of differences in the rural-urban dimension seems to be lacking. It is important to increase our understanding of what promotes residential stability and improves integration efforts. Do the national and local benefits of dispersed settlement outweigh the disadvantages for both refugees and the affected municipalities?
- The spatial dispersal policy which leaves the refugee with few choices on where to reside, seeks to promote a rapid settlement, and partly to avoid concentration of refugees in central areas. Future research could address the question of whether the spatial dispersal ensures equal opportunities for refugees settled in both rural and urban areas, as our results suggest that a rural settlement may have negative consequences for integration processes and outcomes.
- For refugees, a decision to emigrate or return to home country is a very complex one, and most refugees arriving in Norway, choose to stay, in particular if they have lived in the country for more than 2-3 years. Moreover, small support schemes for return to homeland exist in Norway, but are rarely used (Brekke, 2014). However, in the light of a large number of refugee arrivals, low rates of emigrations among previously settled refugees, policies may be designed to provide targeted incentives for voluntary safe repatriation for refugees who have stayed in the country for a very short time. However, this may be problematic, given that conflicts seem to be lasting.

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General contact information

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