

Refugees in towns: experiences of integration

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In countries of first asylum, transit and destination it is increasingly towns and cities that are absorbing refugees. We must look at what is happening at a local level to better understand urban integration as a process shared by refugees and host communities alike.

Towns – especially border towns in countries of first asylum – are at the frontline of refugee displacement and are often where refugees settle or spend long periods of time. When refugees move into a town they change the fabric of social, political, cultural and economic relations, which in turn influences the refugees' own experiences. The Refugees in Towns (RIT) project at the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, is a new initiative that seeks to deepen understanding of urban refugee integration through highlighting the dual experience of refugees and the towns where they have settled. Academic and policy research tends to focus on the national or global level, seldom bringing a local lens to the story. The RIT project explores integration as it happens in towns, which is an important dimension missing from our understanding both of refugee integration and of urban development.

The RIT project draws on a range of methods to develop case-studies of towns and cities that have received refugees.¹ Using qualitative research approaches it focuses on the 'ground-up' experience of host towns and refugee neighbourhoods within large cities. Research is conducted by people who live or work there, and each case-study presents a different angle depending on the perspective and interests of the researcher. The case-studies document the experiences of both refugees and hosts, and the impact an urban refugee population has on local services, on the governance of cities, and on social cohesion. The RIT project's scope is global and case-studies are already underway in North American towns where refugees have been resettled, in transit countries (Mexico and Greece) and countries of first asylum (including South Africa, Lebanon and Turkey).

Academically, the findings from the case-studies will strengthen theory building about refugee integration through documentation and analysis of the ways in which urban refugee and host communities evolve side by side. Practically, the project supports urban policy at the local level by providing guidance and information to community leaders, NGOs and town officials. Our aim is to help shape towns as immigrant- and refugee-friendly urban spaces that take full advantage of the benefits brought by refugees and to identify what practices work well in addressing the challenges of integration.

Why this project now?

In January 2017, the new Trump administration began to try to shift United States (US) refugee policy through introducing travel bans and suspending parts of the refugee programme. Towns across the US responded in different ways, some declaring themselves 'sanctuary cities' and offering other forms of resistance, while others supported Trump's efforts. These political developments at the federal and local levels are bound to affect the integration experience of both newly arrived and long-standing refugees and asylum seekers. Globally, the same political dynamics are at work. In countries of first asylum such as Jordan and Libya, in transit countries such as Greece and Mexico, and in destination countries such as Germany and Sweden, it is towns and cities that are absorbing refugees and migrants. It is crucial that we understand this experience and find ways to support towns where, in many cases, refugees will remain for long periods. The case-studies will:

Map the refugee population: By quantifying the distribution and size of different refugee populations by nationality in the town

October 2017

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each case-study will create a map showing whether and where refugees are clustered in particular areas and how this distribution has changed over time. It will show, for example, where refugees have relocated from other parts of the country to join an 'anchor community', as with Somalis coming from elsewhere in the US to join a long-standing community in Lewiston, Maine.

Document refugees' experiences: The case-studies will document economic and financial aspects: how refugees pursue livelihoods, their sources of income and support (both local and transnational) and their financial obligations (such as debts to smugglers and repayment of IOM travel loans). Furthermore, they will examine whether refugees have become politically active, exploring forms of mobilisation and the kinds of local and transnational social and political networks that have emerged. They will also investigate refugees' own understanding of integration, and explore refugees' attitudes towards the future.

Explore urban impact: Each case-study will explore the economic impacts of the refugees on the town, including on employment, business creation, trade links and the housing/rental market, as well as their impact on services, such as health and education, and on infrastructure, including transportation and water. Each case-study will examine how residents and urban authorities experience and interpret these impacts, and how they have responded socially and politically. The project will also identify how the municipal authorities and mayors have responded to refugee arrivals, and how they have sought to manage relations with the national or state government.

While these three broad investigative areas are intended as guidance for case-studies, we encourage other themes or avenues of investigation.

Contributing case-studies

If you are a refugee, aid worker or resident in a town hosting refugees, we encourage you to write a case-study. Where appropriate

we can pair you with a graduate student from Tufts University or elsewhere, who can help you with the different aspects. We also welcome submissions of independently conducted case-studies. Our goal is to hear different voices and local perspectives on how urban integration happens and we encourage case-studies that reflect diverse political viewpoints and voices.

Case-studies will be reviewed and added to the RIT database and be publicly available through the project's website. Each profiled town will have its own web page, initially 'owned' by the original researcher who can invite others to add to the case-study materials. We seek to use a variety of research approaches, including visual media such as documentary, theatre and dance, and we encourage creative approaches by artists of all kinds.

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1. A more detailed explanation of our research methods is available at <http://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/refugees-in-towns/>



Football team SV Babelsberg 03 of Potsdam, Germany, formed a 'Welcome United' team for refugee footballers, who are now fully integrated members of the club, with the same rights and obligations.