Stay or go?

Norwegian settlement policy and probability of refugees' emigration.

Quasi-experimental evidence[1].

Henrik Lindegaard Andersen[#] and Liv Osland[*]

[*]Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL)

[#]Norwegian Research Centre (NORCE)

Over the past few decades, millions of people have been compelled to flee and seek safety in other countries due to armed conflicts, persecution, violence or natural disasters in their home countries. Currently (2024), Europe is witnessing waves of people seeking protection, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan (Norwegian Refugee Council), and European countries are highly concerned about millions of Ukrainian refugees who are seeking rescue after Russia's invasion of their country in 2022. Over time, many European countries have introduced, or plan to introduce, more restrictive policies in particular following the large-scale influx of refugees in 2015, in addition to policies which encourage voluntary return. In line with this, refugees from Ukraine are currently mainly granted collective temporary protection under national specific emulations of EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). When the temporary protection is ended, within a reasonable period of time, and if peace is restored, these refugees are expected to return to their home country. From the perspective of the refugees, surveys have shown that refugees may prefer to repatriate even in situations when this is not considered to be safe. However, these aspirations may change over time and are stronger shortly after the flight. National and intergovernmental entities (e.g., UNHCR) have also favoured voluntarily and safe repatriation as a durable solution. Moreover, the number of people needing protection is unlikely to decrease in the future, it remains difficult to predict when asylum seekers arrive, how many there will be, and what the integration costs for host countries will be, both in the short and long term. Some countries may be more willing to accept a larger number of asylum seekers if resettlement is temporary, and repatriation is the planned outcome. However, in contrary to these stated preferences, evidence shows that most refugees remain in their new host country.

Our systematic knowledge about the characteristics of those who do return, and the features of the local places they choose to leave behind is limited. One key reason for this research gap is the lack of high-quality, longitudinal quantitative data. Furthermore, the overall context can vary greatly between countries, highlighting the need for case studies stemming from a diverse set of national settings. Our study focuses on Norway, where the comprehensive register data cover the entire refugee population, providing longitudinal information on individual and local

characteristics related to the place of residence. This data provides information about actual registered exits, rather than stated intentions to move which are frequently studied in the related literature. Moreover, Norway is an important receiving country relative to its own population.

Migration is a fundamental aspect of human history, driven by political, economic, and environmental factors. For refugees, migration may often be forced rather than voluntary, with displacement caused by armed conflict, persecution, or human rights violations. The decision to remain in a host country or emigrate again is shaped by multiple factors, including legal status, economic opportunities, social networks, and personal aspirations. This study contributes to the growing literature on refugee mobility by focusing on the Norwegian case, where a structured dispersal policy influences initial settlement patterns. Understanding what drives refugee emigration from Norway offers valuable insights for policymakers aiming to enhance integration efforts and improve retention rates among resettled refugee populations.

To analyze these patterns, we use detailed individual-level register data spanning from 1990 to 2022. This dataset allows us to adjust for key demographic and socioeconomic factors such as gender, country of origin, age, family situation, legal status, education, and year of arrival. Our study tracks refugee families from their arrival in Norway until their first recorded emigration event. The study covers a period of up to 33 years, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of long-term settlement patterns. We analyse refugees' subsequent migration from the host-country in a survival analysis framework, and use the standard Cox proportional hazards model as our framework.

The Norwegian settlement policy, which assigns refugee families to municipalities in an as-if random manner, provides a quasi-experimental framework that enables us to estimate the causal effect of settlement location on emigration probabilities with minimal bias. The study includes approximately 97,000 refugee families who arrived in Norway between 1990 and 2018, tracking their movements both within and outside Norway over time.

The dispersal policy is a central component of Norway's refugee integration strategy, aiming to distribute settlement responsibilities across municipalities, prevent ethnic concentrations in central urban areas, and facilitate rapid placement. The policy was introduced to avoid overburdening specific local governments and to promote balanced demographic distribution. Our estimates show that 82% of refugee families remain in Norway after 20 years. However, those who do emigrate are disproportionately from ex-Yugoslavia, likely due to their initial temporary protection status and the relatively brief duration of the Kosovo war (1998–1999). This suggests that the nature of the conflict in the country of origin, as well as the type of protection status granted upon arrival, significantly influence long-term settlement decisions.

A key contextual factor influencing refugee integration and mobility is the centrality of the settlement municipality. Norwegian municipalities are classified according to their centrality, ranging from highly urbanized areas such as Oslo and its surroundings to highly rural locations with limited access to jobs and services. Centrality is determined based on the number of jobs and service institutions accessible within a 90-minute drive, adjusted for population size. This classification captures contextual differences in settlement areas, including labor market opportunities, social networks, and public amenities. Our data reveals that employment rates

among non-western immigrants are highest in central municipalities and decrease with increasing rurality. In the most central municipalities, the employment rate for non-western men is 60%, whereas in the most rural municipalities, it is only 41%. A similar pattern is observed for women, with employment rates ranging from 44% in central areas to 38% in rural areas. This suggests that location plays a vital role in labor market participation, which in turn influences refugees' decisions to remain in Norway or emigrate.

Our findings indicate a strong relationship between settlement location and emigration likelihood. Refugee families placed in rural municipalities are, on average, 60% more likely to emigrate compared to those settled in central municipalities. This pattern holds for both male- and female-headed families, although the effect appears stronger for men. Families placed in municipalities with intermediate centrality exhibit lower emigration probabilities than those in rural areas, but still higher than those in central municipalities. This gradient suggests that access to employment opportunities and urban amenities plays a crucial role in the decision to emigrate. Limited job prospects in rural areas, combined with potential social isolation, may push refugees to seek better opportunities elsewhere, either within Norway or abroad.

Our results show that families where the head successfully enters the labor market have significantly lower emigration rates, highlighting the importance of labor market integration in promoting long-term settlement. Additionally, educational attainment appears to play a significant role, with higher levels of education associated with lower emigration probabilities.

In addition to emigration, our analysis reveals high rates of internal mobility within Norway among refugees initially settled in rural areas. Many of these families relocate to more central municipalities over time. Previous research suggests that internal relocation within Norway and international emigration may be alternative responses to similar challenges, such as limited employment opportunities and inadequate social infrastructure in rural areas. This pattern suggests that rural settlement may induce greater mobility rather than long-term stability. The ability to relocate internally depends on financial resources, social networks, and access to information about opportunities elsewhere. Those who face significant barriers to mobility may opt for emigration instead.