

Summary of the Survey of New Refugees December 2005–March 2009

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Introduction

This report summarises the key implications and findings of the Survey of New Refugees (SNR). The survey was commissioned by Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management within the UK Border Agency to provide a longitudinal study of refugee integration in the UK.

The full results of the survey are available in two separate reports. The first of these provides information on the characteristics of new refugees at the time of their asylum decision, including their education and qualifications before entering the UK, previous economic status and employment, English language ability, physical and emotional health, and their social support and service needs (Daniel et al., 2010). The second report uses longitudinal data from the survey to examine the integration of new refugees in the UK over time (Cebulla et al., 2010). This report was prepared by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), in collaboration with the UK Border Agency.

Key Implications

Support for refugees needs to be most intensive during the early months following the asylum decision. During this time refugees are most likely to change accommodation, seek employment and attend English language classes.

Good English language skills are associated with other aspects of integration, in particular refugees' entry into employment. Schemes that promote participation in language courses at the earliest opportunity may increase entry into employment. Refugees with persistently low English language skills, such as parents or guardians of a child, may require additional support.

Demand for English language training and National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation may increase with the introduction of faster case conclusion rates through the New Asylum Model (NAM+).

Some groups of refugees are likely to experience multiple barriers to integration in the UK. For example, those from Eritrea and Somalia appear, on average, to have lower English language ability and considerably fewer qualifications on arrival in the UK. Older refugees are more likely to have a low level of English language ability and to experience poorer health than younger refugees. These groups may require additional support to aid their integration.

Schemes that promote improved job-to-skill matches among refugees may wish to pay particular attention to those who held managerial, professional or skilled occupations before entering the UK.

Refugees tend to have poorer health than the general population of the UK. The poorer health of some refugees may need to be addressed before other integration objectives, such as employment, can be achieved.

Support covering the transition from NASS accommodation to more permanent housing may provide a more stable environment and reduce the risk of homelessness among refugees.

Context

Analysis, Research and Knowledge Management (ARK) within the UK Border Agency commissioned the Survey of New Refugees to provide an in-depth study of the integration of new refugees in the UK. The survey collected data on refugees at the time of asylum decision

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(‘the baseline’) and on integration outcomes 8, 15 and 21 months later. Integration was considered in terms of the English language skills, employment and housing of refugees, and how these changed over time.

Aim

The overall aim of the Survey of New Refugees was two-fold:

- (i) to collect information on the characteristics of refugees at the time of their asylum decision; and
- (ii) to provide data on the integration of new refugees in the UK over time.

The survey also planned to examine the impact of the Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services (SUNRISE) pilot, which was designed to aid refugee integration. However, due to the small number of SUNRISE participants who responded to the SNR, it was not possible to assess the effectiveness of this pilot programme specifically.

Methods

A questionnaire was distributed on a weekly basis, by post, to all people who were granted asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain in the UK between 1 December 2005 and 25 March 2007. These individuals were identified from the UK Border Agency Caseworker Information Database. The survey was distributed to all new refugees aged 18 and over with a verifiable postal address.

Initial questionnaires were sent one week after the asylum decision (the baseline) and follow-up questionnaires were sent 8, 15 and 21 months later. Each time point or ‘sweep’ was numbered: sweep 1 (baseline), sweep 2 (8 months), sweep 3 (15 months) and sweep 4 (21 months). More than 5,600 new refugees participated in the first sweep of the survey, decreasing to around 940 respondents in the fourth sweep. A total of 867 refugees participated in all four sweeps of the survey.

Responses to each questionnaire were weighted by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to represent all refugees who entered the UK within this time period (i.e. to be representative of all refugees, including non-respondents and those without verifiable addresses). Weighting also controlled for the loss of respondents between sweeps (attrition), although this may still partially affect the results from later sweeps. Analysis

methods included generating basic descriptive statistics and multivariate regression analyses, drawing on data from the individual surveys (cross-sectional analysis) or longitudinal data. Only statistically significant differences (at the 95% level of significance) are reported.

Findings

This research provides valuable information on the characteristics of refugees at the time of their asylum decision and their integration in the UK over time.

Profile of new refugees

The majority of refugees in this time period were men (63%) and aged under 35 (70%). The largest proportions were from Eritrea (17%) and Somalia (16%). Almost a third (31%) had spent less than six months in the UK before gaining refugee status. Nearly half of new refugees held qualifications and had been employed before they came to the UK, and half assessed themselves as being able to understand, speak, read or write English well. At the time of the asylum decision nearly half of refugees lived in accommodation provided by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). The health of refugees was generally poorer than the health of the general UK population and refugees reported needing a variety of types of help and support, often from community-based organisations.

Evidence of integration

Refugees’ English language skills, employment and housing were chosen as primary measures or indicators of integration. Overall there was evidence of integration over time.

Language

The English language skills of new refugees improved over time. Between the baseline (sweep 1) and 21-month follow-up (sweep 4) the proportion of new refugees reporting a high level of English language ability, compared with a native speaker, increased from 26 per cent to 38 per cent. The proportion of refugees with a low level of English language ability decreased from 38 per cent to 15 per cent.

Employment

Employment rates of new refugees also increased over time. The proportion of refugees who were employed increased from 34 per cent at 8 months (when first recorded) to 49 per cent at 21 months. However, this remained well below the UK average of 80 per cent (ONS, 2009) suggesting that many new refugees struggle to find stable employment. Over half of new refugees in employment felt that they were over-qualified for their jobs.

Housing

The proportion of refugees living in self-contained, rather than shared, accommodation increased over time and housing tended to become more stable (i.e. fewer home moves took place). Four per cent of refugees who participated in every sweep of the survey lived on the streets at some point during the 21-month period.¹ Refugees who lived in NASS accommodation at the time of their asylum decision were more likely than those who lived with family or friends to go on to experience homelessness.

Factors which influenced integration

A range of factors were associated with refugees' integration in the UK. The most important variables identified in this study were:

Country of origin. Refugees from some nationalities (such as Eritrea and Somalia) appeared to have lower English language skills, lower employment rates and a greater need for NASS accommodation support than those from other countries of origin.

Time in the United Kingdom. The longer the time spent in the UK prior to their asylum decision, the better refugees' English language skills were and the sooner their entry into employment.

English language skills. At all time points refugees with higher English language skills were more likely to be employed than refugees with lower language skills.

Age and sex. Men and younger refugees (below the age of 45) typically had better English language skills than women and older refugees, and were more likely to be employed.

Health. Refugees who reported being in good health were more likely to be employed than other refugees. Poor health was associated with slower improvements in English language ability over time.

Previous education and employment. Refugees who had spent more years in education, or who had formal qualifications before entering the UK, had better English language skills and were more likely to be employed eight months after the asylum decision than other refugees.

Family and friends. People who had no contact with family or friends at the baseline (rather than frequent contact) were most likely to improve their English language skills over time. Parents or guardians were particularly *unlikely* to improve their language skills over time.

New refugees were most likely to change accommodation, seek employment and attend English language classes in the first eight months following their asylum decision. Support for refugees is therefore likely to be most valuable during the early months following the asylum decision.

References

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¹ This figure is likely to underestimate the true proportion of refugees who experience homelessness since the SNR was a postal survey which required a fixed address.