

Knowledge Gaps

Literature Review: Refugee Urban Integration

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF

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This is a section of a broad literature review on refugee urban integration that was conducted by the Refugees in Towns (RIT) Project at Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University beginning in December 2017 and being continually updated with new publications. It was conducted to inform the public, academics, and policymakers about the state of refugee urban integration, and to prepare the RIT project for analysis of original data on refugee integration collected from towns around the world.

All references that are available online have a URL link provided in text. Full citations are in the Works Cited document.

The literature identifies at least eight knowledge gaps in our understanding of refugee urban integration:

1. Methodological gaps, i.e., limitations in the methods used for data collection and analysis for the purposes of building generalized theory
2. Data gaps, i.e., availability and accessibility of datasets on the topic
3. Domain synthesis gaps, i.e., a lack of connection between relevant domains such as the urban studies literature and the forced migration literature
4. Gaps in levels of analysis, i.e., little bridging between local, national, and international narratives into coherent structures
5. Thematic gaps, i.e., certain themes are over-researched, such as livelihoods, while other themes, such as the arts as a process for social integration, are under-researched
6. Geographical gaps, i.e., certain countries and cities are over-represented (often cities in the Global North), while others are under-represented (often cities in the Global South, particularly ones that are difficult for Western researchers to access)
7. Linguistic gaps, i.e., almost all research is published in English, requiring technical English writing abilities, and thereby exacerbating the aforementioned thematic and geographical gaps
8. Gaps in relevance, i.e., there is rarely utility of findings for policymakers, practitioners, and academic theory-building

Each of these gaps is detailed below.

Methodological Gaps

On the topic of refugee urban integration, there is a clear need for both a comprehensive review of the existing work and for additional empirical data.¹ There is widespread recognition of the lack of rigorously collected data, particularly longitudinal data (pre- and post-crises) that include the historical and multigenerational context.² Studies that utilize research methods beyond large-N surveys and official national statistics are needed to provide depth, texture, and nuance.³ The few longitudinal studies available are mostly academic ethnographies⁴ and practitioner reports.⁵ Most non-ethnographic data are collected with the goal of being “adequate” for short-term crises, but these data are not adequate for building long-term strategy when it comes to multigenerational processes like integration.⁶

City-level case studies on refugee integration tend to be based on desk reviews of Western-centric English language grey literature reports.⁷ Where original field research has been conducted, the methods are rarely shared, particularly when it comes to sampling, and the limitations and inherent biases of the research are also rarely discussed.⁸ Citing [Hollifield et al. 2002](#), [Baird et al. \(2017\)](#) point out: “A majority of studies evaluating refugee responses to resettlement rely on quantitative measures that have seldom been linguistically or culturally adapted to the population, which renders the validity of conclusions questionable.” In their review of 183 studies of refugee research, [Hollifield et al. \(2002\)](#) found that “most studies had limited or untested reliability and validity with these populations.”

Data Gaps

There are many national-level datasets on refugee urban integration but relatively few datasets at the municipal or local levels,⁹ and there is great demand among practitioners and policymakers for city-level data¹⁰ as today more than 60% of registered refugees live in cities,¹¹ over half of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) caseload are urban refugees,¹² and the number, diversity, needs, and capacities of immigrants in cities have increased greatly in recent years.¹³

In contrast to this growing demand, however, municipal-level research on refugees relies almost entirely on censuses, surveys, population registers, and administrative databases from naturalization offices,¹⁴ despite the fact that these datasets are usually not gathered or stored in a way that makes them comparable across cities or accessible to researchers.¹⁵ Such data are also largely unavailable in developing cities where most refugee integration is occurring.¹⁶ Two notable exceptions are the Atlas of Urban Expansion, with common, detailed, and robust datasets for 4,231 cities in both the Global North and South,¹⁷ and the 100 Resilient Cities initiative that shares best practices for managing forced migration risk—among other stressors—between 100 seemingly

¹ [National Academies of Sciences 2015](#); [World Bank Group 2016](#)

² [Bürkin and Chindea 2012](#); [Fábos and Isotalo 2014](#); [Tang 2015](#); [Allen 2009](#); [Evans and Fitzgerald, 2017](#); [Beirens and Fratzke 2017](#); [Kallick and Mathema 2016](#); [Ott 2013](#); [IRC 2018](#); [Brown et al. 2015](#)

³ [Bürkin and Chindea 2012](#); [Herman 1997: 2](#); [Kobia and Cranfield 2009: 11](#); [Read, Taithe and Mac Ginty 2016](#)

⁴ For example, [Tang 2015](#)

⁵ For example, [Colorado Office of Economic Security 2016](#); [IRC 2018](#)

⁶ [World Bank Group 2017: 27](#)

⁷ [Barongo-Muweke 2016](#)

⁸ Producing “methodological nationalism.” See [Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003](#)

⁹ [Beier and Fritzsche 2017](#); [IOM 2016](#); [UNESCO 2016](#); [Vargas 2018](#)

¹⁰ [Goodall 2011](#); [UNHCR 2009](#); [UNHCR 2010](#)

¹¹ [Brandt 2017](#); [IOM 2015](#)

¹² [Sanyal 2012: 637](#); [UNHCR 2012](#)

¹³ [Congressa 2017](#); [Katz and Jones 2017](#)

¹⁴ [IOM 2015](#)

¹⁵ [Vargas 2018](#)

¹⁶ [Scott and Storper 2015](#); [Schindler 2017](#)

¹⁷ [Vargas 2018](#)

disparate cities experiencing similar challenges, such as migration.¹⁸ Both of these examples provide a model to be emulated.

Domain Synthesis Gaps

Integration challenges have been a feature of urban settings since the early 2000s, but there is a lack of meaningful dialogue between urban studies and international migration scholars.¹⁹ Many findings from urban studies—such as best practices in sustainable housing—are directly transferable to urban displacement settings,²⁰ yet this cross-pollination between disciplines is not widely occurring. Integration includes numerous domains such as education, sociology, law, and housing, but these domains are not speaking directly with the forced migration field. For example, humanitarian discourse on social integration has not incorporated the extensive body of research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from the literature on psychology. Meanwhile, the study of migrants' integration to healthcare systems has not been synthesized with the broader literature on healthcare provision to disadvantaged or disenfranchised populations of urban poor, despite obvious overlaps.

Gaps in Levels of Analysis

Refugees are generally discussed on one of three levels of analysis: the transnational or national level, the local or city level, and the individual level. Each level shares similar themes and narratives, but rarely connects to the themes and narratives of other levels.²¹ As an illustration, national-level studies of the economic participation of refugees in the U.S. are disconnected from narratives of local struggle with unemployment or workplace discrimination.²² There is thus a need to synthesize large aggregated national and international datasets with “microlevel-” municipal, local, neighborhood, and individual-level studies.²³ Inversely, individual- and city-level case studies are rarely contextualized within broader national or multinational megatrends.²⁴

These disconnects present challenges for practitioners and policymakers who only have access to national or international datasets, yet “design, deliver, and finance...many of the engines of integration” at the local and individual levels.²⁵ This gap also presents problems for building theory, as large national datasets may reveal important trends—for example, the key variables for predicting effective economic integration—but do not have the detail or nuance of a local- or individual-level narrative that is needed to find the causal relationship between those variables.²⁶ The city as a level of analysis offers a useful mid-level link between national and individual narratives.²⁷

Thematic Gaps

The refugee urban integration literature tends to aggregate different migrant groups without defining or considering differences between subgroups; for example, the often-unrecognized diversity in experiences of different genders within the same nationality of forced migrants.²⁸ It also tends to focus on the most-accessible groups while largely ignoring less-accessible groups. For example, while there is widespread research on registered refugees in capital cities, there is relatively little research on unregistered refugees and the forcibly

¹⁸ [100RC 2016](#)

¹⁹ [Tibaijuka 2010](#): 4; [UNESCO 2016](#)

²⁰ [Fan 2012](#)

²¹ [Fábos 2017](#); [Zetter and Deikun 2010](#)

²² For example, [Connor 2010](#); [Boston Analytics 2017](#)

²³ [World Bank Group 2017](#): 28

²⁴ [Swilling and Annecke 2012](#)

²⁵ [Brandt 2017](#); see also [Betts, Ali and Memişoğlu 2017](#); [Haysom 2013](#): 11

²⁶ [Ott 2013](#)

²⁷ [Muggah 2017](#)

²⁸ For example, [Women's Refugee Commission 2011](#). See also [IRC 2018](#); [Martin and Copeland 1988](#); [Ott 2013](#); [Women's Refugee Commission 2011](#); [Young 1996](#)

displaced who do not consider themselves refugees,²⁹ or the illegible places in cities that often host these groups.³⁰

Research on the economic integration of migrants in particular has several large thematic gaps. First, data in this domain are rarely disaggregated by type of migrant, clustering forcibly displaced and economic migrants together.³¹ Economic integration research also tends to use data at the national level that describe formal white-market dynamics, but misses the expansive “shadow economies” (i.e., grey- and black-market economic activity)³² that are often more relevant to forced migrants.³³

Research also tends to focus on formal government-sponsored resettlement and UNHCR’s local integration durable solution, rather than the much more common informal systems—like irregular migration, the grey economy, and loosely affiliated community-based organizations or networks—that migrants and host populations utilize to move and become integrated.³⁴

And while economic aspects of integration are thoroughly researched, other domains are under-researched, including social capital,³⁵ “language proficiency, educational attainment, employment, and social connections,”³⁶ as well as the way place and space affect integration.³⁷

Geographical Gaps

“Methodological nationalism” results in wide geographical gaps in the literature. Most forcible displacement takes place in the developing world as South-South migration,³⁸ but thorough datasets mostly cover regular international migration between countries in the Global North.³⁹ This creates distorted perceptions; for example, large statistical surveys suggest forced migration is having an “uneven impact” globally, concentrating in the Middle East, Central and East Africa, and Central America,⁴⁰ but this may only reflect Western biases in definitions, sampling, capacity, and the interests of Western institutions. By contrast, more localized qualitative studies find a diffuse geographical range of impact from forced migration (see map by Van Hear, below).⁴¹

²⁹ [Buscher 2003](#); [World Bank Group 2017](#): 30

³⁰ [Kobia and Cranfield 2009](#)

³¹ For example, [De Haas 2010](#)

³² For example, [De Haas 2010](#); [IMF 2016](#)

³³ Noting that black and grey markets account for 22% of all global economic activity, and as high as 86% of economic activity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where the majority of refugees reside. See [Elgin and Oztunali 2012](#); [Dreher and Schneider 2010](#)

³⁴ [Goldenziel 2016](#)

³⁵ Aldrich 2012: 13

³⁶ [Beirens and Fratzke 2017](#)

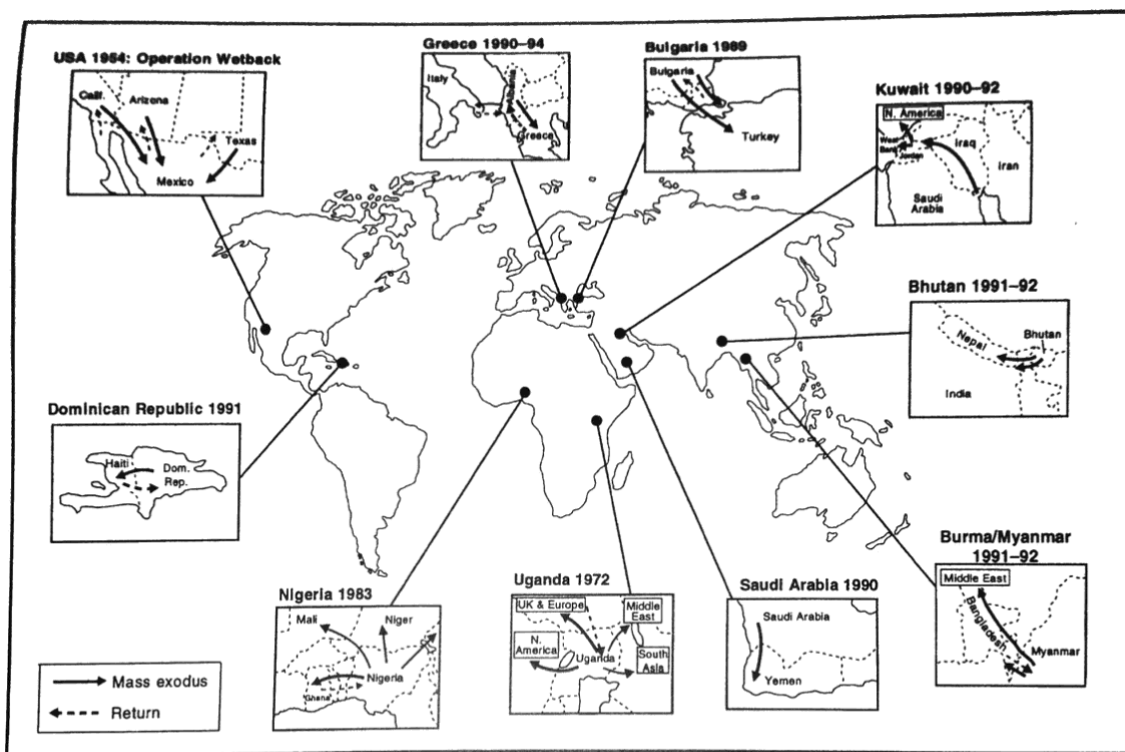
³⁷ [Bose 2017](#)

³⁸ [Ratha and Shaw 2007](#)

³⁹ [World Bank Group 2017](#): 3; [Sarzin 2017](#)

⁴⁰ Serageldin et al. 2014; [World Bank Group 2017](#): 4

⁴¹ For example, Van Hear 1998: xv



Ten migration crises

Source: Van Hear 1998: xv.

Internal migration in China, for example, is roughly equal in scale to all other global international migration combined.⁴² Millions are displaced by disasters⁴³ and civil-ethnic conflict in China,⁴⁴ but these migrations are rarely studied as they are not usually tallied in Western accounting of forcible displacement and do not fall within the political interests of Western migration actors.

Geographically and typologically, some cities are also more studied than others, with most research attention paid to capital cities,⁴⁵ medium-sized cities with populations of 100,000–300,000,⁴⁶ and, within the U.S., “traditional gateways’ such as Chicago, Boston, and New York.”⁴⁷ Regionally, there are significant city-level research gaps in “Latin America, New Zealand, Japan, and Africa.”⁴⁸

Migration policy also features geographical silos. While Western institutions fixate on the Geneva Convention and UNHCR, other regional policy discourses, norms, and agreements are rarely noted in the literature. The Bali Process, for example, originally featured “no reference to refugees or human rights or to the role of UNHCR,” with these concepts and actors only incorporated later.⁴⁹ Urbanization, meanwhile, has been studied mainly in cities in the Global North by Western institutions, largely based in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York.⁵⁰ Any general theory of refugee urban integration would need to overcome these gaps and avoid methodological nationalism.⁵¹

⁴² [Lu and Xia 2016](#); [UN “International Migration Report” 2017](#)

⁴³ [Lavell and Ginnetti 2014](#)

⁴⁴ [Guerif 2010](#); [Radcliff 2015](#); [Peterson 2018](#)

⁴⁵ [Betts, Ali and Memişoğlu 2017](#)

⁴⁶ [Jesuit Refugee Service 2013](#)

⁴⁷ [Varsanyi 2010](#): 10

⁴⁸ [Parker and Maynard 2015](#)

⁴⁹ [Kneebone 2014](#)

⁵⁰ [Parnell and Robinson 2012](#); [Scott and Storper 2015](#); [Schindler 2017](#)

⁵¹ [Beauchemin 2014](#)

Linguistic Gaps

Both the production of knowledge and the dissemination of findings on refugee urban integration largely take place in English and French⁵² despite focusing largely on non-English speaking populations or countries in the Global South.⁵³ A review of local translations of the key terms “refugee,” “urban,” and “integration” to other languages reveals that while English-language concepts may have a literal translation (e.g., in Spanish, Shona); these translated terms usually carry different emotional, historical, and cultural baggage that is not present in the English-language term (especially in Arabic, Chinese, and Turkish). In some languages, there is a complete inability to even literally translate the English term in a meaningful way at all (e.g., in Pashto, Dari, and Urdu).

Gaps in Relevance

Despite demand for rigorous academic research by practitioners and policymakers, producing relevant findings remains a challenge for researchers. One reason is that quantitative, tech-driven findings are easy to collect but difficult to analyze and disseminate to those who can utilize these findings.⁵⁴ Another reason is that practitioners are typically concerned with answers to “how to” questions, while academics focus on answers to “why” questions about context and processes.⁵⁵ Finally, there are common disagreements between these groups on what kinds of lines of inquiry are most important or relevant, with policymakers and practitioners tending to focus on shorter-term established questions, while academics focus on longer-term unexplored questions.⁵⁶

⁵² Jesuit Refugee Service 2013

⁵³ For example, [Scottish Refugee Council 2009](#) or [Kobia and Cranfield 2009](#)

⁵⁴ [Read, Taihe and Mac Ginty 2016](#)

⁵⁵ [Brown et al. 2015](#)

⁵⁶ [Jacobsen and Landau 2003](#)