

Ida Kjeøy, Ingrid Gaarder Harsheim,

Elisabeth Rustøen Skregelid, Guri Tyldum and Nina Skrove Falch

Secondary migration among refugees – causes and consequences





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This report is about refugees in Norway who move from their original settlement municipality: secondary migration. We explore the causes and consequences of this type of migration and discuss how settlement and integration practices by national and local authorities shape refugees' migration patterns. The report draws on analyses of interviews with refugees, municipal employees and staff at the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), a survey of managers in local authorities' refugee service and registry data on migration patterns and descriptive characteristics of refugees settled in Norway between 2010 and 2023.

In Norway, it is the authorities, not the refugees themselves, who decide where refugees are to be settled, and refugees are settled less centrally than the general population live. We find that after seven years, one in three refugees had moved, while two in three still lived in their original settlement municipality. After secondary migration, refugees' settlement patterns are therefore quite similar to those of the general population. The vast majority end up living in a municipality they did not choose themselves.

Single refugees – often young men – are more likely to move. People with children are more likely to stay where they are than those without. Among those who settled in Norway between 2010 and 2016 and have since moved, some have seen an improvement in income, while others have not. Forty-one per cent had a higher income one year after moving, while others report little change. Twenty-four per cent had a lower income after moving. However, everyone we interviewed for this report said that, overall, their situation had improved since moving.

For the refugees we have interviewed, the reasons for moving are the same as for others living in Norway: they move for studies, a different job market or to live closer to family or friends. There is also a significant group who move because they do not feel at home or lack belonging in the municipality they have been settled in. Some say that they were lonely, others that they missed someone who can provide practical help in everyday life. Among those who move, there are also persons who have been settled in municipalities that do not have the necessary services – and who find that they have to move to gain access to relevant education or health services.

When refugees do move, they tend to move to larger and more central municipalities. They move *away from* areas with a small population to places with a larger population, and to places where they have a social network that can support them, typically Eastern Norway and more urban areas. This can lead to a concentration of certain refugee groups in some areas. A local authority can refuse to settle refugees, but it cannot control the number of refugees who choose to live there through secondary migration. Nevertheless, our survey of Norwegian local authorities shows that most of these municipalities do *not* consider secondary migration to be a challenge.

A few municipalities experience secondary migration as demanding. Employees in local authorities experiencing high levels of secondary migration do not consider those who move most frequently (typically young, single people with an income) as problematic. Rather, it is the influx of families with children, people with health challenges, those who speak little Norwegian and people outside the labour market who are unable to support

themselves, that some local authorities find challenging. Part of the reason for this is the pressure that these groups put on welfare budgets. Meanwhile, our interviews with refugees in those same municipalities show that a move that may be perceived as challenging for a local authority can still be a positive step for the refugee. If they are unable to make social connections, learn Norwegian or find a job, life may still be easier in a municipality where others speak their language and where help and support are available when needed.

Given that many refugees' lives improve after secondary migration, it is by no means certain that attempts should be made to restrict this type of movement. At the same time, it may be wise to make arrangements so that as many refugees as possible do not need to move from the settlement municipality. Secondary migration can be negative for municipalities that many move from, because they may stop thinking long-term in their integration efforts and have difficulties dimensioning services. When refugees move from the smallest municipalities in the country to more central urban municipalities, it can also contribute to the concentration of living conditions problems. In this way, secondary migration can contribute to the opposite of the authorities' desire for dispersed settlement. Not least, there are many refugees who themselves want stability and not to have to tear children from the local community again after years of being refugees and constant separations. Therefore, we point out measures that can help more people stay in their original settlement municipality.

Among those who stay in remote municipalities with few inhabitants, several say that they originally thought that they would never stay here longer than they needed to. To their own surprise, they have realized that they now want to stay – and they point to an experience of becoming part of a community and feeling at home in the municipality as the reason for staying. Such local integration is not something that has come about by itself but is often a consequence of good integration work in the municipality, with a focus on comprehensive follow-up of the refugees beyond Norwegian language training and help in finding a job. The voluntary sector often plays an important role in this work.

Rights to an introduction program, introduction support and social benefits are linked to the refugee staying in the original settlement municipality for the first five years after settlement. We do not find a significant change in moving patterns after five years. There are, however, several trends in our data that collectively indicate that the restrictions on rights can affect moving among refugees, and they may also contribute to more people staying in their original settlement municipality. At the same time, we see that these restrictions on rights, as they are interpreted in the municipalities today, can also have negative consequences for refugees' labour market participation.

If the goal is to facilitate less secondary migration, it may be appropriate for the authorities to think more long-term when linking refugees and municipalities. Some refugees are better placed to thrive in non-central municipalities than others, for example because they have experience from the districts or themselves want to live in a small place. The authorities can also do more to ensure that families do not have to move to access necessary services such as upper secondary school or health services.

The authorities should also consider whether it is appropriate for all municipalities in the country to settle, also during periods of high arrival numbers. Municipalities with very high moving rates are mostly small, non-central municipalities that only settle in the years when there are high arrival numbers. Many of these municipalities have little continuity in settlement, little opportunity to build up and retain expertise on refugees and integration, and thus poorer conditions for achieving good local integration, compared to medium-sized and larger municipalities. When there are also few people in the municipality with the same background as themselves, and many refugees also have a fear of or resistance to being settled in such places, the work that employees in such municipalities must put in to succeed in integration is significantly greater. We find several municipalities where all refugees who were settled in the period 2010–2016 have moved on. 25 municipalities have a moving rate of 90 percent or more, while 60 municipalities have a moving rate of 80 percent or higher. In 9 municipalities, all refugees who were settled during the period have moved by 2023.

Today, the authorities focus primarily on ensuring rapid and spread settlement, and that refugees have access to necessary services in the first years after settlement. It is not a stated goal that the connection between refugee and municipality should be made in a way that increases the chance that the refugee will stay. In light of the challenges associated with moving, for municipalities and the refugees themselves, it may, however, be appropriate to include a specific goal that effective settlement involves settling refugees in municipalities they do not need to move from.

Fafo

Institute for Labour and Social Research

Borggata 2B, Oslo

P.O. Box 2947 Tøyen, NO-0608 Oslo

Telephone: +47 22 08 86 00

E-mail: fafo@fafo.no

fafo.no

