

Determinants of Refugee Naturalization in the United States: 2000-2014

Despite the scale of the United States refugee program, policymakers and the public lack systematic information on how refugees adapt to their new environment. We focus on naturalization as a key measure of integration, and draw on administrative data to provide direct estimates of the naturalization rates among refugees. Our results show that, on average, refugees are more likely to acquire citizenship than other legal permanent residents. We also identify the set of factors that promote or constrain naturalization among refugees. These findings have important implications for policymakers seeking to improve the integration of refugees within the United States.

The United States operates the world's largest refugee resettlement program, having resettled over 3 million refugees since 1975. While resettlement entails humanitarian protection and the chance to begin a new life, refugees nevertheless face significant challenges after arrival. Many arrive with poor health, interrupted educations, and a lack of knowledge concerning English and American culture. And while refugees frequently experience significant psychological and physical trauma in their origin countries, they are also likely to encounter discrimination, lack of opportunity, and poverty within their new environment (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005; Marshall, Schell, Elliott, Berthold, & Chun, 2005; McBrien, 2005).

The challenges that refugees face after arrival provide clear incentives for governments and non-governmental organizations to facilitate refugees' adaptation to life in the United States. Yet these barriers to integration also raise questions for policymakers. Every year, policymakers decide how many refugees to admit, from which sending countries, and where to send them in the United States. Although these decisions are primarily made on the basis of humanitarian need, expectations concerning whether refugees will be able to integrate into American society also play a role in shaping the contours of the program (Kennedy, 1981; Zucker, 1983). Moreover, whether refugees successfully integrate can be expected to influence public support for refugee resettlement.

Yet despite the scale and salience of the resettlement program and the policy challenges that surround it, policymakers and scholars currently lack reliable data on the degree to which refugees succeed in adapting to life within the United States. Refugee outcomes are limited to short-term employment indicators, and are only directly tracked by refugee resettlement agencies for the first 90-180 days, after which refugees and their families are expected to transition to economic self-sufficiency. The scattered data that exists after this initial period largely consists of anecdotal evidence, convenience samples (Administration for Children and Families, 2015), or imputed data from partial population surveys (Evans & Fitzgerald, 2017; M. Fix, Hooper, & Zong, 2017). None of these sources permit a direct and accurate portrait of the degree to which refugees integrate into American society.

The lack of data on long-term integration outcomes is concerning from a policy perspective. It means that policymakers cannot learn from past success or failures and harness this evidence in the design of refugee programs. Knowledge of outcomes would also permit policymakers to directly identify subpopulations of refugees who require targeted support, or implement innovations that could improve long-term integration outcomes. The absence of systematic evidence on integration outcomes also increases the challenge of maintaining political support in hosting communities.

To address this evidence gap, we draw on linked administrative data to provide the first systematic analysis of the long-term integration of refugees within the United States. We focus on naturalization, which the scholarly literature has identified as a key measure of the political, civic, and social integration

of immigrants. In contrast to previous approaches, we directly measure naturalization rates using administrative data maintained by the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) at the Department of Homeland Security. These data span the complete population of refugees resettled in the 2000-2010 period, and include background characteristics as well as linked naturalization outcomes.

Citizenship is widely regarded as an important milestone of immigrant integration, and naturalization rates are commonly used by governments and intergovernmental organizations as a core measure of integration (OECD, 2011; OECD/European Union, 2015; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Waters & Pineau, 2015) and provides a costly signal of a long-lasting commitment to the host country. Because all resettled refugees have the option to acquire citizenship after five years in the United States, whether refugees choose to naturalize or not thus offers a concrete behavioral measure of long-term integration.

Beyond systematically documenting the naturalization status of refugees, we also explore the factors that determine citizenship acquisition. Building on studies of immigrant naturalization, we focus on three major categories of determinants. First, we examine whether socio-demographic characteristics condition the likelihood of naturalization. If the decision to naturalize reflects the ease of integrating more generally, we would expect refugee naturalization to be a function of factors that have been theorized to promote successful integration more broadly, including gender, education, the strength of previous ties to United States citizens, the age at which refugees arrived in the U.S., and family size, among others (Waters & Pineau, 2015).

Second, we examine the impact of countries of origin on naturalization rates. Prior research points to the ways in which immigrants' home countries may influence the choice about whether to acquire citizenship in the host country. Less favorable conditions in the home country may increase the probability of naturalization, simultaneously limiting the ability of immigrants to return home and increasing the pressure on them to obtain the benefits of citizenship (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). For refugees who have fled violence or suffered trauma in their countries of origin, these pressures may be more variable and extreme. Country of origin may also capture differing cultural values and practices that affect the desirability of naturalization or impede the process of integration.

Third, we examine how the social context in which refugees are embedded shapes the decision to naturalize (Abascal, 2017; Yang, 1994). The local environments in which refugees are initially placed differ from one another with respect to employment opportunities, the policy environment, and the density of co-nationals and support networks in the local community. Because decisions about initial placement are made by the U.S. government and refugee resettlement agencies, evidence that geographic context is relevant for downstream integration outcomes is highly relevant to the policy process.

Selected Results

Figure 1: Refugee Naturalization Rates by Year of Arrivals. Shows the naturalization rates as of 2015 for refugees who arrived in the United States between 2000-2010.

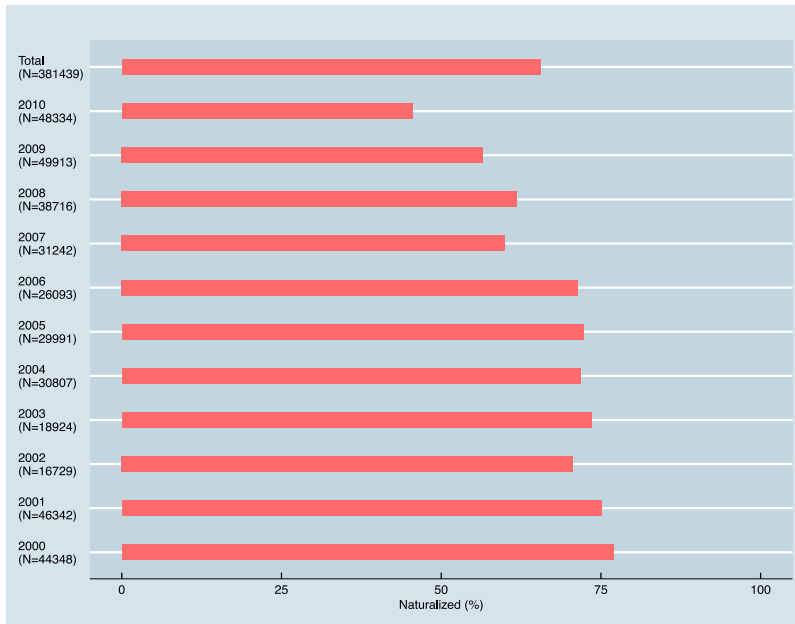


Figure 2: Naturalization Rates for Refugees and Non-Refugee Immigrants: 2000-2010

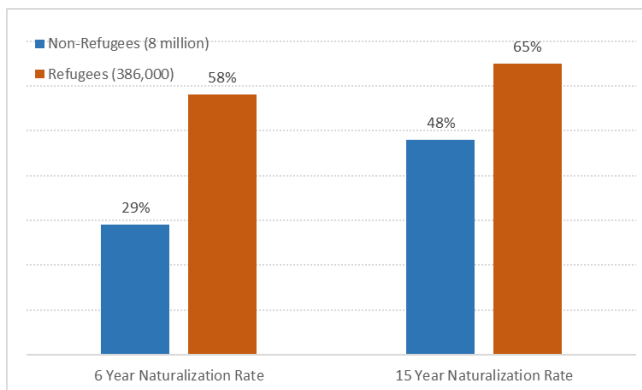


Figure 3: Effects of Refugee Characteristics on Probability of Naturalization. Estimates are from a linear probability model with clustered standard errors; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The unfilled points without horizontal bars denote the attribute value that is the reference category for each characteristic. Sample consists of refugees resettled between 2000-2010; N= 381,439.

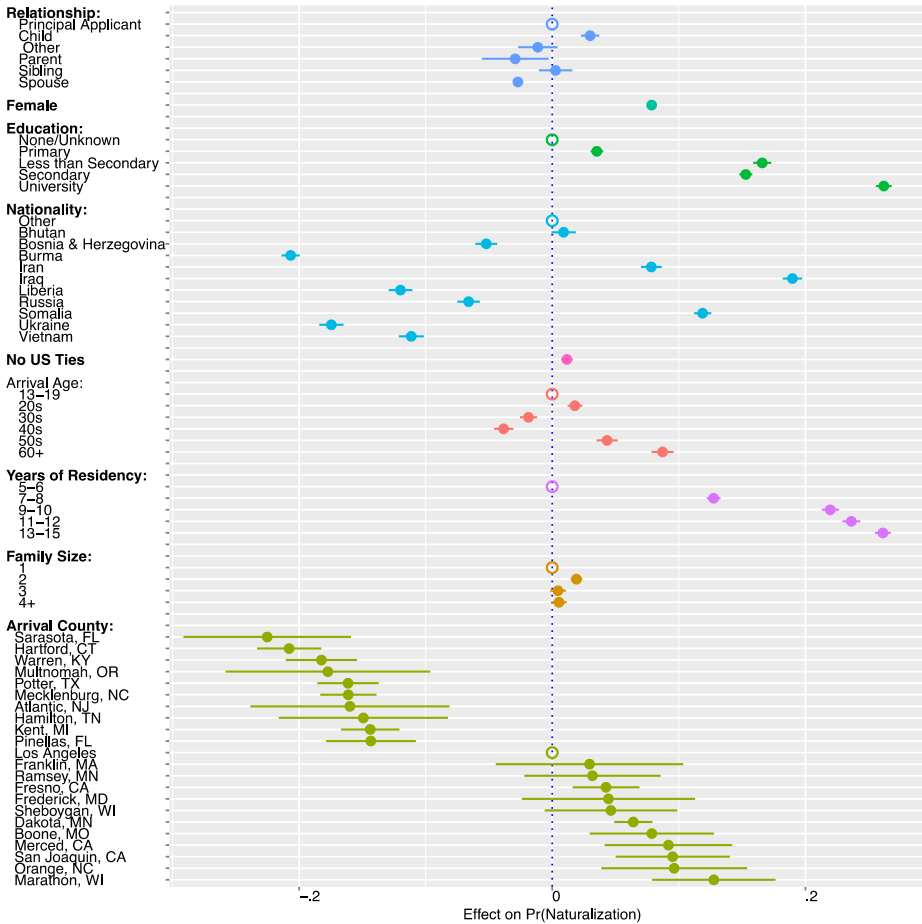


Figure 4: Effects of Initial Settlement Location Characteristics on Probability of Naturalization. Estimates are from a linear probability model with clustered standard errors; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The unfilled points without horizontal bars denote the attribute value that is the reference category for each characteristic. Model includes all individual level characteristics as controls. Sample consists of refugees resettled between 2000-2010; N= 264,758.

