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Understanding the asylum-seeking period

Studies on selection, reception and post-settlement outcomes in Norway

Ane Margrete Tømmerås

Doctoral Thesis in Sociological Demography at Stockholm University, Sweden 2026

Understanding the asylum-seeking period

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Abstract

The arrival and reception of asylum seekers have received much attention in recent years, yet most research on refugees begins once a residence permit is granted. The asylum-seeking period itself has been largely overlooked. This matters, because the selection into granted asylum shapes the population of the arrival country, and because many of the processes that shape how refugees settle into a new society, begin on arrival. This dissertation examines the asylum-seeking period as a formative stage in refugees' lives rather than a neutral period of waiting. Taking a structural perspective, the dissertation aims to understand how the conditions asylum seekers live under while they wait, including how often they move and where they are housed, shape what happens to them after they are granted asylum. It consists of an introductory chapter and three studies. All three studies use linked Norwegian administrative registers, which make it possible to follow asylum seekers from their application date, through the reception-centre system and into the years after they are settled in a municipality.

Study I finds that country of origin, year of arrival, sex, age and family status all affect the probability of being granted asylum. The same characteristics affect the reasons people leave their first reception centre. As a result, some groups experience considerably more moves and less stability than others while they wait.

Study II examines whether moving between reception centres and being settled in a different municipality from the one where they lived longest during the asylum-seeking period, changes the probability of whether asylum-seekers move to another municipality after settlement. It finds that each additional move between centres increases the likelihood of moving again after settlement, whereas being settled where they had lived longest reduces mobility.

Study III exploits the fact that asylum seekers are allocated to their first reception centre largely on the basis of availability in centres. The study examines whether the type of operator running the centre and how urban the location is, relates to participation in the introduction programme, employment and education, or outside of the labour-market in the ten years after arrival. The type of operator makes little difference to later employment and education, whereas location matters more. Those who started their asylum-seeking period in a rural centre are more likely to be employed or in education. The differences are clearest around five years after arrival and smaller after ten.

Through these three studies, the dissertation links the asylum-seeking period with the years after settlement, two phases that research has tended to treat separately. Together, the studies show that the group of people who are granted asylum is shaped by selection before settlement, and that the conditions under which people wait have measurable effects on their mobility and employment years later. The findings support a structural understanding of integration, in which the reception system offers different people different opportunities. Stability during the waiting period supports integration, while frequent moves have consequences that last beyond the reception period. The main contribution of the dissertation is to show that the asylum-seeking period should be understood as part of the integration process, not as a waiting period before it begins.

Keywords: *Asylum-seeker, reception centre, integration, selection, internal mobility, NEET.*

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List of studies

I. Tømmerås, A. (2026). Understanding Asylum-Seeker Approval and Reception Centre Dynamics. European Journal of Population. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-026-09779-5

II. Tømmerås, A. Linking Reception Centre (In)stability to Post-Placement (Im)mobility: A Register based Study on Refugee' Internal Migration in Norway. *Unpublished manuscript.*

III. Tømmerås, A. Does Where You Wait Matter? Reception Centre Operator, Centrality and NEET Status Among Asylum Seekers. *Unpublished manuscript.*

Summary

Much of the research on refugee integration begins only after a person has been granted a residence permit and settled in a new country. For people seeking asylum, however, life in the new country begins much earlier. Time spent in an asylum reception centre can last from a few months to several years. During this period, asylum seekers have limited opportunities to decide where they live, may be moved between different reception centres, and face restrictions on their opportunities to work, study, and participate in society. At the same time, this period constitutes their first prolonged encounter with the new country.

This dissertation starts from the premise that the asylum period is not merely a period of waiting before integration begins, but part of the early integration process itself. Experiences during this period may shape people's subsequent lives after a decision on their asylum application has been made. The aim of the dissertation is therefore to understand how structures during the asylum period and early settlement shape the life trajectories of people seeking asylum. It focuses on who is granted asylum, residential stability and moves between reception centres, and the institutional and geographical contexts that asylum seekers encounter while living in reception centres.

The dissertation is based on Norwegian register data in which information on asylum applications and stays in reception centres can be linked to population registers and other administrative data. This makes it possible to follow individuals over an extended period, from the asylum application, through the reception system and, for those who are granted asylum, into the years following settlement. The dissertation consists of three studies examining different parts of this process.

The first study examines who is granted asylum and what happens during people's time in the reception system. The study includes approximately 104,000 people who applied for asylum in Norway between 2005 and 2016. The results show substantial differences in the probability of being granted asylum according to, among other factors, country of origin, year of arrival, gender, age, and family situation. Women and unaccompanied minors generally have a higher probability of being granted asylum, whereas young men who arrive alone have a lower probability. This means that the composition of the refugee population that is subsequently settled in Norway is already shaped by which asylum seekers are granted residence permits.

The study also shows substantial variation in what happens during the reception-centre period. After a stay in the first ordinary reception centre, a person may be settled in a municipality after being granted asylum, moved to another reception centre, leave the country, or disappear from the reception system. These trajectories do not represent freely chosen alternatives but are shaped to a large extent by decisions and processes within the asylum and reception system. The outcome following the first reception-centre stay also varies across different groups. The asylum period is therefore far from a uniform experience and, for many, involves both prolonged waiting and residential instability.

The second study examines whether this residential instability is also associated with where people live after they have been granted asylum and settled in a municipality. It considers both moves between reception centres and whether individuals are settled in the same municipality in which they had their longest reception-centre stay. The results show that people who are settled in the same municipality as their previous reception centre have a lower probability of subsequently moving away. By contrast, those who were moved between several reception centres during the asylum period have a higher probability of later leaving their first municipality of settlement. The greater the number of reception-centre stays a person has experienced, the higher the probability of a subsequent move.

The findings therefore indicate a link between residential stability during the asylum period and later internal migration. One possible explanation is that stability makes it easier to develop local relationships, knowledge, and a sense of belonging, whereas repeated moves make this more difficult. Another possibility is that previous moves provide experience of establishing oneself in new places and may therefore make future moves easier. In this way, the study shows that experiences of where and how people live during the asylum period may continue to matter after settlement.

The third study instead focuses on the institutional and geographical context of the first ordinary reception centre. Norwegian asylum reception centres are operated by private companies, municipalities, or non-governmental organisations and are located in both urban and rural municipalities. The study examines whether operator type and municipal centrality are associated with subsequent participation in the introduction programme and with the probability of being not in employment, education, or training (NEET). The study includes just over 42,000 asylum seekers who arrived between 2008 and 2014 and follows their situation for up to ten years after arrival.

The results show more consistent differences between reception centres located in urban and rural municipalities. People initially placed in reception centres in rural municipalities generally have somewhat higher probabilities of being in work or education and somewhat lower probabilities of being NEET than those placed in urban municipalities. The differences are most visible in the medium term and are considerably smaller ten years after arrival.

The results therefore do not fully support the assumption that a more central location automatically provides better opportunities through access to larger labour markets and a wider range of services. Place appears to matter, but not always in the way one might initially expect.

Taken together, the three studies demonstrate why the asylum period needs to be included when seeking to understand refugees' later life trajectories. First, the asylum process involves a selection of who is allowed to stay and therefore becomes part of the resident refugee population. Second, experiences during the waiting period vary considerably between individuals. Some have relatively stable stays, whereas others are moved repeatedly between different places. Third, both residential stability and the geographical context during the asylum period are associated with later outcomes, including internal migration and labour-market attachment.

The dissertation therefore points towards an understanding of integration that is not concerned only with what individuals do or with the resources they bring with them. Integration and adaptation are also shaped by the receiving society and by the institutions and places people encounter after arrival. The asylum reception centre is one of the first of these places. Residential stability, local contexts, and decisions made within the reception system may continue to matter long after the wait for an asylum decision has ended. The asylum period should therefore not be understood as the time before integration. It is part of it.

Sammanfattning

Mycket av forskningen om flyktingars integration tar sin början först när en person har fått uppehållstillstånd och bosatts i ett nytt land. För den som söker asyl börjar dock livet i det nya landet långt tidigare. Tiden på asylmottagning kan sträcka sig från månader till år. Under denna period har asylsökande begränsade möjligheter att själva bestämma var de ska bo, de kan flyttas mellan olika mottagningar och deras möjligheter att arbeta, studera och delta i samhället är begränsade. Samtidigt är detta deras första längre möte med det nya landet.

Den här avhandlingen utgår från att asylperioden inte bara är en väntetid före integrationen, utan en del av den tidiga integrationsprocessen. Erfarenheter under denna period kan påverka människors fortsatta liv efter att ett beslut om asyl har fattats. Syftet med avhandlingen är därför att förstå hur strukturer under asylperioden och den tidiga bosättningen formar livsförloppet för personer som söker asyl. Fokus ligger på vilka som beviljas asyl, bostadsmässig stabilitet och flyttar mellan asylmottagningar samt den institutionella och geografiska kontext som asylsökande möter under tiden på mottagning.

Avhandlingen bygger på norska registerdata där information om asylansökningar och vistelser på mottagningar kan kopplas till befolkningsregister och andra administrativa register. Det gör det möjligt att följa personer under en längre tidsperiod, från asylansökan, genom mottagningssystemet och, för dem som beviljas asyl, vidare under åren efter bosättningen. Avhandlingen består av tre studier som undersöker olika delar av denna process.

Den första studien undersöker vilka som beviljas asyl och vad som händer under vistelsen i mottagningssystemet. Studien omfattar omkring 104 000 personer som sökte asyl i Norge mellan 2005 och 2016. Resultaten visar stora skillnader i sannolikheten att få asyl beroende på bland annat ursprungsland, ankomstår, kön, ålder och familjesituation. Kvinnor och ensamkommande minderåriga har generellt högre sannolikhet att beviljas asyl, medan unga män som anländer ensamma har lägre sannolikhet. Det innebär att sammansättningen av den flyktingbefolkning som senare bosätts i Norge formas redan genom vilka asylsökande som beviljas uppehållstillstånd.

Studien visar också stora skillnader i hur tiden på asylmottagning ser ut. Efter vistelsen på den första ordinarie mottagningen kan en person bosättas i

en kommun efter att ha fått asyl, flyttas till en annan mottagning, lämna landet eller försvinna ur mottagningssystemet. Dessa förlopp är inte fria val mellan olika alternativ, utan formas till stor del av beslut och processer inom asyl- och mottagningssystemet. Vilket utfall som följer efter den första mottagningen varierar dessutom mellan olika grupper. Asylperioden är därför långt ifrån en likadan erfarenhet för alla och innebär för många både lång väntan och bostadsmässig instabilitet.

Den andra studien undersöker om denna bostadsmässiga instabilitet också hänger samman med var människor bor efter att de har fått asyl och bosatts i en kommun. Här studeras dels flyttar mellan asylmottagningar, dels om personen bosätts i samma kommun som den där han eller hon hade sin längsta vistelse på en mottagning. Resultaten visar att personer som bosätts i samma kommun som sin tidigare mottagning har lägre sannolikhet att senare flytta därifrån. De som har flyttats mellan flera mottagningar under asylperioden har däremot högre sannolikhet att senare flytta från sin första bosättningskommun. Ju fler mottagningsvistelser en person har haft, desto högre är sannolikheten för en senare flytt.

Resultaten visar därmed en koppling mellan bostadsmässig stabilitet under asylperioden och senare intern migration. En möjlig förklaring är att stabilitet gör det lättare att bygga upp lokala relationer, kunskap och en känsla av tillhörighet, medan upprepade flyttar försvårar detta. En annan är att tidigare flyttar ger erfarenhet av att etablera sig på nya platser och därmed kan göra framtida flyttar lättare. Studien visar på så sätt att erfarenheter av var och hur man bor under asylperioden kan ha betydelse även efter bosättningen.

Den tredje studien fokuserar i stället på den första mottagningens institutionella och geografiska kontext. Norska asylmottagningar drivs av privata företag, kommuner eller ideella organisationer och finns både i urbana och rurala kommuner. Studien undersöker om operatörstyp och kommunens centralitet hänger samman med senare deltagande i introduktionsprogrammet och sannolikheten att vara utanför arbete, utbildning eller arbetsmarknadsåtgärder, så kallad NEET. Studien omfattar drygt 42 000 asylsökande som anlände mellan 2008 och 2014 och följer deras situation under upp till tio år efter ankomsten.

Resultaten visar mer konsekventa skillnader mellan mottagningar i urbana och rurala kommuner. Personer som först placerades på mottagningar i rurala kommuner har generellt något högre sannolikhet att vara i arbete eller utbildning och något lägre sannolikhet att vara NEET än personer som placerades i urbana kommuner. Skillnaderna är tydligast på medellång sikt och är betydligt mindre tio år efter ankomsten. Resultatet går därmed inte helt i linje med antagandet att en mer central placering automatiskt ger bättre möjligheter genom tillgång till större arbetsmarknader och fler tjänster. Platsen verkar spela roll, men inte alltid på det sätt man först skulle förvänta sig.

Tillsammans visar de tre studierna varför asylperioden behöver inkluderas när vi försöker förstå flyktingars senare livsförlopp. För det första sker under asylprocessen ett urval av vilka som får stanna och därmed blir en del av den bofasta flyktingbefolkningen. För det andra skiljer sig erfarenheterna under väntetiden betydligt mellan olika personer. Vissa har relativt stabila vistelser, medan andra flyttas flera gånger mellan olika platser. För det tredje hänger både bostadsmässig stabilitet och den geografiska kontexten under asylperioden samman med senare utfall, såsom intern migration och arbetsmarknadsanknytning.

Avhandlingen pekar därför mot ett perspektiv på integration som inte enbart handlar om vad den enskilda personen gör eller vilka resurser hon eller han har med sig. Integration formas också av det mottagande samhället och av de institutioner och platser som människor möter efter ankomsten. Asylmottagningen är en av de första av dessa platser. Bostadsmässig stabilitet, lokala sammanhang och beslut som fattas inom mottagningssystemet kan få betydelse långt efter att väntan på ett asylbeslut är över. Asylperioden bör därför inte förstås som tiden före integrationen. Den är en del av den.

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Introduction

The arrival and reception of people seeking international protection has become one of the defining policy challenges in Europe over recent decades, brought into particular focus by the conflicts in Syria and, more recently, Ukraine. By 2023, more than 13 million refugees were living in Europe, with a further 1.5 million asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim (UNHCR, 2023). The scale of these arrivals and needs of those who arrive, have sustained intense debate about how receiving societies can accommodate and integrate those in need of protection.

The majority of research on refugee integration begins only after a residence permit has been granted. Quantitative studies often rely on survey or register data measured at or after the point of settlement into the resident population (Hainmueller et al., 2016), leaving the asylum-seeking period itself comparatively unexamined. This is a substantial omission, because many of the processes that bear on later integration begin earlier, on arrival and entry into the asylum system (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010). It also excludes time spent in the country when analysing or controlling for time since arrival. Treating the grant of protection as the starting point also diminishes the question of selection. Those who are granted asylum are not a random subset of those who arrive, and the asylum-seeking experience that comes before placement differs between time of arrival and background characteristics.

A growing body of evidence indicates that these early experiences carry consequences well beyond the waiting period. Longer waits for a decision have been linked to poorer mental health and to weaker subsequent employment and earnings (Hainmueller et al., 2016; Hvidtfeldt et al., 2018; Åslund et al., 2024), while residential instability during reception, in the form of repeated relocations between centres, has been associated with lower host-country language proficiency and the less social ties (Damen et al., 2022; Nielsen et al., 2008; Solbue, 2024). The spatial and institutional conditions of reception have likewise been shown to shape later opportunities for social mobility (Baalbergen et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that the asylum-seeking period is not a neutral period of waiting but a formative stage in the refugee life course.

Norway offers a unique setting in which to examine this stage. Its comprehensive administrative registers record the full population of asylum-seekers

from the point of application onwards, including detailed information on reception-centre stays, relocations between centres, decisions and exits from centres, and these can be linked to population-register data that follow individuals through settlement and into the years that follow. This makes it possible to trace individual trajectories continuously from arrival through to long-term outcomes, bridging the asylum-seeking period and the post-settlement phase that existing research has tended to treat separately. This is only possible for those who are granted asylum.

Aim

The aim of this thesis is to understand the structures of the asylum-seeking and early settlement period that shape the life-course trajectories of people who seek asylum. Rather than focusing on individual characteristics alone, it takes a structural perspective, asking how the institutional and spatial conditions they meet during reception such as waiting times, relocations and reception centres characteristics are associated with later outcomes.

The thesis pursues this aim through three empirical studies that, together, follow asylum-seekers from the determinants of who is granted protection, through the dynamics of the reception-centre period, to distinct long-term outcomes after settlement. The first study examines who is granted asylum and the competing pathways by which asylum seekers leave their first reception centre, establishing both the selection into the resident population and the heterogeneity and instability of the reception period. The second study asks whether residential instability during the asylum-seeking period looking at relocations between centres and the (mis)match between reception-centre and settlement municipality, shapes refugees' internal migration after settlement. The third study turns to the institutional and spatial context of reception, examining whether the operator type and municipal centrality of the first reception centre are associated with the probability of being NEET (not in employment, education, or training) in the years after recognition.

Contribution

The thesis makes three connected contributions. First, it bridges a gap in the literature between the asylum-seeking period and post-settlement outcomes. By incorporating the period before a residence permit is granted, and, in the first study, the full population of applicants, including those whose claims are not approved, it addresses the selection and early-experience questions that studies beginning at settlement cannot.

Second, it exploits linked longitudinal register data to trace life-course trajectories over time, rather than observing outcomes at a single point. This allows the reception-centre period to be characterised in detail and connected to outcomes measured years later, and it supports a structural reading of integration in which institutional arrangements and spatial context, and not only individual attributes, are treated as determinants of refugee trajectories.

Third, the thesis engages with both general theories of immigrant adaptation and refugee-specific frameworks, situating its empirical findings in relation to assimilation theory and to integration frameworks that includes the receiving society and its opportunity structures (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2021). In doing so it speaks to a central debate in the field: how far integration is shaped by what refugees bring with them, and how far by the contexts into which they are received. This thesis also contributes to understanding a growing population in many countries.

Definitions

Several terms used throughout this thesis carry overlapping but distinct meanings, and it is worth setting them out at the outset. Refugee is used here as an umbrella term for a person who has been granted international protection, which can be obtained through several routes: an approved asylum claim or residence on humanitarian grounds, resettlement directly from a refugee camp as a quota (UN) refugee, or family reunification with someone who already holds protection status.

An asylum seeker is a person who has crossed the border into a country and applied for protection from within it, and whose claim has not yet been decided (UDI, 2026). The asylum process is therefore one route into the refugee population, but a sizable share of asylum seekers is never granted status. Because this thesis is concerned specifically with the asylum-seeking process and the reception-centre system, the term asylum seeker is used to identify this group and to distinguish it from quota refugees and family-reunification refugees, who in the Norwegian system are generally settled directly into a municipality without passing through the reception centres. Immigrant is the broadest of these terms, including all those who migrate and take up residence regardless of their reason for moving where both refugees and asylum seekers are a subset.

The concepts of integration, adaptation, and assimilation are likewise related and contested. Assimilation, in both its classical and its more recent formulations, describes a process by which the differences between immigrants and the receiving population diminish over time (Drouhot, 2024). Integration is generally understood as a more multidimensional and two-way process, encompassing structural, social, and cultural dimensions and depending on the receiving society as much as on the newcomer (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2021). Adaptation is used here as a more neutral term for the broad

set of processes through which newcomers come to participate in the host society.

The terms placement and resettlement require a specific clarification. In this thesis they refer to *bosetting*, the process by which a recognised refugee is settled into a particular Norwegian municipality after leaving the reception-centre system, and not to resettlement in the UNHCR sense of transferring refugees from a country of first asylum to a third country. To avoid this ambiguity, placement is generally preferred when referring to the assignment of refugees to a settlement municipality.

Theory and previous research

Theories of immigrant adaptation have developed substantially over the past century, shifting from early accounts that treated integration as a largely one-directional process of cultural conformity towards more structural and multi-dimensional frameworks.

General theories of immigrant adaptation and integration

The earliest accounts of immigrant adaptation treated it as a linear process of cultural convergence. Rooted in the Chicago School of the 1920s, classical assimilation theory held that newcomers would progressively adopt the norms and practices of the host society (Park, 1928). Gordon (1964) elaborated this into a multidimensional process, in which cultural acculturation came first and was followed by structural assimilation, but also through relations (marriages) and identity. The underlying logic was still one-directional. The receiving society is the fixed endpoint, and assimilation the measure of success and the assumed route to upward social mobility.

These assimilation theories assumed a uniform trajectory regardless of which group was under study and gave little weight to the contextual factors that shape how resettlement actually unfolds (van Tubergen, 2006). Alba and Nee (1997, 2003) developed theories of assimilation but defined it as the decline of an ethnic distinction and of the cultural and social differences, and as a largely unintended result of immigrants and their descendants seeking the same social mobility development such as a better education, a better job, a wider set of social ties (Drouhot, 2024). Institutions, particularly schools, labour markets and legal frameworks, become the primary mechanisms through which integration (or assimilation or adaptation) disappear across generations, alongside human and social capital as factors shaping how quickly this occurs (Drouhot, 2024).

Segmented assimilation theory, developed by Portes and Zhou (1993), assumes that integration does not follow a single path, and for many groups the destination is not the middle class. Portes and Zhou (1993) argued that growing up in a new country both acceptance and confrontation can happen depending on what immigrants bring with them and what the social context does with it. They described three distinct trajectories, where the first is similar to what earlier theories suggested, through acculturation and upward mobility

into the majority population. The second trajectory they describe is a downward assimilation into a racialised underclass due to structures such as discrimination and lack of opportunities. The third path is described as rapid economic advancement combined with deliberate preservation of immigrant community values and solidarity. Portes and Zhou (1993) assumes that which trajectory integration takes is not only dependent on individuals but in the institutional and social context that receives them.

Drouhot (2024) reviews an additional complication, sometimes called the integration paradox: immigrants and their descendants often report more perceived discrimination as they advance through education and the labour market, not less. Boundaries can remain even where structural inclusion is occurring. Structural integration and a sense of belonging do not necessarily move together, and neither is sufficient on its own as a measure of integration.

Theories of adaptation and integration among refugees

Ager and Strang's (2008) conceptual frameworks identifies key domains of integration organised around four overarching themes: markers and means (employment, housing, education, health), social connection (bonds within co-ethnic groups, bridges to the wider community, links to state institutions), facilitators (language, cultural knowledge, safety, and stability), and a foundational layer of rights and citizenship that underpins the entire process.

Within this framework, two features are especially relevant for this thesis. First, stability is identified as a core facilitator: the foundations, social connections and markers of integration all depend on a degree of residential and institutional stability. This directly motivates the attention this thesis pays to reception centre experiences through length, relocations and placement destination after, which are important sources of instability in the pre-settlement period. Second, the framework treats integration as a two-way process where the receiving society bears responsibility and sees progress across domains as interdependent, so that restricted rights or unstable housing can also change trajectories in learning the language, employment and social connection. A reception centre period that limits rights, restricts movement and interrupts social networks is therefore not a neutral waiting phase but a potential constraint on integration that extends beyond the day a residence permit is granted.

Donato & Ferris (2020) central argument is that integration is a complex, dynamic, and fundamentally contextual process that is realised differently by different refugee groups at different times and places. They note that most prior studies have captured only parts of this process and call for research designs that attend to the multiscale nature of integration, examining how it unfolds at individual, community, and national levels simultaneously. Drawing on evidence from three distinct policy contexts, Donato and Ferris highlight

how national asylum and resettlement systems shape refugees' access to labour markets, education, and social services in profoundly different ways, creating distinct opportunities.

Phillimore (2021) argues that integration theory, policy, and practice have mainly focused on the characteristics and efforts of refugees themselves. Phillimore contends that the role of receiving societies in shaping integration outcomes has not been systematically interrogated. She introduces the concept of refugee-integration-opportunity structures, defined as groups of resources and routes within the receiving society that either facilitate or undermine integration. She presents five interconnecting domains of opportunity structures: locality (the availability of housing, healthcare, employment, and services in the places where refugees are settled), discourse (public and political narratives about refugees and immigration), relations (the quality of social interactions between refugees and host communities, including experiences of discrimination and xenophobia), structure (institutional and policy frameworks, including recognition of foreign qualifications and access to the labour market), and initiatives and support (the availability of targeted programmes and civil society support). By articulating these multiple, interconnecting dimensions, Phillimore highlights the impossibility of understanding integration outcomes through the one-dimensional models that have largely dominated. Instead, she proposes a multidimensional model that allows for more nuanced analysis of how integration processes occur at different levels and calls on migration scholars to shift their focus from refugee characteristics to the influence of host-society opportunity structures.

Across the frameworks reviewed in this section, a consistent argument emerges: the integration of refugees cannot be reduced to a one-way process of individual adaptation, and the determinants of integration outcomes are located as much in the receiving society as in the characteristics of refugees themselves. Each framework gives an important role to the institutional context, through rights and citizenship (Ager & Strang, 2008), reciprocity and trust (Strang & Ager, 2010), national asylum and resettlement systems (Donato & Ferris, 2020), and spatially differentiated opportunity structures (Phillimore, 2021). All insist on multidimensionality and on the interdependence of integration domains, which means that what happens in one domain — stability, rights, locality — has consequences for what is possible in others.

This theoretical developments maps closely onto the empirical setting examined in this thesis. The Norwegian reception centre system is itself a differentiated opportunity structure where asylum seekers spend variable periods waiting in reception centres that differ in many ways. Before a residence permit is granted, refugees have limited access to most of the integration domains that Ager and Strang (2008) identify as their rights are restricted, their stability is based on decisions outside their control, their social connections are constrained by the centre environment and placement, and their ability to accumulate human and social capital depends on what the centre and the local community make possible. The three empirical studies that follows, treat these

institutional and spatial conditions of the asylum-seeking period as substantive determinants of later trajectories, rather than background variables or experiences without large heterogeneity.

At the same time, the broader empirical literature cautions against equating any single outcome with integration. Broadly assimilative trends in the second generation coexist with persistent boundaries in the lived experience of belonging (Drouhot, 2024). Structural inclusion does not guarantee a sense of belonging and labour-market attachment is not the same as social integration. This is why the empirical chapters use several complementary outcomes, reception centre experiences, refugee status, internal migration and labour-market attachment and attends to variation within the refugee population rather than treating it as homogeneous. Even so, this thesis does not include nor aim to understand all domains from Ager and Strang (2008) framework and not all opportunity structures of Phillimore (2021). This thesis alone cannot understand the full complexity of integration as drawn up in this chapter. The thesis aims to broaden the understanding of what can change integration trajectories, specifically the reception centre period, but many domains within this period is also yet to be researched and understood.

Understanding the asylum-seeking process

Asylum decisions are a central selection mechanism that determines who enters the refugee population, and recognition rates vary substantially both across nationalities and over time. Whether a claim is approved is shaped by international and national law, the prevailing political climate, and the individual characteristics of the applicant, including country of origin, age, sex and family status (Keith & Holmes, 2009; Kosyakova & Brücker, 2020; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2005; Valenta, 2014). The situation and conditions in the country the asylum-seekers are fleeing from are particularly important, as group differences in acceptance reflect the situation in sending countries and the way receiving states respond to specific crises and policy shifts. Prior research also documents inconsistency in the adjudication process itself: Colaiacovo (2013) finds variation attributable to adjudicator bias in Canadian claims, while Ramji-Nogales et al. (2011) describe a "refugee roulette" of disparities between otherwise comparable cases.

Applicants whose demographic profile resembles that of labour migrants (young men arriving alone) are less likely to be granted protection than those perceived as more vulnerable, such as women, children and families, often termed the "labour-migrant penalty" (Valenta, 2014). Gender appears to play an independent role: Ortensi et al. (2024) identify a female advantage in Italian asylum decisions, and Rodda (2015) finds that gender, age and country of origin all shape the likelihood of recognition across European countries. These dynamics have direct consequences for how integration should be understood, since the recognised refugee population is itself then a product of selection.

The legal status granted, and the length of the procedure leading to it, further condition later trajectories, as both have been shown to influence subsequent labour-market integration (Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020).

While waiting for a decision, asylum-seekers typically live in reception centres, which represent their first sustained interaction with the host society. A consistent finding across European contexts is that longer waiting times can change the life trajectory of the asylum-seeker: Hainmueller et al. (2016) show that prolonged asylum procedures reduce subsequent employment among refugees, Åslund et al. (2024) find that extended waiting reduces labour-market participation and income in Sweden, and Hvidtfeldt et al. (2018) report comparable effects on post-resettlement employment in Denmark. The conditions of waiting can also change the health of asylum-seekers. Studies drawing on survey and register data link long and unstable stays to poorer mental health, with Nielsen et al. (2008) documenting adverse effects of length of stay and repeated relocations among children seeking asylum in Denmark, and Damen et al. (2022) and Solbue (2024) describing how the uncertainty of this "limbo" period and frequent moves reduce well-being and the motivation to engage locally.

The reception period can be understood through Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework, in which stability functions as a key facilitator, and through Phillimore's (2021) concept of host-society opportunity structures, which locates integration in the institutional and spatial context of reception. Within the reception centres, opportunity structures are typically constrained: rights are limited, access to work and education is restricted, and living standards are low (Weiss et al., 2017). Yet the period is not only a loss. Contact with the host society, language acquisition and the building of social networks can provide asylum-seekers with country-specific knowledge, and comparisons with resettlement refugees suggest that such experience can improve later labour-market attachment (Bevelander, 2011; Weiss et al., 2017). Khalil and Tjaden (2025) similarly show that the duration of residence in these centres' shapes language skills, contact with the host population and employment, depending on local conditions. These gains, however, depend on stability, since relocations between centres disrupt social ties and the accumulation of local knowledge (Damen et al., 2022; Solbue, 2024), interrupting integration processes that, as De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2010) note, begin already on arrival.

Life-course trajectories among successful asylum-seekers and refugees

Once a residence permit is granted and refugees are settled, education and vocational training become central means of integration – what Ager and Strang (2008) describe as the markers and means that depend in turn on facilitating conditions. During the asylum-seeking period, access to these resources is uneven: children retain the right to primary and lower-secondary schooling, but adults' access to language tuition and qualifying education is more restricted, so that destination-specific human capital may accumulate slowly before recognition (Weiss et al., 2017). After settlement, the introduction programme provides language training and qualification, while the institutional and spatial conditions encountered earlier continue to matter; Baalbergen et al. (2024) show that the characteristics of the localities in which asylum-seekers are placed are significantly associated with later employment, and Khalil and Tjaden (2025) link the duration and conditions of reception to language acquisition and contact with the host society.

Internal migration is a defining feature of refugees' settlement trajectories. Immigrants, and refugees in particular, are more internally mobile than the native-born and tend to move towards larger cities, more diverse labour markets and areas with established co-ethnic networks (Simpson & Finney, 2009), and secondary migration away from assigned municipalities is a common consequence of dispersal systems (Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019). These moves are driven by both structural and social motivations: employment and economic opportunities (Adserà et al., 2022), proximity to relatives and community support, and, as Haberfeld et al. (2019) find for Sweden, social networks that can weigh more heavily in the decision to move than economic gains or losses. Refugees placed in rural or peripheral municipalities are especially likely to relocate, reflecting weaker local opportunity structures (Adserà et al., 2022; Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019; Haandrikman et al., 2024; Lynnebakke & Aasland, 2022). Mobility is also patterned by earlier experience: drawing on Fischer and Malmberg's (2001) life-course account, longer duration in a place builds location-specific capital that anchors people, whereas repeated moves can become a "learned behaviour" or a source of relocation capital that raises the propensity to move again (Bernard & Vidal, 2020; Bernard & Perales, 2021).

Where refugees are first settled, and whether they subsequently move, shapes their integration. The spatial context of initial settlement is associated with long-term economic outcomes: Wimark et al. (2019) find that the place of first settlement matters for subsequent employment and income, while Tønnesen and Andersen (2019) and Adserà et al. (2022) show that the placement municipality influences labour-market integration in Norway. Moves towards co-ethnic networks may raise subjective well-being (Wimark et al., 2019), whereas moves away from the assigned municipality have been associated with lower incomes (Bevelander, 2011). Place attachment developed through

time spent in a locality, in line with Dahl and Sorenson (2010) and Fischer and Malmberg (2001), can therefore support more sustained settlement, while instability encountered during and after the asylum period may undermine it.

Economic integration, measured through labour-market participation and earnings, remains the most studied outcome and measure for how refugees fare. The receiving context matters: Adserà et al. (2022) find an employment penalty for low-educated men in large municipalities and lower employment among women in municipalities with a higher share of non-Western immigrants, and Åslund and Rooth (2007) show that the labour-market conditions encountered on arrival have lasting effects on immigrant earnings. The gap between refugees and other migrants is commonly attributed to differences in human capital, language proficiency and destination-specific knowledge, as well as to the legal status and waiting times that precede settlement (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010; Bevelander, 2011; Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020). Gender differences are persistent, with refugee women facing barriers to participation that widen over time through language acquisition, care responsibilities and access to networks (Bevelander, 2011; Adserà et al., 2022).

Context

Immigration to Norway in the period of study

The period of this study follows right after the extension of EU, that included several countries in eastern Europe. As figure 1 shows, immigration to Norway more than doubles in two years – almost all due to an increase in labour migrants. The labour migrants are to a large degree from Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, but there are also a number of labour migrant from other European countries and Asia that arrives in these years. The number of refugees (granted asylum, applicants not included) lies between 3000 and 7000 per year until 2015, when the war in Syria leads to the arrival of many Syrians, where about 15 000 asylum applications were granted. The number of refugees increases somewhat over time, with small peak in 2009-2010 and 2012, before the large arrivals in 2015-2016. Not shown in figure 1 is the recent arrivals of Ukrainian refugees, with over 100 000 arrivals in Norway between 2022 and 2026.

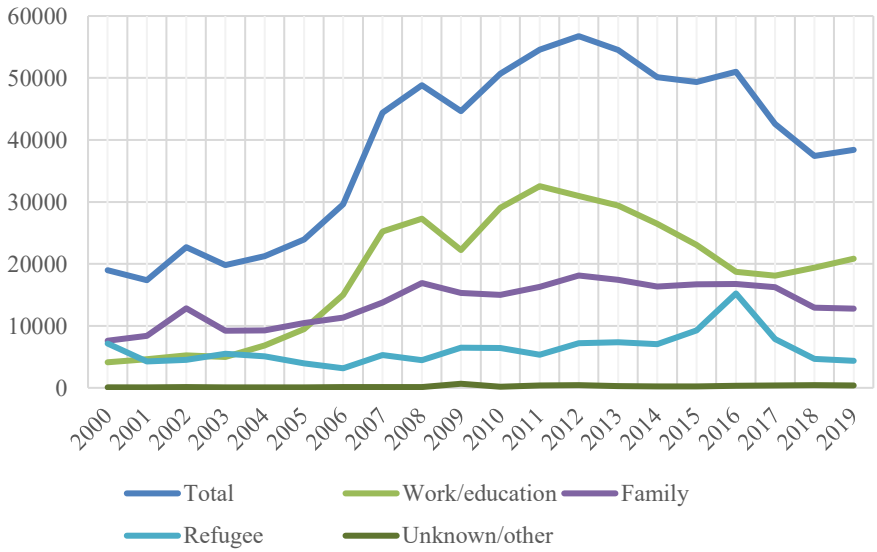

Figure 1. Number of immigrations to Norway by reason for immigration, 2000-2019.
Note: Refugees are shown by accepted claims, not by arrivals.

Changes in Norway's migration policy

Norway's migration policy has changed over the study period, and generally in a more restrictive direction. The most relevant changes include tightening the conditions for protection and for family reunification, including stricter income requirements for family reunifications. These shifts came at the same time as reforms to the integration framework that placed greater emphasis on qualification and labour-market participation. The reception system itself changed in parallel, with a shift towards more private operators over time (see Section 3.4.2). Especially after 2015, with an unusually high number of arrivals, changes in policy and a further tightening of the rules followed. Over the same period the share of resettled (UN) refugees declined. As most quota refugees are settled directly into municipalities without passing through the reception centres, they fall outside the scope of the studies in this thesis.

Refugee immigration to Norway

Before the 2000's, the majority of refugees in Norway came from Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Iran, former Yugoslavia and Turkey (many from Kurdistan). In the early 2000's, there was also noticeable number of refugees arriving from Russia, many from Chechnya. Figure 2 shows the composition of asylum applications for the five largest arrival countries and one category for the rest from 2005 to 2016, which is the time period studied in this thesis.

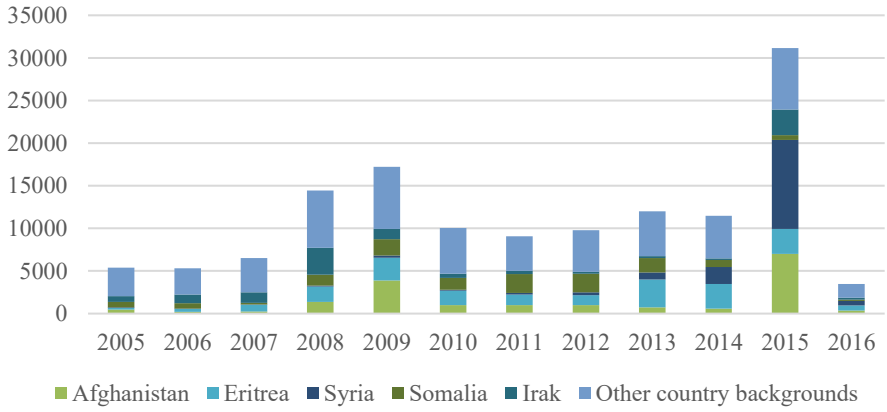

Figure 2 Number of asylum applications by citizenship per year 2005-2015

The Norwegian asylum system

A summary of the system

An asylum seeker who arrives in Norway and registers a claim for protection enters an accommodation system administered by the Directorate of Immigration (UDI) and moves through it in stages. This broad structure is shared across Europe, where reception systems typically rely on collective accommodation and allocate arrivals to centres on the basis of available capacity (EASO, 2022). The first of these is normally a short stay in a transit reception centre (transittmottak), after which applicants are transferred to an ordinary reception centre (ordinært mottak), where the majority remain while their application is assessed, as illustrated in figure 3. A positive decision does not bring this residence to an end. Those who are granted a permit continue to live in the centre until they are placed (bosatt). For some, placement in a municipality happens within weeks, and for some it can take 6 months or more. The reception centre should therefore not be considered a brief point of transit, but as the place where life, though in limbo, unfolds, both before a decision is reached and, for many, also after it.

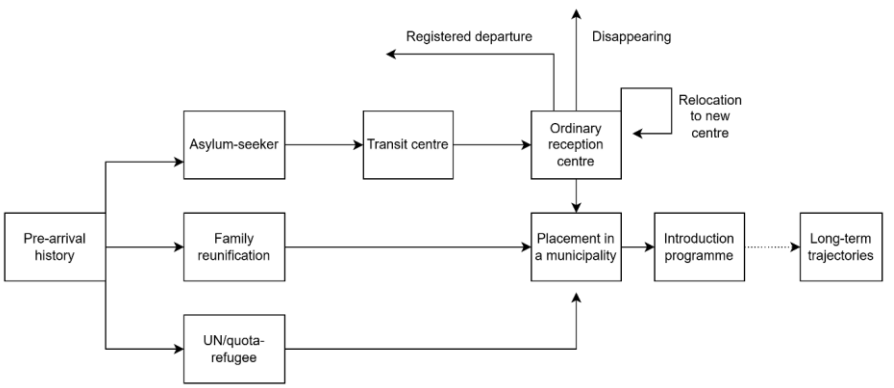

Figure 3 A simplified illustration of the Norwegian asylum system

Heterogeneity in the system

Central administration of the asylum system does not translate into uniform reception centres. A first source of variation lies in how centres are operated, as UDI does not run the centres themselves, but contracts them out through public procurement. Operators can be private companies, municipalities and non-governmental organisations. Over the study period (2005-2016) there has been a pronounced shift towards private operators and shorter contracts, with private companies accounting for a growing majority of stays and the shares run by municipalities and non-governmental organisations are smaller. The three operator types are generally described as differing in character: municipality-run centres offer relative consistency in staffing and stronger links to local welfare institutions; non-governmental organisations tend to have the most ambitious social and activity programmes but face greater difficulties of funding and continuity; and private operators are the most flexible, able to scale up and down quickly in response to fluctuations in arrivals, but bring greater instability through the opening and closing of centres and higher staff turnover (NOU 2024:17). This flexibility has organisational consequences for the workforce, since the rapid scaling of the system tends to draw in less experienced staff during expansions and to disperse accumulated competence when centres close (Oslo Economics, 2018).

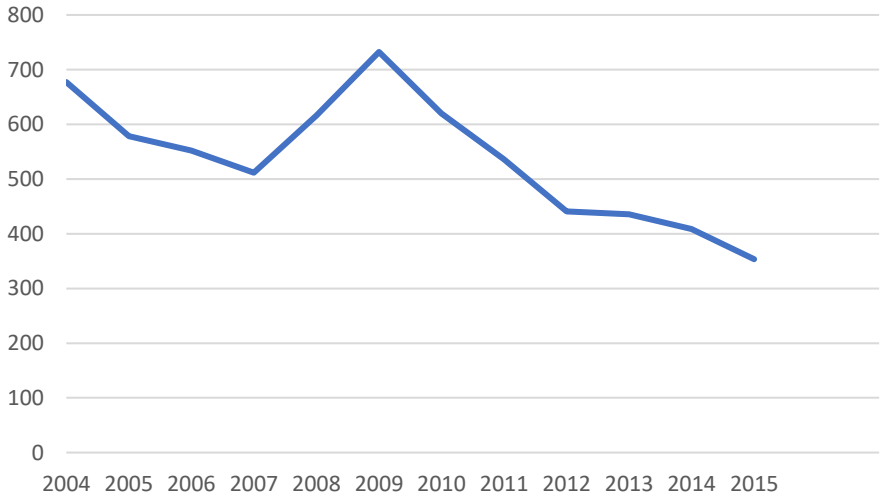

Figure 4 Mean number of days spent in reception centres by arrival year, 2005-2016

A distinct type of centre, the integration centre (integreringsmottak), was introduced in 2016 after the large arrivals of asylum-seekers in 2015. These centres were intended for individuals assessed as having a high probability of being granted protection, and they offer full-time qualification, combining language training, career guidance and civic orientation so that the introduction programme can effectively begin during the reception period rather than only after settlement. They remain a small and selective part of the system (Simensen & Larsen, 2025).

Location and housing are another way reception centres differ. Reception centres are located across municipalities that differ widely in their degree of urbanisation. In Norway this is often measured by the centrality index, which ranks municipalities by their accessibility to jobs and services (Høydahl, 2023). Many centres, and private ones in particular, are situated in less central municipalities where suitable housing and facilities can be secured more readily. Asylum-seekers' early encounters with the host society are shaped by very different communities, services and local labour markets depending on where they are placed. Allocation to a particular centre is determined primarily by available capacity, subject to considerations such as the best interests of children, family ties, language and any special needs, rather than by the characteristics of the individual (Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019; NOU 2024:17).

Reception centres also differ in their basic physical arrangement and are often divided into centralised and decentralised living arrangements (Weiss et al., 2017). In a centralised centre, residents live in the same building as the administration. This is often a converted hotel, hostel or comparable institution where they usually have a room of their own but share kitchens, communal areas and at times bathrooms. In a decentralised centre, residents are housed in apartments or houses spread across the municipality. Residential stability is further disrupted where individuals are relocated between centres, due to centre closures and capacity pressures rather than at the individual's initiative (NOU 2024:17).

Very few asylum seekers hold paid work while they wait for a decision and for subsequent settlement. From 2009, the Immigration Authorities have required applicants to present a passport or other identification documents before they could apply for a work permit (Valenta & Thorshaug 2011). Activities beyond work are limited and inconsistent, but the asylum-seekers have the right to 250 hours of Norwegian language lessons. Other activities differ to a large degree from one centre to another (Weiss 2013).

As a category, reception centres are defined as accommodation for asylum seekers and for those who have been granted residence and are waiting to be settled in a municipality (Weiss et al. 2017). UDI's own guidelines describe this accommodation as "modest yet adequate, intended to secure residents basic needs together with the individual's need for safety" (UDI RS 2008-031).

Refugees and their family members are entitled to the same health services as the rest of the population (Helsedirektoratet 2016), while the rights of asylum seekers are governed by a separate regulation on health and care services for persons without permanent residence. UDI advises newly arrived applicants that they may receive necessary medical treatment while awaiting a decision, and for children under the age of 18 the right to full health care applies irrespective of the status of the claim. All asylum seekers are screened for tuberculosis on arrival, and the Health Directorate asks municipalities to offer a health examination within three months, with the aim of identifying trauma and mental-health needs, somatic conditions, malnutrition and infectious disease.

The Norwegian system after approval

When an asylum claim is approved, the individual eventually leaves the reception-centre system and is settled in a municipality. This involves a move from collective accommodation into an individual or family dwelling and entry into the population register as a resident. Settlement is not left to the individual but is coordinated by the integration authorities (IMDi) in agreement with the municipalities. The refugees have very limited influence over where they are placed, and the placement municipality is often not the same as the municipality as their reception centre. The receiving municipality is responsible for the introduction programme (introduksjonsprogram), a full-time, year-round scheme of language training, civic orientation and labour-market preparation that should start within three months of placement. In the period studied in this thesis, the introduction programme could last up to three years (Introduksjonsloven, 2003)[1]. Participation is accompanied by an introduction benefit (introduksjonsstønad), and because both the programme and the benefit are tied to the municipality of settlement, individuals face strong economic incentives to remain there for the programme's duration.

The municipalities into which refugees are settled differ markedly from one another, and this variation shapes the circumstances they encounter on arrival. They range from large and central urban municipalities to small and peripheral rural ones, with corresponding differences in labour-market opportunities, the availability of education and services, the size of established immigrant and co-ethnic communities, and the resources and experience that local administrations bring to integration work. These differences are not merely administrative: the centrality and size of the placement municipality have been shown to be associated with refugees' subsequent employment (Adserà et al., 2022), and the municipality of settlement more broadly with their integration

[1] The Introduction Act of 2003 was applied throughout the period studied in this thesis. It was replaced by the Integration Act (Integreringsloven, 2020) with effect from 1 January 2021.

(Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019), while the characteristics of the initial settlement location carry consequences for longer-term economic outcomes (Wimark et al., 2019). The placement municipality thus constitutes a further layer of heterogeneity in the trajectories of those who are granted protection, extending the variation present during the reception-centre period into the post-settlement phase.

Research design

Study population

All three papers in the thesis uses a similar, but not identical study population in throughout. They draw on the same underlying population – the full set of individuals who goes through the asylum application process in Norway and passed through the reception-centre system during the study period. The three studies apply the inclusion criteria appropriate to the research questions, resulting in similar but not identical study populations. Table 1 summarises these differences. Paper 1 has the largest study population, covering all individuals who submitted an asylum application within the study period and had a stay in an ordinary reception centre, irrespective of the outcome of their claim, since its purpose is precisely to model who is granted protection and how applicants leave their first centre. Paper 3 follows those who arrive between 2008 and 2014. Papers 2 narrow this population to those whose claims were successful, because both follow individuals into the post-settlement period that only recognised refugees enter. Paper 2 and 3 further restricts the study population to those aged 20 or over at the time of placement reflecting the points in the life course at which their outcomes are meaningful.

Paper 1 follows individuals through the asylum-seeking period itself, until a decision on their claim and until they leave their first ordinary reception centre, whereas Papers 2 begin the clock at placement and follow individuals for up to ten and six years respectively. Paper 3 follows the individuals from time of arrival (time of application for asylum).

Table 1 Overview of the three studies

	Paper 1	*Paper 2*	*Paper 3*
Study subject	The selection into asylum and the different reasons for leaving the first ordinary reception centre	Different reception centre residential instability and long-term internal migration	Reception centre characteristics (type of centre and centrality) effect on long-term labour-market attachment
Outcome(s)	Granted asylum (yes/no) & reason for leaving first ordinary centre	Internal migration, measured as a move to another municipality	Labour-market attachment through: Waiting for the asylum claim, introduction program, NEET-status (Not in education, employment or training), work or in education, or unknown status
Study population	All individuals that submitted an asylum application within the study period and had a stay in an ordinary reception centre	All asylum-seekers with a successful claim over the age of 20 at time of placement	All asylum-seekers arriving in Norway between 2008-2014, 20 years or older at time of arrival. Individuals with a rejected claim, emigration or death are censored at year of the event
Arrival cohorts	2005-2016	2005-2016	2008-2014
Total N	104 113	40 003	42 376
Follow-up time	Time until an outcome of their asylum claim, and time until leaving their first ordinary reception centre	10 years after placement	10 years from year of arrival

Research design and approach of the thesis

The empirical strategy follows from the structure of the data. Papers 1 and 2 adopt an event-history approach, modelling the timing and occurrence of transitions rather than a status observed at a single moment: Paper 1 uses continuous-time Cox model and competing-risks models of the time to a decision and the competing routes out of the first ordinary reception centre, measured in days, while Paper 2 uses a discrete-time competing-risks model of the first move away from the placement municipality by year since placement. In both, duration (time since application or since placement) is the central and an important part of the analysis.

Paper 3 aims to estimate whether the reception centre context (operator, urban/rural) has an effect on later labour-market attachment. This includes an identification strategy: in observational register data, a causal interpretation requires an argument for why the exposure can be treated as independent of the factors that also shape the outcome. In the absence of randomisation, this is often approached by conditioning on the observed characteristics that lead to selection into the exposure. In that way, comparisons are drawn between otherwise similar individuals (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). Paper 3 applies this strategy by using the conditionally random allocation of asylum-seekers to their first ordinary and estimating linear probability models of NEET status that condition on the factors entering that allocation, so the centre's operator type and centrality can be interpreted as independently assigned.

Even so, selection is present throughout this thesis. Paper 1 aims to understand parts of this selection. Papers 2 and 3 follow only those whose claims succeeded, so post-settlement patterns are conditional on an already selected population and (most of) the reception experiences of interest are not randomly assigned. Linked registers can document these structures and adjust for observed characteristics, but cannot capture the motivations, networks and pre-arrival experiences that may drive both exposures and outcomes.

Data

Asylum-seeker register

The asylum register is constructed from administrative records of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and provided to Statistics Norway. It covers all individuals who applied for asylum in Norway in the period studied here, with the first study including applications submitted between 2005 and 2016 (N = 104,113) and the third study restricting attention to applications submitted between 2008 and 2014 in order to align with the availability of the labour-market register described in Section 5.4. The register records, for each applicant, the date on which the application was submitted, the date and outcome of the decision (granted protection, rejected, or other), and the date and nature of mobility within the reception centre system and exit from the asylum system.

Exit events are recorded in categories, in paper 1 in this thesis divided into four larger groups: Settlement/placement into a municipality, relocation to a further reception centre, registered departure (covering voluntary returns, IOM-facilitated returns, forced returns, and Dublin transfers), and deregistration following disappearance. Because each stay carries both a start and end date and is linked to a specific centre and municipality, the data permit reconstruction of the full residential trajectory of an asylum seeker through the centre system, including the duration of each stay, the number and timing of relocations between ordinary centres, and the operator type and location of any centre at any point in the trajectory.

The register also records the socio-demographic characteristics observed at the point of application, including country of origin, sex, date of birth, and family status on arrival. A general description of the asylum-seeker register is found in Utne (2020).

Reception centre data

The Norwegian Immigration Authorities has provided a dataset that includes all reception centres open in the time period 2000-2025. The dataset includes characteristics of each centre. The data includes information on type of operator, whether it is a private company (profit-run), a municipality (public), or a non-governmental organisation (non-profit) that runs the reception centre.

Type of reception centre such as transit, emergency housing, ordinary housing, for single minors or other categories. It also has information about location of the centre and the operating period of the centre (opening and closing date). This information, and therefore data, is public information.

Population registers

The Norwegian Population Register (Folkeregisteret), maintained by Statistics Norway in linked yearly files, provides the post-settlement strand of the data. Recognised refugees enter the register at the point at which they leave the reception-centre system and are settled into a municipality, and the second and third studies follow individuals annually from that point onwards, with follow-up extending to the end of 2023 and a maximum window of approximately ten years after settlement. The register supplies the demographic characteristics used throughout the thesis such as age, sex, country of background, marital status, household composition, and the presence of children, together with annual information on place of residence, internal migration between municipalities, emigration, and death. In this thesis, demographic characteristics are generally measured either at the time of the asylum application or at the time of settlement into a municipality, while outcomes such as internal migration are taken from the yearly event files.

Other data

The third study additionally draws on the NEET register constructed by Statistics Norway, which classifies the labour-market and educational activity of every resident aged 15 and over in a reference week in November each year (Pettersen & Røv, 2020). The classification combines information from several administrative sources, including employment, ordinary educational enrolment, participation in labour-market programmes, and the receipt of social benefits, and assigns each individual a prioritised labour-force status. Individuals classified as not in employment, education, or training (NEET) are distinguished from those in employment, education, or training; participants in the introduction programme are recorded as being in education or training and are therefore not NEET. The register is available from 2008 onwards, which determines the start of the analytical window in the third study, and runs through to 2023, allowing each individual to be followed for up to 10 years after arrival. A small share of individuals (around 3 to 8 per cent, depending on the year since settlement) carry an unknown NEET status in a given year, reflecting unregistered emigration, benefits registered under another household member, or activities not captured by the contributing administrative sources.

Information on the spatial context of reception centres is provided by Statistics Norway's centrality index (Høydahl, 2023), which classifies Norwegian municipalities on a six-point scale according to their accessibility to jobs and services, from the most central urban municipalities (level 1) to the most peripheral rural municipalities (level 6). The third study collapses this scale into a binary urban–rural distinction, grouping centrality levels 1 to 3 as urban and levels 4 to 6 as rural; the threshold corresponds to a meaningful step in access to labour markets, educational institutions, and welfare services. Finally, the conditional independence of allocation to the first ordinary reception centre, on which the third study's identification strategy relies, is documented in the Norwegian Official Report on the reception system (NOU 2024:17), which establishes available capacity as the primary criterion in placement decisions, subject to considerations such as the best interests of children, family ties, language, sex, and any special needs (see also Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019).

Ethical considerations

The studies in this thesis draw on linked administrative registers covering the full population of asylum seekers who arrived in Norway, a group that is in several respects vulnerable. Many have experienced displacement, loss, or trauma; their legal status for much of the observation period is precarious; and they have limited influence over the very institutional processes that the thesis examines. Conducting research on such a population through secondary register data raises distinct ethical considerations. The data are provided by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and Statistics Norway and are accessed in de-identified form, with direct identifiers replaced by pseudonymous keys and all analysis carried out under the confidentiality conditions and secure-access arrangements that govern register-based research at Statistics Norway. Individual informed consent is not asked for nor practicable for whole-population administrative data of this kind. The processing instead rests on the established legal basis for research and statistical use in the public interest, and no individual is identifiable in published output, with small groups aggregated and/or merge with other groups.

Another consideration it the use of individual data. Disaggregating outcomes by country of origin, sex, age, and family status is analytically necessary if the heterogeneity of the asylum-seeking population is to be understood, yet the same detail carries a risk of reinforcing stereotypes, or of being read as evidence of inherent group differences, particularly for nationalities already the subject of restrictive political discourse. The thesis attempts to balance this by interpreting group differences as the products of structural, institutional, and policy contexts rather than of the characteristics of the groups themselves, and by remaining attentive throughout to how the results are framed, so that the analytical value of granular register data is pursued while being careful not

to, as far as possible, contribute to the stigmatisation of an already marginalised population.

Summary of papers

Paper 1.
Understanding Asylum-seeker Approval and Reception Centre Dynamics

This paper addresses two related gaps in the quantitative literature on asylum seekers: the demographic selection that determines whose claims are approved, and the dynamics of the reception-centre period itself, including the competing pathways by which individuals leave their first centre. Drawing on linked administrative registers covering the full population of asylum seekers who arrived in Norway between 2005 and 2016 ($N \approx 104{,}000$), it uses continuous-time event-history and competing-risks models to examine the time to a decision, the likelihood of approval, and four mutually exclusive exits from the first ordinary reception centre: resettlement into a municipality, relocation to another centre, registered departure, and disappearance.

The results show that both approval and the route out of the first centre vary systematically by year of arrival, country of origin, sex, age, and family status. Women and unaccompanied minors have higher approval rates, while young men arriving alone face a "labour-migrant penalty"; Syrians and Eritreans experience comparatively stable stays with high rates of direct resettlement, whereas Iraqis and young adults face longer waits and a greater risk of relocation between centres. This paper shows who is selected into the resident population and how heterogeneous and unstable the reception period can be.

Paper 2.
Early Instability, Later Mobility: The Role of the Asylum-Seeking Period on Refugees' Internal Migration in Norway

This paper studies whether residential instability during the asylum-seeking period shapes refugees' internal migration after they are granted a residence permit. It distinguishes two aspects of early residential trajectories that potentially leads to residential instability: relocations between ordinary reception centres, and whether an individual is settled in the same municipality as their longest reception-centre stay or in a different one. Linking reception-centre records to the population register for all asylum seekers granted asylum between 2005 and 2016 who were aged 20 or over at settlement ($N = 40{,}003$), it

follows individuals for up to ten years and estimates discrete-time competing-risks models of the first move away from the placement municipality.

Individuals settled in the same municipality as their longest reception-centre stay are less likely to leave it, whereas those who experienced relocations between centres are more likely to move on, with the risk rising as the number of stays increases. These patterns hold after adjustment for socio-demographic characteristics and municipal centrality and are interpreted through the complementary mechanisms of place attachment and accumulated relocation capital. There is also a large increased probability for internal mobility if the asylum-seeker is placed in a rural municipality. The paper contributes evidence that the asylum-seeking period is not merely a phase of waiting but a formative stage for later spatial trajectories. It shows that early residential (in)stability carries through to long-term settlement, and that the asylum-seeking period therefore belongs within research on refugee mobility and dispersal rather than being treated as prior to it.

Paper 3.
Does Where You Wait Matter? Reception Centre Operator Type, Municipal Centrality and NEET Status Among Asylum-Seekers

This paper changes focus from instability to the institutional and spatial context of reception, asking whether the characteristics of the first ordinary reception centre shape subsequent labour-market attachment. It examines two features of that context i) the type of operator running the centre (private, municipal, or non-governmental) and ii) the centrality of the municipality in which it is located (urban or rural), and their association with the probability of being NEET (not in employment, education, or training) in each of the first six years after recognition. The analysis covers about 42,000 asylum seekers who arrived between 2008 and 2014 and exploits the conditionally random allocation of individuals to their first centre.

The results show limited differences by operator type, but more consistent differences by centrality. Individuals initially placed in rural centres generally have higher probabilities of work or education and lower probabilities of NEET than those placed in urban centres, particularly in the medium term, although these differences diminish over time. Women and older asylum seekers also have higher probabilities of NEET. Overall, the findings suggest that the spatial context of reception matters more for later labour-market attachment than operator type.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to understand how the institutional and spatial conditions of the asylum-seeking and early settlement period shape the life-course trajectories of people who seek asylum. The three papers approach this aim from different points along the same trajectory and read together they make a connected argument: the period between arrival and placement is not just waiting, but time in limbo that can shape asylum-seeker life trajectories.

This thesis is situated within sociological demography, with migration as its central demographic process. Migration is one of the three fundamental processes of population change, alongside fertility and mortality, but the demographic consequences of migration depend not only on who crosses a national border, but also on who becomes part of the resident population, who remains in the country, and where people live over time. By studying the population of asylum seekers from arrival, through the asylum and reception system, and, for those granted protection, into longer-term settlement, this thesis contributes to a demographic understanding of a population whose trajectories are only partly captured in conventional population registers. It documents the socio-demographic composition and heterogeneity of this population, including differences by age, sex, country of origin and family status, and shows how these characteristics are associated with selection into the resident refugee population and with subsequent spatial and socioeconomic trajectories.

The thesis is also firmly anchored in demographic methods and in the Nordic tradition of longitudinal register-based population research. The analyses combine administrative asylum and reception-centre records with population registers to follow individuals across time and between demographic states and places. In particular, the use of event-history and competing-risks methods in Papers 1 and 2 places duration, transitions and competing destinations at the centre of the analysis, allowing the thesis to examine not simply whether an event occurs, but when it occurs and through which pathway. Linking information from the asylum system to established population registers further extends the possibilities of Norwegian register research by bringing into view a period that ordinarily precedes entry into the registered resident population. This is important for demographic research because the migration process begins before a person necessarily enters the registered resident population. Asylum seekers may spend months or years in Norway before being registered as residents, and some never enter the resident population at all. The asylum pro-

cess therefore constitutes a demographic selection process: it shapes who becomes part of the population that can subsequently be observed in conventional studies of refugees and immigrants. For those who remain, the thesis further examines where they settle and whether they stay in or leave their initial municipality, connecting international migration to subsequent internal migration and population redistribution within Norway. In this way, the thesis contributes not only to research on refugee integration, but more broadly to demographic research on migration, population composition, selection, mobility and the processes through which migrant populations become part of national and local populations over time.

Paper 1 sets out the two foundations that the later papers build on. First, it shows that approval varies systematically by country of origin, year of arrival, sex, age, and family status, with women and unaccompanied minors more likely to be granted protection and young men arriving alone facing a "labour-migrant penalty" (Valenta, 2014; Ortensi et al., 2024). The recognised refugee population that post-settlement research observes is therefore a selected group, and not a random subset of those who arrive. Second, it shows that the reception period itself is heterogeneous and often unstable, with the routes out of the first centre, resettlement, relocation, registered departure, or disappearance differs across the same characteristics.

Papers 2 and 3 follow this heterogeneity into the post-placement period, each including these aspects of the reception period. Paper 2 starts from the instability shown in Paper 1 and shows that it persists over time. Relocations between reception centres, and a mismatch between the longest reception centre municipality and the placement municipality, both increase the risk of later internal migration, with a higher share of matched individuals than mismatched individuals are still living in the placement municipality after ten years. The two mechanisms used to interpret this are weakened place attachment and accumulated relocation capital (Fischer & Malmberg, 2001; Bernard & Perales, 2021). Paper 3 turns from instability to the institutional and spatial context of reception. It finds that the centrality (urban/rural) of the first centre's municipality is associated with later labour-market attachment, while operator type, conditional on centrality, seems less important, and the importance of the reception centre context diminishes over time.

Taken together, the three papers support a structural reading of integration rather than one based on individual adaptation alone. Classical and segmented assimilation theory differ over how far trajectories depend on what migrants bring with them and how far on the contexts that receive them (Drouhot, 2024), while refugee-specific frameworks treat integration as a two-way process dependent on the receiving society (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2021; Donato & Ferris, 2020). The patterns found here are consistent with the latter emphasis, even if this thesis also find support for the importance of individual demographic characteristics. The reception system works as the kind of differentiated opportunity structure Phillimore (2021) describes: stability acts as a facilitator whose absence carries over into later domains (Ager &

Strang, 2008), and the conditions of waiting leave measurable, population-level traces in mobility and employment after recognition. The thesis does not capture integration in full and domains such as health, social connection, and the subjective sense of belonging fall outside its scope. Even so, the thesis shows that the asylum-seeking period belongs inside, rather than before, the study of refugee life courses.

Policy implications

The findings carry several implications, which are offered with the caution that observational evidence requires. Relocations and municipality mismatch are associated with more onward mobility, and much of this instability comes from capacity pressures, centre closures, and the short contracts that follow the shift towards private operators (Paper 1; NOU 2024:17). Measures that reduce this through longer or more stable contracts, fewer involuntary moves, and closer alignment between the reception-centre municipality and the eventual placement municipality may therefore support more sustained settlement.

The limited role of operator type, once centrality is accounted for, suggests that the debate over private, municipal, and non-governmental provision may matter less for these outcomes than where centres are located. This does not make operator type irrelevant, as its consequences appear to work through the instability it generates rather than through the daily environment it provides, but it does shift attention towards the spatial distribution of reception capacity and the local opportunity structures into which asylum-seekers are placed.

A final implication concerns how integration evidence is interpreted. Because recognition is selective, studies that compare recognised refugees with other groups without acknowledging this selection risk attributing to individual characteristics what is in fact a feature of who is admitted. Norway offers comparatively favourable reception conditions in a European context, yet the selection and instability shown here resemble patterns found elsewhere (Hainmueller et al., 2016; Baalbergen et al., 2025), so the findings would probably not be specific to Norway.

Limitations and future research

A number of limitations qualify these conclusions, and most follow from the data. Linked administrative registers describe structure such as timings, locations, and transitions, but they say little about the mechanisms assumed to connect that structure to outcomes. Place attachment, relocation capital, social ties, mental health, and the motivations to move or to work are inferred rather than observed. Measurement is a related constraint: We do not know the reason for moving, and we can therefore not know if internal mobility of the asylum-seekers have a positive or negative long-term effect for them. Further,

NEET is a coarse, single indicator that captures whether someone is in employment, education, or training, but not the quality of that activity, and it might not pick up smaller differences across reception contexts. It also does not capture whether individuals are more or less likely to choose education or training instead of entering the labour-market directly, where the education or training might lead to more social mobility or a more stable attachment to the labour-market long-term.

Selection and non-randomness also recur across the papers. Relocations between centres, and being matched to one's reception-centre municipality, are not randomly assigned. Because more time in the system itself raises the likelihood of instability, the associations in Paper 2 may partly reflect waiting time, and some individuals are more likely than others to be matched in the first place. The identification in Paper 3 rests on the conditionally random allocation to the first centre, which is supported by the capacity-based placement rules (NOU 2024:17; Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019) but cannot be fully tested. Paper 1 does not observe the adjudication process itself, so documented bias and inconsistency remain outside the analysis, and the disappearance outcome is hard to interpret, since unregistered departures from Norway are likely recorded as disappearances rather than as exits. The thesis also does not examine pre-arrival selection, so it cannot control for who migrates, through which routes, and with what experiences on the journey, even though these may shape both recognition and later integration.

There are also limits of scope. Papers 2 and 3 necessarily follow only those who are granted asylum into the post-placement period, so the long-term part of the thesis concerns the same selected population whose selection Paper 1 documents. The analyses capture first moves rather than full mobility histories (Paper 2), describe the reception period through a limited set of features rather than the quality of environments and services within centres, and cover only some of the domains and opportunity structures set out in the theoretical framework (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2021).

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Future work could model repeated and full mobility trajectories rather than the first move alone, and examine the mechanisms behind the urban NEET pattern, ideally combining register data with qualitative evidence on local labour markets, networks, and discourse. A broader definition of (in)stability — including moves within centres, staff turnover, and other structural changes — would sharpen the measurement of the central concept, and richer measures of reception-centre quality and of outcomes beyond labour-market attachment, such as health and social connection, would extend the analysis across more of the framework. More generally, the thesis argues that the asylum-seeking period should be built into models of long-term refugee outcomes as a matter of course, on the understanding that this early period shapes the trajectories that follow it.

This thesis set out to bring the asylum-seeking period into the study of refugee life courses, and the three papers together show why it belongs there: the

period selects who becomes a refugee, distributes stability unevenly among them, and shapes where they settle and their trajectories. In doing so, it supports a reading of integration in which the contexts of reception shape the trajectories that follow.

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