

# Defining Key Terms: Refugees

## Literature Review: Refugee Urban Integration

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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

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

It is widely recognized that the terms “refugee,” “urban,” and “integration” are not clear-cut or universally defined.<sup>1</sup> There are ongoing debates and inconsistent definitions found in the literature as well as among policymakers and practitioners. The following section will discuss the contested definition of “refugee” in the literature and in practice.

### Legal vs. Academic Definitions of “Refugees”

International law defines a “refugee” primarily in two documents: the 1951 Convention Related to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, both approved by the United Nations General Assembly. Under the 1951 Convention, a refugee is defined as an individual who has left his or her country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return due to a fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.<sup>2</sup> It also defines the rights and obligations of refugees and host countries. The 1967 Protocol expanded the scope of refugee protections by removing the time-limited and geographic restrictions of the 1951 Convention in light of increased displacement.<sup>3</sup>

However, the term “refugee” is contested for legal, contextual, moral, and linguistic reasons. Most refugee research takes a more inclusive and broad definition than the legal definition, using “refugee” to denote the status of any person who has fled his or her country and crossed a border due to insecurity.<sup>4</sup> This definition allows the broader inclusion of the approximately 35 million displaced people who are not legally tallied as refugees because they are actively in the process of seeking asylum, are awaiting applications for refugee status at various stages of the process, or have chosen not to formally apply for refugee status.<sup>5</sup>

This inclusive definition also recognizes that the legal definition of refugees emerged from a particular political context and power imbalance between Western states and the colonized developing world in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore the legal definition is based in and constrained by those power imbalances. As Peterson

<sup>1</sup> [Council of Europe 2000](#)

<sup>2</sup> [UN General Assembly 1951](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UN General Assembly 1967](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Schibel et al. 2002](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Atfield, Brahmhatt and O’Toole 2007](#); [Goldenziel 2016](#); [UNHCR 2018](#)

(2018) describes: “the international jurisprudence surrounding asylum and refuge was formulated at a time when it was widely assumed—by international lawyers and states alike—that colonial powers could do more or less as they wished with the people under their control.” The legal status of “refugee” therefore tends to apply to the group Western onlookers view as most in need of political shelter at the time,<sup>6</sup> with political context changing the “refugee” category over time.<sup>7</sup> For example, Cubans were a dominant refugee group in the 1950s, Palestinians were in the 1960s, Russians were in the 1980s, and Syrians and Afghans are today.

Perhaps most problematic for using the legal definition of “refugees” are the practical limitations for selecting who qualifies for refugee legal status, which include “difficulties in evaluating evidence, assessing credibility, and conducting hearings; problems in coping with vicarious traumatization and uncontrolled emotional reactions; poor knowledge of the political context, false representations of war, and cultural misunderstandings or insensitivity.”<sup>8</sup> These issues are so widespread that “it is improbable that legal categories will accurately correspond to social categories.”<sup>9</sup>

The category “refugee,” is further contested because of its cultural and political baggage. For example, the notion of being a “guest” is as important in Muslim countries’ politics toward migrants as the Western-originating notion of being a “refugee.”<sup>10</sup> Importantly, 90% of recognized refugees are Muslims,<sup>11</sup> so while Western actors may focus on refugees’ “pathways to citizenship,” Muslim countries may focus on less-Westphalian-bounded notions of belonging to the *ummah* that is unrelated or only loosely related to refugee legal status.<sup>12</sup> Further, while countries in the West tend to perceive the production of refugees as a result of dynamics in unstable and violent developing countries, countries outside of the West tend to perceive refugees through the lens of decolonization caused by foreign domination that “seriously disturbs public order.”<sup>13</sup>

### Defining “Refugeeness”

Noting the issues with using the legal label “refugee,” as a categorization tool,<sup>14</sup> much of the literature instead applies some version of “refugeeness” as a category based not on legal status but instead on identifiable traits such as experiences with violence, emotional states, degrees of vulnerability, or behaviors.<sup>15</sup> The focus on traits of “refugeeness” removes legal status as the deciding factor for who fits in the group and instead asks: what is it about being a “refugee” that results in different types of people?

“Refugeeness” as a category comes with two main advantages. First, it sidesteps the aforementioned problems of the legal definition. Second, it expands the temporal boundaries of the category to include the time before an individual’s refugee status is issued and after refugee status is withdrawn due to resettlement, both of which are important stages in the process of integration. In other words, someone with “refugeeness” may be of interest to researchers before they are officially declared a refugee and after a host government has replaced their refugee status with a permanent residency status.<sup>16</sup>

The biggest distinctions then between forced migrants or displaced persons and other types of migrants, say economic migrants, are the involuntary nature of the departure and the lack of financial motivation for

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<sup>6</sup> Keller 1975

<sup>7</sup> [Massey 2015](#); [Rottman, Fariss and Poe 2009](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Rousseau et al. 2002](#)

<sup>9</sup> Joly 2002: 4

<sup>10</sup> Fábos and Isotalo 2014: 5

<sup>11</sup> Fábos and Isotalo 2014: 8

<sup>12</sup> Fábos and Isotalo 2014: 6

<sup>13</sup> Joly 2002; see also [Organization of African Unity 1969](#); [Organization of American States 1985](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Laderchi, Saith and Stewart 2003](#)

<sup>15</sup> Keller 1975

<sup>16</sup> Tang 2015: 164-165; Varsanyi 2010: 97

leaving.<sup>17</sup> Arguing for the utility of these categories are findings demonstrating different behaviors like spending patterns between forced migrants and economic migrants.<sup>18</sup>

The psychological literature on “refugeeness” emphasizes that this forcible displacement often comes with experiences with violence, higher rates of trauma, and behavioral health concerns that deepen the differences between this group and other types of migrants,<sup>19</sup> which in turn reduces prosocial behavior and capacity to integrate.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile the security literature emphasizes sources of vulnerability as a key differentiating factor between a group of migrants with “refugeeness” and other groups of migrants. While all of these groups may experience trauma and risk of violence,<sup>21</sup> those in the “refugeeness” category face a higher risk of state-sponsored violence and political persecution than other migrant groups and host populations.<sup>22</sup>

### Categories with “Refugeeness”

Perhaps the two most common “refugeeness” categories found in the literature are “forced migrants” and “displaced persons.” The literature may employ these terms to capture groups of migrants who may or may not have refugee legal status but are still characterized by having experienced forcible action as a cause of migration and by experiencing a sense of impermanence in their new location.<sup>23</sup> The use of the word “forced” emphasizes the “social process and human agency” of the migration experience in a way the term “refugee” does not.<sup>24</sup>

Another category of “refugeeness” are internally displaced persons (IDPs), differentiated from refugees because they have not crossed an international border. More deeply, IDPs and others with “refugeeness” behave differently and have separate experiences. For example, IDP migrations are less defined by political experience than those of internationally displaced persons, and IDPs’ movement is typically caused by apolitical forces like environmental degradation, infrastructural failure, or economic inopportunity.<sup>25</sup> The fact that IDPs remain in a country of origin results in a different perception of permanence than that for internationally forcibly displaced persons.<sup>26</sup> Other differences between refugees and IDPs include that “IDPs often return before refugees do; their return in most cases happens spontaneously while refugee returns are often organized; and IDP returns happen at the domestic level only while refugee returns have an international dimension with countries of refuge playing a certain role.”<sup>27</sup>

### Contesting “Refugeeness”

Despite the advantages of “refugeeness,” as a typology, the literature identifies several problems with the categorization. First, the category “forcibly displaced” is criticized because it implies an agent causing the displacing, but migrants may be forcibly displaced not by armed conflict but rather by forced evictions,<sup>28</sup> natural disasters, or a complex combination of factors.<sup>29</sup> Second, there is a problem with externally imposing the category “refugeeness” on numerous individuals who do not self-identify as refugees or IDPs and choose instead

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<sup>17</sup> Jolly 2002: 7

<sup>18</sup> Diaz-Briquets and Perez-Lopez 1997

<sup>19</sup> Jacobsen 2006: 276; see also Birn et al. 2014; [Brooker et al. 2013](#); [Hanson et al. 2015](#); Herman 1997: 20; Mateen et al. 2012; Mooren and Kleber 2013; Porter and Haslam 2005; [Roberts et al. 2009](#); Shackman et al. 2016; [Varvin 1998](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009](#); [Lyubomirsky, Sousa and Dickerhoof 2006](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Kilpatrick et al. 2014](#)

<sup>22</sup> Chung, Flook and Fuligni 2009; Jacobsen, Young and Osman 2008; [Sude, Stebbins and Weiland 2015](#)

<sup>23</sup> [IASC 2014](#)

<sup>24</sup> Castles 2003

<sup>25</sup> [IDMC 2016](#); [Kaelin, Deng and Cohen 2002](#)

<sup>26</sup> [IASC 2014](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Kälin 2015](#)

<sup>28</sup> McDowell and Morrell 2010: 137

<sup>29</sup> Fábos and Isotalo 2014: 3

to identify by other features of their identity.<sup>30</sup> This opens the potential for categories to be misused and cause social or political harm; for example, a national study from the Netherlands defined “nontraditional immigrants” as non-Western Europeans who are not white, thereby Othering them in a way that was perceived as demeaning.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, basing “refugeeness” on a group’s similar experiences with trauma is criticized because it makes the definition a kind of clinical diagnosis. Defining “refugeeness” based on psychological wellbeing also might overemphasize past experiences and loss while underemphasizing the future and a migrant’s resilience.<sup>32</sup>

Another problem is that like any category, refugeeness “imposes a problematic fictive unity upon group social relations,” without recognition of diversity and change within the group,<sup>33</sup> and may require further disaggregation into subcategories.<sup>34</sup> For example, the subcategories of voluntarily and involuntarily resettled refugees may need to be distinguished, as they are known to have different social integration outcomes between these two groups.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, within the “irregular migrant” category, differing degrees of “illegality” have been found to result in different capacities to integrate.<sup>36</sup> Similarly to refugees, “IDPs should not be viewed as a homogenous group, given that their economic status and resource levels can vary dramatically.”<sup>37</sup>

The term “migration” is criticized for suggesting a clear movement from one point to another, while migrations are often non-linear, cyclical, and include both internal and international phases.<sup>38</sup> A final criticism of the terms “forced migrant,” “displaced person,” and “refugee” is that these terms stress the importance of migration in defining a group’s identity as if movement is an exceptional—rather than a normal—part of peoples’ lived experiences.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of these issues, numerous studies choose to remove these terms altogether, instead clustering refugees into other groups using discourse from different disciplines such as the “urban poor,”<sup>40</sup> “third-country nationals,”<sup>41</sup> “new diasporas,”<sup>42</sup> or people with “multiple allegiances to place.”<sup>43</sup> Still others choose to cluster refugees, economic migrants, and other displaced persons into a single category, arguing that they are all “refugees of globalization,”<sup>44</sup> part of a fundamental “conflict between the powerful and the powerless,”<sup>45</sup> founding the definition in decolonization, not strictly migration.<sup>46</sup>

### Redefining “Host Communities” in Urban Settings

The term “host community” is commonly used in the forced migration literature but has limited descriptive power in an urban setting. Urban settings are a diverse and wide-ranging collection of neighborhoods, each with their own characteristics, and each neighborhood in turn contains many sub-groups who may or may not

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<sup>30</sup> [Chemaly, Baal and Jacobsen 2016](#)

<sup>31</sup> [Alink et al. 2013](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Caruso, Gilbert and Wilson 2008](#); [Ebert, Gilbert and Wilson 2009](#); [Wilson, Meyers and Gilbert 2003](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Piacentini 2012](#); see also Moro 2004

<sup>34</sup> [Atfield, Brahmhatt and O’Toole 2007](#): 7

<sup>35</sup> Oliver-Smith 1991

<sup>36</sup> [De Genova 2002](#)

<sup>37</sup> [IDMC 2015](#): 7

<sup>38</sup> [Balbo and Marconi 2005](#); [Habitat III 2015](#)

<sup>39</sup> Fábos and Isotalo 2014: 1; [McDowell and Haan 1997](#)

<sup>40</sup> [Balbo and Marconi 2005](#)

<sup>41</sup> [Bürkin and Chindea 2012](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Berdal 2005](#); [Brinkerhoff 2005](#); [Collier 1999](#); [Collier and Hoeffler 2002](#); Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Østergaard 2003; Van Hear 1998: 4

<sup>43</sup> Van Hear 1998: 4; Fábos and Isotalo 2014

<sup>44</sup> [Goodall 2011](#)

<sup>45</sup> McDowell and Morrell 2010

<sup>46</sup> Peterson 2018; [Yiftachel 2009](#)

constitute a community.<sup>47</sup> Urban neighborhoods are stratified and spatially subdivided by wealth, class, race, ethnicity, or religion, and by national origin (for international migrants and refugees) or place of origin (in the case of internal migrants and IDPs). Each of these identifiers has implications for social cohesion and sense of community, and in many cases, there simply is no “community” that can easily be identified.<sup>48</sup> Rather, “host population” or “host society” offer more neutral terms that do not qualify whether a group is socially and culturally connected or not. However, the term “host” might still be criticized for creating a dehumanizing effect on refugees, framing them as a sort of inundation or parasitic presence.<sup>49</sup>

## Good Practices for Refugee Typologies

The most effective typologies tend to define and provide evidence for why “refugees” behave differently or not from other groups, while also acknowledging the limitations the typology is imposing, and the ways different groups blend and interact.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, “not all migrants who come from refugee-producing countries are refugees,” and vice versa, although public discourses and legal categories do not usually reflect these subtleties.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, “refugees and ‘refugee networks’ should be considered not in isolation.”<sup>52</sup> As Watters and Nawyn (2013) argue: “the idea that there is ‘one immigrant experience’ often referred to as ‘the immigrant experience,’ is proven invalid.”

Beyond academic theory, there is utility to blending these categories for practitioners, and contesting the definition of “refugee” is a widespread operational requirement. For example, the UN High Commissioner for “Refugees,” does not purely work with “refugees” but also serves IDPs and stateless persons in order to access vulnerable populations.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, resettlement agencies in the U.S., like the Bureau of Population, “Refugees,” and Migration (PRM) also serve asylum seekers, Cuban and Haitian entrants, Special Immigrant Visa holders, Amerasians, and victims of trafficking.<sup>54</sup> Regardless of its use, a good definition of “refugees” requires precision, reasoning, and flexibility.

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<sup>47</sup> [World Bank Group and GFDRR 2015](#)

<sup>48</sup> Putnam 2001

<sup>49</sup> [Turton 2003](#)

<sup>50</sup> [Fagen and Bump 2006](#)

<sup>51</sup> Jacobsen 2016: 274

<sup>52</sup> Crisp 1999: 3

<sup>53</sup> UNHCR 2009

<sup>54</sup> [ORR Annual Report 2015](#)