



Summary: ‘Like Pebbles in a Pool: The Effect of Community Sponsorship on Knowledge about, and Attitudes to, Refugees in Less-Diverse Communities’

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Like Pebbles in a Pool: The Effect of Community Sponsorship on Knowledge about, and Attitudes to, Refugees in Less-Diverse Communities

Executive Summary

- This exploratory research explores the impact of the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) on wider communities and institutions. It focuses on the knowledge and public attitudes of community members with regard to refugees, CSS, and the impact of CSS on their local area.
- The research objective was to gain insights into how interactions with CSS groups or refugees had influenced their awareness and comprehension of refugees and to understand some of the difficulties and advantages linked to CSS for local communities.
- The study finds that CSS reduces community fear and anxiety about refugees through the provision of information and facilitating interaction between refugees and community members.
- Respondents who interacted with refugees showed a good understanding of them and appreciated those interactions as learning opportunities to know more about their culture, food and way of life.
- Service delivery staff working with refugees reflected on how refugees' prior experiences in service delivery have been different from their work.
- Refugees' presence was mostly felt within the contact zone of localities rather than the wider community.
- The presence of refugees in less diverse communities contributes to shifting people's mindset to become more inclusive of cultural diversity and new perspectives.
- CSSs can have better impacts by increasing community knowledge about refugees, improving their language skills, and enhancing interactions between locals and refugees.

Research Information

- The Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) conducted research in five small towns to understand the wider impact of CSS in relation to the attitude of communities toward refugees and their sponsors.
- Each of the five selected areas had a well-established CSS but was characterized by a low level of ethnic diversity. Refugees sponsored by CSSs were the first refugee groups resettled in these areas.
- The interviewees were selected from institutions like schools, dentistry, local community members and CSS members. Most of the interviewees were encountering refugees for the first time.
- The study utilized semi-structured interviews with 33 individuals residing and working in regions where there was an active CSS group that had supported a refugee family.

Research findings

- Community sponsorship improves peoples' perception of refugees, contributes to reduced fear, and promotes understanding of new perspectives in less diverse communities.
 - A main cause of fear in those communities was accepting stereotypes about refugees by some community members. CSSs provided opportunities for community gatherings and shared information about the settled families, which helped mitigate those concerns.
- Some individuals who were anxious about refugees reported that their concerns were reduced after refugees' arrival to their communities as they had either direct or indirect interactions with refugees. They reported to be impressed with refugees' gratitude, generosity and welcoming spirits.
- The findings suggest that contacts with refugees and sponsorship groups potentially overcome some local concerns.
 - A volunteer who worked with a Syrian family reported that her friends were concerned that she would be affected by radicalized ideas. The volunteer disagreed and her response to this concern was that she found the refugee family very kind and caring.
- People with close interactions with refugees reported learning opportunities and broadening their horizons through experiencing different food and cultural differences.
- Local institutions like job centers, schools and community groups were involved in awareness-raising and preparatory works before the arrival of refugees. They showed a higher degree of understanding and support for refugees and passed on their refugee knowledge to others.
- Some service delivery participants expressed learning opportunities through realizing stereotypical assumptions about refugees.
 - A participant worked very hard to disprove the assumption that the issue a refugee woman had with her teenage daughter had nothing to do with her culture or religion.
- Staff working at school learned how to adopt new teaching methods to accommodate refugee children's needs, like focusing on learning techniques not requiring English language competency.
- Teachers reported sharing their teaching experiences with other peers to be used in similar situations working with children who were out of school for some time.
- Refugees faced challenges around employment and language. They were also perceived as different in attitudes toward gender parity and sexuality.
 - A respondent talked about her experience discussing their brother's homosexuality with a Muslim refugee. Initiating such discussion could contribute to long-term attitude change and mutual understanding.

- Those in contact with refugees—volunteers and institutional employees— expressed positive experiences interacting with refugees, potentially supporting further community sponsorship programs.
 - These service providers realized that refugees were not accustomed to the type of services offered in the UK and appreciated diversity and cultural differences.
- The effect of community sponsorship in a less diverse area is analogized to dropping a pebble in the pool. The effects are small, but the change would be more salient if the process continued.
- CSS potentially helps less diverse communities to transform their refugee perceptions, reduce their fears, embrace changes in their work practices and make them more inclusive of a diverse population and new perspectives.