Refugee Mobility Rates in the ACS

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The last decade has seen rapidly increasing refugee numbers. In the period from 2011 to 2021, refugees under UNHCR and UNRWA's mandates rose from 15.2 million to 27.1 million.[1,2] While many countries accept refugees, they often limit movement either by placing them in refugee camps, or through policy that seeks to disperse refugees and afterwards discourages relocation. These policies often inhibit labor market integration, leading to poorer socioeconomic outcomes (Fasani, Frattini, and Minale 2022). The problem may be aggravated if refugees have a higher willingness to relocate compared to immigrants.

Are higher mobility rates plausible? On one hand, refugees settled in developed countries often overcome long journeys (Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020) and are likely poorer than immigrants. Both may increase mobility rates, the former by allowing more efficient moving from built up experience and the latter by reducing costs as there is less inhibiting a potential move. Conversely, refugees are likely less educated, whereas education increases mobility (Aydemir, Kırdar, and Torun 2021) and they are likely more dependent on their ethnic group, making a separation from their ethnicity more costly.

In this paper, I investigate the long run mobility rates of refugees and immigrants in the US. My work is related to Mossaad et al. (2020) who measure refugee mobility rates in the immediate 1-2 years after resettlement, whereas I am able to observe refugees' mobility rates for longer. It is also related to Ransom (2022) in which low-income groups have lower moving costs.

One challenge is that the available data in the United do not identify refugees separately from immigrants. However, Capps et al. (2015) and Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) propose a method of identifying refugees in the American Community Survey (ACS) which compares refugee and immigrant inflows by country of origin and year of migration pairs in the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Yearbook of Immigration Statistics and ACS respectively. If the refugee counts in the DHS data are close to the immigrant counts in the ACS, all immigrants in the country, year pair are classified as refugees. Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) choose a cutoff of 0.7 (i.e. if the refugees in the DHS data and immigrants in the ACS in any country, year pair are in a ratio of 7:10 or

[1] https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=4YH3jb
[2] https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=0PogMd

above, all individuals in that county, year pair are classified as refugees).

After identifying refugees, I turn to their mobility rates within the host country. The ACS collects data on whether respondents switched houses compared to 12 months ago, and if they did, whether they moved within state, across state, or from a foreign country.

I use this data to regress mobility rates on refugee status, first without controls, and progressively adding country fixed effects, ancestry fixed effects, and years of residence as regressors. I find that refugees have higher cross-state migration rates than immigrants but that the difference disappears when I add country fixed effects and ancestry fixed effects. I also find that mobility rates decrease with years of residence. Table 1 columns 1 through 4 summarize the four regressions – column 1 summarizes the regression of refugee status on mobility rates without controls, column 2 adds country fixed effects, column 3 adds ancestry fixed effects, and column 4 adds a duration of residence regressor. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate between and within-state mobility rates of refugees and immigrants arranged by increasing difference.

The aforementioned regressions suggest that refugees do indeed have higher mobility rates, but that they do not originate from the refugee experience. Even so, the policy relevance is not diminished. Typically in the US, refugee aid is tied to a location rather than the individual. Refugees' higher mobility rates imply that such policy can lead to surplus funds in places of out-migration and shortages in places of in-migration, squeezing available funds in schools, hospitals, and other public institutions which can harm refugees themselves and create tension between the refugee population and the local community. Further, lower mobility rates with time suggest that these policies take effect when they are most detrimental – when refugees first enter the country and are most mobile.

Immediate next goals are to experiment with the refugee assignment algorithm of Evans and Fitzgerald (2017). Their method is not without its shortcomings, particularly since there are country, year pairs with refugee : immigrant ratios covering the whole spectrum between 0 and 1. I plan to assign refugee probabilities rather than a binary refugee treatment based on a fixed cutoff. Further along, I plan to use MCFADDEN (1974)'s conditional logit model to explore location characteristics most favored by refugees. Of particular interest is the rural, urban location choice. Rural locations may prove very attractive for refugees (cheap housing, agrarian roots of refugees) but rural migration immediately upon arrival may inhibit formation of support networks and inhibit cultural and economic assimilation. Finally, I hope to study the returns to mobility and selection into secondary migration, although data availability and methodological feasibility are both real issues.

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Table 1: Mobility Regressions - Refugee Status from Cutoff

	Dependent variable:			
	Moved in the past 12 months			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Refugee Status	0.023***	0.005	0.005	0.004
	(0.002)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Years in US				−0.006***
				(0.0004)
Constant	0.166***	0.204***	0.019	0.082
	(0.0003)	(0.007)	(0.223)	(0.222)
Country fixed effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ancestry fixed effects	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,429,474	43,700	43,700	43,700
R^2	0.0001	0.006	0.013	0.018
Adjusted R^2	0.0001	0.006	0.009	0.014
Residual Std. Error	0.372 (df = 1429472)	0.386 (df = 43682)	0.385 (df = 43535)	0.384 (df = 43534)
F Statistic	93.448*** (df = 1; 1429472)	15.341*** (df = 17; 43682)	3.526*** (df = 164; 43535)	4.881*** (df = 165; 43534)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 1: Inter-state Mobility Rates

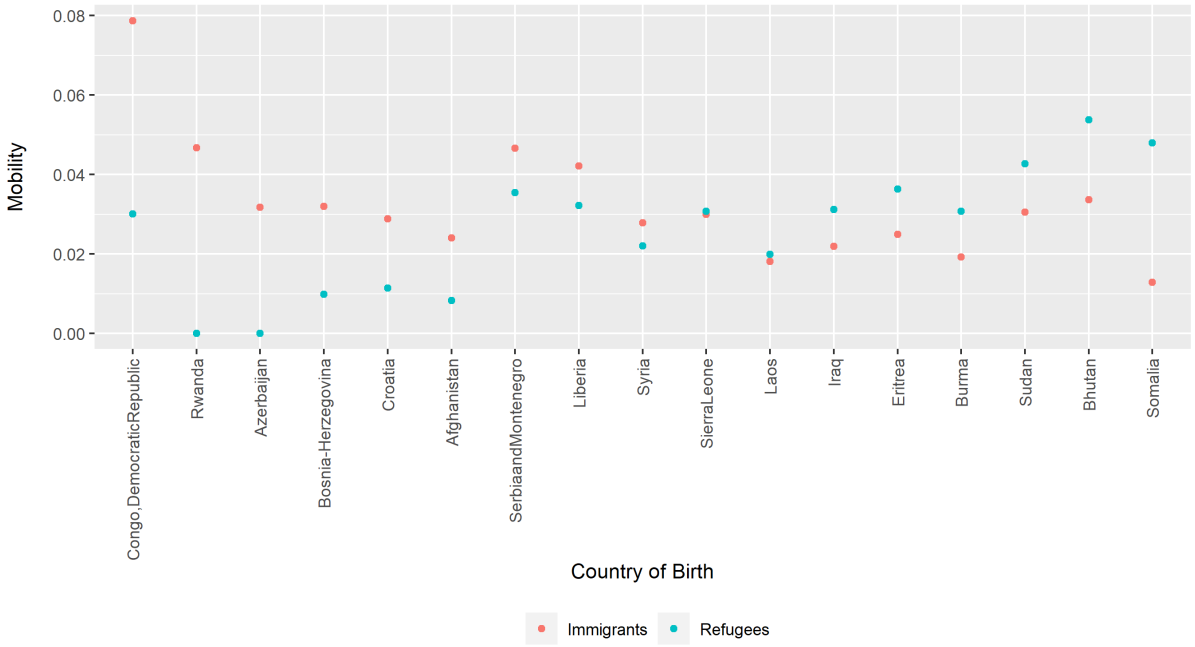

Figure 2: Intra-state Mobility Rates