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Georgia Policy Labs

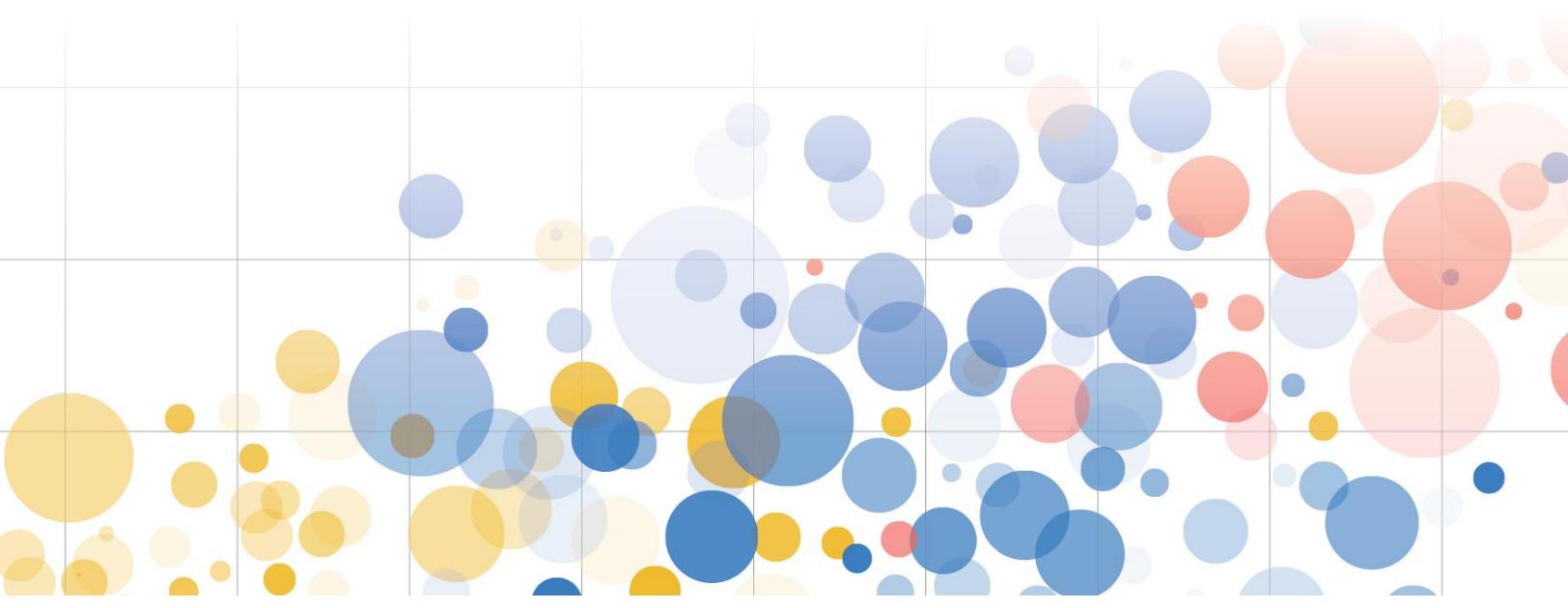
Refugee Students and Peer Effects

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Disclaimer: The results in this policy brief are preliminary and have not undergone the peer review process.



HIGHLIGHTS

- Refugee students make up roughly 3 percent of the total student population in the school district with the highest inflow of refugees in Georgia.
- As of 2016, the top five countries of birth for refugee students in the district were Burma (Myanmar), Ethiopia, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Bhutan.
- Results show that an increase in the share of refugee students at the grade level is associated with higher English Language Arts (ELA) test scores for non-refugee peers.

MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND

The number of refugees and individuals displaced by conflict is at a record high. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that by 2017, over 70 million people have been forced to flee their country of origin because of persecution, war, or violence; a rapid increase from approximately 16 million in 2005.

Historically, the United States has been the top resettlement destination for refugees. Since 1975, the United States has admitted over 3.7 million displaced individuals, which amounts to over two-thirds of the total resettled population worldwide.¹ However, amid controversy and political debate, changes in the refugee admissions ceiling for federal fiscal year (FFY) 2017 led the United States to resettle fewer refugees than the rest of the world for the first time since the creation of the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program in 1980 (Connor and Krogstad, 2018). The proposed ceiling for FFY 2019, 30,000 individuals, is the lowest ever recorded.

Much of the debate on whether to raise or decrease the number of refugee arrivals is based on the perceived costs that refugees may impose across all levels of government and the native population; yet, there is sparse credible evidence on the direct and indirect costs associated with refugee resettlement.

Data availability is an important limitation in the study of refugee integration in the United States. Refugees are commonly not identified apart from other foreign-born individuals, and this has led to limited research on the impact of resettlement, especially using large administrative data sets. However, a recently developed strategy to identify refugees in large data sets has provided the opportunity to expand the knowledge base on refugee integration outcomes (Capps et al., 2015).

Recent work by Evans and Fitzgerald (2017), for example, demonstrates that although initially adult refugees have lower education levels, low employment, and high use of social safety net programs, there are important improvements in the long run. Approximately six years after resettlement, refugees work at higher rates than natives, and it is estimated that refugees pay \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits during the first 20 years in the country.

Refugees are also more likely to be business owners, with approximately 13 percent of working-age refugees being entrepreneurs, compared to 9 percent of U.S. born individuals (Capps et al., 2015). Additionally, refugees who arrive in the country before the age of 14 graduate high school and enter

paths include repatriation and local integration in the first country to which a refugee fled.

¹ Less than 1 percent of refugees are offered the resettlement option; it is known as the solution of last resort (UNHCR). Other

college at the same rate as U.S. born students (Evans and Fitzgerald, 2017).

The closest evidence on the impact of refugee children on the academic outcomes of their peers comes from Florida's K-12 public schools. Research by Figlio and Özek (2017) finds no adverse effects on tests scores following a high inflow of earthquake evacuees from Haiti in 2010.

Even with important new contributions in what we know about refugee resettlement, there remain important knowledge gaps on the impact of resettlement on host communities, including public education. This matters for school districts that welcome refugees into their schools, for teachers who are serving refugees in their classrooms, and students whose peer group is changing. What are the effects of having refugee students as peers?

REFUGEE STUDENTS IN GEORGIA

To our knowledge, we are the first to identify refugees from school administrative data, thereby allowing us to descriptively explore summary statistics about refugee students, in addition to studying the peer effects.

We focus on refugees in Georgia, a state that has resettled over 28,000 refugees since 2004 and ranks among the top 10 resettlement destinations in the United States. In general, the total arrival of refugees in Georgia follows the trend for the country—a decline in arrivals during the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks followed by a mild increase that was reversed during the post-Great-Recession years. Notably, refugee arrival flows have seen a sharp decline nationwide since 2016. In fact, the number of refugees resettled in Georgia in 2017 was the lowest in over a decade.

A snapshot of the student population in the school district in our study reveals that in 2016 there were approximately 3,300 refugee students across all grades (K-12). Thus, refugee students made up roughly 3 percent of the total student population in the district. On average, there were about 250 refugee students per grade, with significant variation across grades. For example, while only 2 percent of first-graders were refugees, this proportion climbs to 5 percent among ninth-graders.

Refugee students in the district come from a variety of countries and enter with varying language skills. In 2016, over 18 countries were represented among the refugee population. The top country of birth for refugee students in the district was Burma (Myanmar), followed by Ethiopia, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Bhutan. Approximately 26 percent of refugee students did not receive English as a Second Language (ESL) services.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the causal effect of refugee exposure on non-refugee students' English Language Arts (ELA) test scores?
- 2) What is the causal effect of refugee exposure on non-refugee students' math test scores?

Theoretically, the expected direction of the effects of refugee enrollment on the achievement of peers is ambiguous. Theoretical explanations exist that rationalize both positive and negative effects for non-refugee students. For example, given that the refugee population is diverse, both in language and education levels, it may be that increases in refugee enrollment lead to increases in classroom disruptions and divert teacher time to accommodate the needs of these students. On the other hand, in partnership with refugee-serving organizations, refugees are provided a host of academic auxiliary

services to improve their English proficiency and overall academic success. To the extent that there are spillovers stemming from these support services, non-refugee students could experience gains in achievement. Therefore, whether refugee students have an impact on the academic achievement of their peers remains an unanswered question.

DATA AND METHODS

We utilize individual-level administrative data on all students in grades three through eight who were enrolled in public schools in the district with the highest inflow of refugees in Georgia between 2008 and 2016. Access to school administrative records allows us to determine the outcomes of students (both refugee and non-refugee), including their test scores, attendance, behavior, and high school graduation. We also have data on student demographics (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender), and English Language Learner (ELL) and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) status.

We merge administrative school records with state-level data from the Refugee Processing Center to identify potential refugee students based on country of birth. The potential refugee student population includes all foreign-born students whose country of origin is on the annual refugee arrivals list within the five years prior to being first observed as a public school student.²

As shown in Table 1, refugee students in this district are, on average, lower performing than both their U.S. born and non-refugee immigrant peers.

Table 1. Summary Statistics by Student Nativity Status for Grades 3-8 (2008-16)

| Variables | U.S. Born | Foreign Born | |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------|---------|
| | | Immigrant | Refugee |
| ELA score | -0.21 | -0.49 | -0.86 |
| Math score | -0.27 | -0.34 | -0.62 |
| Share Female | 0.49 | 0.48 | 0.48 |
| Share Hispanic | 0.11 | 0.43 | 0.05 |
| Share Black | 0.75 | 0.24 | 0.41 |
| Share White | 0.15 | 0.16 | 0.10 |
| Share Asian | 0.03 | 0.28 | 0.47 |
| Share Gifted | 0.17 | 0.10 | 0.06 |
| Share FRPL | 0.71 | 0.81 | 0.89 |
| Share ESL | 0.04 | 0.48 | 0.68 |
| Obs. | 355,571 | 28,744 | 9,718 |
| Percent of Obs. | 90.24% | 7.30% | 2.46% |

Note: The summary statistics are averages over the years 2008-16, and they include only students in grades three through eight. ELA and math test scores are shown in standard deviation units, normalized using the grade-year statewide distribution of test scores by subject. The statewide mean score is therefore zero.

For example, while U.S. born students in the district score 0.21 standard deviations below the state average in English Language Arts (ELA), refugee students score 0.86 standard deviations lower than the state average. This means that about 58 percent of students in the state score above the average of native students in the district whereas over 80 percent of students in the state score above the average refugee student in the district on ELA exams. We observe a less dramatic difference for math test scores: U.S. born and refugee students score 0.27 and 0.62 standard deviations below the state average, respectively—meaning 61 percent of students in the state score above the average native student in the district on the math exam whereas 73 percent of students in the state score above the average refugee student in the district in math.

² The school district in this study does not track students' immigration status. The strategy used to identify refugees is a proxy measure obtained from merging data on students' country

of birth and public records on refugee arrivals by country of origin and destination city.

There are also important socio-demographic differences between refugee and non-refugee students. On average 47 percent of refugee students in the district are Asian and 41 percent are black, 89 percent qualify for FRPL, and 68 percent receive ESL services.

The peers of refugees are likely to be students from low-income households—71 percent of U.S. born and 81 percent of immigrant students qualify for FRPL. On average 75 percent of U.S. born students in the district are black and 17 percent have been identified as gifted students. In contrast, 43 percent of immigrant students are Hispanic and 48 percent receive ESL services.

To determine the causal impacts of refugee students on the academic achievement of their peers, it is necessary to account for potential confounding factors. Importantly, we need to control for differences in school and teacher quality. This matters because we want to attribute differences in student achievement to differences in the share of peers who are refugees, independently of other factors that may also drive differences in student achievement.

We account for school quality by comparing students within schools (not across), and control for teacher quality by measuring peer effects at the student grade level (not classrooms). In sum, we compare ELA and math test scores across students in different grades for the same school and year, where the main difference over time is the share of refugee peers.

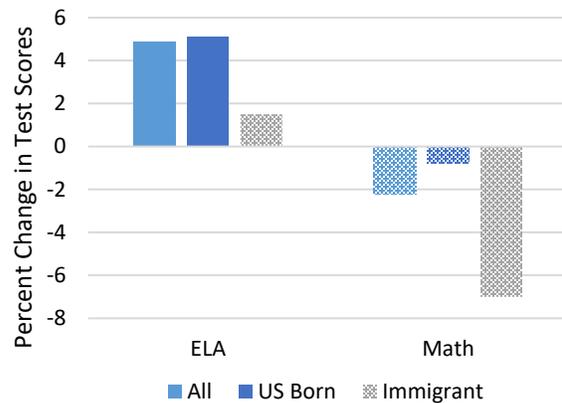
FINDINGS

Our results show no consistent evidence of negative spillover effects on test scores. In fact, we find that students in grades with a higher share of refugees see an increase in their ELA scores. Results for math

test scores show that a higher share of refugee peers has no significant impact on the scores of their non-refugee peers, in general.

As shown in Figure 1, an increase in the share of refugee peers at the grade level from the current average (2.5 percent) to 5 percent is associated with a 5 percent increase in the ELA test score for the average non-refugee student.

Figure 1. Effects of Doubling the Share of Grade-Level Peers Who are Refugees on ELA and Math Scores of Non-Refugee Students



Note: The height of the bars indicates the estimated percent change in test scores for the average non-refugee student by subject and subgroup as a result of an increase in the share of refugee peers at the grade level from the current average (2.5 percent) to 5 percent. Estimates significant at a 95 percent confidence level are shown in solid color.

Note that in the most general case, peers of refugees include both U.S. born and non-refugee immigrant students. Are these two groups of students differentially impacted by refugee peers? We find that the positive peer effects for ELA scores are concentrated among U.S. born students. Although there is a suggestive positive relationship between the share of refugee students and ELA test scores for immigrants as well, our estimates are not precise enough to determine the impact with a high degree of certainty.

In general, we find no causal relationship between the share of refugee students at the grade level and math test scores for non-refugee students. However, there is suggestive evidence of a negative spillover among immigrant peers (evidenced by a marginally significant negative impact estimate), a result that aligns with previous evidence of potential negative peer effects among foreign-born students (Schneeweis, 2015).

We further analyze our results by classifying schools into three main groups: all schools who serve refugee students, schools whose share of refugee students is above 0.5 percent, and schools whose share of refugee students is above 1 percent. This classification allows us to explore whether the peer effects differ depending on the concentration of refugees at the school level.

For ELA scores, the peer effect impact increases with the concentration of refugee students. That is, schools with a share of refugee students above 1 percent saw the greatest increase in ELA scores from an increase in the share of refugee students.

SUMMARY

Does attending school with refugee students affect their peers? We use school administrative data for students in grades three through eight in the district with the highest inflow of refugees in Georgia to examine whether the ELA and math test scores of non-refugee students are impacted by the share of peers who are refugees.

We find no consistent evidence of a negative peer effect. On the contrary, our results show a positive spillover effect for ELA test scores, especially among U.S. born students. We find no causal relationship between the share of refugee students at the grade level and changes in math scores of non-refugee peers.

More details about the methodology of this study and more detailed results will be posted in an academic working paper at gpl.gsu.edu. Tim Sass is the corresponding author (tsass@gsu.edu).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Camila N. Morales is an economics Ph.D. candidate at Georgia State University and a graduate research assistant with the Georgia Policy Labs. Her research interests lie at the intersection of education economics, labor economics, and immigration policy. Her current work focuses on the educational outcomes of refugee and immigrant students, second language learners, and their peers. Prior to pursuing her Ph.D., Camila earned a B.S. in economics and a minor in mathematics from Georgia State University.

Tim R. Sass is an applied micro-economist whose research focuses on the economics of education. He is also the faculty director of the Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education (MAPLE). Specific areas of interest include teacher labor supply, the measurement of teacher quality and school choice. His work has been published in numerous academic journals, including the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Labor Economics*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *Journal of Law and Economics* and *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. His research has been supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, the Gates Foundation, the Smith-Richardson Foundation, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation. He has acted as a consultant to school systems in New York City, Washington, DC, Charlotte, the state of Florida and the state of New York. He is a senior researcher at the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) and serves on the editorial board of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

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