

Home for Good? Obstacles and Opportunities for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece



Athens, 2023 (Photo credit: Marine Casalis)

Key findings

- Two-thirds of refugees and asylum seekers were unemployed, with a pronounced gender disparity, (82% of the women reported being without work vs. 54% of the men).
- The wages of those refugees and asylum seekers gainfully employed were significantly below the Greek national minimum wage, despite extended working hours. This low level of economic integration makes this population particularly vulnerable to exploitation.
- One third of the surveyed sample resorted to negative coping mechanisms due to financial constraints, including skipping meals or limiting food intake.
- Levels of psychological distress were very high among this population: 85% reported moderate to severe levels of psychological distress.
- About half of the sample reported at least one instance of either exploitation or violence since their arrival in Greece.
- Finally, about half the sample stated that they would like to stay in Greece.

From 2015 to 2016, Greece witnessed an influx of almost 1 million forcibly displaced people. The vast majority subsequently navigated their way towards Northern and Western European countries. The situation changed when Balkan borders started closing and the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016 limited their movement, mostly confining them to Greece. Instead of a transit site, Greece became a hosting country. Since then, arrivals continued but at a much smaller pace.

What are the obstacles to integration that displaced people face in Greece? What opportunities do they have? To what extent do the experiences of men and women differ? How does legal status make a difference?

Researchers at the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) and University College London (UCL) conducted a representative survey with 3,755 refugees and asylum seekers between April and July 2022.

The full report can be read [here](#).

The Survey

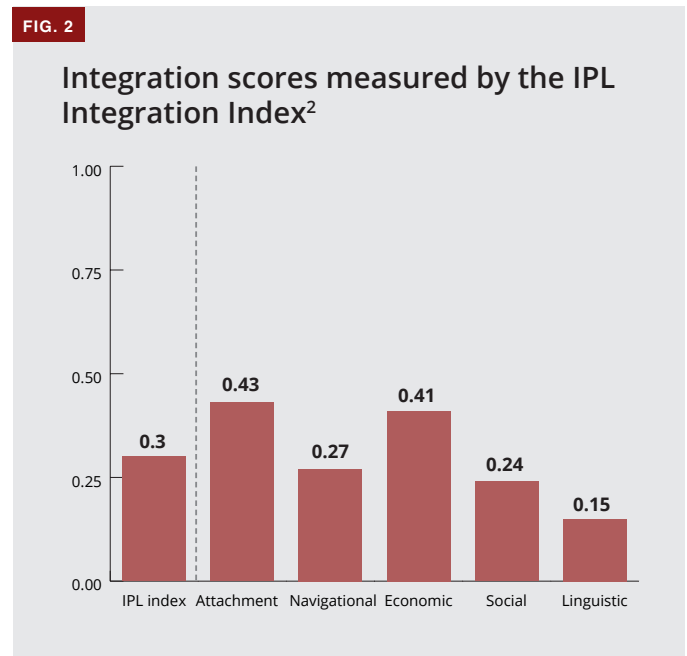
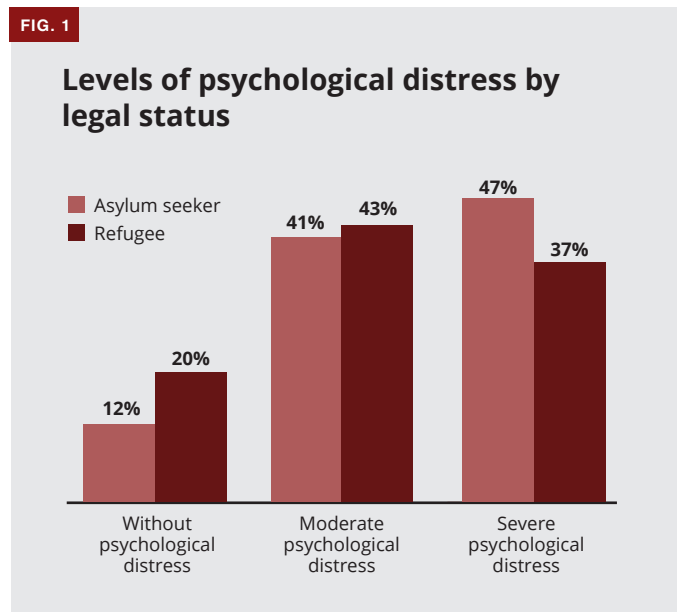
The sample is drawn from the UNHCR Profile Global Registration System (proGres) database and **closely resembles the universe of asylum-seekers and refugees believed to be in Greece as of November 2021**. Participants were interviewed on the phone between **May and July 2022**.

Individuals in this sample are **not recent arrivals**: the vast majority (96%) have been in Greece for more than two years. The top five countries of origin are Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Women represent 38% of the sample. 58% of the respondents are asylum seekers and 42% obtained refugee status or subsidiary protection (both referred to as ‘refugees’ here).

Results

Psychological distress was very high overall regardless of respondents’ legal status. 88% of asylum seekers and 80% of refugees suffered from moderate to severe psychological distress¹.

Overall, respondents had the highest scores on two dimensions of integration: psychological (attachment to Greece) and economic, as measured by IPL’s Immigrant Integration Index ([the IPL-12](#)). The dimensions with the lowest scores were the social (interactions with the host community) and linguistic dimensions (see Figure 2).



¹ To measure psychological distress, we used the Kessler-6 (K6), a widely adopted measure to screen for psychological distress. The K6 is used globally, including among vulnerable and displaced populations.

² We used the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) Integration Index (Harder et al., 2018), which has been widely adopted in the study of migration and forced displacement, including in countries such as Switzerland, Austria and Brazil. It defines integration as the degree to which immigrants and the forcibly displaced have the knowledge and capacity to build a successful, fulfilling life in the host society.

Conclusion

Overall, the research finds a varied picture of the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Greece. On the one hand, some refugees and asylum seekers have managed to find housing, are employed, and report relatively high levels of integration across our multidimensional integration index. There is evidence that refugees and asylum seekers themselves see the opportunities that Greece can offer them—about half state that they do not intend to move away from Greece.

At the same time, the majority of respondents face substantial obstacles to integration, including very low employment rates and challenges to linguistic and social integration. This is true regardless of legal status in Greece. The findings suggest that programming that supports access to jobs, language learning and cooperative activities with Greeks could be beneficial. In addition, asylum seekers and refugees exhibit very high levels of psychological distress. Many people, especially women, are at risk of exploitation in Greece due to poor labor conditions.

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