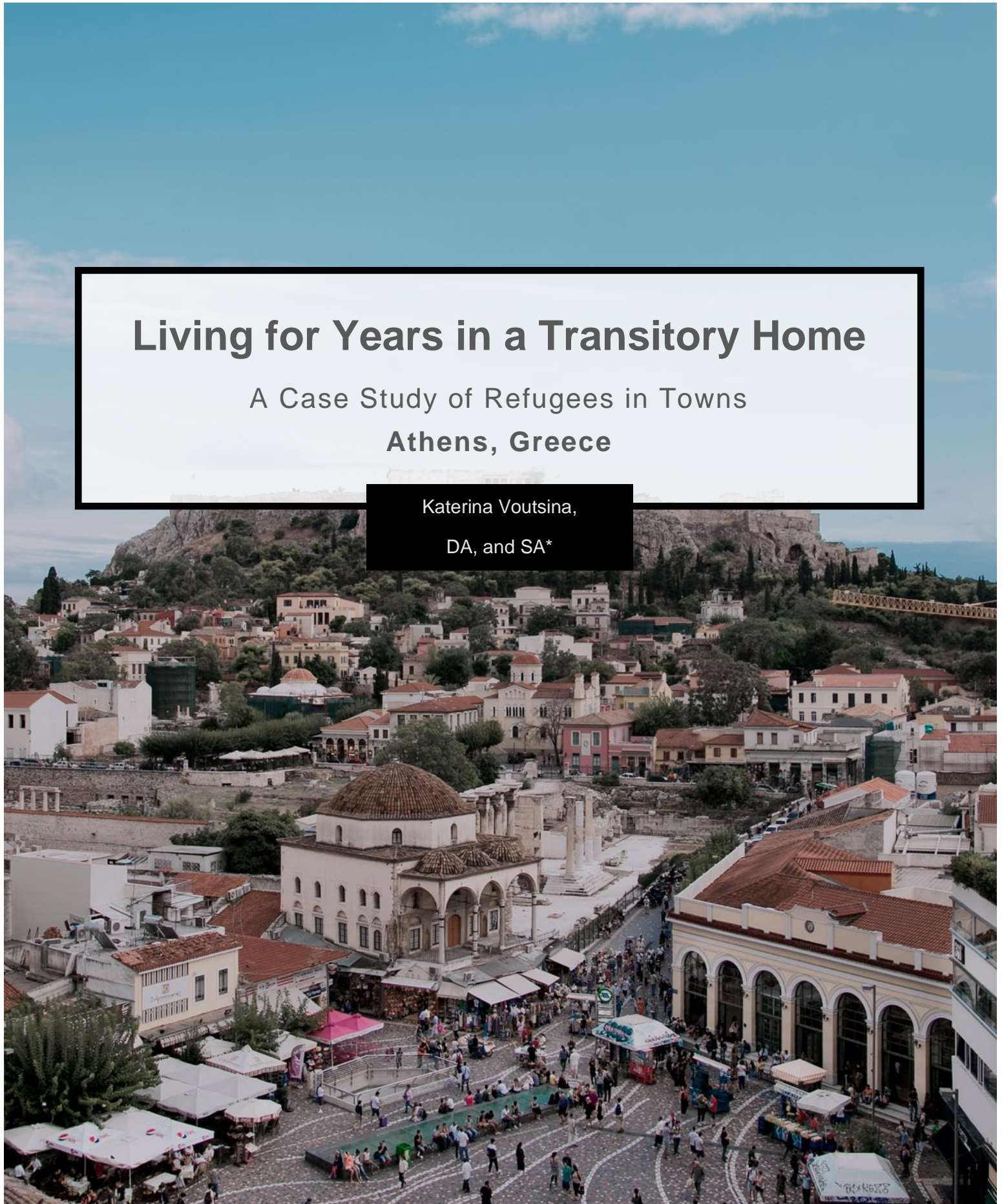


Living for Years in a Transitory Home

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Athens, Greece

Katerina Voutsina,
DA, and SA*



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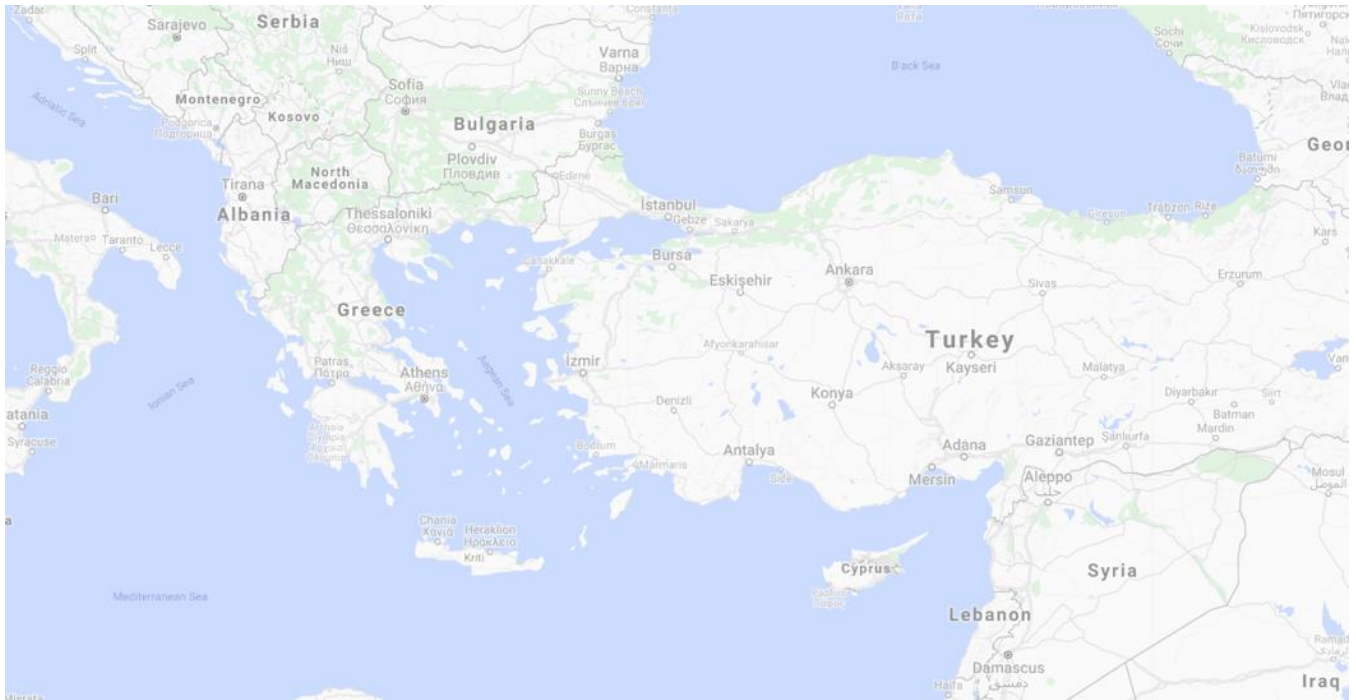
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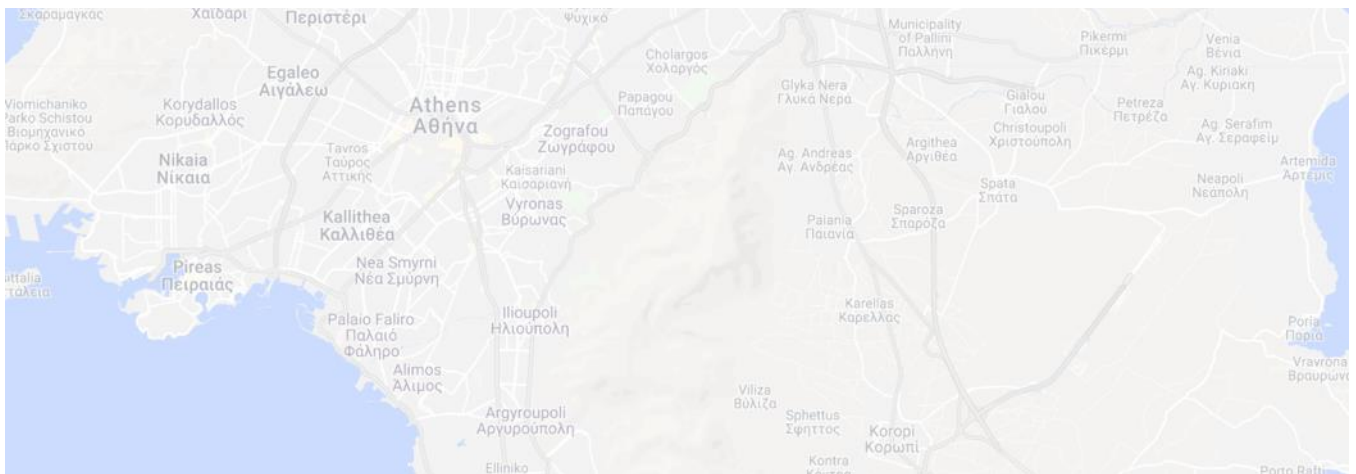
*Co-authors are a male and a female from Iran and Syria respectively. They are still in a precarious situation in Greece and asked to remain anonymous.

Cover photo: Monastiraki Square in downtown Athens superficially remains a bustling tourist destination, but look deeper, and the city is experiencing deep economic challenges and demographic changes. Photo by Jimmy Teoh, 2015.

Location



Greece is located at the start of the Balkans Route, a transit country where migrants moved from Turkey toward northern Europe. When the Balkans Route closed through border securitization, thousands of migrants found themselves stuck as long term residents of Greece's cities, like Athens.



Athens is a large, sprawling city of over 600,000 people. While migrants first arrived in Pireas Port (bottom left), they have since dispersed throughout Athens, especially in ethnically diverse, low- to middle-income neighborhoods. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

For more background on migration in Greece and Athens, continue to the appendices.

Introduction

Walking around Athens's city center in early 2018, the signs of a deep economic recession and the recent European refugee crisis are not immediately visible. Ermou Street is bustling with shoppers. Tourists flock to Monastiraki Square, and cafes around Thiseio and Psiri are heaving with young people. Getting a table at a restaurant overlooking the Acropolis around dinner time is difficult, even on weekdays. But the streets outside the tourist areas reveal a different reality. Here it is easy to spot the empty retail spaces, the offices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing aid to refugees, and the local food banks feeding Athenians who live in poverty.

In 2018, Greece entered the eighth consecutive year of recession. The financial crisis, which started in 2010, shrank Greece's gross domestic product (GDP) by a quarter compared to 2008.¹ By the spring of 2018, the unemployment rate was 19%, with youth unemployment at 39%, the highest among European Union (EU) member states. Many young Greeks depend on their parents' pensions to survive,² and 35% of Greeks are at risk of extreme poverty. Between 2010 and 2014, more than 200,000 Greeks left Greece. Today, 1 in 18 Greek families has a member who works abroad.³

Layered on top of this domestic economic challenge is the 2015 refugee crisis, when Victoria Square became the meeting point for refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Exhausted refugees who arrived at Piraeus Port from the Aegean Islands slept rough in the square before continuing to Greece's northern borders, headed to destination countries like Germany and Sweden. Within days of the first large-scale arrivals of refugees, local and international NGOs set up around Victoria Square, and residents organized through social media to hand out food, blankets, toiletries, and baby formula. However, when the Balkans route to northern Europe was closed in 2016 and the EU's mandatory relocation program took effect in December 2017,⁴ thousands of migrants were either trapped in or returned to Greece. Both migrants and Greeks were unprepared for this and have had to adapt from providing short-term care like blanket handouts to providing longer-term support like education to children and jobs for adults.

Many of the refugees who remained in Athens are single men and unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Algeria, and Morocco. There is also a small undocumented population from several countries, including Syria, who can afford to temporarily rent apartments or live in squats, but some also live on the streets. They have decided to remain invisible or hide their identity in the hope that they will one day register for asylum in Western Europe.

Once-abandoned retail spaces have been transformed into NGO offices and community centers around the square, offering services from language courses to legal representation and psychological support. By 2018, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had a housing

¹ Nelson, 2017.

² Stamouli, 2018.

³ Lambrianidis & Pratsinakis, 2015.

⁴ Barigazzi, 2017.

program for refugees (see housing section below), and many refugees have found informal jobs and are renting apartments across the city, especially in multicultural neighborhoods like the area around Attiki Metro Station, Kato Patisia, Kipseli Square, Amerikis Square, Koliatsou Square, and Victoria Square.

This case study attempts to capture perceptions of integration of refugees, migrants, and the host population in Athens during the months of our research. The findings are the result of a collective effort between three co-authors, a Greek journalist and two refugees living in Greece, one from Syria and the other from Iran.

The Authors' Positions in Athens and Experiences Researching this Case

All three authors used their personal and professional networks to find and interview participants for this study. Katerina was born in Athens and has been living in Athens and Boston for the past four years. Since 2015, she has been researching and reporting on the migration crisis in Greece, which has enabled her to forge relationships with sources she trusts, including local officials, activists, migration experts, academics, and NGO/IO workers. Our Syrian researcher also used the network she formed during her stay in Athens to find and interview Syrian refugees. Most of her interviewees were part of a language learning program that she attended at the University of Athens. Our Iranian researcher's interviewees were a mix of personal contacts and recommended individuals. All of his interviewees were Farsi speakers who knew him or his refugee friends, who also have been living in Athens for the past few months.

Refugee and Host Experiences in Athens

Since the beginning of the refugee crisis, Greek society has responded with empathy towards refugees and migrants passing through the country. Civic groups, local authorities, and NGOs have provided aid in the form of clothes, meals, medicines, legal and psychological support, and informal education. Most Greeks we interviewed said that they have more than once donated goods or money to organizations that support refugees.

"I don't believe I will stay because Greece cannot provide any help, accommodation, or financial support, and it is very difficult to find a job. So, I may travel to Germany to be close to my family."

- NA, 28, single Syrian woman

Two years after the closing of the borders, and with limited job openings in Greece, refugees are still dependent on humanitarian assistance. When we introduced the concept of refugee integration in Athens to locals and refugees, we received similar responses: both communities believe that integration is unattainable without job security. Refugees feel stranded in Greece, and locals worry about the future, especially when humanitarian aid programs end.

Social Integration

Tensions between Greeks and refugees are rare. But the lack of long-term integration policies fuels feelings of anxiety and fear. A 2016 survey suggested that 64% of Greeks do not believe refugees can have a positive effect on the Greek economy,⁵ and 95% said the number of refugees and migrants who have arrived in Greece over the past ten years is too high. Some 79% said the presence of migrants in Greece could increase crime rates.

Our Syrian researcher observes that many people associate the word “refugee” with someone from the Middle East, and some connect refugees with terrorism. While she has not experienced insecurity or crime in Athens, she has faced a few instances of racism. “I am wearing a head scarf, so while I was waiting at a bus station an old woman came to me and said: ‘Why are you wearing this thing? Do you see anyone else wear it around you?’ Then she tried to take it off.”

“After being recognized as a refugee, so far, I have become familiar with a clear distinction between Greek asylum policies and other countries: in Greece, when you receive asylum, there is no further protection, and you have to go back to your own life. In other countries, when you receive a positive answer, you receive a home, and rights, and education, and so on. When they called me, and told me that my asylum result is positive, they insisted that all the rights of a Greek citizen would be given to me, such as the right to work, travel, and so on. But I waited for a year to get the passport (travel document), and I tried to find work for a long time up to now. I did not know the rights of a Greek citizen, but after a while, I came to know that I am abandoned with all my problems and have the right to die.”

- *RK, 26, single Iranian man*

Over the past decades, the integration of migrants into Greek society was not a result of any government program. Instead it came from social connections between migrants and hosts. Researchers have pointed out that integration has been the “laborious individual family strategies of the migrants themselves.”⁶ In the 1990s, migrant families rebuilt their lives in Greece by working in the construction, agricultural, and tourism sectors of Athens, but these opportunities are now rare in 2018.

⁵ Keridis, 2016.

⁶ Kasimis & Kassimi, 2004.

Making Ends Meet

In 2018, asylum seekers waited an average of 82 days from pre-registration until they received their asylum decision.⁷ Once they are registered, they are eligible to work. Several NGOs, however, report that refugees face problems finding employment. Although they present all needed documents, they have difficulty getting a Tax Registration Number (AFM, ΑΦΜ in Greek). Refugees who live in the camps are sometimes denied an AFM number because they do not have a permanent residence address or street address. So, they cannot accept legal employment or receive benefits.

NGOs and international organizations in Greece are the largest employers for educated refugees, who work as interpreters and cultural mediators on a contract basis. Those who do not speak a second language or have not completed secondary education resort to temporary jobs in the informal market, often working in fruit picking, tailoring, and construction. A Syrian woman who works as a tailor in Athens told us that she makes 50 euros (USD 61) a week, working eight-hour shifts. Refugees also work in migrant-owned shops in the city center. Acharnon Street has a high concentration of restaurants and cafes owned by Arabic- and Farsi-speaking migrants. Speaking Greek is an asset for a job as a cashier or a manager, a refugee told us, “but those are usually taken by migrants who already live in Greece.”

In 2018, the main sources of income for registered refugees were the cash cards they receive from local and international NGOs. In January 2018, 39,233 refugees (17,903 households) received cash assistance in Greece, of whom 16,870 lived in Athens. About 40% of the beneficiaries are Syrians, 20% are Iraqis, and 19% are Afghans.⁸

The amounts of cash assistance vary. For example, a family of seven receives 550 euros (USD 632) a month, while a single person who does not receive meals or subsidized rent can receive 150 euros (USD 172). The refugees we interviewed mentioned that this amount barely covers groceries and transportation to the city. Many families depend on NGOs for daily meals in order to send money back to their families or repay “travel debts” from being smuggled from Turkey to Greece. These debts range from 3,500 euros (USD 4,023) to 7,000 euros (USD 8,047) or more and are sent to smugglers, or relatives or friends who loaned them money to pay to smugglers.

Sending and receiving money from abroad is a challenge. Refugees need a Greek work contract to open a checking account. They often use Western Union near Omonoia Square to transfer money back home or to receive funds from relatives in Europe. But the transfers and amounts they can send and receive are limited each month. Some use informal means to send or receive money or ask friends who are traveling back to carry small amounts to give to their relatives. We also spoke with refugees who have never opened a bank account, either in Greece or their home country.

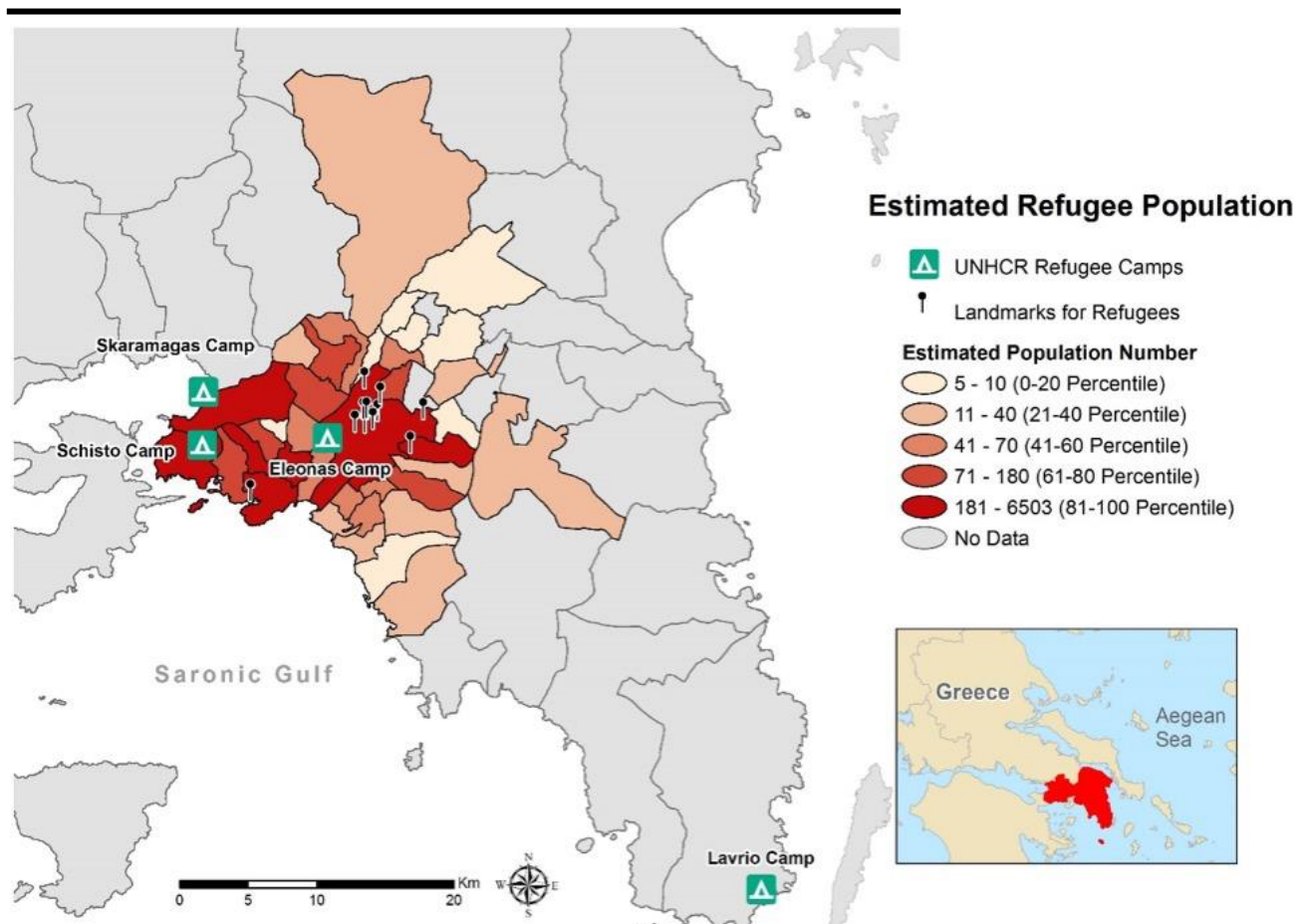
⁷ Information provided by the Greek Asylum Service during an interview in January 2018.

⁸ UNHCR, 2018.

Impact on Housing

UNHCR has managed the refugee accommodation program since 2015. In 2018, the program provided accommodation in apartments in 38 municipalities across Athens. Initially, this program was geared towards refugees who participated in the EU’s relocation program. It covers the rent and utilities. The program had a high turnover rate as beneficiaries either migrated elsewhere or found their own apartment. There is no study on the impact of the program on the housing market, but interviewees said they thought it benefited apartment owners in low-income areas, such as Nea Philadelphia-Halkidona, who had small apartments for which they could not find tenants. Through the program, apartment owners receive funding to renovate the apartments and then up to 400 euros (USD 460) a month in rent. Refugees who can find apartments for themselves tend to live in multicultural neighborhoods such as those near Attiki Metro Station, Kato Patisia, Kipseli Square, Amerikis Square, Koliatsou Square, and Victoria Square. See Map 1.

Map 1: Estimated Refugee Population



Estimated concentration of refugee population in Athens. Cartographer: Jifan Wang.

Like many refugees who are eligible for accommodation through UNHCR and its partners, our Syrian researcher moved six times.

“When I arrived in Athens, I stayed with my sister in a hotel. Then, I lived for six months in a house in Galatsi. The owner, a Greek woman, participated in the hosting program for vulnerable women that was run by a Greek NGO. Then, they told us that the program ended and that we should find a new place. I looked everywhere until I found a house near Stournari Street [in downtown Athens], where I stayed in a room with my sister for a month and a half. Then, the NGO called me again, and we moved to a nicer apartment with two rooms near Kypseli Square. One room was for us two and the other for an Iraqi woman with two babies. After two months, the Iraqi woman left, and the NGO brought two Moroccan girls to live in her room.”

- DA, married Syrian woman

She added that the constant changes of roommates was extremely stressful.

“When our lease ended they moved me into a [UNHCR-sponsored] apartment with two other girls. My roommates tried to sexually harass me and hurt me. So, I moved immediately to another apartment.”

- FS, 23, single Syrian woman

Affordable apartments were already scarce in Athens before the arrival of refugees because of the slow recovery of Greece’s residential property market.⁹ Property prices started rising in 2018, driven by the demand for tourism-related apartments. Many owners opt for renting their apartments through Airbnb and other platforms, rather than renting them long term to tenants. In the city center, where the demand is higher, owners can charge high daily rates that provide extra income to their families. This has created an affordable housing shortage for both Greeks and migrants.

Impact on the City’s Economy

It is not clear whether local businesses have benefited from the refugees and the accommodation program, since asylum seekers and migrants are dependent on humanitarian aid and tend to save additional funds or send it to family. Grocery stores that sell *halal*¹⁰ meat or traditional products around Omonia Square seem to have more clients. However, it is too early to estimate the contribution of refugees to the Greek economy, since official employment of refugees seems low. On the Greek side, millions of euros have been invested in Athens to develop local capacity. NGOs that provide healthcare, counseling, legal services, or aid packages are now a leading employer of Greek citizens, who often are untrained for this work but take these jobs because of their widespread availability.

⁹ Georgiopoulos, 2018.

¹⁰ Meat slaughtered in accordance with Islamic principles.

Meanwhile, there is a booming micro-economy in the refugee camps of Athens.¹¹ In Skaramangkas Camp, refugees utilize their skills to make some money while waiting to hear about their asylum application decisions. They give cheap haircuts—the camp has ten barber shops—cook and sell traditional falafel, and re-sell used clothes. Women’s entrepreneurship is also thriving; female refugees have created makeshift salons and tailor shops. According to an AthensLive article, using WhatsApp or Viber, any refugee can call the owner of a falafel restaurant and request a delivery of hookah, drinks, or food to their container, free of charge. “The Facebook page for the refugees living in Skaramagas is a platform for new businesses to post about their grand openings, or for old businesses to share new menu items,” it continues.¹²

Many refugees are highly educated and underemployed. Our Syrian researcher is one of the few female, college-educated refugees who was able to find work quite quickly.

“I was learning English in a program for refugees at the University of Athens, funded and organized by an international NGO. At that time, the NGO wanted someone to work for the program and to be able to communicate with the students and the university. So, I applied and was selected to work part-time as a cultural mediator.”

- DA, married Syrian woman

Entering the work force, even as a temporary worker, was a return to normalcy for her. “My contract was for three months and my salary was 500 euros [USD 575] after taxes. However, I became more confident. I moved from a person who gets help to the person who helps,” she said.

Integration and Impact on Education

Officially, asylum seekers and refugees have full access to healthcare, pharmaceutical treatment, and emergency care, free of charge. But in reality, they have to overcome several obstacles. For example, accessing the healthcare system requires a Social Security Number (SSN). Those who are denied an SSN can find it difficult to get medical care at a public hospital.¹³ In addition, refugees who live outside of the camps and do not speak English or Greek have difficulty finding a translator or cultural mediator to accompany them to the hospital. The demand for translators is high, and those working for NGOs are busy. Humanitarian workers have also recorded cases where refugees refused to use the Greek healthcare system because they anticipated moving on to Western Europe and did not want to be registered in Greece. Some local and international NGOs fill the gaps in medical services and offer medical and dental care to those who have not registered for asylum in Greece and live outside of the formal healthcare system.

Finally, language learning has been a challenge for older refugees, especially those who want to access the labor market and educational system (universities and vocational training programs). Since

¹¹ AbdelRahim, 2018.

¹² AbdelRahim, 2018.

¹³ MSF, 2016.

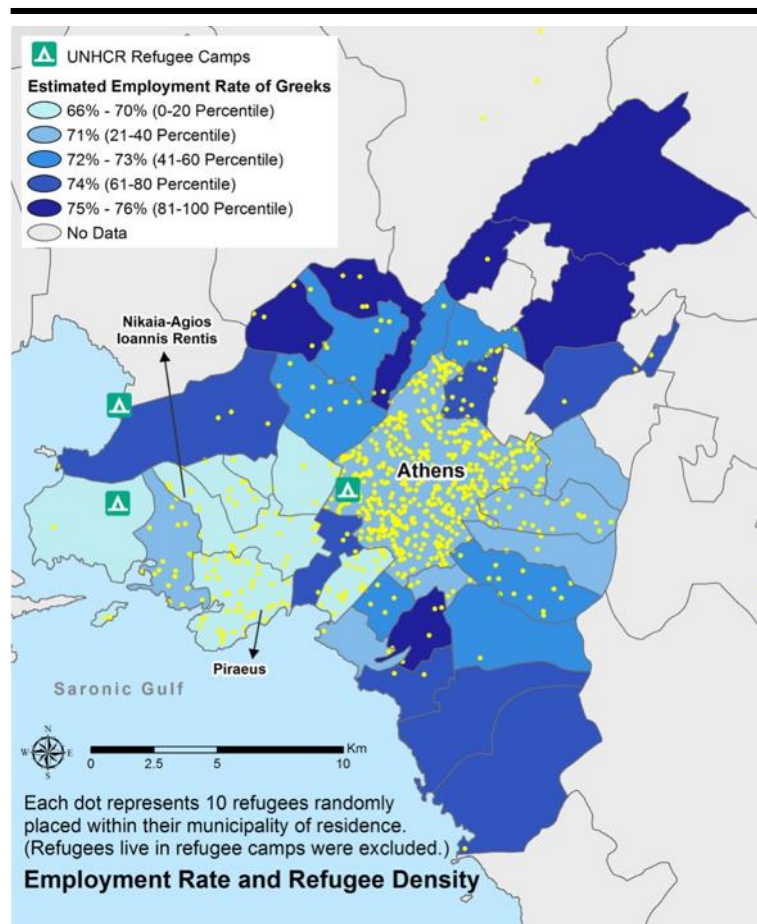
“[Greece is not suitable for refugees] because of the economic crisis and the Greek language [which] is difficult. There are not good classes to learn it well. It is very difficult to find a job, but if Greece gives help as Germany [does], we will stay here.”

- MG, 33, married Syrian woman

2016, several NGOs have offered free Greek, English, and German language courses, usually taught by volunteers. Refugees complained that they were of low quality. In January 2018, the Greek government announced the creation of a Greek language program for 5,000 eligible refugees aged 15 years and older. The pilot program was designed to offer working-level proficiency in Greek within 12 months.

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Map 2: Employment Rate and Refugee Density



Refugee Density per employment rate in different municipalities across Athens. Data source: ELSTAT, 2017; UNHCR. Cartographer: Jifan Wang.

The Future of Integration in Athens

By 2020, Greek authorities will assume responsibility for the cash and housing programs now managed by UNHCR. But even if Greece extends cash and housing aid and language courses beyond 2020 to alleviate the stress of poverty and give refugees a better chance to make their own decisions on where and how to settle, it may worsen long-term integration without a concrete plan for refugee employment. With little access to the labor market, refugees—as well as Greeks—can barely survive, which is a source of shame for both.

“It is very difficult to find a job, especially if you do not speak Greek and if you are Muslim girl with a scarf. But I consider myself a lucky person, and I worked hard for every chance in my life. I did not learn Greek, because Greece is the only country that uses this language and it is very difficult. I want to move on. Greece is not [the] final destination for any refugee because of the economic crisis and the language.”

- *FS, 23, single Syrian woman*

Movement to other European countries continues to be difficult for refugees. Our Iranian researcher received a full scholarship to study at a university in Central Europe, but his student visa was denied. However, foreign European languages like English and German are more popular in language classes than Greek, suggesting a desire to keep trying to move on.

“The application of the scholarship was done online, and then I was invited to an interview and a language test. The interview and my English language tests went well, and I was informed that I was accepted two weeks later. In my correspondence with the university, I was told that I should go to the embassy in Athens to apply for a visa. The university sent me an invitation letter, and I sent my visa application to the embassy. I was told that I should wait at least two weeks to get my visa result. During this time, the university sent me information about the start of program and dormitory. I was thrilled. About a month later, I was told that my visa application was rejected. After this, I felt that I had wasted my time waiting for nothing. Who is responsible for such a terrible problem? A country that forbids a person from studying at a university in the country for the sake of refugee status? The university that wasted my energy and motivation to study without proper planning? Or the European Union, which on the one hand promotes human rights but on the other hand, discriminates against human beings as refugees?” our Iranian researcher noted.

For those who try to build a new life in Athens, like our Syrian researcher, accepting their new identity as a “refugee” is often the first step towards survival and, then, integration.

“I do not have a problem being a refugee. It is not a choice, it is a fact. When God lets us pass through a hard time, it may be for two reasons: to punish us for bad things we did or to test our faith and patience...I am satisfied because there is a reason for everything we go through. Maybe God wants me to discover how strong I can be when I trust His will. Through this journey of being a refugee, I discovered a new part of my character that I never noticed before.”

Conclusion

Living in a transit city that may become a long-term home is the feeling of the refugees and asylum seekers we spoke with who were living in Athens. Both newcomers and the host population share uncertainty about sustaining their families. Job scarcity keeps everyone in a state of ambiguity, even as refugees stay in Athens for years. NGO and aid workers said they still prioritize essential services, such as access to medical care, hot meals, housing, and clothes even when what they would like to focus on is helping refugees integrate into the Greek society. However, a few are optimistic, especially those involved in primary education. Refugee children enrolled in Greek schools across Athens pick up the language quickly and are making Greek friends. Greece, however, needs to address the integration of their parents and other adults, who still lack language skills and, in many cases, still suffer from the trauma of fleeing conflict and the dangerous journey to Athens.

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Appendix A: Methods

This report is based on observations and qualitative interviews over four months from December 2017 to March 2018, and a survey of refugees enrolled in English and Greek language classes administered by one of the refugee authors. We also reviewed reports by governmental and non-governmental sources on the integration of refugees and migrants in Greece. Our refugee authors' experiences and preliminary observations as an Iranian male and a Syrian female living in Athens for the past year were crucial for this research. They developed our interview protocols and helped us reach a diverse group of interviewees.

Katerina interviewed key informants, Greek and international citizens legally living and working in Athens across a spectrum of ages, gender, organizations, and professions. Our refugee researchers interviewed refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria who live throughout the city and have sought or received asylum. See Table 1 below.

Both locals and refugees still consider Greece a “transit country,” not a destination country, even after the closing of the borders in 2016. Early in our research, we found that local authorities, civil society, and refugees struggled to answer our questions about integration, mainly because the concept of refugee *integration* in Athens was new and not desirable to refugees. Therefore, we adapted our questions to better capture the perceptions of locals and refugees about life in Athens and *de facto* integration.

Table 1. Interview chart

Category	No.	Demographics
Total migrants and hosts	22	Ages 18–59, 17 male and 5 female
- Refugees	9	5 Syria, 2 Afghanistan, 2 Iran
- Other migrants living in Athens	3	1 US, 1 South Korea, 1 France
- Greek hosts	10	Athens residents of a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and neighborhoods
Key informants	8	1 Christian religious leader, 1 Greek Asylum Service representative, 3 Greek NGO and civic society group representatives, 1 local authority, 2 international NGO and international organization (IO) representatives

The report data were collected from fall 2017 through spring 2018.

Appendix B: Background on Refugees in Greece

Greece, a country of 11 million people, has been producing and receiving migrants throughout its modern history. Following World War I and World War II, the Greek diaspora was especially present in the United States, Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Modern immigration to Greece can be traced back to the 1970s,¹⁴ but it became more visible after 1981 when Greece integrated into the EU. The improvement of living standards created a demand for flexible labor in tourism, agriculture, domestic services, and the construction business. In the 1990s, the country received the highest percentage of migrants in relation to its labor force, mainly Albanian nationals, who immigrated after the economic failure of “pyramid schemes” in Albania's banking sector in 1996. During the decades that followed, migrants from Pakistan and Iraq have arrived illegally to get work in the agriculture and construction sectors. Many remain undocumented.

The Greek government first responded to illegal migration in the 1990s in an attempt to regulate the employment of undocumented migrants throughout the economy. In 1991, it passed an immigration law that dealt with work authorization, family reunification, the legal stay of migrants in Greece, the legal status of refugees, and aliens' obligations.¹⁵ It also permitted deportations and increased policing at the borders.

In the following years, Greece signed agreements with neighboring countries and granted temporary visas and work permits to migrants who had entered illegally. In 1997, it also granted “amnesty” to illegal migrants and introduced a two-step registration system for those who could provide all the documents needed to obtain a green card. However, many migrants chose to remain undocumented. A few years later, in 2001, the government passed another law that gave migrants who had a work permit the opportunity to acquire Greek nationality through naturalization.

Although Greece took the first step to regulate illegal migration, national and municipal governments never fully implemented integration programs. Consequently, Greece has not benefited from economic migration.

The Greek Response to the European “Refugee Crisis”

In 2015, Greece experienced a massive influx of refugees and migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. UNHCR estimated that over 800,000 refugees and migrants arrived from Turkey on their way to Western European countries.

¹⁴ Kasimis & Kassimi, 2004.

¹⁵ Djajic, 2005.

Since the closing of the borders and the deal between the EU and Turkey, 42,425 people have registered for asylum in Greece. The EU-Turkey deal complicated and slowed the asylum process. According to the Greek Asylum Service, asylum seekers have to wait for 82 days on average between the day they pre-register and the decision on their case.¹⁶ After March 2016, refugees and migrants arriving on the Greek islands were detained until interviewed. While Syrians were often able to register within a few days, others waited for several months under inhumane conditions in refugee camps,¹⁷ while still others avoided registration to keep from being assigned to Greece under the Dublin Conventions.

After the registration process, officially asylum seekers and refugees receive cash assistance and have access to healthcare, psychosocial support services, and the public education system. Since September 2016, children in refugee camps started attending classes within the sites, while children living in apartments could join regular school classes. In total, 58,725 people received cash assistance and accommodation in refugee sites or apartments.

Urban accommodation in rented apartments has been provided through UNHCR and is funded by the EU. The program is supposed to provide accommodation proximate to services and schools. UNHCR estimates that more than 42,000 people have benefited since 2015.

However, once asylum has been granted to refugees, they stop receiving assistance from UNHCR, including accommodation, and are eligible for financial aid from the Greek government on the same terms and conditions as Greek nationals.

Appendix C: Background on Refugees in Athens

As of October 2018, 58% of refugees living in UNHCR-sponsored apartments in Greece—almost 12,515 people—were living in Attica region around Athens and 6,323¹⁸ in refugee camps outside the city. Apartments are rented primarily to vulnerable groups, such as families and women, and the leases can last from six months to a year.

Out of the six refugee camps near Athens, only Eleonas Camp is located in the city center. The other five camps (Elefsina, Lavrio, Malakasa, Schisto, and Skaramagas) are located 12 kilometers (7.4 miles) to 68 kilometers (42 miles) away from Athens. Eleonas Camp currently hosts 1,519 people, Elefsina Camp 155, Lavrio Camp 250, Malakasa Camp 1,075, Schisto Camp 821, and Skaramanga Camp

¹⁶ The EU-Turkey agreement came into force in the spring of 2016. Its aim was to address the overwhelming flow of refugees and migrants crossing from Turkey to the Aegean Islands in Greece. Turkey agreed to intensify patrols between its borders with Greece and to host refugees. In exchange, the EU initially pledged 3 billion euros (USD 3.3 billion) in humanitarian assistance.

¹⁷ Banning-Lover, 2017.

¹⁸ This number is based on July 2018 UNHCR data, see <http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/monthly-accommodation-update-july-2018/>

2,503 people. The population in most camps consists mainly of Afghans (mostly single young men), with the exception of Lavrio and Skaramagas Camps, where the majority of the population is from Syria. Other nationalities in camps include Iranians and Pakistanis. These populations rarely commute to the city center, and the distance from the city has incentivized many refugees to create small businesses (barber shops, restaurants, and mini-markets) within the camps.

Those who can afford to rent an apartment usually opt for places near the city center. Refugees usually use their network of friends and family to connect online with owners. In many cases, rentals are advertised by word of mouth within the different communities. Refugees told us that most available options are around the areas of Metaxourgeio, Omonia Square, Acharnon, Victoria Square, and Larissa Train Station. Since 2010, several Greek media have reported that owners illegally rented apartments to more than 30 migrants, demanding rent in cash.¹⁹ In 2018, single male refugees who sought co-habitation options said to our researcher that owners charge a monthly rent of 100 euros (USD 122) per person for shared rooms between two people.

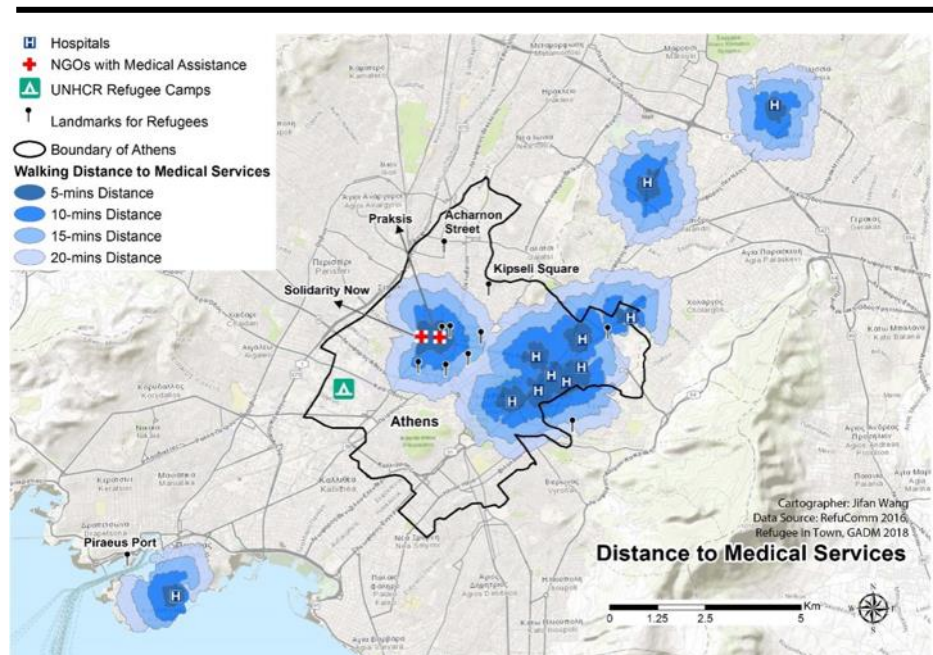
In addition, by early 2018 more than 3,000 migrants and refugees lived in informal arrangements, or squats, near the city center. Buildings, such as City Plaza Hotel, have been occupied by Greek and international activist groups without the consent of the owners²⁰ and host refugees, often in squalid conditions. Many migrants and refugees who are not eligible for urban housing or want to be closer to aid services around the city center opt for temporary accommodation in squats. The municipality of Athens and the police have received several complaints from residents near squats, but the decision to intervene or not is difficult, mainly because official housing remains limited.

There is also a smaller but visible homeless refugee population in Athens. Local residents have reported several cases of unaccompanied minors found among those homeless groups, but it is difficult to bring these children into a shelter: most of them wish to remain invisible, hoping to request asylum in Western Europe.

¹⁹ Voutsina, Haris, & Giannis, 2010.

²⁰ Georgiopoulou, 2017.

Map : Concentration of Health Services



Concentration of health services in the center of Athens and walking distance from meeting points and NGOs. Data source: RefuComm, 2016; Refugee in Town, GADM, 2018. Cartographer: Jifan Wang.

Legal Status and Protection

In Greece, refugees are entitled to full and free of charge access to healthcare if they have no health insurance or if they cannot afford medical care. See Map 3 for proximity of health services to meeting points and NGO offices. In addition, refugee children can enroll in schools, even with incomplete papers and in some cases even if the legal residence of their parents has not been settled yet.²¹ In 2016, after the EU-Turkey agreement, Greece adopted a new Law on Asylum (4375/16) that allows refugees to automatically access the job market, once they receive their asylum seeker's card. However, because of high unemployment, it is extremely difficult for refugees to access the labor market, at least without Greek language skills.

²¹ Koulocheris, 2017.

About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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