

Time in Limbo & Education: Duration of Temporary Status and the Educational Outcomes for Children of Refugees in Sweden

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Introduction

Legal status shapes access to rights, opportunities, and a sense of belonging. While extensive research documents how asylum processes and temporary residence affect adult refugees' integration, much less attention has been given to their children who are with their parents throughout these periods of uncertainty. These children often spend critical developmental periods in unstable legal circumstances. As they age and begin to recognize that their residence status differs from their peers, their educational motivation and wellbeing may be directly affected.

This study examines how the cumulative duration of temporary or uncertain legal status; what we term "time in limbo", influences educational outcomes for children of refugees who completed compulsory schooling in Sweden by 2022. We further exploit the 2016 policy reform that ended the automatic granting of permanent residence to newly recognized refugees, replacing it with temporary residence permits. This allows comparison between cohorts who completed school under the pre-2016 "permanent-first" regime and those exposed to the post-2016 "temporary-first" system.

Theoretical focus and background

This research draws from the literature on legal stratification, life-course and intergenerational adaptation, and educational inequality among forced migrants. Legal stratification theory argues that the state's allocation of legal categories—citizen, permanent resident, temporary resident, asylum seeker—creates enduring hierarchies of belonging and security (Menjívar 2006). Temporary residence and pending asylum claims limit access to social rights, employment, and welfare, while shaping future expectations and identity (Bloch 2014; Gleeson & Gonzales 2012).

From a life-course perspective, early exposure to instability can have long-term developmental consequences (Elder 1998). For refugee children, prolonged uncertainty overlaps with critical schooling and socialization phases. Studies show that lengthy asylum processes and temporary permits reduce wellbeing and integration prospects for adults (Hainmueller et al. 2017; Bakker et al. 2014; Laban et al. 2004), effects that may cascade to children through parental stress and constrained resources. As Dryden-Peterson (2016) notes, refugee children's schooling experiences are profoundly shaped by their sense of safety and future security. From this perspective, legal status is not a mere bureaucratic condition but a social and psychological determinant of educational engagement.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual model framing this study views time in limbo as a temporal and relational process that connects policy structures to family and child outcomes. At the macro level, asylum and residence policies determine how quickly families transition from temporary to permanent residence. Prolonged uncertainty generates psychosocial stress and material insecurity for parents, limiting access to stable housing and employment. At the meso level, these pressures weaken family stability

and reduce parents' ability to support their children's schooling. At the micro level, children experience limbo both indirectly through parental strain and limited resources and directly, as they develop awareness of their precarious status relative to peers. Over time, these experiences may affect expectations, motivation, and belonging in school. Thus, time in limbo can be conceptualized as a pathway linking state policy to parental insecurity to family environment to children's educational outcomes. This proposed conceptualization highlights legal status not as a static label but as a dynamic exposure unfolding through childhood and adolescence, influencing integration trajectories via cumulative uncertainty.

In Sweden, until 2016, most recognized refugees were granted permanent residence upon recognition. The subsequent reform introduced temporary permits (typically three years) with renewal contingent on continued need for protection. Then followed by acquisition of permanent residence after fulfilling minimum years of residence, stable housing, self-sufficiency and established and verifiable identity. This shift fundamentally altered the temporal experience of settlement and the developmental context for children growing up in refugee families.

Data and method

We use register-based data obtained from Statistics Sweden. These data afford us access to whole-population longitudinal microdata on population change, linked to individual-level data on: migration background (e.g. country of birth and year of arrival), residence permits, integration outcomes, and other sociodemographic variables. For each individual we can also link to microdata on nuclear family members (parents, partners and children) who have ever lived in Sweden, and register data (i.e. all of the aforementioned variables) for each of these family members.

The study population consists of children with at least one parent who was granted refugee status and who completed compulsory schooling (grade 9) in Sweden by 2022. These data allow annual tracking of both parental and child legal statuses. For each child, we construct annual legal-status trajectories from the year of arrival through the end of compulsory schooling, identifying transitions across asylum, temporary residence, permanent residence, and citizenship. Time in limbo is measured as the cumulative number of years spent in asylum or temporary residence prior to acquiring permanent residence or citizenship.

The outcome variable is the standardized grade-point average (0–320 scale) from the National Assessment at the end of compulsory schooling (age ~16). Covariates include parental education, income, country of origin, family structure, sex, cohort, and year of arrival, as well as contextual variables capturing neighbourhood socioeconomic profile and refugee density (DeSO level).

We estimate multilevel linear regression models with random effects for family and neighbourhood to assess the association between time in limbo and grades. To reduce bias from unobserved family characteristics, we employ sibling fixed-effects models comparing children within the same family who experienced different legal-status durations or transitions. As a quasi-experimental extension, we exploit the 2016 reform by contrasting cohorts educated under the pre-reform (permanent-first) and post-reform (temporary-first) systems. This design allows us to examine whether immediate permanent residence, compared to prolonged temporary status, resulted in different educational outcomes.

Expected results contributions and further steps

Preliminary descriptive patterns indicate notable variation in the length of legal limbo. Before 2016, most recognized refugees received permanent residence within a few years; after 2016, many families remained on temporary permits for extended periods, sometimes through the entirety of their children's compulsory schooling. Early indications suggest that children with shorter exposure to legal uncertainty achieve slightly higher average grades, potentially reflecting greater family stability and reduced stress.

We expect to find that prolonged "time in limbo" is negatively associated with educational performance, even after adjusting for socioeconomic background. This effect likely varies by arrival cohort, parental education, and neighbourhood context. We also anticipate that the post-2016 temporary-first policy regime may have widened educational inequalities by prolonging uncertainty and delaying a sense of belonging.

This study advances current understanding in three ways. First, it reframes legal-status uncertainty as a childhood experience, not solely an adult integration issue. Second, it introduces a dynamic, life-course perspective to the study of refugee adaptation by operationalizing "time in limbo" as a measurable temporal exposure. Third, it provides rare population-level evidence linking residence policy to children's educational outcomes, offering actionable insight into the long-term implications of refugee legal status regimes.

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