

Forced Moves, Chosen Moves: How Reception-Center Relocations Shapes Internal Migration for Asylum-Seekers in Norway

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Introduction

Refugee integration research in Europe often begins post-recognition, masking how experiences during the asylum-seeking period shape who becomes a recognized refugee and how early reception dynamics condition later trajectories. In Norway, average time to decision has been around 1.5 years, with sizeable variation across cohorts and origins. These months are normally spent in reception centers and are the first point of sustained contact with the destination society and a formative arena for adaptation (Ager & Strang, 2008). Quantitative studies that rely on registers typically start the clock only after registration in the population register, excluding the pre-recognition months (or years) in reception, which are systematically associated with later outcomes in the labor market and health (Åslund et.al, 2025, Damen et.al 2022, Solbue 2022). More recent work suggests that not only wait length but residential instability such as relocations between reception centers may drive scarring effects during this period.

This paper connects the (forced) residential mobility before recognition to (chosen) residential mobility after recognition. We ask whether relocations while in reception predict long-run mobility patterns after settlement, and whether the site of settlement relative to prior reception experience (same vs. different municipality) shapes subsequent staying or moving. We leverage complete register data linking the reception period to the years after recognition for all individuals granted asylum.

Background

Why reception experiences matter.

Ager & Strang's (2008) integration framework highlights foundations (rights), facilitators (e.g., stability), social connections, and markers and means. Although typically applied post-recognition, the same lenses illuminate the reception period: constrained rights, uncertain timelines, and repeated relocations can undermine the very facilitators and social ties needed later. Studies from Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands link longer waits and/or reception geographies to worse subsequent employment and income; emerging work points specifically to relocations as a key channel behind adverse effects (Åslund et al., 2024; Hvidtfeldt et al., 2018; Baalbergen et al., 2025; Damen et al., 2022). At the same time, reception centers may generate positives—language exposure, country-specific knowledge, and networks—that can benefit later integration (Bevelander, 2011).

This paper's contribution:

We extend this evidence in two directions: (1) linking reception relocations to long-run post-

recognition residential mobility; (2) testing whether settlement in the same municipality as a salient reception center location (first, longest, last) anchors people more strongly to place. We situate these tests in theories on place attachment and secondary moves among refugees/migrants, which show both constraints and agency in mobility decisions and heterogeneous payoffs to relocating vs. staying as well as the integration framework of Ager and Strang (2008) (Adserà et al., 2022; Lynnebakke & Aasland, 2022; Simpson & Finney, 2009; Wimark et al., 2019).

Reception center context

The European and Norwegian system:

Across Europe, asylum seekers begin in short transit/screening and then move to longer-term reception accommodation while awaiting a decision. Allocation rules vary; waits lengthen during surges. Norway follows this pattern: after transit, individuals are assigned to an ordinary reception center and typically wait there for the decision. Average time in centers (2005–2016) was ~430 days, but with large cohort variation—longest for 2009 arrivals, shorter for 2013–2016. Operators include municipalities (public), NGOs (non-profit), and private companies; procurement shifts since the late 2000s increased short-term contracts and the private share, boosting flexibility during surges but also churn (openings/closures), which can propagate relocations.

From ordinary centers, people may (i) be resettled to a municipality (conditional on approval), (ii) relocate to another center (e.g., closures, capacity), (iii) register departure (voluntary/forced/Dublin return), or (iv) disappear (later reappearances possible). Prior analyses show that groups with high approval (Eritrea, Syria, Somalia, stateless) are more often resettled directly from the first center, though relocations rose in large inflow years (e.g., 2016). Private-run centers show slightly higher relocation risks, consistent with contracting dynamics.

After recognition: settlement and the introduction program:

Upon recognition, individuals are settled in a municipality and enter the Introduction Program, a structured, time-limited scheme offering income support plus language and civic/employment measures to accelerate integration. Administrative and capacity constraints can delay the move from center to municipality, and some recognized refugees experience additional relocations within reception before settlement. The program and financial support are recorded in national registers and there are strong economic incentives for attending and finishing the introduction program. After the program is finished (1-3 years) the individual is freer to move, and previous research points to an increase in mobility after the program ends.

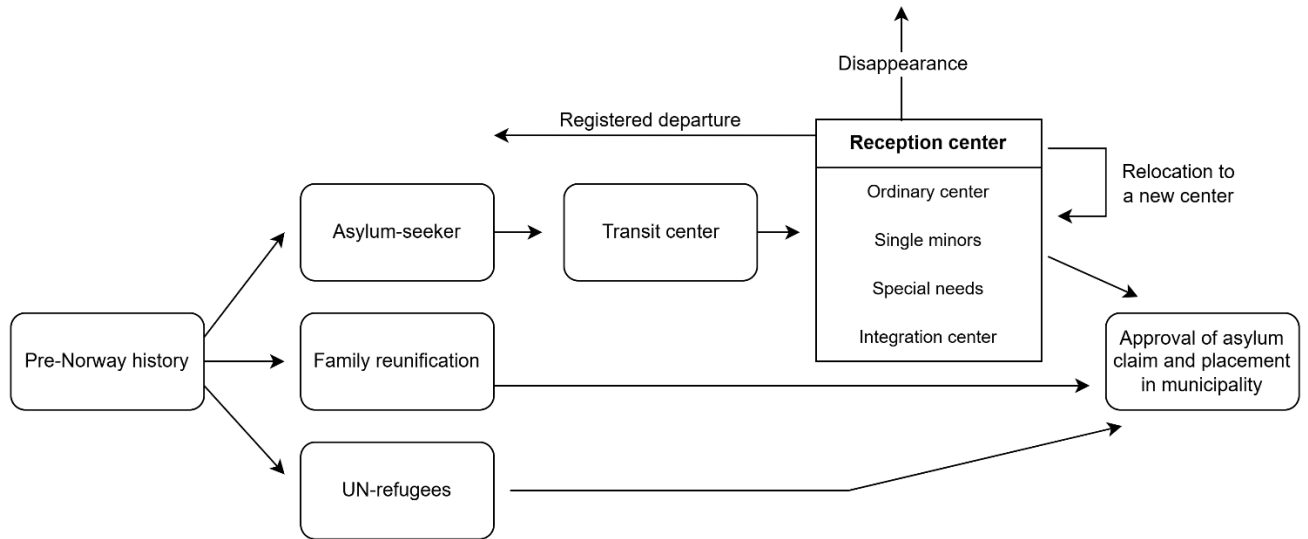


Figure 1. The Norwegian asylum system (simplified)

Notes: The figure shows the different paths for different groups of refugees. Asylum-seekers (generally) cross the border, and are then placed in transit centers, where the application and asylum interview should be carried out. Then the asylum seeker is moved to an ordinary reception center appropriate of their need. They can from there depart the country, disappear from the center, be relocated to a new center or have their claim approved and placed in a municipality. Individuals that arrive through family reunification and UN-refugees are usually placed directly in a municipality, but there are many exceptions.

Research questions

- Do residential relocations during the asylum-seeking period predict long-term residential mobility after recognition?
- Does where someone is first settled—relative to reception-center municipalities (first, longest, last)—predict long-term staying vs. moving?
- To what extent can pre-recognition (forced) mobility account for variation in post-recognition (chosen) mobility?

Hypotheses

- H1 (Instability carries forward): More reception-period relocations → higher long-term mobility (more inter-municipal moves).
- H2 (Place familiarity “anchors”): Settlement in the same municipality as first/longest/last reception-center municipality → lower subsequent mobility (higher retention).
- H3 (Context matters): Retention is stronger where settlement municipalities offer larger co-ethnic presence and better opportunity structures; mobility is not inherently negative.

Data and methods

We use linked administrative registers from Statistics Norway and the Norwegian Immigration Authority covering all asylum applicants who entered an ordinary reception center between 2005–2016, with follow-up through 2023 for post-resettlement mobility. We identify the first ordinary center, track all center relocations and exits (resettlement, departure, disappearance), and merge with population registers after they are granted asylum and resettled in a municipality (variables such as settlement municipality, Introduction Program support, income, employment, family, mobility etc.). The total number of individuals in this time frame is almost 60 000 (N = 59 947).

We estimate discrete-time event-history models for 10 post-settlement years where the outcome is between municipality move(s) (and robustness for economic regions that are larger in size). Key predictors: (i) number of reception relocations, (ii) settled in same municipality as first/longest/last reception-center municipality (three definitions), plus controls measured at application: arrival-year FE, origin groups, age, sex, family status; and settlement-municipality attributes (centrality/size, labor-market indicators, co-ethnic share). We adjust for time in and after the Introduction Program. UN-quota refugees might be a comparison groups, as this groups is directly resettled, and does not enter the reception center system.

Preliminary findings

Table 1. Share who are settled in the same municipality as key reception-center locations. Notes: Percentages are of total N=59,947. “Missing” reflects linkage gaps between resettlement municipality and the respective reception-center municipality definition.

Definition of reception municipality	Same municipality	Different municipality	Missing
First ordinary reception center municipality	6,686 (11.2%)	52,568 (87.7%)	693 (1.2%)
Longest reception-center stay municipality	8,114 (13.5%)	51,171 (85.4%)	662 (1.1%)
Last ordinary reception center municipality	8,542 (14.2%)	50,707 (84.6%)	698 (1.2%)

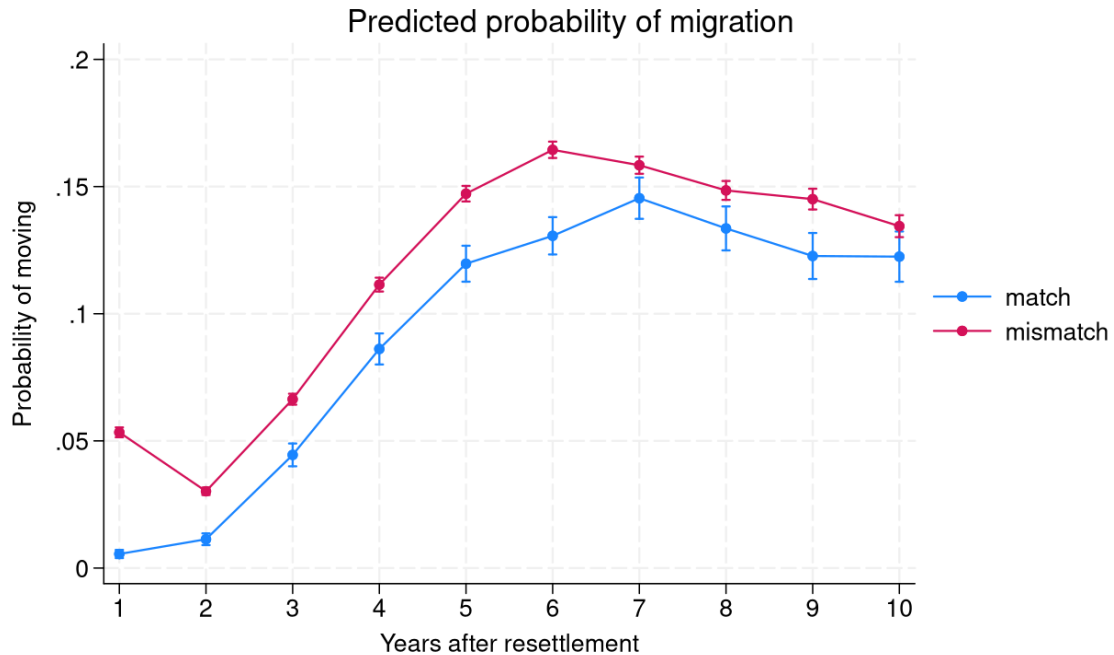


Figure 2. Probability of moving if placed in the same/different municipality as the reception center the individual stayed in the longest. Only moves across municipalities. Matched indicates that the individual is resettled in the same municipality as the municipality of their longest reception center stay. Mismatch means that they were not. We cannot follow the full sample until the 10th year of resettlement, and year 8-10 does not include all individuals.

The predicted probability of migration is higher for the mismatched group, with an increase in the difference around year five after resettlement. This does make sense as the introduction program limits the opportunity of internal migration in Norway for most asylum-seekers, and only when they finish the introduction program (takes around 3 years in this context) they are freer to move.

Next steps

Next step is to understand the variation in who is able to stay in the reception center municipality and who is not. There might be (demographic) variables that could explain both the opportunity to stay in the reception center municipality and also low mobility. One such variable could be family status, as families with children have lower mobility amongst refugees.

Furthermore, a larger discrete-time model including the more complex paths, by for example including number of relocations between reception centers, employment after introduction program and characteristics of the municipalities the individuals are resettled to. We know from earlier that many who are resettled in the least urban areas move and including this in the model does seem like an important next step.

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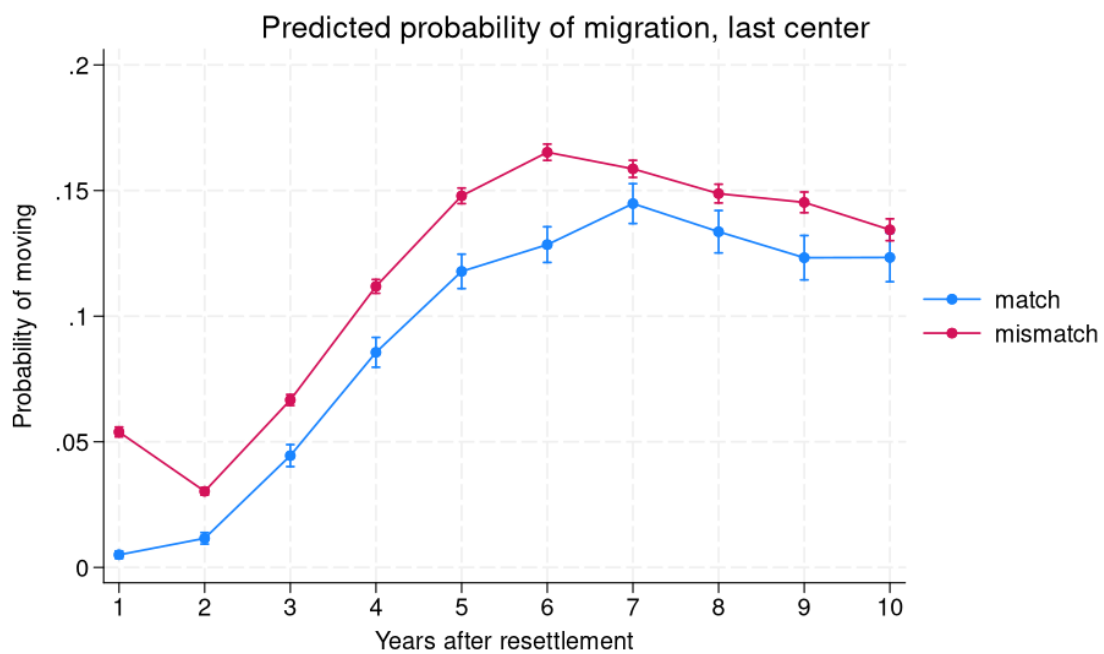


Figure 3. Robustness check with last ordinary reception center. Probability of moving if placed in the same/different municipality as the reception center the individual stayed in last. Only moves across municipalities.