

The Violent Legacy of Conflict: Evidence on Asylum Seekers, Crime, and Public Policy in Switzerland (Couttenier et al., 2019)

In 2011, there was a series of civil wars in the middle east called the Arab Spring. The European Union (EU) and the United States (USA) received a huge influx of refugees or asylum seekers¹. The Europeans and Americans were concerned about the consequences. One of the questions they wondered was: will those refugees become criminals inside their country?

One Sentence Summary

Using a Switzerland's crime data they found: (i) male asylum seekers exposed to *nation violence* during childhood are 35% more likely to commit a violent crime than a non-refugee, (ii) criminal asylum seekers mostly target their co-nationals more than nationals and (iii) offering quick labor market access to asylum seekers could reduce, by two thirds, the negative effect of childhood exposure to civil conflict as a child.

Main Findings

People who experience violent events as a child can have a higher probability of committing a violent crime. Asylum seekers are normally exposed to high levels of violence in their childhood. However, the literature hasn't been able to prove a causal effect from childhood *national violence*² and violent crimes. The main problem is that most refugees tend to be marginalized in communities with high criminal rates and low income. Begging the question: Are refugees violent because of their past experiences or because of their present context? This paper managed to find a causal effect by studying asylum seekers in Switzerland.

The authors found that experiencing civil conflicts or mass killings during childhood makes male refugees more likely to commit a violent crime. While the intensity of the violence experienced caused an increase in the probability of a violent crime, the duration of the experience did not have any effect. Interestingly, female refugees seem to not be affected by violent exposure as a child. They also found that the early exposure to civil violent conflicts did not influence the propensity to commit poverty crimes (e.g. petty theft and scams) or sexual assaults³. Those criminal refugees will tend to target co-nationals as civil conflicts tend to decrease national social trust. Therefore, a Syrian refugee will have more distrust for a Syrian than a Swiss, making a Syrian a more *desirable* victim.

With public policy in mind, they studied which policies reduced the negative of violent exposure during childhood. They found that providing open job access to refugees (e.g. shorted work bans, participation in all sectors of the economy) and providing more social integration (e.g. civic classes for the refugees) can reduce the effect by two thirds.

¹ I'll use both concepts interchangeably. Describing migrants who left their countries because of violent related reasons.

² The authors use the terms *civil conflicts* and *mass killings*.

³ It is consistent with the literature. Sexual assaults seem to be motivated by other antisocial behavior.

Concluding Remarks

This paper does not recommend tighter immigration laws, it encourages the opposite. A country could receive refugees and reduce their effects by making a smoother transition to the labor market and increase social integration. This way it is more likely to benefit from the influx of extra labor supply. It could also break the vicious cycle of violence on those immigrants.

References

- Couttenier, M., Petrencu, V., Rohner, D., Thoenig, M., 2019. The Violent Legacy of Conflict: Evidence on Asylum Seekers, Crime, and Public Policy in Switzerland. *Am. Econ. Rev.* 109, 4378–4425. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20170263>.