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Where to Settle? How Syrian Refugees Choose their Place of Residence in Lebanon

Daniel Garrote Sánchez

Executive Summary

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are widely portrayed as a broad, uniform group. However, results from an in-depth quantitative survey in the cities of Halba, Saida, and Zahle highlight the significant differences in the profiles of refugees across the country's municipalities. These differences appear as refugees choose where to settle in Lebanon, a decision that varies depending on their socioeconomic characteristics and those of the different localities. In general, refugees tend to settle closer to the border but are also attracted to areas that have higher income generating opportunities. Social networks also play a key role in choosing where to be located, leading to clusters of Syrians from different regions of origin in each Lebanese city. The main reason behind choosing a location varies from city to city, ranging from networks in Zahle, proximity to the border in Halba, and job opportunities in Saida. Understanding the different profiles of refugees in each area can help tailor policies and make a better use of the available skills in the local economies.

Introduction

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are widely portrayed as a homogeneous group characterized by low levels of education, high incidence of poverty, and large families. On average, several of those depictions are true when compared to the Lebanese population. For example, while the Lebanese adult population has about 10.4 years of schooling, an average Syrian adult living in Lebanon has attended school for half of that time (5.3 years). Similarly, Syrian families have double the number of children compared to Lebanese families (3 compared to 1.4 children, respectively).¹

¹ These numbers are based on the LCSRHCL (2018) survey that was run in the municipalities of Saida, Zahle, and Halba. Data at the national level yield similar conclusions as well.

Beyond these general findings, there is a large variation in the background of Syrian refugees in Lebanon that has been widely overlooked, be it education, income, region of origin, or age. Even more importantly, as refugees choose where to settle in the host country, instead of being randomly allocated a place, it is relevant to assess the extent of their sorting in different Lebanese municipalities, as well as their different motivations behind the selection of the destination, and how that translates into different profiles of refugees in each locality.

In order to do so, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) and the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) conducted the Living Condition Survey of Refugees and Host Communities in Lebanon (LCSRHCL) in 2018. The LCSRHCL is an extensive survey covering 1,556 households and 7,208 individuals (4,326 Syrians and 2,882 Lebanese) representative of the population in three Lebanese municipalities: Saida, Zahle, and Halba.² We selected those municipalities because they all host a large number of refugees, but also have quite different characteristics in terms of location, level of development, religious composition, institutional structure, and stance vis-à-vis refugees.

² We limited the scope of the research to three municipalities in order to be able to cover a representative sample of the population in each municipality and provide meaningful results at the local level, thus prioritizing depth at the expense of breadth.

Studying the motivations of refugees and how they select their new place of residence after fleeing war in Syria is important for a number of reasons. First, it can shed light on the most efficient geographical allocation of humanitarian resources toward specific vulnerabilities in each area, which seems of high relevance given the constraints in funds and the extent of the needs in the current crisis. It also helps to profile the skill distribution of refugees across different localities that would, in turn, facilitate the design of programs by policymakers to maximize their participation in the area's economic activity. Better integration of refugees, even if their intentions to stay in Lebanon are temporary until violence in Syria ceases, contributes to social stability between communities and provides further skills and experience that can help a smoother return and reintegration of refugees in the Syrian economy.

Previous Literature on Self-Selection of Refugees

In the economic literature on migration, there is a general consensus that migrants are affected by a wide array of factors coming from both the country of origin and the country of destination ('push' and 'pull' factors) which shape their choice to migrate. To come up with that decision, they weigh the potential costs and risks on the one hand, and potential benefits of migration on the other.³ In the case of refugees, fleeing violence and insecurity is the main driver of displacement and, as a result, the decision to migrate is considered forced or involuntary. However, as Ibañez and Velez (2008)⁴ show in the case of the Colombian conflict, individuals still took into consideration other variables, including economic ones, when deciding whether to leave or not and, if so, where to.

In general, people choose to migrate to places where their skills are more valued and rewarded.⁵ Different studies have found that high-skilled economic migrants go to countries with more inequality where human capital yields higher returns in the labor market (for example, in the United States), while lower-skilled economic migrants choose to go to more egalitarian countries with larger welfare states (e.g. certain European countries).⁶

The cost is another major driver in the decision to leave, as many migrants cannot afford to travel longer distances even if their skills would be more rewarded in countries that are further away. These financial constraints accentuate the disparities among migrants' decisions to leave as well as their destination, as higher-skilled individuals tend to have higher income to finance more expensive journeys and are, thus, more mobile to reach more distant and richer countries than low-skilled migrants.⁷

One factor that reduces the general prevalence of economic motivations for selecting the location of residence is the perception of duration of conflict. Ruiz and Vargas-Silva (2013) mention the case of Northern Uganda where refugees relocated in the closest camps without considering the economic benefits of migrating to other places because of the general belief that there was an imminent solution to the conflict.⁸

Overall, there is substantive evidence that even refugees fleeing prosecution and conflict sometimes choose where to settle depending on the economic and social attractiveness of each location given their skills, socioeconomic background, and financial constraints to finance the trip. The current Syrian refugee crisis is not an exception, showing similar patterns across different countries.⁹ In turn, this self-selection of refugees into different places has major consequences for their economic and social integration in the host country.¹⁰

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Chiswick, B. R. 2007. 'Are Immigrants Favorably Self-Selected? An Economic Analysis.' *In Migration Theory: Talking across the Disciplines*, edited by C. D. Brettell and J. F. Hollifield, 52-76. New York: Routledge.

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Kondylis, F. 2010. 'Conflict Displacement and Labor Market Outcomes in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina.' *Journal of Development Economics*, 93 (2): 235-248.

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These findings are framed in the economic migration literature in Roy, A. 1951. 'Some Thoughts on the Distribution of Earnings.' *Oxford Economic Papers*. 3 (2): 135-146, and Borjas, J. G. 1987. 'Self-Selection and the Earnings of Immigrants.' *American Economic Review*. 77 (4): 531-553.

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A Diverse Pool of Refugees Across Lebanese Municipalities

In order to analyze how refugees select a desired area to settle within the different regions in Lebanon, it is important to differentiate between characteristics determined prior to fleeing Syria (such as education achievements back home) and the economic outcomes observed after arriving in the host country (e.g. labor market status in Lebanon). The integration of Syrian refugees in the Lebanese economy does not only depend on their previous socioeconomic status before they left Syria, but also on other factors related to the environment of the host locality, such as the economic situation and job opportunities, or the general stance toward refugees from individuals, employers, or public institutions (e.g. discrimination in the work place or accessing services). Interestingly, a diverse socioeconomic environment across municipalities can attract a varied pool of refugees. In order to assess whether there is sorting (or self-selection) of refugees in Lebanese municipalities, we need to focus on their background prior to their arrival in Lebanon.

The LCSRHCL shows significant variations in the demographic composition of the Syrian population across the three studied municipalities (figure 1). An

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average Syrian in Saida is 24.6 years old, a little bit older than an average Syrian in Halba (23.4) and significantly older than those in Zahle (19.3). This is because families in Zahle tend to have more children (4.5) than in Halba (3.3) and

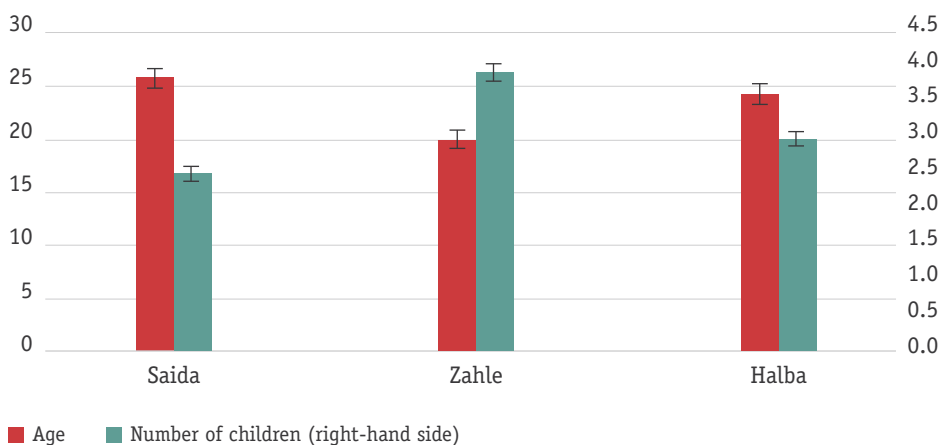
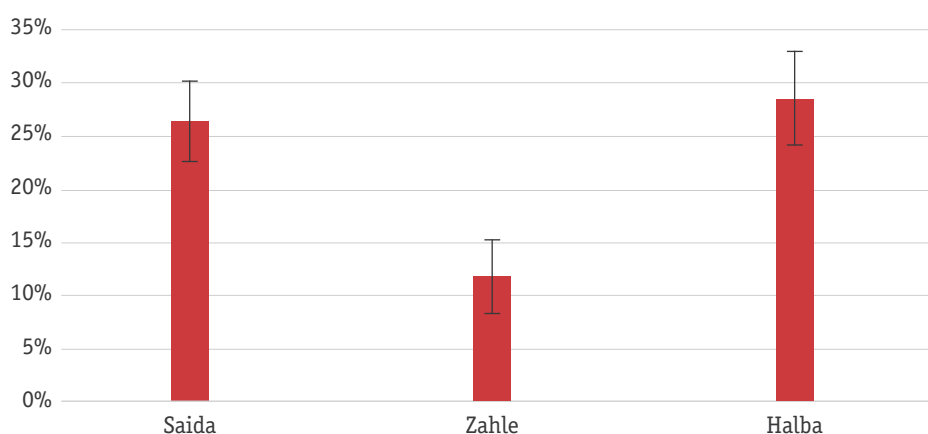
Saida (2.8). Going back to the initial comparison between Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community, a Syrian family's fertility behavior in Saida is more similar to that of a Lebanese household than to other Syrians in Zahle. The larger youth population in Zahle also has significant repercussions on the Syrian households' finances, as fewer adults have to sustain the livelihood of more dependents. The dependency ratio¹¹ shows that there are 1.02 dependents for every adult in Zahle, while the ratio is lower in Halba (0.68 for every adult) and Saida (0.61).

Regarding education, we observe that the Syrian adult population (above 25) in Zahle has lower educational levels than that in Saida and Halba. For example, while only 12% in Zahle had attained at least secondary education in Syria, more than 25% did so in the other two municipalities (figure 1.b).

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The dependency ratio is the total population that are below 15 or above 65 years old, divided by the population aged between 15 and 65.

Figure 1

Profiles of Syrian refugees in Saida, Zahle, and Halba**a Demographics of Syrian refugees****b Adults with at least a secondary education**

Source **LCSRHCL (2018)**.

The different socio-demographic characteristics of Syrian refugees across Lebanese municipalities is related to their place of origin, as there are clear clusters of Syrians coming from the same region. In Saida, the most distant city from the border with Syria, more than half of the Syrian refugees came from Damascus (figure 2), and more than two thirds came from Syria's southern governorates (Damascus, Daraa, and Quneitra). In the northern city of Halba, almost the entire Syrian population (86%) comes from Homs, from both the capital of the governorate and more rural areas, while other smaller groups come from Hama and Idlib.

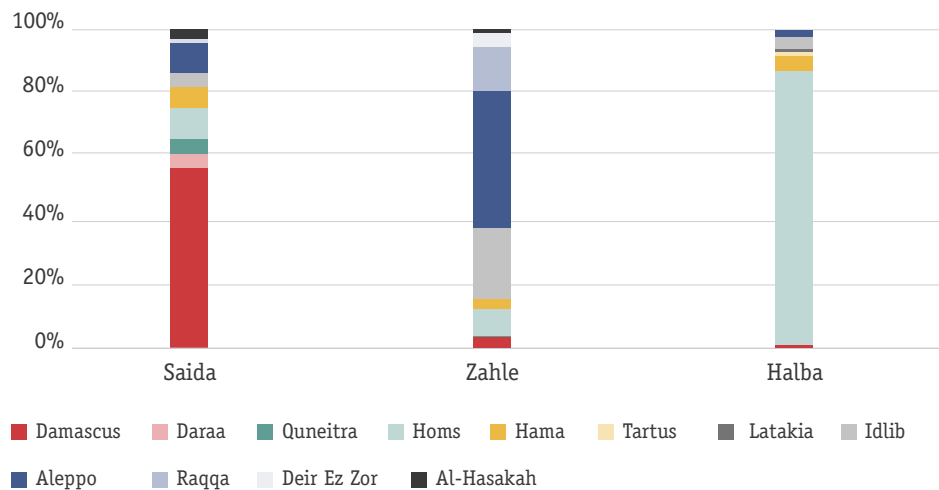
About half of Syrian refugees surveyed had networks of relatives or Syrian acquaintances in the host municipality prior to their arrival

Finally, Syrians in Zahle are mainly from rural areas in the north (43% from Aleppo, 22% from Idlib, and 14% from Raqqa).

The clustering of Syrians in different Lebanese localities is partly associated with past connections in the municipality. Results from the LCSRHCL highlight that about half of Syrian refugees surveyed had networks of relatives or Syrian acquaintances in the host municipality prior to their arrival, something particularly prevalent in Zahle (70%) but not in Saida (9%). The geographic concentration of Syrians in a particular area also partly explains the different times of arrival to Lebanon. For instance, a majority of the Syrian refugees in Saida, who are from the south, arrived in Lebanon in earlier stages of the Syrian conflict, when the most intense fighting was in the southern governorates between 2011 and 2013.

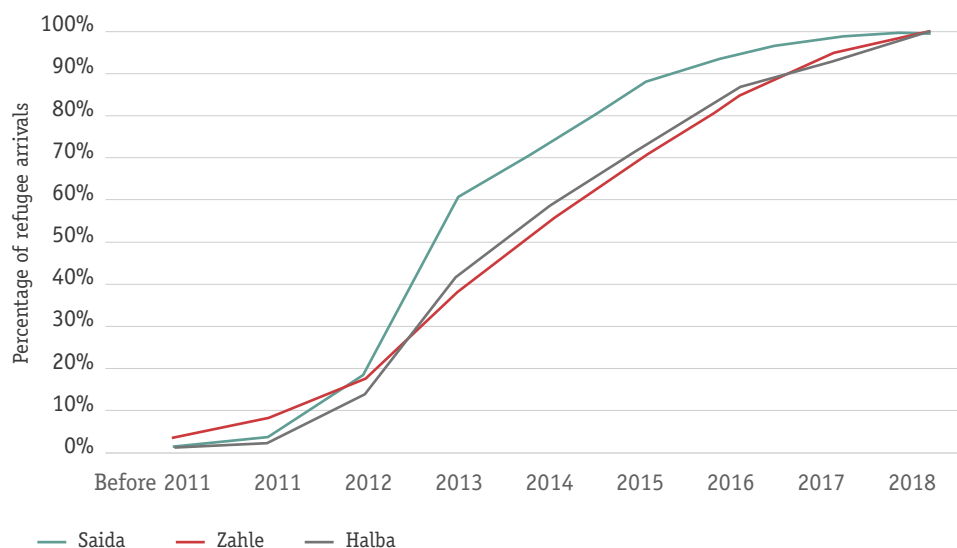
Figure 2

Syrian refugees' region of origin



Source LCSRHCL (2018).

Figure 3

Syrian refugees' arrival to Lebanon up until 2018

Source **LCSRHCL (2018)**.

How Do Refugees Choose Where to Settle?

As previously mentioned, deciding whether to flee and where to flee is a complicated process for which refugees often take into account multiple considerations including security concerns, social networks, or economic opportunities.

In line with previous literature on migration, more educated Syrian refugees tend to travel farther distances to reach Europe while lower-skilled refugees either were internally displaced in Syria or fled to neighboring countries like Lebanon (figure 4). We observe this pattern even within Europe, as richer and more distant countries, like Austria and Germany, host refugees with higher education levels than those who stayed in Greece.¹²

Within Lebanon, the picture is less clear, at least in the three municipalities for which we have data. Saida and Zahle are two municipalities with an upper-middle level of economic development, while Halba is more rural and underdeveloped. Given its relatively higher economic development, Saida attracts a more qualified pool of Syrian refugees. However, education levels of refugees arriving in Halba are significantly higher than for those who are based in Zahle, which runs counter to the original argument. There are two potential

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Abdel Jelil, M., P. A. Corral Rodas, A. Dahmani Scuitti, M. E. Davalos, G. Demarchi, N. N. Demirel, QT. Do, R. Hanna, D. JM. Houeix, S. Lenehan, and H. K. Muger. 2018. 'Asylum Seekers in the European Union: Building Evidence to Inform Policy Making'. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

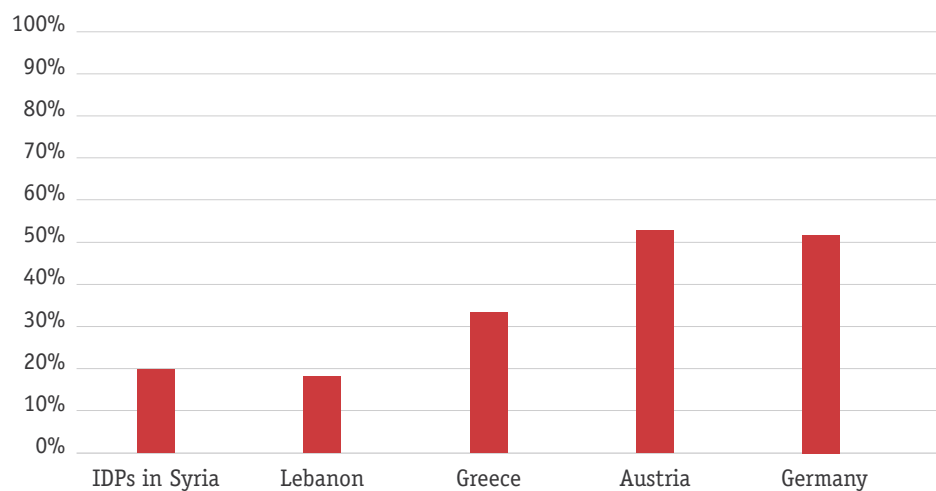
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For example, Human Rights Watch (2018) highlights the animosity of public authorities toward refugees in the form of evictions and police harassment. See: Human Rights Watch. 2018. 'Our Homes Are Not for Strangers: Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities.' <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/20/our-homes-are-not-strangers/mass-evictions-syrian-refugees-lebanese>.

explanations for this: (a) Refugees do not only prioritize places that have a higher demand for their skills, but also prioritize the presence of social networks that facilitate their integration in the host country; and (b) The city has been cited as being particularly antagonistic toward Syrian refugees,¹³ hindering their ability to integrate and participate in the economy, thus potentially chasing away higher-skilled refugees.

Figure 4

Percentage of adult Syrians with at least secondary education by place of residence



Source **LCSRHCL (2018)** for Lebanese municipalities; **SCPR (2016)** for IDPs in Syria; **Abdel Jelil et al. (2018)** for Greece, Austria, and Germany. IDPs are internally displaced people.

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In particular, we use conditional and multinomial logit models.

In order to provide further insights about the refugees' pull and push factors in each municipality, we use econometric techniques on the probability of migration—and to which municipality—based on key characteristics.¹⁴ The annex shows the results that can be summarized as follows: First, refugees take into consideration the cost of the journey, which we measured by the distance in time from the region of origin to the destination. As expected, the longer the distance, the less likely a Syrian refugee was to leave Syria to a given location in Lebanon. We also observe a significant effect of potential economic returns in the decision of where to settle. In particular, we compute the average monthly wages in each municipality for each level of education (or skill cell) and find that a one dollar increase in the salary¹⁵ offered in a given locality to a given skill level increases the odds of a refugee with that skill level to migrate to the locality by 0.1%. Similar to the earlier analysis, we observe that higher levels of education and a smaller number of children (which is strongly correlated with household income) are both associated with higher probabilities of selecting the municipality of Saida. The geographical

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This is based on the LBP 1,507 per dollar exchange rate used at the time of the data collection.

clustering based on the region of origin is also found in the multivariate regressions even after controlling for other factors, with Syrian refugees from the north being more likely to go to Zahle, those from the center giving preference to Halba, and those from Damascus and the south mainly settling in Saida. This, again, provides supporting evidence of the role of social networks in the refugee settlement decisions. Beyond these factors, we find that the sectoral job experience also shapes the decision of where to migrate. For example, Syrians with experience in agriculture were more likely to settle in Zahle (which has a more buoyant nearby agricultural sector), while those with past employment in construction were more likely to go to Saida. These patterns point to the presence of a certain degree of mobility in search of job matching, as refugees with certain sectoral skills are more likely to go to places with more job opportunities for those specific skills.

Finally, we asked Syrian refugees in each municipality about the main reasons behind their decision to select their new place of residence. The results of this direct question yield similar answers (figure 5).

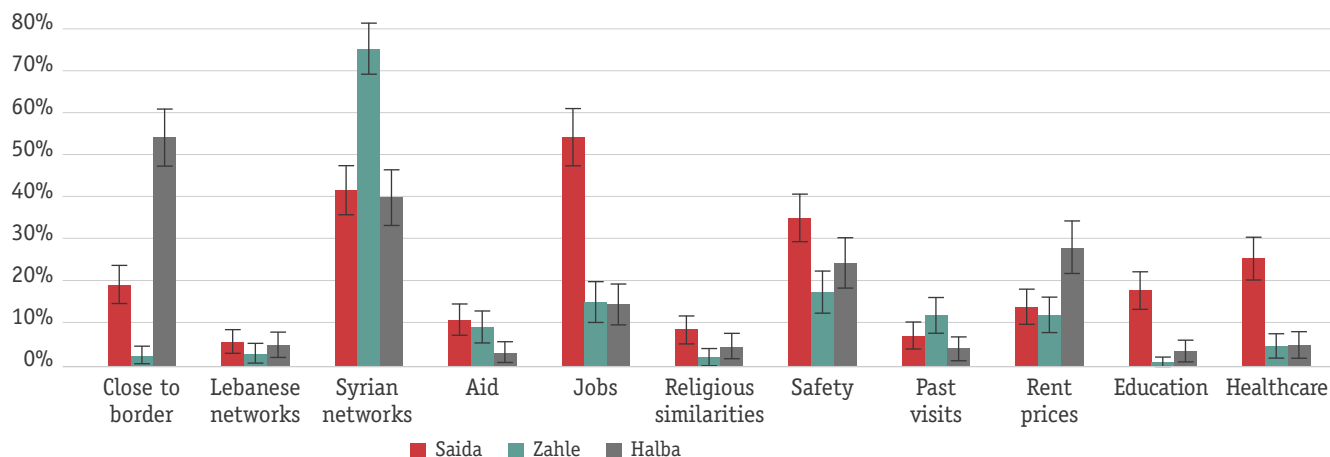
In Zahle, where Syrian refugees come from poorer regions and have lower education levels, 72% of families mentioned that

Refugees with certain sectoral skills are more likely to go to places with more job opportunities for those specific skills

their Syrian networks in the city were the main reason they chose to settle there. Indeed, about 7% of Syrians in Zahle already lived and worked in the city before the onset of the Syrian war. This contrasts with the significantly lower percentage of families mentioning this reason in Halba and Saida. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most Syrian refugees in Halba mention the city's proximity to the border as the main reason for settling there. Besides networks there, refugees cited the more moderate rent prices and safety as other reasons to stay in the city. Finally, job availability was the most prevalent pull factor mentioned by Syrian families in Saida. Access to social services such as healthcare and education was also more frequently cited there than in the other two municipalities.

Figure 5

Reasons mentioned by Syrian refugees for selecting where to settle in Lebanon



Source LCSRHCL (2018).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This policy brief highlights the vast differences in the profile of Syrian refugees across Lebanese municipalities, which calls into question the widespread view of Syrians as a uniform group. Refugees select where to settle based on their personal characteristics, where their skills would be more valued, where they would have more amenities, and where they have more social networks that would facilitate their integration in a new community.

The sorting of refugees into different pools across Lebanon requires different policy interventions that tackle the various binding constraints refugees might face in order to sustain their livelihoods. For example, we found that refugees in Zahle arrive with particularly low levels of education. As the literature shows that one of the strongest determinants of children's school enrolment is their parents' education level,¹⁵ Syrian children are at a particular disadvantage in attending school in the municipality. More importantly, increasing the capacity of schools to host more students might not be a sufficient policy: It has to be complemented with more engagement with families, such as financial support. Unfortunately, Zahle is one of the municipalities with higher inequalities in access to education where most Lebanese children go to private schools that Syrian children cannot afford and, as a result, their school enrolments are abysmal. In the case of Saida, where we have seen that refugees have fewer social networks, it is particularly important to develop programs that connect refugees with other Syrians and the Lebanese community to enhance their access to services and job opportunities. On top of shedding light on the more pressing constraints for refugees in each locality, understanding their different profiles can provide quick gains for local economies by tapping into their available skills.

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See for example: Oreopoulos, P. and M. E. Page. 2006. 'The Intergenerational Effects of Compulsory Schooling,' *Journal of Labor Economics*, 24 (4): 729-760; and Carneiro, P., C. Meghir, and M. Parey. 2013. 'Maternal Education, Home Environments and the Development of Children and Adolescents,' *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 11(1): 123-160.

Annex 1

Econometric regressions (Conditional logit model) on probability and drivers of migration

Variables	P (migration)
Distance	-0.015*** (0.005)
Income in Lebanese city	0.001** (0.0004)
Years of education * Zahle	-0.076*** (0.027)
Years of education * Halba	-0.034 (0.025)
Number of children * Zahle	0.285*** (0.054)
Number of children * Halba	0.173*** (0.055)
South Syria * Zahle	-3.954*** (0.279)
South Syria * Halba	-0.609 (0.893)
Center Syria * Zahle	-1.466*** (0.243)
Center Syria * Halba	2.899*** (0.254)
Capital * Zahle	-1.738*** (0.284)
Capital * Halba	0.0487 (0.212)
Unemployed Syria * Zahle	-0.060 (0.431)
Unemployed Syria * Halba	-0.720* (0.373)
Farmer Syria * Zahle	1.548*** (0.558)
Farmer Syria * Halba	-0.340 (0.541)
Construction Syria * Zahle	-0.668 (0.469)
Construction Syria * Halba	-1.515*** (0.413)
Manufacturing Syria * Zahle	0.928 (0.678)
Manufacturing Syria * Halba	-0.398 (0.614)

Variables	P (migration)
Sales Syria * Zahle	-0.499 (0.642)
Sales Syria * Halba	-3.317*** (0.883)
Own business Syria * Zahle	-1.568 (0.997)
Own business Syria * Halba	-0.638 (0.642)
Skilled job Syria * Zahle	0.326 (0.581)
Skilled job Syria * Halba	-0.390 (0.554)
Observations	4,452

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About the author

Daniel Garrote Sánchez contributed to this project while being a senior researcher at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. He currently works as a labor market consultant at the World Bank. His areas of work include economic migration, labor markets and the task content of jobs, conflict and forced displacement, and development of lagging regions. Prior to joining LCPS, he served as a labor migration consultant for the World Bank and the Ministry of Labor of Saudi Arabia. He also worked for six years as an economic researcher at the Central Bank of Spain covering a range of macroeconomic topics such as fiscal policy, labor markets, and deleveraging. Garrote Sánchez holds a master's degree in Public Administration and International Development from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

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About the Policy Brief

A Policy Brief is a short piece regularly published by LCPS that analyzes key political, economic, and social issues and provides policy recommendations to a wide audience of decision makers and the public at large.

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Founded in 1989, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is a Beirut-based independent, non-partisan think-tank whose mission is to produce and advocate policies that improve good governance in fields such as oil and gas, economic development, public finance, and decentralization.

Contact Information Lebanese Center for Policy Studies

Sadat Tower, Tenth floor
 P.O.B 55-215, Leon Street,
 Ras Beirut, Lebanon
 T: + 961 1 799301
 F: + 961 1 799302
info@lcps-lebanon.org
www.lcps-lebanon.org