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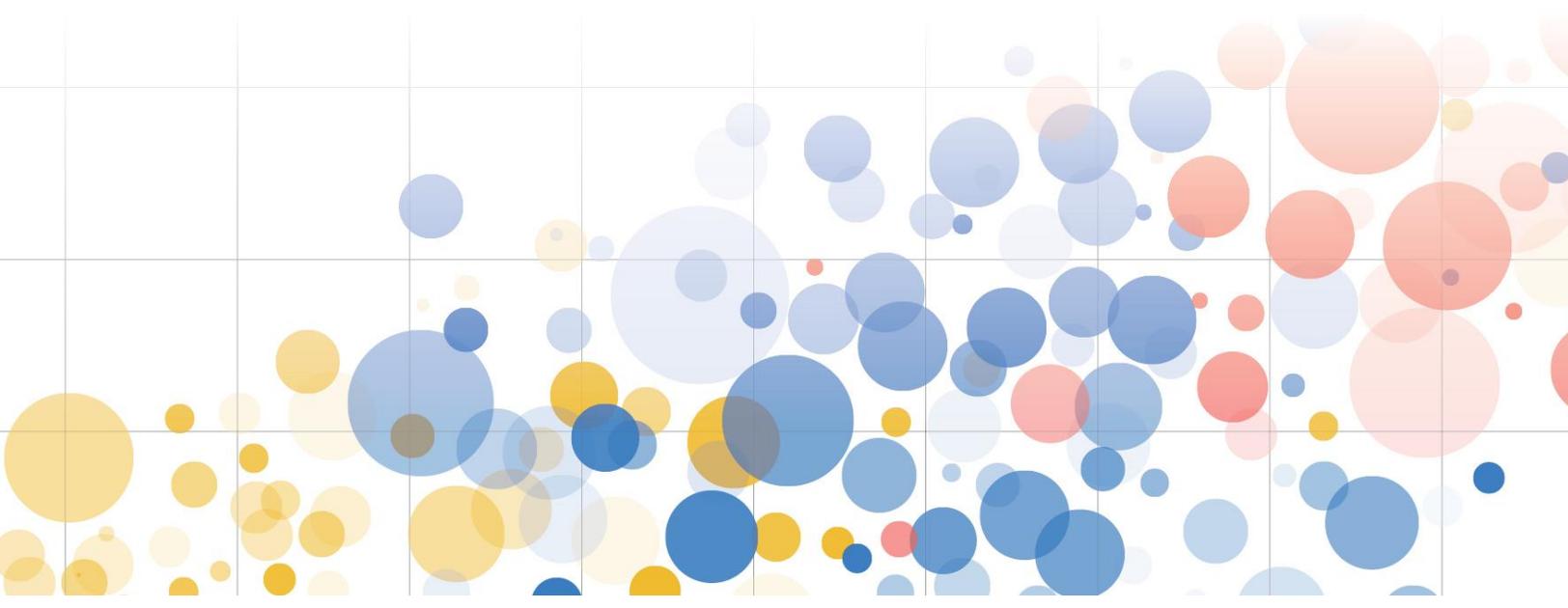
# Refugee Students and Peer Effects

February 2020

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**Disclaimer:** The results in this policy brief are preliminary and have not undergone the peer review process.



## HIGHLIGHTS

- As of 2017, refugee students make up roughly 4 percent of the K-12 student population in the school district with the highest inflow of refugees in Georgia.
- The top five countries of birth for refugee students in the district are Burma (Myanmar), Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Thailand, and Iraq.
- On average, an increase in the proportion of refugee students in the grade level results in higher math test scores for non-refugee peers with no effect on their English Language Arts scores.

## MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND

The number of refugees and individuals displaced by conflict is at a record high. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that by 2017, over 70 million people were forced to flee their country of origin because of persecution, war, or violence—a rapid increase from approximately 16 million in 2005.

Historically, the United States has been the top resettlement destination for refugees. Since 1975, the United States has admitted over 3.7 million displaced individuals, amounting to over two-thirds of the total resettled population worldwide.<sup>1</sup> However, amid controversy and political debate, changes in the refugee admissions ceiling for federal fiscal year (FFY) 2017 led the United States to resettle fewer refugees than the rest of the world for the first time since the creation of the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program in 1980 (Connor and Krogstad, 2018). The proposed ceiling for FFY 2020, at 18,000 individuals, is the lowest ever recorded.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the debate on whether to increase or decrease the number of refugee arrivals is based on the perceived costs that refugees are thought to impose across all levels of government and the native population; yet, there is sparse credible

evidence on the direct and indirect costs associated with refugee resettlement.

Data availability is an important limitation in the study of refugee integration in the United States. Refugees are commonly not identified separately from other foreign-born individuals, despite the increasingly widespread availability of large administrative data sets, and this has led to limited research on the impact of resettlement. A recently developed strategy to identify refugees in large data sets, however, has provided the opportunity to expand the knowledge base on refugee integration outcomes (Capps et al., 2015).

Recent work by Evans and Fitzgerald (2017), for example, demonstrates that although adult refugees initially have lower education levels, low employment, and high use of social safety net programs, over time that changes dramatically. Approximately six years after resettlement, refugees work at higher rates than natives, and it is estimated that refugees pay \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits during their first 20 years in the country. Refugees are also more likely to be business owners, with approximately 13 percent of working-age refugees being entrepreneurs, compared to 9

<sup>1</sup> Less than 1 percent of refugees are offered the resettlement option; it is known as the solution of last resort (UNHCR). Other paths include repatriation and local integration in the first country to which a refugee fled.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-determination-refugee-admissions-fiscal-year-2020/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-determination-refugee-admissions-fiscal-year-2020/)

percent of U.S.-born individuals (Capps et al., 2015). Additionally, refugees who arrive in the country before the age of 14 graduate high school and enter college at the same rate as U.S.-born students (Evans and Fitzgerald, 2017).

The evidence most closely related to this study on the impact of refugee children on the academic outcomes of peers comes from Florida's K-12 public schools. Figlio and Özek (2019) find precisely estimated zero effects on peer test scores following an inflow of earthquake evacuees from Haiti in 2010.

Despite important new contributions to the refugee resettlement knowledge base, there remain important gaps concerning the impact of resettlement on host communities, including public education. This matters for school districts that welcome refugees into their schools, teachers who are serving refugees in their classrooms, and students whose peer groups are changing. Consequently, one area of research requiring further investigation is the effects of refugee students on their non-refugee peers.

## REFUGEE STUDENTS IN GEORGIA

To our knowledge, we are the first to identify refugees from school administrative data, thereby allowing us to descriptively explore summary statistics about refugee students in addition to studying peer effects.

We focus on refugees in Georgia, a state that has resettled over 37,000 refugees since 2002 and ranks among the top 10 resettlement destinations in the United States. In general, the total arrival of refugees in Georgia follows the trend for the country: a decline in arrivals during the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks followed by a slight increase that has been reversed during the post-Great-Recession

years. Notably, refugee arrival flows have sharply declined nationwide since 2016. In fact, the number of refugees resettled in Georgia in 2017 was the lowest in over a decade.

A snapshot of the student population in the school district in our study reveals that there were approximately 4,200 refugee students across all grades (K-12) in 2017. Thus, refugee students made up roughly 4 percent of the total student population in the district. On average, there were about 320 refugee students per grade, with significant variation across grades. For example, while roughly 3 percent of first graders were refugees, this proportion climbs to nearly 6 percent among ninth graders.

Refugee students in the district come from a variety of countries and enter with varying language skills. In 2017, over 70 countries were represented among the refugee population. The top country of birth for refugee students in the district was Burma (Myanmar), followed by Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Thailand, and Iraq. Approximately 20 percent of refugee students did not receive English as a Second Language (ESL) services.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Does attending school with refugees impact the average English Language Arts (ELA) and math achievement of non-refugee students?
- 2) Do the refugee peer effects differ across peer groups—U.S.-born versus immigrant students?

Theoretically, the expected direction of the effect of refugee enrollment on the achievement of peers is ambiguous. For example, given that the refugee population is diverse in both language and its level of education, it may be that increases in refugee enrollment lead to increases in classroom disruptions and divert teacher time to accommodate the needs of these students. On the other hand, in

partnership with refugee-serving organizations, refugees are provided a host of academic auxiliary services to enhance their learning experience. To the extent that there are spillovers stemming from these support services, non-refugee students could experience gains in achievement. Therefore, whether refugee students have an impact on the academic achievement of their peers remains an unanswered question.

## DATA AND METHODS

We utilize individual-level administrative data on all students in grades three through eight who were enrolled in public schools in the district with the highest inflow of refugees in Georgia between 2008 and 2017. School administrative records allow us to observe the outcomes of students (both refugee and non-refugee), including their test scores, attendance, behavior, and high school graduation. We also have data on student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex), English Language Learner status, and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) status.

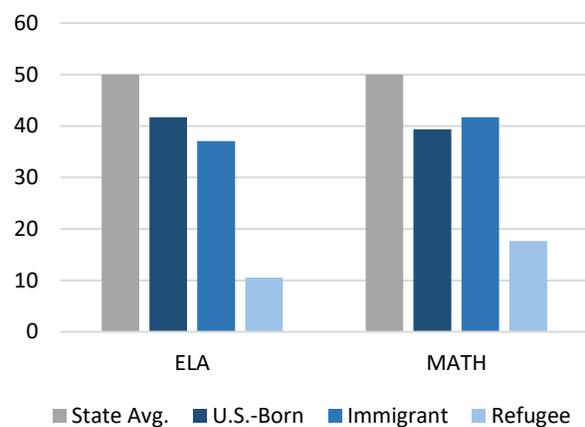
To identify students' refugee status, we access registration records from the district's International Welcome Center, which contain data from a question that asks students to self-report whether they are refugees at the time of registration. Per discussions with both district administrators and program coordinators from local refugee-serving organizations, we conclude that these data, while self-reported, capture students' true refugee status.<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The school district in this study does not track students' immigration status. It simply allows for voluntary self-reported information on refugee status in order to target services to the refugee student community in the district.

<sup>4</sup> We confirmed the validity of the self-reported measure by comparing the reported countries of birth to aggregate data on

Refugee students in this district are, on average, lower performing than both their U.S.-born and non-refugee immigrant peers. To illustrate these differences in achievement, Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in Georgia who score below the average achievement of U.S.-born, immigrant, and refugee students in the district. About 42 percent of students in Georgia score below the average ELA achievement of U.S.-born students in the district. In contrast, no more than 11 percent of students in the state score below the average ELA achievement of refugee students in the district. The difference in average ELA achievement between U.S.-born and refugee students in the district corresponds to roughly 2.9 times the average annual learning gains in reading for students in grades 3 through 8 (Lipsey et al. 2012).

**Figure 1. Percentage of Students in Georgia Who Score Below The Average Normalized Achievement of U.S.-Born, Immigrant, And Refugee Students in the District of Study (School Year 2008-17)**



Note: ELA and math test scores are normalized using the grade-year statewide distribution of test scores by subject. The

the characteristics of refugees in Georgia. Disparities in the countries of birth were reconciled by checking students' language spoken at home and confirmed in conversations with district administrators and education program coordinators from several local refugee-serving organizations.

statewide mean score is therefore zero. Each bar represents the percent of students who score below the average achievement by group and subject. For example, by construction, 50 percent of the students in Georgia score below the state average in ELA. In contrast, only 11 percent of students in Georgia score below the average ELA achievement of refugee students in the studied district.

We observe a slightly less dramatic difference in math test scores. Approximately 40 percent of students in Georgia score below the average math achievement of U.S.-born students in the district, while only 17 percent of students in the state score below the average math achievement of refugees in the district. This difference corresponds to roughly 1.3 times the average annual learning gains in math for students in grades 3 through 8 (Lipsey et al., 2012).

There are also important socio-demographic differences between refugee and non-refugee students, as shown in Table 1. On average, 62 percent of refugee students in the district are Asian and 30 percent are Black, 89 percent qualify for FRPL, and 84 percent receive ESL services.

The peers of refugees are likely to be minority students from low-income households. Of the U.S.-born student population, 73 percent are Black and 71 percent qualify for FRPL. Of the immigrant students in the district, 44 percent are Hispanic, 79 percent qualify for FRPL, and 42 percent receive ESL services.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics by Student Nativity Status for Grades 3-8 (School Years 2008-17)**

Variables	U.S.-Born	Foreign Born	
		Immigrant	Refugee
Share Female	0.49	0.48	0.48
Share Hispanic	0.12	0.44	0.03
Share Black	0.73	0.27	0.30
Share White	0.14	0.16	0.07
Share Asian	0.03	0.22	0.62
Share Gifted	0.17	0.11	0.01
Share FRPL	0.71	0.79	0.89
Share ESL	0.05	0.42	0.84
Obs.	396,560	29,546	12,737
Percent of Obs.	90.36%	6.73%	2.90%

Note: The summary statistics are averages over the years 2008-17, and they include only students in grades three through eight.

To determine the causal impacts of refugee students on the academic achievement of peers, it is necessary to account for potential confounding factors. Importantly, we need to control for differences in school and teacher quality. By doing this, we can attribute differences in student achievement to differences in the proportion of peers who are refugees, independent of other factors that may also drive differences in student achievement.

We account for school quality by comparing students within schools (not across) and control for teacher quality by measuring peer effects at the student-grade level (not classrooms). In sum, we compare ELA and math test scores across students in different grades for the same school and year where the main difference over time is the proportion of peers who are refugees.

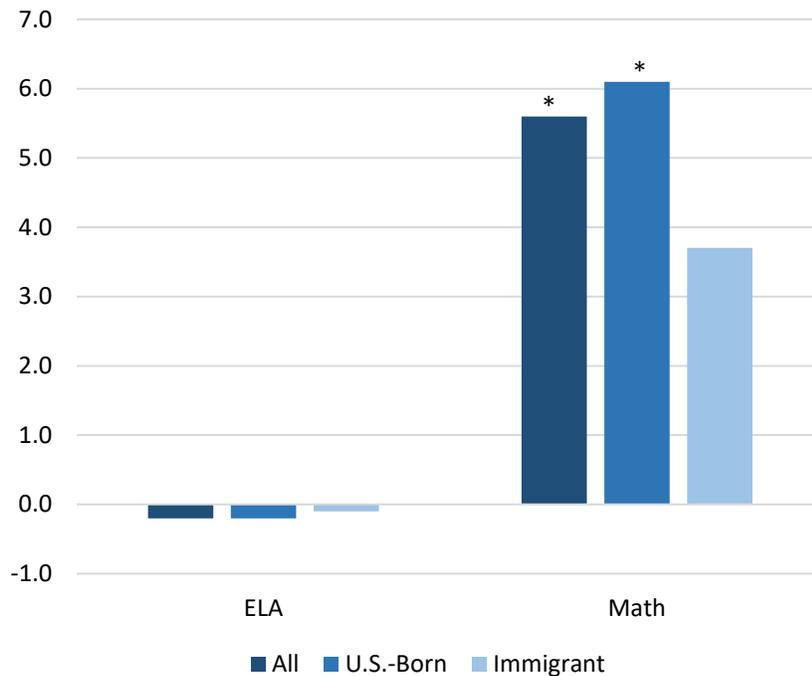
## FINDINGS

Our results suggest overall null or positive spillovers in peer achievement. Using the sample of all refugee-serving schools, we find no statistically significant spillovers in ELA or math achievement. Moreover, when we focus on the subset of schools that serve a high proportion of refugees, we find that students in grades with a higher proportion of refugees see an increase in their math scores.

Results for ELA test scores show that a higher proportion of refugee students has no significant impact on the scores of non-refugees, in general.

As shown in Figure 2, among the schools that serve a high proportion of refugees, doubling the average proportion of refugee students at the grade level from the current average (2 percent to 4 percent) results in a 5.6 percent increase in the math test score for the average non-refugee student.

**Figure 2. Effects of Doubling the Proportion of Grade-Level Peers Who are Refugees on ELA and Math Scores of Non-Refugee Students**



Note: These results are from a sub-sample of schools whose average proportion of refugees over school years 2008-17 is above 1 percent. Results using the full sample of refugee serving schools show similar patterns, but average effects are not statistically significant. The height of the bars indicates the estimated percent change in test scores for the average non-refugee student by subject and subgroup as a result of an increase in the share of refugee peers at the grade level from the current average (2 percent) to 4 percent. Estimates significant at a 95 percent confidence level are shown with a star (\*) above the bar.

Note that in the most general case, peers of refugees include both U.S.-born and non-refugee immigrant students. Are these two groups of students differentially impacted by refugee peers? We find that the positive peer effects for math

scores are concentrated among U.S.-born students. Although there is a suggestive positive relationship between the proportion of refugee students and math test scores for immigrants as well, our

estimates are not precise enough to determine the impact with a high degree of certainty.

In general, we find no causal relationship between the proportion of refugee students at the grade level and ELA test scores for non-refugee students. This is a remarkable finding in light of the fact that refugee students have significantly lower ELA test scores relative to U.S.-born students in the district. Our results show that increasing the proportion of refugees has no impact on the average ELA achievement of non-refugees.

We stratify our analysis by classifying schools into two groups: all refugee-serving schools and schools where over 1 percent of the student population are refugees. This classification allows us to explore whether the peer effects differ depending on the concentration of refugees at the school level. Our findings indicate that the positive spillovers in math achievement increase and are significant only for the subset of schools that serve a high proportion of refugees.

*In a previous version of this brief (published in July 2019), we reported that an increase in refugee students resulted in higher ELA achievement among non-refugee students. The current results differ, in part, due to the use of a new method to identify refugee students in the district. Notably, irrespective of the methodology, no negative refugee peer effects on average student achievement were found.*

## SUMMARY

Does attending school with refugee students affect their peers? We used school administrative data for students in grades three through eight in the district with the highest inflow of refugees in Georgia to examine whether the ELA and math test scores of non-refugee students are impacted by the share of peers who are refugees.

Focusing on the subset of schools that serve a high proportion of refugee students, our results revealed a positive spillover effect for math test scores, especially among U.S.-born students. Furthermore, we found no causal relationship between the proportion of refugee students at the grade level and changes in ELA scores of non-refugee peers.

*More details about the methodology of this study and additional findings are contained in an academic working paper at [gpl.gsu.edu](http://gpl.gsu.edu). Tim Sass is the corresponding author for this brief ([tsass@gsu.edu](mailto:tsass@gsu.edu)).*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Camila N. Morales** is an economics Ph.D. candidate at Georgia State University and a graduate research assistant with the Georgia Policy Labs. Her research interests lie at the intersection of education economics, labor economics, and immigration policy. Her current work focuses on the educational outcomes of refugee and immigrant students, second language learners, and their peers. Prior to pursuing her Ph.D., Camila earned a B.S. in economics and a minor in mathematics from Georgia State University.

**Tim R. Sass** is an applied micro-economist whose research focuses on the economics of education. He is also the faculty director of the Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education (MAPLE). Specific areas of interest include teacher labor supply, the measurement of teacher quality and school choice. His work has been published in numerous academic journals, including the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Labor Economics*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *Journal of Law and Economics* and *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. His research has been supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, the Gates Foundation, the Smith-Richardson Foundation, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation. He has acted as a consultant to school systems in New York City, Washington, DC, Charlotte, the state of Florida and the state of New York. He is a senior researcher at the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) and serves on the editorial board of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

## ABOUT THE GEORGIA POLICY LABS

The Georgia Policy Labs (GPL) is a collaboration between Georgia State University and a variety of government agencies to promote evidence-based policy development and implementation. Housed in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, GPL works to create an environment where policymakers have the information and tools available to improve the effectiveness of existing government policies and programs, try out new ideas for addressing pressing issues, and decide what new initiatives are promising enough to scale up. The ultimate goal is to help government entities more effectively use scarce resources and make a positive difference in people's lives. GPL contains three focus areas: The Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education works to improve K-12 educational outcomes in metro Atlanta; the Career and Technical Education Policy Exchange focuses on high-school-based career and technical education in multiple U.S. states; and the Child and Family Lab looks at issues of the whole child and whole family with Georgia's state agencies. In addition to conducting evidence-based policy research, GPL serves as a teaching and learning resource for state officials and policymakers, students, and other constituents. See more at [gpl.gsu.edu](http://gpl.gsu.edu).