Migration status and the dynamics of urban diversity

In what ways can a migrant’s status, whether refugee or temporary worker, influence a city's diversity? While investigating this question, StatusCities also explored worrying trends in the production and use of migration statistics.

While many of the rules and regulations that determine migrant status (such as refugee, visiting students, etc.) are made at the national level, at the local level, status determines which resources can be accessed, while also directly influencing the diversity of local populations.

The EU-supported project, StatusCities, investigated how urban diversification is tied to the interplay between who gets to move through a particular immigration track (conditionalities of entry) and how being a migrant is linked to what a person can and cannot do with a
particular status (parameters of presence).

With analysis still ongoing, the qualitative work conducted so far suggests that many individuals rarely identify with their immigration status – unless problems arise. Individuals typically feel that their reasons for migration are legitimate and not reducible to a simple status. The project also traced how migration status influences the quality of neighbourhoods that migrants inhabit.

Additionally, the work led to research, outlined in a 2019 paper, which looked at how the ‘crisis narratives’ surrounding Europe’s 2015 migration influx fuelled the ‘datafication’ of migration through demands for new data-led ways of tracking, mapping and predicting human mobility. The article outlines how this demand for migration statistics presented a market opportunity for technology and data analytic firms which consolidated narratives that present migration as a risk.

**Geographic patterns and perspectives of legal status**

The StatusCities Marie Skłodowska-Curie researcher focused on urban areas as the destination of choice for the majority of international migrants. “Urban diversity used to be about how many different countries people came from – a very static conception. Recently, focus has shifted to how different origin groups are highly differentiated, partly due to their different legal statuses,” explains Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow, Fran Meissner.

To understand legal status from a migrant’s perspective, interviews with 39 individuals representing a range of legal statuses were conducted in a mid-sized German city. The interviews were complemented with photos taken by the participants that were placed on a mobile map to represent an individual’s interaction with the city. The interviews focused on the respondent’s experience of arrival in the city, finding housing and keeping or changing their legal status.

The data revealed some instructive patterns. For example, those granted refugee status were more likely to have an ‘entry’ into the housing market via housing corporations. This had the potential knock-on effect that these migrants could then be found clustered in certain areas of the city.

Additionally, at the time of the interviews in 2016 many rules and regulations were changed, resulting in those awaiting refugee status being prohibited from looking for housing while their case was pending. This meant that once they were able to enter the housing market, they did so at a time when the pressures in the housing market were steadily rising (the beginning of a new university term), which exacerbated their difficulties in finding somewhere suitable.

**Implications for migration policy**

“Debates about regulating migration almost always focus on controlling migration flows. By highlighting the implications of these regulations, StatusCities offers insights into some of the social considerations that should be considered when deciding to put (aspiring) resident foreign nationals in legal limbo,” says Meissner.
Currently, Meissner is working with Dutch Register data to develop visualisations of migrant housing trajectories over many years, to show both those from different status groups, and also trends in upward and downward mobility.

Keywords

StatusCities, data, migrant, refugees, legal status, regulations, urban, city, neighbourhood, diversity, human mobility

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