Do immigrants get better lives?

Does life improve for people after moving to another country? In this age of massive migrations, researchers are beginning to come up with answers.

Some 250 million persons now live in a different country than the one they were born in.

Nearly 16 percent of the population in Norway have immigrant backgrounds, either actual immigrants or their Norwegian-born offspring.

Roughly 35 percent of the immigrants are from Asia, 27 percent from Eastern Europe and 22 percent from Nordic countries and the rest of Western Europe. About 12 percent are from Africa.

A little less satisfied

Anders Barstad, a researcher at Statistics Norway (SSB), has compiled Norwegian and international research on the quality of life that immigrants achieve in their new countries.

On the whole, immigrants are a little less satisfied with their lives than the general population in the countries they have settled in, according to the SSB researcher’s research summary.

Not surprisingly, moving to a rich country in the “North” – for instance Norway – usually leads to a higher level of satisfaction than moving between two low or medium income countries in the “South”.

What is it that makes life better in Norway or Northern Europe?

People needn’t fear for their safety outdoors, there is less corruption, police are trustworthy, the justice system works, elections are fair and the health system is better. These are some of the advantages international research finds immigrants appreciating when they move from the South to the North.

The biggest drawback found by immigrants who move to the North is a loss of the social network of neighbours, relatives and others they had in the countries they left behind.

Becoming relatively poorer

Most of the studies on the subject find that immigrants who move from poor to wealthy countries enjoy less feeling of well-being than the natives of their new homeland. SSB has seen this confirmed by studies in Norway and abroad.

Nearly all immigrants gain economically when they move from South to North.

However, a drop in relative income is one of the factors undermining the satisfaction of many immigrants to a rich country like Norway. The economic disparity between them and others in the new country is greater than it was in the country they migrated from.
In other words, these immigrants have become richer in absolute money, but poorer in relative money.

This might not matter much for those who spend nearly all their time with their own families and fellow immigrants from their home country. But as time passes the experience of an income gap will begin to erode their satisfaction as immigrants engage more with the general population.

This explains why various degrees of discouragement and disappointment can get a grip on many immigrants to Nordic countries after a few years.

If numerous immigrants to Nordic or North-Western European countries don’t feel their lives are essentially better, why do so few choose to return to their original homeland? Researchers at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) have looked at that issue. Read about it here: Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration [5].

Do immigrants get assimilated?

Another key question is whether immigrants become part of the societies they move to. Are they assimilated?

Many studies indicate that the differences between immigrants and the majority population decrease little as the years pass in the new country. This might come as a surprise to many.

However, the results of international studies diverge on this point. A large British study confirms a lack of assimilation. It found little or no difference in assimilation between first and second generation immigrants in the UK.

A study of persons with Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds in the Netherlands indicates gradual gains for the sons and daughters of immigrants.

A variety of causes

The SSB study has taken a closer look at the causes of unequal qualities of life between immigrants and the majority populations in their new countries.

Anders Barstad of SSB thinks it hard to draw clear conclusions.

Contrary to the findings mentioned above, other large studies in Germany and the UK conclude that socioeconomic differences cannot be the cause of these disparities in perceived and experienced quality of life.

Another German study emphasises the importance of work. A key factor is an immigrant’s sense of job security.

Not surprisingly, quality of life is jeopardized by any experiences or perceptions of discrimination.

A larger study covering several European nations shows that a country’s general attitude toward immigrants also has an impact on perceived quality of life.

Some studies show that achieving language skills in the new country has an effect on an immigrant’s satisfaction. Others have shown that this does not help.

Some immigrants are plagued by tough or traumatic experiences in their home countries. It is quite likely that the incidence of post-traumatic stress syndrome is higher in the immigrant population than the native population.
But the SSB report found a surprising lack of information about this factor.

**What is subjective quality of life?**

Researching how good the lives of people are is always complicated.

Much of it necessarily entails quantifying an individual’s subjective quality of life. Not easy. This means that research results can contradict one another or at least diverge significantly.

Another factor can be one-sidedness or an imbalance amongst the persons researchers manage to interview. This can skew the result. In general, researchers might tend to interview immigrants who are better adjusted and integrated – as it is harder to communicate with ones who are isolated and resentful.

This means that as a rule such research sways toward overestimating the quality of life among immigrants.

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Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no [6]

Most immigrants move abroad in hope of better lives. Do they get them? (Illustrative photo: iStockphoto) [7]

349481_iStock_000011829480XSmall_None.jpg [8]

**Blond, sexy and immigrant** [9] **Children of immigrants choose gender equality** [10]

**Anders Barstad's profile** [11]


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