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**Article**

## Refugees' high employment expectations: Partially met

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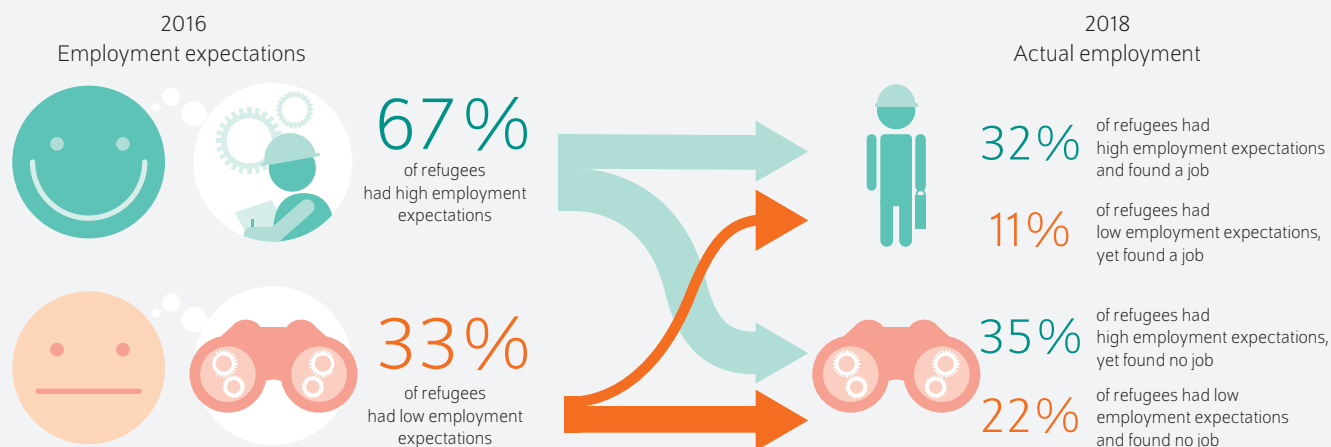
AT A GLANCE

## Refugees' High Employment Expectations: Partially Met

By Daniel Graeber and Felicitas Schikora

- In 2016, two in three refugees reported that the probability they would find employment within two years was high
- Male refugees had higher expectations than their female counterparts; refugees with higher education and better mental health had higher expectations than others
- Although expectations were met for around half the refugees, about one-third did not find a job despite their high expectations
- Female refugees, refugees with poor mental health, or with primary education, in particular, had high expectations that were not met
- Poor mental health or structural variables such as a lack of childcare may have impacted the refugees' entry into employment

### Most refugees reported a high probability of finding employment within two years



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, v.35.

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### FROM THE AUTHORS

*“The majority of refugees reported that the probability they would find employment within two years was high. Refugees should receive sufficient information on the German labor market and the necessary qualifications in order to avoid disappointment, which can hamper their integration.”*

— Felicitas Schikora —

### MEDIA



Audio Interview with C. Katharina Spieß (in German)  
[www.diw.de/mediathek](http://www.diw.de/mediathek)

# Refugees' High Employment Expectations: Partially Met

By Daniel Graeber and Felicitas Schikora

## ABSTRACT

This report compares employment expectations among refugees in Germany in 2016 with their actual employment situation in 2018, using the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany. In 2016, the majority of refugees reported that the probability they would find employment within two years was high. Employment expectations were met by 54 percent of all refugees; yet 35 percent of refugees who articulated high expectations in 2016, had no job in 2018. The findings show that both structural factors, such as a lack of childcare, and individual level characteristics, such as mental health, impacted entry into employment. Extra support for refugees seeking employment—the provision of information and advice on the German labor market, better childcare options, or support for those with mental health issues, for example—could help ensure that employment expectations are met more frequently. Further studies are needed to provide a better understanding of the different mechanisms at play here.

The number of refugees and displaced persons worldwide has increased markedly over the past ten years.<sup>1</sup> These people leave their homes expecting to find safety and security in the receiving country. Besides safeguarding their physical integrity, refugees also hope to obtain greater financial security and have the chance to build a new life in the host country, including having a good education and gainful employment.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, refugees find themselves facing very many uncertainties in the receiving country, for example they lack knowledge of the local labor market and face uncertain prospects of staying. These uncertainties cause refugees to form expectations on which they base their actions. Examples include expectations regarding future employment and earnings. Unlike other immigrant groups, in the majority of cases, refugees are unable to access information on the current labor market or on whether they will be able to have their qualifications or degrees recognized. If refugees' expectations are not met, this directly impacts on their material welfare. This can also negatively affect their sense of well-being that, in turn, can hamper their further integration. For instance, qualitative studies in Germany show that disappointment over unsuccessful integration can cause refugees to have psychological problems,<sup>3</sup> which in turn correlate with a deceleration of the integration process.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have found that the high level of motivation among children with a migration background often goes hand in hand with better academic achievement.<sup>5</sup> In light of this, it is vital to know which individual characteristics impact expectation formation among refugees and what

**1** UNHCR, *Global trends 2008 – Refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, internally displaced and stateless persons* (Geneva, 2009) (available online, accessed July 23, 2020; this applies to all other online sources in this report unless stated otherwise); UNHCR, *Global trends 2018 – Forced displacement in 2018* (Geneva, 2019) (available online).

**2** This fundamental right is also expressed in the 1951 Refugee Convention in Geneva 1951. According to this, refugees shall be accorded in the host country as favorable as possible and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, as regards the right to education and employment. See UNHCR, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951, Articles 17–19, Article 22 (1951)* (available online).

**3** Bundesforum Männer e.V., "Male refugees in Germany: Needs, Challenges, and Resources – Summary," (2019) (available online).

**4** Isabella Buber-Ennser et al., "The Effect of Stressors and Resilience Factors on Mental Health of Recent Refugees in Austria," *wiiw Working Paper* no. 169 (2019).

**5** Grace Kao and Marta Tienda, "Optimism and achievement: The educational performance of immigrant youth," *Social science quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1995): 1–19.

groups of refugees gauge their chances of finding employment wrongly.

At the same time, the host society often articulates high expectations of the refugees. This *Weekly Report* switches the perspective, analyzing for the first time refugees' employment expectations in 2016, their actual employment in 2018, and the extent of associated expectation errors, i.e., the deviations from the articulated expectations. The study specifically examines what individual characteristics are linked with expectation errors.<sup>6</sup>

A unique data source is used for the analysis: the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany.<sup>7</sup> With the same refugees being surveyed over a number of years here, it is possible to compare the refugees' subjective employment expectations in 2016 with the actual employment situation in 2018.

This *Weekly Report* thus identifies sub-groups of refugees which are frequently prone to expectation errors. The findings of this report are a useful starting point for politicians to identify refugees with unmet employment expectations, enabling them to develop targeted policy measures. Interviews with refugees conducted as part of the asylum process, for example, could be used to inform refugees better about their prospects on the German labor market. This form of expectations management could reduce the occurrence of false expectations among refugees and would at the same time provide concrete proposals as to how to facilitate integration into the labor market (e.g. language courses for refugees, training or career reorientation programs, alternative training options). It could also help remove any obstacles that make it hard for refugees to enter the German labor market.

### Refugees' expectations about future employment high in 2016

In the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees conducted in 2016, refugees were asked how likely they feel it is that they will have a job in Germany in two years' time (Box 1).

On the whole, the refugees' responses in 2016 about their employment situation in 2018 were optimistic (Figure 1). Around one-third of the respondents said it was "definitely likely" ("100 percent") they would have a job in 2018. The median of the distribution<sup>8</sup> of responses is "80 percent;" in other words, exactly 50 percent of the respondents answered with "80 percent" or more. Around two-thirds answered "60 percent" or more, i.e., two in three refugees articulated high employment expectations. Only seven percent of the

<sup>6</sup> To differentiate by individual characteristics, we use every variable from 2016 without exception. This approach serves to prevent biases arising from the correlation between individual characteristics and expectation errors. Expectations that are not met can impair mental health, for instance. In this case, we would overestimate the correlation between expectation errors and mental health.

<sup>7</sup> "IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany," DIW Berlin (available online).

<sup>8</sup> The median or middle score splits a dataset, sample or distribution into two equal parts such that the values in one half are not greater and those in the other half are not smaller than the median.

Box 1

#### Questionnaire Content Used for Our Analysis

This report analyzes refugees' expectations on the basis of information provided by refugees in 2016. To find out what future expectations refugees have about various aspects of their integration, the respondents were asked to estimate their own situation in two years' time. This report focuses on information provided on expected employment in 2018.

"How likely is it that you will have a job in Germany in two years' time? 0 means "Not likely at all". 100 means "Definitely likely". You can use the in-between ratings to tailor your response."

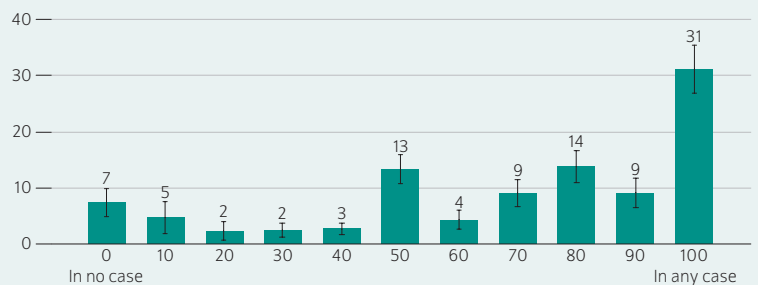
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

The survey questionnaire may not use percentage values for the responses. The question type and form, however, suggest that these are percentages. This report thus refers to percentages when characterizing the different response categories.

Figure 1

#### Refugees' expectations in 2016 regarding their employment in 2018

Distribution of answers in percent



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1,407, weighted.

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More than half of the respondents estimated the probability of having a job in two years' time to be "80 percent" or higher.

refugees said it was not likely at all that they would have a job in 2018.

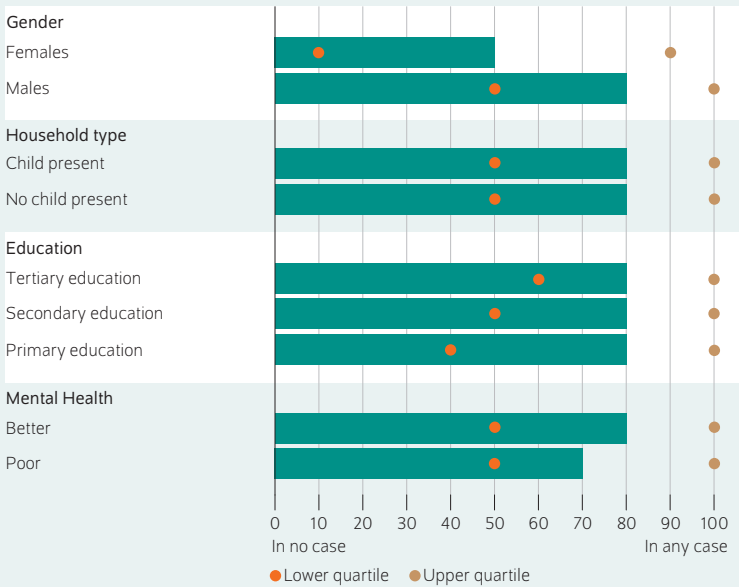
#### Women refugees feel they are less likely to find employment in future

Employment expectations differ between men and women, however (Figure 2, Gender). Male refugees generally expressed higher subjective expectations in 2016 than their female counterparts, with 34 percent of male respondents stating in 2016 that it was "definitely likely" that they would have a job in 2018 compared with as little as 23 percent of female refugees who gave the same response—this is

Figure 2

**Refugees' expectations in 2016 regarding their employment in 2018, by subgroups**

Median as well as the lower and upper quartile of answers



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1,407, weighted.

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Male refugees generally expressed higher expectations in 2016 that they that they would have a job in 2018 than their female counterparts.

equivalent to a difference between female and male respondents of 11 percentage points or 32 percent. The median for male and female respondents is “80 percent” and “50 percent,” respectively. That is, half of the male refugees estimated the probability of having a job in two years’ time to be “80 percent” or higher, while half the female respondents estimated this to be “50 percent” or higher.

One possible reason for this is that when women flee their home countries, they often do so with the rest of their family;<sup>9</sup> at the same time, these women come from countries with more traditional gender roles.<sup>10</sup> Underpinning this assumption is the fact that the median for female refugees with a partner is “50 percent,” while that for single female refugees is “70 percent.” The median for male refugees, by way of contrast, is “80 percent,” irrespective of relationship status.

<sup>9</sup> Ludovica Gambaro et al., “Refugees in Germany with children still living abroad have lowest life satisfaction,” *DIW Weekly Report*, no. 42 (2018): 905–916 (available online).

<sup>10</sup> Initial studies on attitudes towards democracy and the rule of law show that refugees in Germany have traditional values. Among the refugee respondents in Germany, however, there was far less agreement with antidemocratic statements than among the respondents in the World Value Survey in crisis regions. See Herbert Brücker, Nina Rother, and Jürgen Schupp, “IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees: overview and first results,” *Policy advice compact*, no. 116 (2016) (in German; available online). Furthermore, qualitative studies show that gender roles among female refugees from Syria have changed dramatically since 2011. See Nisren Habib, “Gender Role Changes and their Impacts on Syrian Women Refugees in Berlin in Light of the Syrian Crisis,” *WZB Discussion Paper*, no. SP VI 2018-101 (2018) (available online).

No systematic differences were found between households with and without children (Figure 2, Household Type). Thus, we can assume that the presence of children in the household has no influence on employment expectations.

**Higher education and better mental health correlate positively with employment expectations among refugees**

Refugees’ employment expectations also differ depending on their level of education.<sup>11</sup> Refugees with a secondary school or university education have slightly higher expectations than those with primary school education only (see Figure 2, Education). While the median for all educational groups is “80 percent,” refugees with school education, whether primary or secondary, however, report lower employment expectations more frequently than those with university qualifications. The lower the level of education, the lower the lower quartile,<sup>12</sup> for example.

This study also shows that refugees with poor mental health had lower employment expectations in 2016 than refugees with better mental health (Figure 2, Mental Health). Here, a distinction is made between refugees whose Mental Component Summary Score (MCS),<sup>13</sup> an index-based measure of mental health, is below the median and those whose score is above it. The median of employment expectations for refugees with a low MCS is “70 percent” compared with “80 percent” for those with a high MCS.

**Integration into labor market continues to make progress**

A transnational comparison shows that in the first years after arrival, refugees have far lower employment rates and wages than other migrant groups.<sup>14</sup> In line with these findings, the labor force participation (rate) of refugees in Germany is lower than for other immigrants, although it has grown continually over the years. While in 2016, the labor force

<sup>11</sup> The report distinguishes between primary, secondary, and university education. This categorization is based on information on the total years of schooling as well as details of qualifications obtained in the country of origin: primary education (up to eight years of schooling), secondary education (nine to 12 years of schooling), university education (more than 12 years of schooling and/or a completed university degree).

<sup>12</sup> The lower (upper) quartile describes the response category for which the first (last) 25 percent of the information provided is smaller than (larger than) or equal to the respective response category. 50 percent of the responses lie exactly between the lower and the upper quartile.

<sup>13</sup> The Mental Component Summary Score is the second factor of a principal component analysis of the 12 items in the short-form 12 Questionnaire. In the short-form 12 Questionnaire, respondents provide information on their mental and physical health. The MCS is standardized, meaning a value of 50 corresponds to the average value for the German population and higher values determine better mental health. See Maria Metzger, Diana Schacht, and Antonia Scherz, “Psychische und körperliche Gesundheit von Geflüchteten im Vergleich zu anderen Bevölkerungsgruppen,” *DIW Wochenbericht*, no. 5 (2019): 64–72 (available online).

<sup>14</sup> Courtney Brell, Christian Dustmann, and Ian Preston, “The Labor Market Integration of Refugee Migrants in High-Income Countries,” *CREAM DP*, no. 10/20.

participation of refugees was 14 percent,<sup>15</sup> it had increased by 29 percentage points to an average of 43 percent until 2018.<sup>16</sup>

**Lower employment among female refugees, refugees with children in the same household, and refugees with primary education**

In 2018, similar to employment expectations, the refugees' actual employment situation also displays considerable heterogeneity. First, there is a clear gender gap in refugee employment, with 52 percent of male refugees in employment compared to just 14 percent of female refugees. A further crucial characteristic is the refugees' school education: Some 33 percent of refugees with primary school education were in gainful employment in Germany in 2018. In contrast, 49 percent of refugees with secondary or tertiary education had found employment by 2018. Furthermore, 26 percent of refugees with at least one child living in their household had entered employment in 2018. Of those refugees with no children living in their household, 56 percent were employed in 2018. Refugees' mental health in the reference year 2016 was also found to play an important role, with 32 percent of refugees with poor mental health in employment in 2018—23 percentage points higher for those with good mental health in 2016.

**35 percent of refugees had high employment expectations in 2016, yet no job in 2018**

A comparison of refugees' subjective employment expectations and actual employment in 2018 shows to what degree these expectations were met. There are four possible scenarios (Table). Expectations are considered positively met if, in 2016, a refugee responded there is a high probability (more than 50 percent) of having a job in 2018 and then actually does have a job, whereas expectations are considered negatively met if, in 2016, a refugee responded there is a low probability (less than or equal to 50 percent) of having a job and then does not have one in 2018. The expectation is considered surpassed (positive deviation) if a refugee is employed in 2018 despite having had low employment expectations in 2016. In contrast, expectations are considered negatively met (negative deviation) if a refugee is not employed in 2018 and had high employment expectations in 2016.

In 2016, 32 percent of refugees expected to have employment in future and did in fact have a job (positively met), while 22 percent of refugees had low expectations of having future employment in 2018 and were not in employment (negatively met). Overall, 11 percent of all refugees surveyed

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Brücker et al., "IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees".

<sup>16</sup> The labor force participation rate includes those in full- and part-time employment, self-employed, trainees, and those in internships. In our analysis, no distinction is made between different types of employment. The IAB Brief Report 04/2020 specifies a labor force participation rate of 35 percent. Here, only refugees with a job and a positive income are regarded as gainfully employed. This *Weekly Report* does not factor in remuneration. Including remuneration in the evaluation would reduce the percentage of employed in our sample specification from 43 to 35 percent. See Herbert Brücker, Yuliya Kosyakova, and Eric Schuß, "Fünf Jahre seit Fluchtmigration 2020, Integration in Arbeitsmarkt und Bildungssystem macht weitere Fortschritte," *IAB Brief Report*, no. 04 (2020) (in German; available online).

Table

**Fulfilment of refugees' employment expectations**

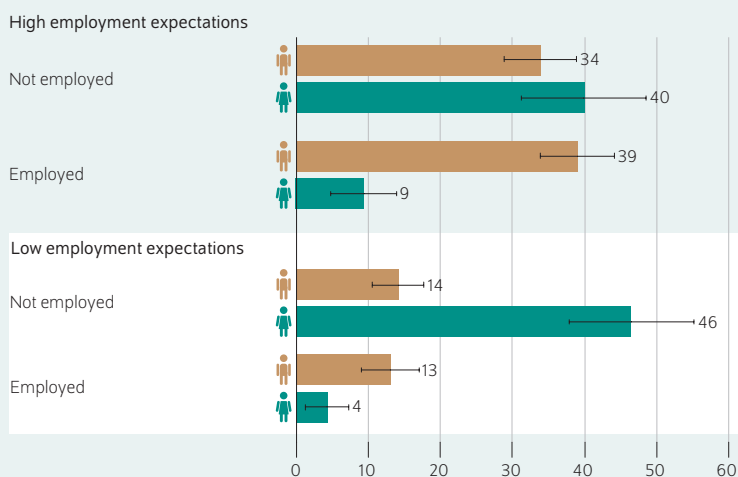
	Employment expectations	
	High	Low
Gainfully employed	(Positively) met 32 percent	Positive deviation 11 percent
Not in gainful employment	Negative deviation 35 percent	(Negatively) met 22 percent

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1,407, weighted.

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Figure 3

**Fulfilment of refugees' employment expectations, by gender**  
In percent



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1,407, weighted.

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The expectations of male and female refugees regarding their employment prospects in 2018 are equally likely to be wrong. Yet, female refugees articulated expectations that were too high more often than their male counterparts.

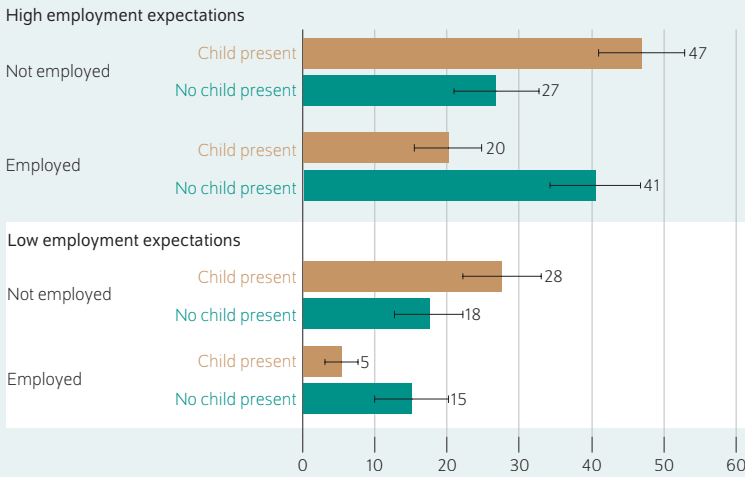
had low employment expectations in 2016, but actually had a job in 2018 (positive deviation). A total of 35 percent of refugees had high employment expectations in 2016, but did not have a job in 2018 (negative deviation).

All in all, the expectations of 46 percent of all refugees were not met. Of those refugees who had made an expectation error, 24 percent had responded too pessimistically and 76 percent too optimistically. The latter are consequently in the clear majority. Since disappointment and unsuccessful integration often correlate with mental health problems,<sup>17</sup> this group warrants particular attention from stakeholders and politicians. In light of this, it is important to understand

<sup>17</sup> Bundesforum Männer e.V., "Male Refugees in Germany."

Figure 4

**Fulfilment of refugees' employment expectations, by household type**  
In percent



Source : IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1,407, weighted.

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Refugees with children made expectation errors more often than refugees with no children living in the household.

to what extent the different expectation errors are associated with individual refugee characteristics (Figure 3–6).<sup>18</sup>

Generally speaking, the expectations of male and female refugees regarding their employment prospects for 2018 are equally likely to be wrong, with 47 percent of male and 44 percent of female refugees making expectation errors (Figure 3). Strikingly, female refugees articulated expectations that were too high more often than their male counterparts (40 compared with 34 percent). In addition, 39 percent of male refugees had high employment expectations in 2016, which were met, in contrast to the mere 9 percent for female counterparts.

Of the refugees with children living in the household, 47 percent had expressed high employment expectations in 2016 but had no job in 2018 (Figure 4), compared to 27 percent for refugees with no children living in their household.

Expectation errors were observed in 52 percent of refugees with children living in the household, compared to 42 percent of refugees with no children living in the household. This is particularly interesting given that barely any difference was observed in the employment expectations of these two household types in 2016. This suggests that children living in the household played no more than a minor role in the formation of employment expectations, although differences were found when it came to taking up employment. Consistent with this observation is the hypothesis that structural reasons that were not anticipated in 2016 made it more difficult for the respondents to take up employment. Structural reasons include, for instance, inflexible work arrangements or a lack of childcare. In fact, existing empirical evidence already shows that childcare makes it easier for displaced or refugee parents to integrate into the host society. In the case of mothers of children under six years, for example, the employment expectations were higher if the child or children had a place in a day care establishment.<sup>19</sup>

A look at the different educational biographies shows that the positive expectations of refugees with a university or secondary education are met far more often than those with primary education only (Figure 5). A further observation is that of the refugees with a university education as little as five percent expressed too low expectations, while those with primary or secondary education expressed too low expectations more frequently (11 and 12 percent, respectively).

As regards mental health, the expectations expressed in 2016 by refugees with good mental health were found to be met

Figure 5

**Fulfilment of refugees' employment expectations, by education**  
In percent



Source : IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1,407, weighted.

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The positive expectations of refugees with a university or secondary education are met far more often than those with primary education only.

<sup>18</sup> Of those whose expectations were not met and who did not have a job in 2018, some are in trainee programs or are taking part in an integration course (14 percent for those with a negative deviation, 19 percent for those whose expectations were negatively met). What is not known is whether these are lock-in effects (the person postpones entering the job market because they want to invest in education), or these individuals start training or an integration course because they have failed to find employment. Further studies into causality are needed.

<sup>19</sup> Ludovica Gambaro, Guido Neidhöfer, and C. Katharina Spieß, "The effect of early childhood education and care services on the social integration of refugee families," *DIW Discussion Paper*, no. 1828 (2019).

more often: Expectation errors were observed in around 40 percent of refugees with better mental health compared to 52 percent with poor mental health. This difference is especially evident for refugees whose expectations were too high (Figure 6). Better mental health was also found to correlate with the positive fulfilment of expectations: While among refugees with better mental health, 44 percent articulated high expectations and had a job in 2018, the equivalent share for those with poor mental health was just half as high (at 22 percent). Finally, of the refugees with poor mental health, the share who had expressed negative expectations about finding a job and actually failed to find a job was also higher.

**Conclusion: Measures needed to help refugees form rational expectations**

The formation of realistic expectations is instrumental in situations of uncertainty. This is especially important for migrants whose decision to migrate is usually based on a cost-benefit analysis.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, when expectations are not met, the result is often disappointment and mental health problems.

In this context, this report analyzes employment expectations of refugees for the first time. This study looks at employment expectations of refugees in Germany in 2016, the actual employment situation in 2018, and the associated expectation errors. This report shows that in 2016 refugees generally had high expectations with regard to their employment situation in 2018. These high expectations, however, were only partially met. The employment expectations of female refugees, refugees with poor mental health, and refugees with primary school education, in particular, were not met in 2018.

The findings of this report suggest that the role played by individual and structural variables such as children living in the household or work-family balance were underestimated. Mental health would also appear to play an important role: The better the mental health in 2016 the more likely it is for the refugees' expectations to be positively met. This is particularly relevant given that, on average, refugees have poorer mental health than German nationals.<sup>21</sup>

The findings of this *Weekly Report* propose measures in the following three areas: First, when they arrive, refugees should

<sup>20</sup> Larry A. Sjaastad, "The costs and returns of human migration," *Journal of Political Economy* 70, no. 5 (1962): 80–93.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Metzger et al., "Psychische und körperliche Gesundheit von Geflüchteten," 64–72.

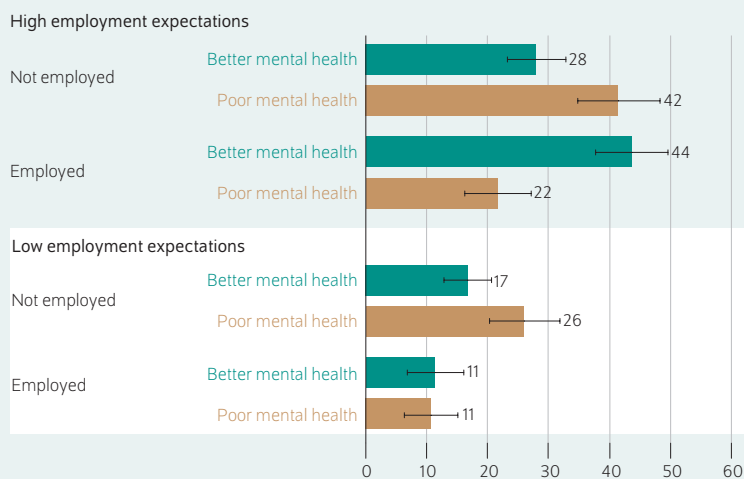
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JEL: D84, F22, J61

Keywords: refugees, expectation formation, integration, expectation error

Figure 6

**Fulfilment of refugees' employment expectations, by mental health**  
In percent



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, v.35, survey data for 2018, N = 1 407, weighted.

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The expectations expressed in 2016 by refugees with better mental health were found to be met more often.

receive sufficient information on the German labor market and the necessary qualifications. This would guarantee more accurate management of expectations from the very beginning. Second, the low expectations of female refugees and the discrepancy between the expectations and actual employment situation of households with children suggest that these groups of refugees have to be given greater consideration and/or that additional support measures or services are needed for these groups. The bivariate analyses in this *Weekly Report* are somewhat limited in the conclusions that can be drawn from them. In combination with other empirical findings,<sup>22</sup> however, these findings show the importance of facilitating access to employment for these groups through more flexible working hours or suitable childcare options, for example. Third, refugees with poor mental health need additional support.

<sup>22</sup> Ludovica Gambaro et al., "The effect of early childhood education and care services on the social integration of refugee families".

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## EMPLOYMENT EXPECTATIONS

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