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Syrian Refugee Inflows and Crime in Lebanon
(Job Market Paper)

This paper investigates the effect on violent crime, in a developing host country, of a large influx of refugees, focusing on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The influx of over one million Syrian refugees into Lebanon at the height of the refugee crisis led to more than a 20 percent increase in the pre-crisis Lebanese population. I study how this massive inflow into a developing country affects crime, thereby contributing to the growing literature on non-economic migrants and crime in low-income and middle-income countries. I use novel administrative data on crime in Lebanon that spans the periods prior to the Syrian war and after refugee inflows began in 2011. The distinctive feature of this dataset is the availability of information on suspects, victims and their nationality. This allows me to observe whether suspects and victims are Lebanese, Syrian or other foreign nationals.

Using two main datasets on refugees and crime, I employ a difference-in-differences strategy to compare geographic areas with varying refugee intensities in the pre- and post-crisis periods. A potential concern is that refugee settlement may be correlated with crime rates if settlement decisions are made based on local economic conditions. I estimate different specifications to check the robustness of my estimates to the extent that I am able, given data limitations. I find a negative effect on violent crime per thousand total population and per thousand Lebanese-only population at the district level. I explore the results further. Because overall political and sectarian ties between refugees and local populations may differ across areas, I explore whether the effect on crime varies due to the similarity or dissimilarity of refugees and Lebanese based on sect across these areas. To do so, I group districts by the majority sect of voters. I find a decrease in crime rates for almost all groups separately. I also find that the arrival of refugees is associated with a decrease in violent crimes committed by Lebanese suspects, but it has no significant effect on crimes by Syrian suspects. In the literature on crime and non-economic migrants, such as asylum seekers and refugees, the findings on the relationship between crime and migrants are varied. While some papers find a positive effect on crime, due in some cases to limited employment opportunities and labor market inaccessibility, others find a negative effect or no effect. My results provide further evidence of a possible negative relationship between migrants and crime.

JEL Codes: F22, J15, K42

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