Integration through Friendship—Evidence from a Peer Matching Program in Sweden

Sector(s): Education, Labor Markets

Fieldwork: Enkatfabriken

Location: Sweden

Sample: 700-800 migrants across several municipalities

Initiative(s): European Social Inclusion Initiative (ESII)

Target group: Refugees Migrants

Outcome of interest: Employment Gender attitudes and norms Attitudes and norms Social cohesion

Intervention type: Social networks Empowerment training Intergroup/social contact

Partner organization(s): Kompis Sverige

Increasing levels of migration to the European Union have created significant challenges for governments to ensure migrants fully integrate and thrive in their host societies, but there is little rigorous evidence that evaluates current programs that promote social inclusion. Researchers are conducting a randomized evaluation to test the impact of a peer matching program that aims to increase information and improve social capital on migrants' social attitudes, Swedish language skills, employment, education levels, and general feeling of belonging in Sweden.

Policy issue

In recent years, there has been an increase in migration to Europe; specifically in 2022, 1.92 million people immigrated to the European Union, though down from its peak in 2015. There can be several challenges to migrants' effective integration and social inclusion in their host country, including linguistic, cultural, and administrative barriers. Despite migrants' economic and social contributions to societies, many can face discrimination and hurdles to accessing education, fully participating in the labor market, and joining or forming social groups.

As a result of increased migration, the creation of policies and programs that address the social and economic inclusion of migrants have become a priority for many local and national governments. Peer matching programs that link nationals with migrants to facilitate social ties and interaction have the potential to improve social and economic integration of recent migrants by facilitating opportunities for migrants to receive relevant information related to language, social networks, and the local context in a structured way. Policies that address social inclusion also have the potential to improve attitudes towards migrants and migration. Despite significant spending on social programs to foster social inclusion and improve attitudes towards migrants, there is little rigorous evidence about the impact of peer matching programs on social inclusion of migrants in the European context.

Context of the evaluation

In the past several years, Sweden has seen one of the largest increases in migration within Europe, with over 160,000 immigrating in 2016. Unemployment among migrants in Sweden is also triple that of the native-born population. Nearly 27 percent of

migrants are out of the labor force despite the Swedish government spending up to seven percent of its budget on immigrant integration, making migration a polarizing issue in local politics. Those that are employed play a valuable role in the Swedish economy, finding employment in sectors such as higher education, construction, and the restaurant industry.

Kompis Sverige is a Swedish non-profit organization that implements migrant integration programs throughout Sweden that are designed to bolster interactions between migrants and established Swedes. In their Buddy Match program, participating migrants are matched with an established Swede based on shared characteristics, like where they live, gender, age, interests, and educational or professional background. The Buddy Match program encourages participation among recent migrants of all skill backgrounds and established Swedes through word-of-mouth, posters, local media, and direct contact with those who are already enrolled in a Swedish language class. The average age of recruited migrants and established Swedes is 31 and 44, respectively, and 73 percent of participants are women.

The peer matching program arranges regular meetings and social activities between the matched pair for six hours each month over multiple months. The program is designed to improve the migrant's Swedish language skills, build connections, and improve knowledge of the local context and available services, while also improving the variety of social interactions for Swedes. Kompis Sverige staff also ask participants about the match after six weeks and offer re-matching if requested.



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Details of the intervention

Researchers partnered with Kompis Sverige to conduct a randomized evaluation to test the impact of the Buddy Match program on the social and economic integration of migrants through increased interactions with established Swedes. Kompis Sverige receives many more migrants looking for a match than established Swedes looking for a "buddy." In the intervention, Kompis

Sverige generates two matches for each volunteering established Swede: one of these is randomly assigned to the intervention group and provided the match, the other is assigned to the comparison group. The intervention is conducted across several municipalities in Sweden where Kompis Sverige has a presence. Researchers anticipate that the final sample will have between 350 and 500 pairs of migrants.

To assess the impact of the Buddy Match program, the researchers are measuring migrants' knowledge of the Swedish language, current employment and education status, and their feeling of inclusion and belonging in Swedish society. To measure employment, education, and social inclusion, the researchers used benchmarks from both the European Values Survey and the World Values Survey. Six and twelve months after the program, researchers conduct surveys around belonging, trust, gender attitudes, and Swedish norms and culture. Finally, to further assess measures of social and cultural belonging in Sweden, the researchers will also conduct incentivized tasks at the end of the program.

An important ethical consideration was to ensure that the evaluation did not result in reducing the number of successful buddy matches. The program design only randomizes among pairs of migrants who are judged to be equally suitable for matching to an established Swede who volunteers to be part of the program. Other considerations relate to the safeguarding of personal data and confidentiality. To ensure this, we partnered with a reputable survey firm, Enkatfabriken, that has substantial previous experience of running academic surveys in Sweden. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the J-PAL Europe IRB at the Paris School of Economics.

Results and policy lessons

Research ongoing; results forthcoming.

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