

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whole-COMM research in small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas in nine European countries revealed that recent migrants (those arriving since 2014) and long-term residents tended to have few meaningful relations or interactions with each other. Everyday encounters often remained limited to necessary exchanges and did not extend to deeper contact that would enable the building of long-lasting relations.

Based on this finding, this policy brief offers suggestions on how to increase the possibilities for encounters between recent migrants and long-term residents, with the ultimate aim of improving integration experiences and social cohesion. It recommends that local governments provide resources to make getting together possible and collaborate with civil society, philanthropy, and migrant-owned businesses to organize events that foster intergroup interaction. It also suggests that local governments redesign public spaces and initiatives, or create new ones, that are co-designed or informed by residents, including migrants, to ensure that they are of interest and accessible to the wider community,

The Whole-COMM project

The EU-funded Whole-COMM research project investigated attitudes, social relations between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents, and migrant integration experiences in small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas. This policy brief is based on data collected by the project's research team through participant observation, interviews, and focus groups in 42 migrant-receiving localities across 9 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey).



INTRODUCTION

Migration leads to a change in an individual's social network, and to a certain extent a rupture, creating a need to establish new contacts in the destination community. These connections can provide an important source of logistical, emotional, and material support¹ for migrants looking to settle in. While other newcomers are often an important part of migrants' social networks, those who have lived in the community for longer (who may or may not have migrated themselves) are an important source of information and advice related to the various aspects of life in the local community, including finding a place to live, learning the language, and landing a job. As highlighted by Whole-COMM research,² social networks are crucial for positive integration experiences on the part of recent migrants (meaning those who have arrived since 2014), but building these networks in destination communities can be challenging. Social contact between newcomers and long-term residents, as underscored by social contact theory, moreover, fosters positive intergroup attitudes, helping to reduce stereotypes and prejudices.³ Thus, increased interactions can support integration and social cohesion in local communities.

Yet across the countries studied by Whole-COMM, there was overall little interaction or social relations between recent migrants and long-term residents. Furthermore, adults found it more difficult to form new connections compared to younger migrants, especially if they did not have children (those who did had opportunities to come into contact with other parents). This policy brief looks at the spaces in which adult migrants and long-term residents did interact in meaningful ways and offers suggestions on how to increase the possibilities for such encounters, with the ultimate aim of improving integration experiences and social cohesion. It highlights research conducted outside of larger destination cities, areas which are increasingly seeing the arrival of migrants but which have received relatively less attention from the policy sphere.

¹ Wagner, M. et al. (2022), [Strengthening policy responses to protracted displacement](#), TRAFIG policy handbook, p. 15.

² Hadj Abdou, L. & Katsiaficas, C. (2023), [Attitudes, intergroup relations, and post-2014 migrant integration experiences in small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas: A cross-country perspective](#), Whole-COMM working paper.

³ See, for example, De Coninck, D., Rodríguez-de-Dios, I., & d'Haenens, L. (2021), 'The contact hypothesis during the European refugee crisis: Relating quality and quantity of (in)direct intergroup contact to attitudes towards refugees,' *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24(6): 881–901; Tropp, R. & Dehron, T. (2022), [Cultivating Contact. A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups](#), American Immigration Council, p. 5.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM WHOLE-COMM RESEARCH

Public attitudes shape the context in which interactions take place and relations are formed (or not). Integration was reported to take place amidst a mix of hostility and rejection, welcoming and inclusion, and indifference (the last group representing a ‘silent majority’). At the same time, where recent migrants did report social relations with long-term residents, these contacts were mainly volunteers, illustrating that newcomers’ social networks stand to be further widened to other segments of the community. Additionally, in many cases, both recent migrants and long-term residents held stereotypes about each other or lacked trust that otherwise hindered meaningful interaction. This underscores the challenge of getting additional community members on board, particularly those who are indifferent to or even wary of newcomers.

Meaningful intergroup relations are scarce but often stem from structured activities Workplaces, for instance, can foster social integration⁴. However, the frequency and depth of interactions between newcomers and long-term residents varied, and in many instances, recent migrants did not have jobs where they worked alongside or met natives. Generally speaking, there was little meaningful interaction between recent migrants and long-term residents, even in communities that were perceived as welcoming. Unsurprisingly, then, newcomers reported having few meaningful relationships with long-term residents. Of the meaningful encounters that did take place, many occurred in a structured or moderated space. These places offered a chance to meet new people and participate in a common activity, and point to a way forward for actors looking to further increase connections between newcomers and long-term residents.

Multiple stakeholders are engaged, especially civil society actors. Civil society organizations (including migrant-led and diaspora organizations, migrant-serving groups, and places of worship) and individual volunteers were a crucial source of integration-related support and served as a bridge between recent migrants and long-term residents. Some municipalities also organized activities and offered spaces where people could come together. In addition, migrant entrepreneurs played an important role by diversifying the availability of products and services on offer in local marketplaces and providing spaces (such as restaurants, grocery stores, and hairdressers) for those of the same nationality or ethnic group to gather, which helped migrants to feel more at home. All of these actors can be tapped to expand opportunities for intergroup interactions.

So-called ‘third places’ are important places for intergroup encounter. Third places encompass a diverse range of spaces: public spaces; organizations offering support services; sites of commerce and personal services such as restaurants and barbershops; and places for arts and leisure

⁴ Work can also limit social integration, as Whole-COMM research underlined. Newcomers who work a lot, especially those who work anti-social hours, have simply less or no time to develop meaningful contacts with long-term residents outside of work.

activities.⁵ These third places provide a free or low-cost place for people to gather, have conversations, and spend time outside of their homes and workplaces.⁶ In Whole-COMM's sites of study, they included civil society organizations, leisure spaces, libraries, and community centres. However, the amount of, appeal of, and access to these spaces varied across countries and communities. For recent migrants, obstacles to accessing these spaces included language barriers, time (work schedules and conflicting responsibilities), distance or lack of public transport, cost, a perception of being unwelcome, and a lack of public space in the first place. In addition, perceived cultural differences, as well as socioeconomic and generational gaps, also made some hesitant to utilize them. This finding highlights the importance of leveraging third places to encourage interaction, alleviating barriers to participation, and ensuring that third places respond to the needs and interests of residents so that more will take part.

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted community building. In-person events and social activities were halted, meeting places closed, and social and physical distance increased, while integration-related activities more generally were in many cases interrupted. The pandemic led to less intergroup contact, meaning that Covid-19 worsened an already weak level of encounter. This trend provides further impetus to think about how to encourage more meaningful intergroup relations by offering more opportunities to interact.

Still, several activities generated interactions between recent migrants and long-term residents. Despite the overall lack of meaningful interactions and relations between newcomers and long-term residents, there were numerous instances of encounter through:

- Cultural events⁷ (especially inclusive ones), including intercultural events and those featuring theatre, cinema, music, art, and food, as well as fairs and carnival celebrations
- Buddy projects, where long-term residents help newcomers settle in
- Language cafes or intercultural cafes, which provide a space to practice language skills but may also be used to celebrate life events like birthdays or the arrival of a new child
- Other civil society-run activities such as sewing groups, cooking classes, and children's play groups
- Mixed-housing projects that house native-born youth with those who arrived as unaccompanied minors under one roof, alongside social activities
- Neighbourhood social cohesion initiatives
- Sports, including sports clubs and other organized activities such as running clubs and events, soccer clubs, dancing, tennis, and squash

⁵ For a typology of third places, see Rhubart, D., Sun, Y., Pendergrast, C., & Monnat, S. (2022), '[Sociospatial Disparities in "Third Place" Availability in the United States](#),' *Socius* 8.

⁶ See Butler, S.M. & Diaz, C. (2016), '["Third places" as community builders](#),' Brookings Institution; Oldenburg, R. & Christensen, K. (2023), '[Third places, true citizen spaces](#),' The UNESCO Courier.

⁷ For more on the role of arts and culture in bridge building, see Welcoming America & ArtPlace America (2021), '[Creative Placemaking & Welcoming: Tips and Tools for Integrating Arts, Culture, and Immigration](#)'.

- Leisure more generally, including parks,⁸ playgrounds, beaches, and other built and natural water sources
- Gardening associations and allotment gardens
- Walking tours, such as those that Whole-COMM conducted in four localities (see box below)

Whole-COMM walking tours

Alongside its research activities, the Whole-COMM project conducted walking tours in four communities⁹ to see whether this type of activity could bring people together, foster dialogue, and generate increased understanding about migrants' lives. These walking tours focused on the topic of change in the particular community, a theme going beyond migration that was selected in order to avoid reaching only those long-term residents who already had an interest in learning more about migrants or active engagement with migrants, as well as to contextualize the issue of migration. The tours touched upon the sub-themes of economic development, mobility, community, and conflict/safety, each of which were represented by specific stops in the community. The guides (Whole-COMM researchers and NGO staff) used story-telling, trivia questions, and discussion questions to foster reflection and dialogue.¹⁰

For practical reasons, this tour was a one-time activity and the researchers could only collect participants' perspectives after the tour, meaning that it would be inaccurate to draw conclusions about the short- or long-term impact of the tours on the likelihood of recent migrants and long-term residents to interact. Still, drawing on the impressions gained from these tours and similar existing initiatives,¹¹ it appears that walking tours of this kind, especially if repeated in a locality on a regular basis,¹² bear potential to foster interaction and create awareness about migration- and migrant integration-related issues. Based on the feedback received, connecting topics to places that people frequent in their everyday lives allowed participants to see their city with fresh eyes. Whilst the post-walking tour surveys revealed that participants' views on migration and diversity remained mixed, the overwhelming majority of participating long-term residents expressed their willingness to engage in a conversation with someone who had recently migrated to the locality (and vice versa) after taking the tour.

⁸ On the relevance of green spaces more broadly for refugees and asylum seekers, see also Rishbeth, C., Blachnicka-Ciacek, D. & Darling, J. (2019), 'Participation and wellbeing in urban greenspace: 'curating sociability' for refugees and asylum seekers,' *Geoforum* 106: 125-134.

⁹ St. Pölten, Austria; Dessau, Germany; Cuneo, Italy; and Trelleborg, Sweden.

¹⁰ For more, see Hadj Abdou & Katsiaficas *Attitudes, intergroup relations, and post-2014 migrant integration experiences in small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas*, p. 29.

¹¹ See, for example, [Migrantour](#).

¹² For the social and health benefits of repeated group walks, see Streets, A. (2022), 'Walk with Others,' in *52 Ways to Walk: The Surprising Science of Walking for Wellness and Joy, One Week at a Time*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, p. 177-181.

As illustrated by Whole-COMM research, a variety of activities have the potential to bring newcomers and long-term residents together, including those aimed at the wider community as well as those targeting integration or highlighting migrant groups in particular. These findings add to the growing body of research showing, among others, that such spaces can provide a valued space with wider impacts related to networking, building language skills, and fostering self-confidence¹³ and migrants' settlement experiences and wellbeing.¹⁴ At the same time, other research has shown that such activities can serve different functions: Some may increase awareness or prompt reflection, while others can change perceptions or foster ongoing, meaningful contact.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING INTERGROUP INTERACTIONS

Efforts to improve the quantity and quality of intergroup interactions in smaller communities would benefit from increasing opportunities for meaningful encounter and at the same time reducing barriers to migrants' participation.

- Local governments can provide funding (directly or from other sources), space, publicity, and other resources to make getting together possible. They can also collaborate with civil society and migrant-owned businesses to organize events that foster interaction, intergroup understanding, and a sense of belonging, looking to the above list of activities for inspiration.
- Stakeholders can make existing activities more inclusive and public spaces more welcoming to migrants. This includes alleviating barriers related to language, physical distance, cost, and work schedules. In this endeavour, different age groups and family situations should be considered, including children and youth, working-age adults, retirees, men, women, families, and single persons. Special attention should be paid to reaching out to younger persons in the community, as people's stances on immigration are formed when they are young and typically remain consistent as they age.¹⁶
- Local governments, as well as national governments, civil society, and philanthropy, can boost the availability of community activities and spaces. These can be for the locality in general, such as neighbourhood-level initiatives, gardening and sports activities, walking

¹³ Hunt, L. (2023), 'Creative (en)counterspaces: Engineering valuable contact for young refugees via solidarity arts workshops in Thessaloniki, Greece,' *Migration Studies*.

¹⁴ Zhuang, Z.C. & Lok, R.T. (2023), 'Exploring the wellbeing of migrants in third places: An empirical study of smaller Canadian cities,' *Wellbeing, Space and Society* 4.

¹⁵ See Tropp & Dehrone, [Cultivating Contact. A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups](#).

¹⁶ Kustov, A. (2023), [Persuading People on Immigration is Hard but Here's What Can be Done](#), Migration Policy Centre blog, European University Institute.

tours, and cultural events. They can also include activities more directly related to integration and the migrant community, such as language cafes, buddy projects, and intercultural events. Support from non-governmental actors is particularly important in cases where local governments are unable or uninterested in getting involved.

- Local actors can (re)design public places and initiatives with the participation of (migrant) residents, to ensure that they are of interest and accessible to the wider community.
- Local actors can strive to reach the 'silent' or indifferent majority in the community, in addition to those those who are already engaged, to expand possibilities for meaningful intergroup interactions and relations. In fact, community members who have had limited contact with migrants might see a larger change by participating in intergroup activities.¹⁷ Such efforts might include the provision of information and stories about their localities that includes migrants and their lives in the locality, underlining commonalities across groups and highlighting issues of shared concern, particularly instances where migrant and non-migrant residents have successfully worked together to solve a common challenge.
- National governments, philanthropic actors, and private companies can provide funding and technical assistance to local actors to develop and implement projects that bring people together across differences to work toward a common goal.

Facilitating intergroup interactions

- Provide incentives for people to engage in intergroup activities
- Develop an agenda that sparks interest among people with diverse backgrounds, capabilities, and status
- Foster balanced participation across different groups
- Ensure participants join/contribute as equals
- Hold a series of activities or meetings rather than a one-off event
- Set common a goal that is appealing across groups and members of those groups and work towards shared aims

Sources: International Organization for Migration (2021), [*The Power of "Contact". Designing, Facilitating and Evaluating Social Mixing Activities to Strengthen Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion Between Migrants and Local Communities. A Review of Lessons Learned*](#), Geneva; Tropp, R. & Dehrone, T.(2022), [*Cultivating Contact. A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups*](#). American Immigration Council.

¹⁷ Tropp & Dehrone (2022), [*Cultivating Contact. A Guide to Building Bridges and Meaningful Connections Between Groups*](#), p. 15.

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