

# Are community characteristics linked to people's attitudes to immigration in Ireland?<sup>1, 2</sup>

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James Laurence, Frances McGinnity\* & Keire Murphy

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## INTRODUCTION

Migrants come to countries but settle in local areas. Therefore, while the national context and individual-level characteristics can influence people's attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, community-level factors also matter.<sup>3</sup> Recent large inflows of forced migrants have sharply raised the prominence of immigration in public debate in Ireland. This has been accompanied by incidents of protest and violence, often at community level.

International research has shown that both the characteristics of local areas (such as their level of disadvantage, or whether they are urban or rural) and the characteristics of the migrants who come can influence people's responses to immigrants and immigration. This link has not yet been explored in Ireland.

Drawing on theories of intergroup threat and social contact, this paper considers how the characteristics and concentration of migrants at the local level (the proportion of migrants, how this has changed, and how segregated communities are), as well as characteristics of the communities themselves, are associated with people's attitudes to immigration.

Concerns about local services and resources are often raised by communities in response to the opening of reception centres for asylum seekers. The paper also tests innovative measures of pressures on local services (housing, schools, GP places), and the presence of Ukrainian refugees or asylum seekers in the local area, and how these are associated with people's attitudes to immigration.

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin summaries the findings from: Laurence, J., McGinnity, F. & Murphy, K. (2025). Community-level drivers of attitudes towards immigration in Ireland *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2487198> \* Correspondence: [fran.mcginfinity@esri.ie](mailto:fran.mcginfinity@esri.ie)

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<sup>3</sup> See Laurence, J., McGinnity, F. & Murphy, K. (2024). Attitudes towards immigration and refugees in Ireland: Understanding recent trends and drivers, Dublin: ESRI and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, <https://doi.org/10.26504/jr5>

## DATA AND METHODS

This paper is based on a nationally representative sample of adults fielded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in Spring 2023, matched to 2022 Census data on the characteristics of communities in which survey respondents live. In addition to Census 2022 small area data, we match data on communities from other sources: the number of refugees from Ukraine; the location and occupancy of international accommodation centres; GP places per person; housing affordability and the supply of and demand for primary school places. The analysis is restricted to the immigration attitudes of Irish-born who responded to the interview in person (1,210 individuals).

## RESULTS

We find that neither the proportion of migrants in a community nor recent increases in the share of migrants in that community are associated with immigration attitudes, on average. However, other characteristics of local areas do influence attitudes.

Consistent with international evidence, we find that attitudes to immigration are more negative in disadvantaged communities, even after accounting for people's own financial situation. This is particularly the case in disadvantaged communities where the proportion of migrants has increased since 2011. It is not the case that migrants are more likely to live in disadvantaged communities in Ireland, but where they do, people living there express more negative attitudes to immigration.

In rural areas, attitudes to migrants are less positive than in urban areas. Yet where rural residents live among a higher proportion of migrants, they tend to report more positive attitudes, which is supportive of contact theory. Contact theory states that positive contact between groups improves attitudes towards the other group. Higher residential segregation of migrants (i.e. where migrants are more clustered, instead of more spread out among the non-migrant population) is associated with more negative attitudes. This may be because of more limited opportunities for contact in segregated communities, or inflated perceptions of the size of migrant communities.

Given both public debate and predictions based on ethnic competition theory, we expected that immigration attitudes might be more negative in areas with evidence of high competition for health, housing and education places. Yet using a measure of pressure on GPs (number of GPs per household in a small area) and housing affordability<sup>4</sup> as measures of scarcity, we find no evidence of this. Surprisingly, higher demand for primary schools, measured as the ratio of supply of and demand for primary school places, is linked to more positive attitudes. It may therefore be that it is *perceived* rather than actual pressure on services that influences attitudes. Alternatively, a general concern that there is a national shortage of housing, medical services and school places may influence attitudes more than people's local experiences.

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<sup>4</sup> Two measures are used at Local Electoral Area level: the proportion of tenants in an area who pay 40% or more of their disposable income on rent and the ratio of median (buyers) income to median house purchase price (in 2021).

We find that attitudes are not related to the proportion of Ukrainian refugees in people's local area. The proportion of non-European asylum seekers living in the neighbourhood is linked to more positive attitudes to immigration overall, though a relatively small number of respondents have an asylum seeker accommodation centre in their local area.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

These results provide new insights into the role of community contexts and community strain (e.g. pressures on services and amenities) in shaping immigration attitudes in Ireland. The analysis sheds light on the role that neighbourhood-level factors might be playing in the recent rise of anxiety around immigration. In particular, the research highlights the role of broader social and economic factors in influencing attitudes towards immigration. Of note is the contrast between the positive immigration attitudes of residents in areas that contain more asylum seekers and the negative immigration attitudes in disadvantaged areas that have experienced a recent large increase in immigration. We conclude that it may not be proximity to increasing numbers of asylum seekers that is driving recent anxiety, but rather the rapid changes in immigration coupled with economic precarity. Two important caveats to our analysis are that people may overstate their support for immigration in surveys, and that we do not measure social contact directly. Nonetheless, these findings provide important insights into attitude formation in the context of the current public debate on immigration in Ireland.