

Prison or Sanctuary? An Evaluation of Camps for Syrian Refugees

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Abstract

Camps are one strategy to manage an influx of refugees. Host countries want to minimize effects on natives, but relief organizations worry that isolation reduces employment and self-reliance over time. Using a novel survey, I study Syrians in Jordan, comparing camp residents to other refugees who self-settle in the same country. I identify the effects of camp residence with three strategies: selection on a rich set of observables, difference-in-differences with Lebanon where camps were never opened, and arrival before and after opening. I find that, after an average of three years in displacement, camps reduce household income; however, the gap is less than the rent saved by living in a camp, and employment growth is similar over time. Combined with additional refugee outcomes, expenditure data, and the literature on general equilibrium effects, I argue that camps can be an efficient subsidy to refugees willing to opt out of urban areas.